

## Eriugena, Johannes Scottus (c.800–c.877)

Johannes Scottus Eriugena is the most important philosopher writing in Latin between Boethius and Anselm. A Christian Neoplatonist, he developed a unique synthesis between the Neoplatonic traditions of Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine. Eriugena knew Greek, which was highly unusual in the West at that time, and his translations of Dionysius and other Greek authors provided access to a theological tradition hitherto unknown in the Latin West. From these sources, Eriugena produced an original cosmology with Nature as the first principle. Nature, the totality of all things that are and are not, includes both God and creation, and has four divisions: nature which creates and is not created, nature which creates and is created, nature which is created and does not create, and nature which is neither created nor creates. These divisions participate in the cosmic procession of creatures from God and in their return to God. As everything takes place within Nature, God is present in all four divisions. Eriugena influenced twelfth-century Neoplatonists but was condemned in the thirteenth century for teaching the identity of God and creation.

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### 1 Life and writings

Little is known about Eriugena's life. His exact place and date of birth are unknown, but contemporary sources refer to him as *scottus*, meaning 'Irish', and he signed one of his manuscripts with the pleonasm 'Eriugena' (Irish born). No evidence of his education survives. Johannes joined the court of Charles the Bald, possibly in the 840s, and achieved recognition as a liberal arts master. Two partial commentaries on *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (*The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*), the liberal arts handbook of the late Latin author Martianus Capella, survive from Eriugena's period as royal master (see [Encyclopedists, medieval §4](#)).

Eriugena was commissioned to refute a treatise by a Saxon monk, Gottschalk, who interpreted [Augustine](#) as teaching a twofold predestination: of the elect and of the damned. Eriugena's response, *De divina praedestinatione* (*On Divine Predestination*), denied predestination by defending God's transcendence and goodness. God, being perfectly good, wants all humans to be saved. Humans, however, damn themselves through their own free choices. God, who is outside time, cannot be said to 'fore-know' or to 'pre-destine', terms which involve temporal predicates. Hence God does not predestine souls to damnation (see [Eternity](#)). Due to a perceived overemphasis on human free-will in the salvific process, Eriugena was accused of Pelagianism (the heresy that human beings can be saved through their own resources rather than by divine grace) (see [Pelagianism](#)), and *De divina praedestinatione* was condemned in France at the councils of Valence (855) and Langres (859). While purporting merely to interpret Augustinian texts, this early treatise is philosophically significant for its rationalistic, dialectical analysis of key theological concepts.

Despite the condemnations of *De divina praedestinatione*, Eriugena continued to have the patronage of Charles the Bald, who invited him to translate the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, a mysterious Christian Neoplatonist, possibly of the sixth century, who imitated

[Proclus](#) and purported to be Dionysius, the first convert of St Paul at Athens (see [Pseudo-Dionysius](#)). This author had been wrongly identified with St Denis, patron saint of France. For Dionysius, it is more true to say ‘God is not’ than ‘God is’, since God is ‘above all the things that are and are not’. Eriugena adopted Dionysius’ affirmative and negative theology, according to which denials concerning God are ‘more true’, ‘better’, ‘more apt’, than affirmations.

Eriugena’s major dialogue, *Periphyseon* or *De divisione naturae* (*On the Division of Nature*) was completed around 867. He also wrote a commentary on Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy* (*Expositiones in hierarchiam coelestem*) and on Maximus’ *Ambigua*. A fragmentary commentary on the Gospel of St. John and a sermon, *Homilia in Johannem* (*Homily on the Prologue to St John’s Gospel*), were also written probably in the late 860s or 870s. A number of poems also survive. It is probable that Eriugena died sometime around 877; an apocryphal tale, dating from the twelfth century, records that he was stabbed to death by his students.

## 2 Sources

Eriugena had no direct knowledge of [Plotinus](#), [Porphyry](#) or Proclus. He appears to have known Plato’s *Timaeus* in Calcidius’ translation (see [Plato](#)). He knew the Pseudo-Augustinian paraphrase of Aristotle’s *Categories*, Rufinus’s Latin translation of Origen’s *De principiis* (*On First Principles*), and Boethius’ trinitarian tracts and *De consolazione philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy*) (see [Boethius, A.M.S.](#); [Origen](#)). His chief authorities were Augustine, Ambrose, Hilary of Poitiers and Jerome, among the Latin Fathers, but he more often expresses a preference for Eastern Church Fathers, in particular Dionysius and the Cappadocians, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, whose *De hominis opificio* (*The Creation of Man*) he translated under the title of *De imagine* (*On the Image of God*). He also translated Maximus Confessor’s *Ambigua* (*Difficult Questions of Interpretation [in Pseudo-Dionysius]*) and *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* (*Questions to Thalassium*) and he may have translated Epiphanius’s *Anchoratus* (*De fide*) (*The Hermit State* (*On Faith*)) (see [Patristic philosophy](#)).

Given the available resources, Eriugena was exceptionally learned, but his genius lay in being able to bring all these ‘authorities’ together in a new cosmological framework. Eriugena enthusiastically incorporated many Greek Christian theological concepts: God, the One, creates by self-emanation; creation is a timeless event and hence ongoing and always contemporary; human nature is originally a Platonic Idea in the mind of God. Humans fail to understand their true nature as image of God in God because they are distracted by created, temporal images (*phantasiai*), leading to a fall into the spatio-temporal realm of sense. However, through intellectual contemplation (*theoria*) and divine illumination (which is the divine self-manifestation, *theophania*), humans may achieve unification (*henosis*) with God, deification (*theosis*). God became man so that humans can become God (see [Platonism, early and middle](#)).

## 3 The divisions of nature

The *Periphyseon*, or *De divisione naturae* (*On the Division of Nature*), a long dialogue in five books between an anonymous teacher and his student, is Eriugena’s major philosophical treatise. It opens with an all-encompassing definition of its subject matter. Nature is the general term ‘for all things that are and all things that are not’ (CXXII I.441a), including both God and creation. The first principle of nature is God, ‘the cause of all things that are and that

are not' (I.442b). Nature is divided into four 'species', echoing similar divisions in Augustine and [Marius Victorinus](#): first, that which creates and is not created (that is, God); second, that which creates and is created (that is, Primary Causes or Ideas); third, that which is created and does not create (that is, Temporal Effects, created things); and fourth, that which is neither created nor creates (that is, non-being or nothingness).

Eriugena proceeds to list five ways (*quinque modi*) in which things may be said to be and not to be. According to the first mode, things accessible to the senses and the intellect are said to be, whereas those which – through their excellence – transcend our faculties are said not to be. According to this classification, God is said not to be; he is 'nothingness through excellence' (*nihil per excellentiam*). The second mode of being and non-being is based on the 'orders and differences of created natures', whereby if one level of nature is said to be, those orders above or below it are said not to be. According to this mode, to affirm 'man' is to negate 'angel' and vice versa. This mode invokes the medieval hierarchy of being and at the same time subverts it by relativising the notion of being: only one level of the hierarchy can at any time be said to be. The third mode asserts that *actual* things are, whereas *potential* things still caught up 'in the secret recesses of nature' are not. The fourth mode says that things which the intellect contemplates truly are, whereas material things caught up in generation do not truly exist. The fifth mode says that humans sanctified by grace are, whereas sinful humans are not.

Eriugena's discussion of being and non-being is subject to a dialectic of affirmation and negation. Being and non-being, then, are correlative categories; something may be said to be under one mode and not to be under another mode. These modes further must be taken into account when assessing Eriugena's metaphysical statements. Thus when Eriugena calls God 'nothing,' he means that God transcends all created being. Matter is called 'nothing through privation' (*nihil per privationem*), and created things are called 'nothing' because they do not contain in themselves their principles of subsistence (see [Being](#)).

*Periphyseon* Book I examines the first division, God. The Aristotelian categories do not properly apply to God, who is not literally (*proprie*) substance or essence, does not possess quantity or quality, has no relations and is not in place and time. God transcends all. His 'being' is beyond being. God is a 'nothingness' whose real essence is unknown to all created beings, including the angels. Indeed, God's nature is unknown even to himself, since he is the 'infinity of infinities' and hence beyond all comprehension and circumscription. God does not know evil, and, in a real sense, God may be said not to know anything (see [God, concepts of](#)).

However, for Eriugena, God also creates himself. He manifests himself in theophanies. This self-creation is God's self-manifestation and also the expression of the Word and the creation of all other things, since all things are contained in the Word. The Word enfolds in itself the Ideas or Primary Causes of all things. God is 'all in all'. All things are in God: '... the Creative nature permits nothing outside itself because outside it nothing can be, yet everything which it has created and creates it contains within itself, but in such a way that it itself is other, because it is superessential, than what it creates within itself' (III.675c). God's transcendent otherness above creatures is precisely that which allows creatures to be within God and yet other than God. Eriugena stresses both the divine transcendence and immanence in creation, which is at the same time the immanence of creatures within God (see [Creation and conservation, religious doctrine of](#)).

God and the creature are one and the same: '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' (III.678c). Eriugena's assertion that God is the 'form of all things' (*forma omnium*) led to the accusation of heresy, an accusation which fixates on one side only of Eriugena's dialectical reasoning. Although Eriugena asserts the identity of God and creation, he explicitly rejects the view that God is the 'genus' or 'whole' of which the creatures are 'species' or 'parts'. Only metaphorically (*metaforice, translative*) can it be said that God is a 'genus' or a 'whole'. The immanence of God in creation is balanced by God's transcendence above all things. God is both form of all things and without form.

*Periphyseon* Book II discusses the Primary Causes located in the mind of God. This doctrine combines the Platonic theory of Forms, Dionysius's discussion of the divine names and the Stoic–Augustinian notion of eternal reasons. The number of causes is infinite and none has priority over the other; for example, Being is not prior to Goodness, or vice versa. Each is a divine theophany. The very nature of these Causes is to flow out from themselves, bringing about their Effects. This outflowing (*exitus*) creates the whole universe from the highest genus to the lowest species. In this causal procession, like produces like; incorporeal causes produce incorporeal effects (see [Causation](#)). All created things are essentially incorporeal, immaterial, intellectual and eternal. Place and time are definitions which locate things, and since definitions are in the mind, then place and time are also in the mind. The sensible, corporeal spatio-temporal appearance of things is produced by the qualities or 'circumstances' of place, time, position and so on, which surround the incorporeal essence. The whole spatio-temporal world and our corporeal bodies are a consequence of the Fall, an emanation of the mind.

Book III discusses the nature of creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*). 'Nothing' has two meanings. The lowest rung in the hierarchy of being, unformed matter, is 'almost nothing' (*prope nihil*), 'nothingness through privation' (*nihil per privationem*). In contrast, God is non-being through excellence. Creation from nothing cannot mean creation from a principle outside God, since there is nothing outside God. *Ex nihilo* creation then means 'out of God's superabundant nothingness'. God creates out of himself and all creation remains within him.

Books IV and V discuss the return (*reditus*) of all things to God. Corporeal things will return to their incorporeal causes, the temporal to the eternal. The human mind will achieve reunification with the divine, and then the corporeal, temporal and material world will become essentially incorporeal, timeless and intellectual. Human nature will return to its Idea in the mind of God. This perfect human nature is paradise. There is a general return of all things to God. Humans who refuse to let go of the 'circumstances' remain trapped in their own phantasies, and this constitutes hell. The elect achieve a special deification whereby they will merge with God completely, as lights blend into the one light. Neither hell or heaven are localized; for Eriugena, they are intellectual states.

Eriugena's anthropology has been the focus of much philosophical interest in the twentieth century. For Eriugena, 'rational animal' does not adequately define human nature, nor is humanity a microcosm: humanity is an Idea eternally made in the mind of God. Perfect human nature is omniscient and omnipotent. Human nature is open to infinite possibility and perfectibility (see [Perfectionism](#)).

#### 4 Influence and significance

Eriugena had immediate influence in France, notably at the schools of Laon, Auxerre and Corbie. His translations of Dionysius were widely used into the thirteenth century. His *Vox spiritualis* (*The Spiritual Voice*) or *Homilia in Johannem* (often attributed to Origen) was widely read in the Middle Ages. The *Periphyseon* was popular in the twelfth century especially in the paraphrase of Honorius Augustodunensis; [Hugh of St Victor](#), Alanus of Lille, Suger of St Denis and William of Malmesbury were all influenced by Eriugena. In the thirteenth century, the *Periphyseon* was associated with the writings of [David of Dinant](#) and Amaury of Bène, two theologians at the University of Paris, and was condemned with them in 1210 and 1225. According to Thomas Aquinas, Amaury of Bène was condemned for saying that God is the formal principle of all things, an accusation of pantheism, which recalled Eriugena's statement that God is the 'form of all things' (*forma omnium*). In the later Middle Ages both [Meister Eckhart](#) of Hochheim and [Nicholas of Cusa](#) were sympathetic to Eriugena and familiar with his *Periphyseon*. Interest in Eriugena was revived by Thomas Gale's edition of *De divisione naturae* (1681). Hegel and his followers saw Eriugena as the father of German idealism (see [German Idealism](#)). Critical editions of his major works are only now being produced.

Eriugena is an original philosopher who articulates the relation between God and creation in a manner which preserves both divine transcendence and omnipresence. His theory of human nature is rationalist and intellectualist. His theory of place and time as defining structures of the mind anticipates Kant, and his dialectical reasoning prefigures Hegel. Eriugena is a mystic who emphasises the unity of human nature with God.

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