



## John Scotus Erigena Denis Hawkins

[John Scotus Erigena] stands apart as a unique figure among the worthy but not usually very venturesome thinkers of the Carolingian Renaissance....[I]n the middle of the ninth century, he developed a complete and symmetrical philosophical system.

Very little is known of the personality of John Scot the Irishman except what we can deduce from his works, but we meet with him at the court of Charles the Bald. In a knowledge of Greek he possessed an accomplishment unusual at his period, and he made use of it in translations of the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius and of the *Ambigua* of Maximus the Confessor. His philosophical system is expounded in the original work *De Divisione Naturae*.

This system is an elaborate construction with obvious derivation from later Neoplatonism after the manner of Proclus. One wonders how Erigena picked up his ideas, for there is no sufficient evidence that he had read Plotinus or Proclus themselves. The Neoplatonic elements in Augustine do not account for Erigena's full-blown Neoplatonic system. However, as we have seen, he had studied the Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus, and no doubt he had access to Macrobius. Nor was living contact between the Latin West and the Eastern Empire completely lacking. We read of an unnamed *Atheniensis sophista* at the court of Charlemagne, and whoever taught Erigena Greek in the time of Charlemagne's grandson may also have initiated him orally into the architecture of the Neoplatonic systems.

Erigena's work states and develops a fourfold division of nature. Nature here has no narrower signification than reality, but reality, for Erigena, is indeed a nature in the Aristotelian sense, a principle of becoming, for it necessarily evolves by the familiar Neoplatonic mode of emanation. The divisions of nature are the principal stages in the evolution of reality. What Erigena sets out to provide, then, is a synthetic view of the development of being according to its inner intelligible necessity.

The first division of nature or stage of being is the nature which creates and is not created. This is the absolutely undifferentiated primordial unity of God. Like the One of Plotinus, it transcends mind as well as matter in its dazzling simplicity and is completely beyond the common measure of thought.

From this original unity proceeds the nature which is created and creates; this is the second division of nature. It is the intelligible world, the world of essences, forming a unity in the Logos. After the example of the Neoplatonists, Erigena makes Plato's ideal world into a cosmic mind, subordinate, however, to an original simple unity which transcends mind. As a Christian, if not a very orthodox one, he identifies this second nature with the second Person of the Trinity.

The realization of the divine ideas existing in the Logos is the formation of the world of persons and things which is the world of our experience; this is the third division of nature, the nature which is created and does not create. Everything that exists, says Erigena, is a theophany, a manifestation of God. Even more, the reality of things is no other than the reality of God unfolding itself.

So far the process has been one of unfolding and, in its increasing multiplicity and

incompleteness, of descent from the majestic simplicity of absolute being. But the process is consummated by an ascent back to its beginning. There is a return of all things to God, which is the fourth division of nature, the nature which neither creates nor is created. Things fulfil their destiny not by perishing but by being taken up once again into the divine unity.

Man, emerging first of all as an idea in the Logos and then realized in the actual human race, has to learn to transcend not only sense-experience but also the ordinary operations of the discursive reason. Thus he attains to the contemplation of God and is at the same time one with God; he enjoys a mystical intuition (*gnosticus intuitus*) which is a vision of all things in God. Here Erigena remembers Christian dogma once more and describes how, in order to raise fallen man from his sinful state and to enable him to rise to the contemplation of God, the Logos himself entered the world and, as Christ, redeemed us.

That so impressive a system should have come to birth amid the first glimmerings of mediaeval civilization in the ninth century is a proof of the exceptional intellectual power of Erigena. Its faults, however, are obvious. It displays what we have called the gnostic tendency, the tendency to incorporate the Christian faith into a philosophical system and to represent its doctrines as objects of direct rational insight for the completely enlightened mind. In reality, something which claims to be a divine revelation demanding the assent of faith must be primarily concerned with truths which are not accessible to direct rational insight. Since a revelation, if it occurs, is an historical fact, its credibility must be judged by reference to the historical events through which it took its rise. Hence philosophy, even when it is concerned with the being of God, has a different source and method from theology, and to reduce Christianity to a philosophy is to alter its whole nature. Erigena is guilty of confusing theology with philosophy. Although his is not an isolated case in the middle ages, this mistake cannot be said to be one to which the mediaeval thinkers were in general prone. It can, however, be said that the distinction gradually became clearer as the thought of the middle ages developed.

Moreover, whatever the intentions of Erigena may have been, the system at which he arrived is plainly pantheistic. The fourfold division of nature indicates phases in the evolution of a single divine reality which first unfolds itself and then, in the last phase, returns into itself again. God "spreads out into all things . . . and this very spreading out is all things". "The essence of all things is no other than the knowledge of all things in the divine wisdom." Such conclusions set Erigena apart from the main line of the eminently Christian thinking of the middle ages. While they were enough in themselves to ensure that he should not exercise any dominating influence, the very sweep and elevation of his thought was so remote from the common run of ninth-century preoccupations that it contributed to the same result. That little attention was paid to him is shown by his having for so long escaped ecclesiastical condemnation; that he continued to enjoy a discreet reputation and to be read by a few is proved by the eventual condemnation of his work after three centuries and a half by Honorius III in 1225. But he was not left entirely without spiritual descendants; there is a notable affinity, for example, in Master Eckhart and, still more, in Nicholas of Cusa.

Meanwhile it is not irrelevant to an appreciation of later mediaeval philosophy to consider what the roots of pantheism are. Pantheism, of course, has a certain foundation in spontaneous religious feeling, in a sense of the nothingness of creatures and the infinite being of God. To speak of the nothingness of creatures is admissible as an emotional utterance and is familiar in religious literature; if it be taken as a

literally accurate statement, the outcome is pantheism.

Within the sphere of strict metaphysics, however, the source of pantheism may be said to be the neglect of the notion of individual existence\* If thinking be carried on exclusively in terms of universal notions, within the realm of essences, reality tends to be exhibited as a single, necessary, unchangeable intellectual system. We think of the descriptions of things in terms of universals and forget the things themselves. How, then, do things differ among themselves except by negation, by an unreality? Hence finitude appears in the end to be unreal, and the sum of reality is the only reality. Pantheism is, therefore, a view to which Platonists, with their emphasis on the ideal and the universal, are naturally inclined; one says Platonists rather than Plato, for Plato himself displays a much greater balance than most of those who have taken his name.

The balance is in fact restored when we remember that reality is not exhausted by description in universal terms. That a universal should be verified entails that an individual thing exists and manifests it. Existence is necessarily individual, and the finitude of the finite individual is not a mere negation but the limit of its being. A correct evaluation of individual existence is the refutation of pantheism, and the elucidation of this point is, as we shall see, a merit of St. Thomas Aquinas.

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Denis Hawkins. *A Sketch of Medieval Philosophy*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1946. This text is in the public domain.