

otherworld. A benevolent god may function as progenitor and helper, a malevolent one as villain and destroyer. The burden of heroism is a heavy one, and is ultimately unenviable. While celebrating the achievements of the hero, Irish myth asserts the precariousness of man's position in the cosmos.

PART II

4

Dermot Moran

NATURE, MAN AND GOD
IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF
JOHN SCOTTUS ERIUGENA

It follows that we ought not to understand God and the creature as two things distinct from one another, but as one and the same. For both the creature, by subsisting, is in God; and God, by manifesting Himself, in a marvellous and ineffable manner creates Himself in the creature.

John Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, vol. 3, 678c

This is why I pray to God to rid me of God, for my essential being is above God in so far as we comprehend God as the principle of creatures. . . . And if I myself were not, God would not be either: that God is God, of this I am the cause. If I were not, God would not be God. There is, however, no need to understand this.

Meister Eckhart, *Beati pauperes spiritu*.

Apart from Berkeley, Johannes Scottus Eriugena (also known as John Scotus Erigena or John the Scot) is Ireland's most important philosopher. He has been called the greatest philosopher writing in Latin between Augustine and Anselm, one of the greatest metaphysicians of all time, the "father of speculative philosophy", the first scholastic.¹ Yet, despite this high evaluation of his position, he is generally regarded as an outsider to the main western tradition in philosophy, whose philosophy spawned no movement, whose achievement stands alone, an isolated beacon of light in the prevailing darkness of the age.² It was not until the nineteenth century that the serious study of his works began, and then it was because of the similarity perceived between his system and the idealist philosophies of the German writers who saw him as their precursor, an enlightened rationalist struggling against blind subservience to authority.³ In the twentieth century the true subtlety and brilliance of his system has been appreciated for its own sake, but, more often than not, among specialists in the history of philosophy rather than among general students and readers. Translations of his works are not readily available, he is rarely the subject of

post-graduate dissertations; his greatness is generally acknowledged, his works generally ignored.⁴ There is a pressing need for a reevaluation of his contribution to philosophy and for a new recognition of the imaginative adventure which his system expresses — a speculative critique of ideas not at all irrelevant to present day philosophical debates on the nature of the universe, or the significance of human existence. I hope that this essay may at least stimulate an appetite for the exploration of Eriugena's intellectual world.

I

LIFE AND WORKS (THE IRISH BACKGROUND)

John was born in Ireland in the early ninth century. He emigrated to France possibly to escape the Viking raids which were gradually destroying the monastic golden age of this island, and he first appears in history as philosopher-grammarian at the court of Charles the Bald.⁵ This period in France is generally known as a time of educational reform and *renovatio*, and yet even in this climate John was noticed for his breadth of learning and the boldness of his cosmological interpretations in his commentary on the writings of an obscure Neoplatonist, Martianus Capella.⁶ Because of his knowledge of Augustine and his obvious dialectical skills, he was enlisted by Hincmar, Bishop of Rheims and Pardulus, Bishop of Laon, into the theological dispute raging at the time over the question of freewill and predestination, a controversy which had been sparked off by the Saxon monk, Gottschalk.⁷ Scottus wrote an enthusiastic and idiosyncratic rebuttal of Gottschalk which insisted that evil and sin belong more properly to the realm of non-being than to being. Hence evil and sin are unknown to God who knows only His own volitions which are necessarily good. God did not create hell as a place of punishment; rather hell is a state of mind which the sinful bring about in themselves of their own doing.⁸ This rebuttal of Gottschalk's double predestination (*gemina praedestinatio*) theory was severely condemned by the French bishops and by the councils of Valence and Langres, but Scottus himself seems to have been untouched by this censure, presumably because he was a favourite of the king. Thus we find him, soon after his theological disputes, engaged by Charles as the official translator of the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, a mysterious eastern Christian who wrote in Greek, thought by Charles to be St Denis, patron saint of France.⁹

Eriugena's theological speculations on predestination had already led him away from the standard interpretation of Augustine and the Christian literature of the Latin west; the impact on him of Dionysius and the Greek eastern Christian tradition marked him off from the western tradition even more. A new world had been opened up and Eriugena's philosophical efforts were now directed towards constructing a vast synthesis of the learning of Greek east and Latin west, reconciling Augustine and Dionysius, Roman realism with eastern mysticism.

The result of this undertaking was Eriugena's masterpiece, the dialogue *On the Division of Nature*, a complete account in five books of the nature of God and creation, fall and redemption, heaven and hell, so far as human reason could grasp them. It was this work which inspired much of the cosmological thinking of the twelfth century Renaissance.¹⁰ However it later became linked with the pantheistical teachings of David of Dinant and Amaury of Bène and was condemned with their writings in 1210 and again in 1225.¹¹ This papal condemnation obscured Eriugena's influence in the thirteenth century, although his translations of Dionysius and his homily on the Prologue of John's Gospel remained in circulation. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries he had some influence over the mystical doctrines of Meister Eckhart and Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, although the latter regarded his doctrines as too dangerous for general consumption.¹² Finally, when the first printed edition of his works appeared from Oxford in 1681 it was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

The reasons for Eriugena's condemnation are not clear, especially as these condemnations come so long after his death, and also because his teachings were not that different from other writers such as Cusanus who escaped censure. But it is absolutely clear that the curt dismissal of his work contained in the condemnations, and repeated in the early manuals of scholastic philosophy, is a complete misrepresentation of the complex dialectical arguments which he employs and the careful manner with which he presents his conclusions, backed up by the best authorities of the eastern and western traditions.

The accusation of heresy excluded Eriugena from the main western philosophical tradition for many centuries. Yet even in his own time he was regarded as an outsider, a *vir barbarus*, as the Vatican Librarian termed him, an *advena*, merely a "famous Irishman" (*Scotum illum*).¹³ He stood out as a stranger in France. Presumably he coined the name, Eriugena, to express this curious phenomenon, an Irishman versed in philosophical wisdom. Yet he is equally a stranger to Irish tradition. He did not write in Irish (although Eriu- is considered to be Old Irish) nor refer to Irish events or customs. He wrote in a Latin which has hardly anything insular or Hibernian about it.¹⁴ All of this troubles those who would seek to claim Eriugena as an exclusively "Irish" philosopher, meaning by that someone who advocated an Irish or Celtic way of life, or whose ideas have something of the Celtic twilight about them, a precursor of George Russell perhaps. "Irish" traits have been adduced — his love of nature, his resistance to authority which reminds one of Columbanus, his use of the imagery of sea-voyaging and peregrination which recalls Brendan the Navigator (or Walafrid Strabo's remark that wandering was "second nature" to the Irish).¹⁵ His love of learning might suggest a schooling in the famous monasteries of early Ireland. Yet none of these traits provide us with concrete evidence of his "Irishness".

Several writers have tried to explain his fascination for things Greek by suggesting a Greek education for him in the Irish schools. The controversy has raged since the 1930s and the present *status quaestionis* reflects a compromise.¹⁶ There is no evidence to suggest that Eriugena learned his Greek in Ireland, indeed he himself claimed to be a novice in these matters until King Charles asked him to translate Dionysius. At the same time, Greek learning on the continent was carried on in the main at Irish centres, and there is no evidence to suppose that Scottus could *not* have learned his Greek in Ireland.

We are left with something curious: a pre-established harmony, as it were, between Eriugena's mind and the mental attitude of the Neoplatonic Christian writers of the Greek tradition. When he had to choose between Latin and Greek authorities he chose the Greek, when he had to decide between realism and idealism, he chose idealism.¹⁷ How is this to be understood? Instead of worrying about Eriugena's actual contact with Ireland, it would be more fruitful to engage in a comparative analysis of the structures of the Greek and Celtic-Irish cultures of the early middle ages, in order to find some clues to the apparent convergence between them on spiritual matters. I am not talking here about the distinguishing features of the Celtic church, its date for Easter, or the shape of the tonsure and such like; rather I am suggesting that the categories of sainthood and deification (*theosis*) be compared, or the Greek contemplation (*theoria*) with the imaginative visions (*vis*) of Irish literature. Eriugena's concept of the otherworld, and the nature of punishment as a fantasy which torments the mind, could be compared with the Irish Christian understanding of these things — not so much the dogma, but the popular literary portrayal of these matters. Eriugena's commentary on the scriptures should be compared with surviving Irish commentaries. It is only in this way that the true nature of Eriugena's relation to his Irish background can be assessed. We are no longer dealing here with random biographical facts, but are at the more important task of cultural comparison, which will be of enormous value to those who wish to understand Eriugena's true standing as a philosopher.

To sum up, it is somewhat misleading to portray Eriugena as a complete outsider to the western or even to the Irish traditions. His work transcends the narrow categories which are most often used in textbooks on the history of philosophy. Rather than attempting to fit him in to the narrow mould of western Aristotelian-Thomistic or Augustinian traditions, he should be conceived as the founder of a new philosophy, an originator like Plotinus or Descartes, whose work itself sets the categories of the new age. Similarly with his Irish heritage, there is no point in seeking in Scottus some Anglo-Irish Revival concept of Irishness or even some classical Celtic criterion, instead we should see Eriugena as establishing a most significant cultural motif — the Irishman who became a European intellectual, indeed a figure of world

status. His philosophy should be judged, as all philosophy must, on its own merits alone. In Eriugena's case we must seek to understand the speculative idealism which informs all his major concepts, a speculative idealism so forceful that it does not recur again with such vigour until we come to the writings of the eighteenth century Irish philosopher Berkeley.

II

THE MEDIEVAL COSMOS AND THE RENAISSANCE IDEAL OF MAN

In order to understand Eriugena's philosophy we must first situate him in the medieval world. He is a writer of the Carolingian *renovatio*, a time when the liberal arts were the basis of the educational curriculum¹⁸ and there was a strong, if fashionable, interest in things Greek. It is often described as a time of humanist inquiry in contrast to the general decline of the tenth and eleventh centuries; but the Carolingian revival is rarely seen as a full renaissance of thought and letters as it later developed in Italy.¹⁹ Generally speaking, the medieval world is contrasted with the modern post-Cartesian world along the following lines: the medievals accepted the primacy of faith over reason, they conceived of the cosmos as a finite well-ordered structure exhibiting a hierarchy of perfection and value, with God occupying the highest position, the angels below Him, and below them the planets, until we come to man who occupies a central but lowly place above the irrational animals and the vegetable and mineral strata.²⁰ The moderns, on the other hand, begin with the primacy of the human intellect and its own self-certainty (the Cartesian *cogito*); they accept the independent and self-validating nature of reason itself, championing the individual's moral autonomy and freedom of conscience against the authoritarian dictates of a dogmatic scholasticism. They assert the infinity and boundlessness of the world and the homogeneity of space, rejecting totally the hierarchical world of the medievals.²¹ To the moderns, medieval philosophy is speculation based not on rational principles but upon received opinions. It is the moderns who recognise the need for the critical reevaluation of the role of reason itself, who make a "Copernican revolution" and begin not with God as true object of our knowing but with man's indubitable presence to himself.²² Thus, Ernst Cassirer names Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa as the "first modern thinker" because "his first step consists in asking not about God, but about the possibility of knowledge about God".²³

In general, then, the medieval world was broken apart by the developments of the new science and the new philosophy of writers such as Cusanus, Bruno, Descartes and Newton. The new emphasis on critical reason and subjective self-awareness had the consequence of making all reality into mere external objectivity, reducing the whole medieval

hierarchy of being into homogeneous extended matter, limitless extension radically distinct from the unextended perceiving subject. Thus the modern world gives rise to a new concentration on *human* nature, now seen as the epistemological measure of all things. This liberation of man from nature represents a considerable advance on the medieval position, which saw man as an integral part of the natural chain of beings. Pico della Mirandola is often seen as the harbinger of this new non-medieval confidence in man and his unlimited rational powers, although he expresses his new understanding in the traditional language of hierarchy and order:

O great liberality of God the Father! O great and wonderful happiness of man! It is given him to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills. As soon as brutes are born, they bring with them "from their dam's bag", as Lucilius says, what they are going to possess. . . . At man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear fruit in him. If he cultivates vegetable seeds, he will become a plant. If the seeds of sensation, he will grow into brute. If rational, he will come out a heavenly animal. If intellectual he will be an angel, and a son of God. And if he is not contented with the lot of any creatures but takes himself up into the centre of his own unity, then, made one spirit with God and settled in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, he will stand ahead of all things. Who does not wonder at this chameleon which we are?²⁴

There is no doubt that Pico is asserting that man lives in a hierarchical universe. But much more importantly, he is saying that man is not limited to a single position in that universe, he has the freedom and the power to range across all the levels of created being; and still more, he has at the centre of his consciousness the ability to transcend his created nature altogether and can enter into complete unity with God.

Pico's recognition of the infinite capacity of the human will and intellect is the beginning of a new interest in consciousness in western philosophy. Now, not only God but man also is in touch with the infinite. Instead of abasement before the infinite omnipotent God, man proclaims that he too can be infinite and omnipotent, can become one with God in *theosis*.²⁵ This movement reaches its historical culmination in Sartre's pronouncement in *L'Être et le Néant*: man's project is to be God.²⁶

We have simplified the contrast between medieval and modern world views for a particular purpose, namely, to show the critical position occupied by Johannes Scottus Eriugena in the transition between

medieval and modern worlds. If Pico, Cusanus and Descartes are harbingers of the modern world, it is mainly because the traditional portrait of the middle ages as a time of dull scholasticism (a portrait painted by the Renaissance and canonised in the official histories of philosophy by the Hegelian *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*) has gone largely unchallenged.²⁷ It is only in the twentieth century that the importance of such writers as Scottus Eriugena and the medieval mystics has been recognised in its true role. Eriugena, the Victorines, the English and German mystics were all instrumental in anticipating the so called "modern" view of man as the real centre of the world.²⁸

Until recently this philosophical movement has been understood as a fringe development outside of the main Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of the thirteenth century flowering of scholasticism, and as such it has been seen as obscure, figurative, fantastical. If, however, we read the Neoplatonic philosophy of Scottus and his successors not as an aberration of the true tradition but as the first stirrings of the modern understanding of philosophy, then this imaginative, figurative tradition begins to make sense. For it is in Scottus, for example, that we have the hierarchical tradition at the same time both propagated and subverted.²⁹ We have the theological discussion of God's nature dismissed in favour of a negative theological approach which concentrates on human knowledge and its limits.³⁰ We have authority reinterpreted until it comes to be understood as nothing other than *vera ratio*, right reason.³¹ We find an infinite world proclaimed and a Cartesian *cogito* whereby man, like God, can know with absolute certainty *that* he is, but cannot circumscribe his nature so as to be able to say *what* he is.³² We find human nature understood as a perfect image of God such that human beings have the potentiality to be both omnipotent and omniscient, and can of course in deification become one with God himself. In fact, all of the features of the modern world which we sketched above are to be found, not just prefigured but laid out in detail, in Scottus' massive cosmological epic of the *Periphyseon*, the dialogue *On the Division of Nature*.

So far we have attempted to situate Eriugena's philosophy at the theoretical (rather than historical) intersection of the medieval and modern conceptions of the world. It is now time to turn our attention to the *Periphyseon* itself in order to examine more closely Eriugena's understanding of the nature of man and the world.

III THE MEANING OF NATURE IN ERIUGENA

Eriugena's point of departure is novel. He sets out by defining his area of investigation as *nature*, which for him includes all that is, and all that is not.³³ By this he means that nature includes not only being (material

or spiritual) but also those things which escape the intellect because of their superiority to it (e.g. God transcends the mind). Thus nature is a term which includes both creation *and* God. From this beginning he is able to sketch out the four possible logical options offered by considering nature in relation to creation. We can, he says, conceive of nature as uncreated and creating (i.e. God as creator), as created and creating (i.e. the "Platonic ideas" or "primary causes" as Eriugena calls them upon which the created world is modelled and from which it is derived), as created and not creating (the visible spatio-temporal world which is what we usually mean by the term *nature*), and as uncreated and uncreating (nature as unrelated to creation – that is either pure nothingness or else God considered apart from creation).³⁴

These four possible interpretations of nature are seen by Scottus as expressing successive *moments* in the being of God and the world, related according to the Neoplatonic sequence of procession and return.³⁵ God is the name Christians give to the inaccessible one who dwells beyond being and from whom all being derives. When God creates the world, He wills the primary causes into being and these causes are conceived of as contained in the word or *verbum*, the utterance (*clamor*) of which gives rise to creation.³⁶ The primary cause in their turn "flow forth" into their effects, which gives rise to the spatio-temporal world of creatures in all their particularity. These effects are themselves unproductive of anything lower and depend totally upon their causes to which they "revert" or return.³⁷ Below this region of created effects lies the realm of *non-being*.³⁸ Ultimately, however, when the cycle of procession of causes into effects has terminated and all the effects have returned to rest in their causes, then the cycle of creation is complete and the absolute non-being of the fourth level becomes indistinguishable from the manner of existence of the inaccessible One.

Although this brief description of the cycle of nature conveys the impression of a temporal sequence, Eriugena more properly conceives of the four "levels" of nature as four "aspects" or ways of viewing the absolute unity of the One. The four divisions of nature are ways in which the human rational mind orders the manifest appearances of this world in relation to the One which, above time and space, is their origin.³⁹

Eriugena's metaphysics, then, is an attempt to reconcile the Christian understanding of the creation with the understanding of the One developed by Neoplatonist philosophers.⁴⁰ The Christian Neoplatonists exploited the parallels between the Biblical myth of creation and the Platonic understanding of the dependence of this imperfect world upon the perfect realm of the forms (or causes) and ultimately on the One itself. The Christian Platonists, whom Eriugena read in the original Greek, conceived of God as the One of Plotinus (as developed from the concepts of the One in the hypotheses of Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*). This One is above being, beyond the good, beyond the realm of

intellect or the intellectual light, dwelling in an inaccessible darkness, unknowable and unfathomable. This conception of God (as wholly transcendent) satisfied the Greek demand that God should be unsullied by the world, even to the extent of not knowing about it. At the same time all other beings flow forth from the One and depend on it for their existence. All things achieve their identity by attempting to imitate the primal unity of the One at a lower level. Everything which exists is a unity of some kind, and the more integrated is the unity, the closer does the thing come to the One.⁴¹ Thus the lower level unities imitate the higher and the whole chain or procession of being is linked together by a pattern of imitation and striving upwards by which each thing tries to become more self-integrated. The One, itself, of course, is unaffected by this striving. The result of this striving is that the world must be seen as possessing a triadic structure of unity-procession-return.⁴²

This Neoplatonic metaphysics struck the Christians as similar to the truth of Christian revelation in two ways. *First*, the triadic structure paralleled the paradise-fall-salvation sequence of Christian myth. All creatures were originally one with God in paradise, then they fell through the sin of Adam (which the Neoplatonists and Eriugena see as a disruption of the original unity in which man's total consciousness was centred on God, brought about by man turning his gaze upon himself, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of human self-consciousness).⁴³ The aim to achieve salvation is understood as a process through which man will recover his primordial unity with God by purifying his self-conscious activity until it is once again God-centred.

The *second* parallel with the Neoplatonic triad is expressed by the nature of the One itself, since for the Christians the One is also a Trinity. According to Eriugena God is in Himself hidden and unknown, dwelling in inaccessible darkness; but when He utters the Word which gives rise to creation, He makes himself manifest at the same time in the Person of the Word, the second Person of the Trinity.

This movement of self-manifestation from darkness to light is a procession similar in kind to the procession of things from the One.⁴⁴ The second procession from the Son to the Holy Spirit is understood by Eriugena as overseeing the procession of the primary causes (contained in the Son as *verbum* and *sapientia*) into their spatio-temporal effects, and of course at the same time is responsible for the reversion of those effects upon their causes.⁴⁵

From the Greeks then Eriugena inherited a very unusual theory of creation. Creation is to be understood as the self-manifestation of God, the process by which He makes His hidden nature manifest.⁴⁶ As such it is a timeless event, inseparable from the Trinitarian procession from Father to Son. The whole of the created universe is to be understood as unfolding within the Trinity, at no stage is creation to be seen as an alienation or separation of things from God. If the fall had not

taken place, it is implied, all things including man would have evolved in their own mysterious manner in the bosom of God Himself. Eriugena's God is not static but dynamic, manifesting, unfolding and explicating Himself in spirals of divine history. The famous triadic spirals of the chi-rho page of the Book of Kells might be taken as an illustration of this divine dynamism.

The fall however disrupts this cycle. The fall is, like creation, a timeless event. Man in his prelapsarian condition was one with God, indistinguishable from him, omnipotent and omniscient like him, because man was the perfect image of God. Man fell from this unity because he became obsessed with his own self-image and self-consciousness and sought to impose human rather than divine meanings on things. The fall never took place in historical time; rather, for Eriugena, it expresses the metaphysical possibility that man can achieve unity with God if his freewill is utilised correctly. Eriugena has no time for the more literal interpretations of the Bible which sought to blame the devil or Eve for original sin. All human beings are separate from God so long as their freewills are self-centred rather than directed towards the infinite, endless will of God.

Eriugena understands man as possessing a boundless freedom of choice, the perfect mirror of God's infinite and boundless freedom. In Greek, God's boundlessness is expressed by the term *anarchos* which means without limit or without ruling principle.⁴⁷ Thus we can say that Eriugena's perfect man is *anarchic* in character, totally free because he is ruled by nothing other than God's will which is itself total freedom:

Thus, just as the Divine Essence is infinite, so human substance made in Its image is bounded by no definite limit.

Periphyseon, vol. 4, 772a⁴⁸

For if human nature had not sinned and had clung without change to Him Who had created it, it would certainly be omnipotent. Whatever in the universe it wished done would necessarily be done, since it would not wish anything to be done except what it understood that its Creator wished.

Periphyseon, vol. 4, 778b⁴⁹

Eriugena took this doctrine of the potential omnipotence and omniscience of human nature from the Greek writers, notably Gregory of Nyssa.⁵⁰ In the *Periphyseon* Eriugena quotes long passages from Gregory of Nyssa's tract *De Hominis Opificio*, a work which explained the concept of human nature as made in God's image in terms of the complete identity between image and archetype. For Gregory and Scottus, an image resembled its archetype or exemplar in *all* aspects, they differ only in being numerically distinct. Thus Eriugena quotes Gregory:

For if God is the plenitude of good things, and man is an image of God, the image must resemble the Primal Exemplar in this respect also, that it is the plenitude of all good . . . In this respect also it is the image, in that it is free from all necessity, and is subjected to no natural or material authority but possesses in itself a will which is capable of obtaining its desires.

Periphyseon, vol. 4, 796a⁵¹

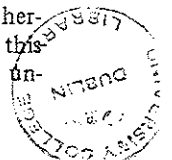
How far this is from the usual humility of medieval statements about man! Man is asserted here as being free from all external authority and all necessity. As the image of God, he mirrors God's perfect freedom and power. Indeed it is difficult to speak about God without recognising that in fact we are also speaking about human nature — a fact which Feuerbach and Marx will utilise in their critique of religion. But for Eriugena, the transcendence of God protects religious utterance from the total conflation of the divine with man. God is always an unknown darkness above the world, it cannot be said *what* He is. But what about man? Can we understand human nature and grasp its essence? If human will is really infinite and boundless then perhaps it is equally impossible to say what man is. Let us now turn to a more detailed examination of Eriugena's concept of human nature and its self-knowledge.

IV.

THE DEFINITION OF MAN

After our cursory examination of Eriugena's understanding of nature, we were led to a consideration of his theory of creation and the concept of human nature involved therein. We must now look more specifically at human nature from the standpoint of knowledge in general and self-knowledge in particular, because, for Eriugena, the return of all things to the One is brought about by man when he purifies his self-understanding and "reverts" upon himself and upon his cause (i.e. God) in the right manner. Self-knowledge then is the lynch-pin of the entire system, as it is also, of course, for the systems of Descartes and the rationalists who followed him.

Eriugena conceives of man as being essentially a mind. Man is *mens*, *spiritus*, *animus* or, in Greek, *nous*.⁵² In itself it is without sexual differentiation into male or female, and indeed, at the highest level, all human minds are one.⁵³ This pure mind has several levels of awareness or contemplation. The highest is that by which it contemplates the hidden darkness of the Father (the One). He calls this "motion" of the soul "simple" because it "surpasses the nature of the soul herself and cannot be interpreted" (*Periphyseon*, vol. 2, 572d).⁵⁴ At this level the soul both knows itself and also by recognising itself as un-



bounded and infinite, it transcends itself towards its source. Eriugena can only speak about this level of contemplation in terms of negatives, because, of course, it is merely a transcendent ideal for man in this fallen, sinful state. The second level of the soul is represented by rational knowledge, which has divided up the primordial unity of the first level into cause and effect.⁵⁵ This second rational level of the self Eriugena considers to be born from the highest intellectual contemplation, in a manner akin to the way in which the Son is generated from the Father:

For just as the wise artist produces his art from himself in himself and foresees in it the things he is to make . . . so the intellect brought forth from itself and in itself its reason, in which it foreknows and causally pre-creates all things which it desires to make.

Periphyseon, vol. 2, 577a-b 56

Thus Eriugena conceives of the mind as a hidden transcendent unity which then creates (manifests) itself in the form of the rational mind we know and understand. Just as God is a transcendent "non-being" above the being of creation, so also the human mind is understood to have a hidden depth which acts to produce the rational and sensible minds. It is this third motion of the soul which links the mind with the outer world and the phantasies of sense.⁵⁷ Eriugena sees the sense level as a further descent from the highest hidden level of the mind. Indeed he sees the *nous* or mind of man as being responsible for the creation of the body:

For (the mind) is made from God in the image of God out of nothing, but the body it creates (itself), though not out of nothing but out of something. For by the action of the soul . . . it creates for itself a body in which it may openly display its hidden actions which in themselves are invisible, and bring them forth into sensible knowledge.

Periphyseon, vol. 2, 580b 58

Eriugena then makes high claims for the nature of man's mind. Not only does it have a hidden perfect side (this is reminiscent of Plotinus's belief that part of the soul remains in the One and does not fall into the alienating realm of sense) which Eriugena says is immortal, omniscient and omnipotent; but the mind also is active in the creation of the realms of reason and sense. Mind gives man a body so that he can articulate his inner thoughts in signs, actions and language, and so that he can receive the phantasies of the world about him. Of course Eriugena makes it sound as if the mind does this freely and willingly, as if it could prevent itself from so doing; and this indeed is what he intends. The fall of man is essentially a fall of the mind into sense, which man chose of his own free will to perform. Fallen human nature then is

temporal and spatial, it operates in the realm of sense knowledge and in the corporeal physical realm. Man at this level is a rational animal.⁵⁹

But even understood as a rational animal Eriugena believes man to be the pinnacle of creation. Following Maximus he sees man as spanning the two worlds of the sensible and the intellectual.

Maximus argues that man "contains within himself all creation"⁶⁰ because he spans the two worlds of sense and intellect, and joins them together in his own self which is a blending of body and mind. Hence all things are said to be contained in man. According to Maximus and Eriugena, man is the *officina omnium*, the container of all things.

For man was created with a nature of so high a status that there is no creature, whether visible or intelligible, that cannot be found in him. For he is composed of the two universal parts of created nature by way of a wonderful union.

Periphyseon, vol. 2, 531a-c⁶¹

Not only is man said to contain all things in this rather loose sense, but Eriugena actually believes that the seeds or principles of all things are contained in the human mind. We have already seen that Eriugena thinks of all things as present in God's wisdom (the Son). It is a short step from this to seeing all things as present in the human mind, because Christ is, Eriugena says, the perfect man.⁶² Man not only operates with reason, he also contains the entire domain of the rational as one aspect of his higher intellectual self. Man, as it were, enfolds reason in himself.⁶³

But how does Eriugena conceive of this human trait of "containing" all things? To answer this question, we need to look at Eriugena's theory of knowledge, his epistemology.

Eriugena understands knowing primarily as a comprehending or defining. Knowledge, for Eriugena, is not simply the scholastic adquisition of thought with reality, but is rather the absorption or subsumption of reality into thought. As with the Neoplatonists, and later with the German idealists, knowledge can best be understood as possessing a certain kind of being in its own right, higher than the being of ordinary material reality.⁶⁴ To know something is to define its essence, that is, for Eriugena, to situate the object into one's conceptual or mental scheme. Since Eriugena held that to know is "higher" than to be known, the mind is placed higher than anything which can be known; but since it can know all things, it is thought to be able to define all things, to give them a place in the logical structure of the mind's knowledge:

Do you see that place is simply the act of him who understands and by virtue of his understanding comprehends

those things which he can comprehend, whether they be sensible or accessible only to intellect.

Periphyseon, vol. 1, 485d⁶⁵

The mind which knows things gives them their place. This is true idealism. Place, Eriugena says, is inseparable from time, and all things in this world are subject to place and time, hence all things are *contained* in the mind. Place is nothing but the limit and definition of every finite nature.⁶⁶ This limit is given by the mind's act of defining or knowing, and since the mind is incorporeal then place itself must be incorporeal. By this circuitous route Eriugena has managed to argue both that the mind contains and circumscribes the whole world and that the spatio-temporal world is essentially immaterial and incorporeal. It is only a fantasy of sense which gives rise to the common belief that the world is made up of corporeal matter.⁶⁷ Once this fantasy has been recognised as an illusion, the mind is brought back to recognise its true power and function in the world (it gives every created essence in the cosmos its place and time), and it is freed from the slavery of the body. It is then free to make the intellectual journey back to God.

But comprehension or definition is not man's only mode of knowing. There exists also in man a kind of non-defining knowledge, a knowledge which does not contain or dominate the known, but is one with what is known.⁶⁸ This is the mode of knowledge by which man grasps those beings which are either equal to or above his own nature. Man cannot define himself or any other human or angel. Man cannot define or comprehend God.

How then does man know himself, others, the angels or God? According to Scottus, the mind has a direct knowledge of its own existence: it knows for certain *that* it exists even though it does not know *what* it is, since knowing-what implies definition, and no mind can define (that is, be the place of) itself.⁶⁹ Man's existential knowledge *that* he exists is as it were a formless kind of knowing, which does not seek to impose structure or limit or definition. It is akin in fact to a form of ignorance.⁷⁰ Ignorance in this sense however is not a defect but is rather an acknowledgement of the unlimited, infinite nature of man. Man knows that he is unknowable and undefinable, this knowledge in itself brings him near to God.

Hence Eriugena does offer a kind of definition of man's nature; he says in volume 3 of the *Periphyseon* that "man is a certain intellectual idea formed eternally in the mind of God."⁷¹ Man knows himself only by defining himself in reference to God's unknowable infinite nature. Eriugena is here expressing the true nature of human transcendence above the world — man's being can only be fully understood by invoking the concept of God. As Eriugena says elsewhere, "man and God are paradigms of each other."⁷²

Thus, just as it can be said of God that He is being *and* that He is the non-being above being, so also it can be said of man that he is a rational animal and that he is not a rational animal.⁷³ He is an intellectual being who comprehends all things in the created world, but he is also a being whose intellect is formless and "circles about" itself and about God. But more than that, Eriugena recognises that man's existence itself is the result of his self-knowledge in the higher sense (knowing-that). Not only does the human mind provide the essential definitions of all other things, but it may also be seen as self-creating.⁷⁴

If then the inner notion (*notio interior*) which is contained in the human mind constitutes the substance of those things of which it is the notion, it follows that the notion by which man knows himself may be considered his very substance.

Periphyseon, vol. 4, 770a⁷⁵

The mind knows itself, Eriugena concludes, as creative of itself (*causa sui*) because it knows that it is identical with the object of knowledge which is itself. When we define man in relation to God we see that man can be understood as one with God because man is an idea in God, and an idea in God according to Eriugena's thinking is a form of self-manifestation of God. When man comes to true self-knowledge, he learns of his proximity to God as the source of his being, and he actually comes to participate in the creative act by which he himself is made.⁷⁶ Thus by thinking back from the spatio-temporal world up through the various motions of the soul until we arrive at the highest self-knowledge, man makes the journey from the fallen embodied world, separated from God, to the *nous* or intellect which shares in God's creative process. The highest form of human self-knowledge turns out to be also a contemplation of God's infinite richness:

And this is the greatest and perhaps the only step towards knowledge of the truth, namely, that human nature should first know and love itself and then refer the whole of its knowledge of itself and the whole of its love of itself to the glory and love and knowledge of the Creator. For if it did not know what is at work in itself, how can it desire to know the things that are above it?

Periphyseon, vol. 2, 611a⁷⁷

This is perhaps the highest expression in medieval philosophy of the need for self-knowledge as a means to gain access to true knowledge and love of God.

V
CONCLUSIONS

In this essay I have tried to show how Eriugena's ideas on man and world culminate in a complex and idealist metaphysical system, the main tenets of which are closer to the modern understanding of the self and the world than they are to our current understanding of the medieval world. Eriugena's system cannot be dismissed as of merely historical interest. The history of philosophy is not so much a history of dead facts and ideas, but is rather an index of possibilities. Eriugena's understanding of human nature as a kind of formless and boundless self-knowledge, which contains within itself infinite possibilities of growth and self-perfection leading ultimately to deification, has very real similarities with both Sartre's and Heidegger's modern conception of man as a "nothingness", an empty space for the revelation of Being. Who can say whether Eriugena's insight, based as it is on the synthesis of Greek and Latin philosophical traditions of a thousand years, may in the end prove more valuable than the insight of contemporary philosophers who have based themselves on less than two hundred years of post-Kantian and phenomenological philosophy? Either way, the contribution of Ireland's first thinker to European philosophy must now be recognised as both original and profound; it will surely be a well-spring of ideas for many generations of philosophers to come.

Harry Bracken

GEORGE BERKELEY,
THE IRISH CARTESIAN

Berkeley is the most important Irish philosopher. Yet despite a number of original ideas and considerable influence, his portrait does not grace one of the new series of Irish bank notes (as does Eriugena's). Although the new library at Trinity College, Dublin, has recently been named in his memory, his name adorns more American than Irish institutions.

It is difficult to learn very much about the forces which moulded Berkeley's reputation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it does seem clear that the reputation he acquired was not firmly based either on the philosophical principles which influenced him or the ideas he in fact articulated. For example, Berkeley's classification (along with John Locke and David Hume) as *British empiricist* helped, I suspect, to create the picture of him as an outsider to Irish intellectual currents. In what follows, it is urged that Berkeley's arguments ought to be taken more seriously in their own right, rather than be forced into a preconceived abstract framework. In short, I contend that one stands a better chance of understanding Berkeley if one reads him as an Irish Cartesian rather than as a "British empiricist".¹

I

While there is little to suggest that Berkeley should be counted as an Irish nationalist, in several entries in the *Philosophical Commentaries* he counts himself as an Irishman: "There are men who Say there are insensible extensions, there are others who Say the Wall is not white, the fire is not hot &c We Irish men cannot attain to these truths" (entry 392). The *We Irish men* is repeated in entries 393, 394, and 398. In his note upon these entries, the great Berkeley scholar, A.A. Luce (from Trinity College, Dublin) writes that "we need not read a political reference into the words. Berkeley certainly always regarded himself as an Irishman, and Newton was, to him, 'a philosopher of a neighbouring nation' (Princ. 110, 1st ed.); but when he writes 'we