John Scottus Eriugena: Analysing the Philosophical Contribution of an Forgotten Thinker

Abstract: Historically John Scottus Eriugena's influence has been somewhat underestimated within the discipline of philosophy, making an inquiry into his thought important for understanding his influence on later thinkers such as Meister Eckhart, Nicolas of Cusa and the German Idealists. This paper seeks to examine the contribution to philosophy by Eriugena. This will be done with an analysis of his four divisions of nature and five modes of being, examining how he incorporates and attempts to synthesise the thought of his predecessors from within the Neo-Platonic and Christian traditions which so strongly influenced him and how he manages to produce a profoundly innovative metaphysics. The significance of his contribution will, therefore, be discussed showing how Eriugena attempts to reinforce key insights from earlier thinkers who influenced him while at the same time articulating a highly original metaphysical system, paving the way for future thought, placing special emphasis on the human mind and dialectical reasoning.

Keywords: Eriugena; Nature; God; Metaphysics; Dialectic.

The influence of John Scottus Eriugena is often understated throughout history, his name lost to the annals of time but that is not to reflect his contribution to philosophy. He was a profoundly insightful thinker, active in an age frequently overlooked between the two great epochs of early classical philosophy and the rise of scholasticism and Thomas Aquinas. A noteworthy characteristic of Eriugena was his ability to read Greek and the writings opened up to him as a result no doubt had a profound influence upon his thought, resulting in one of the most intricate metaphysical systems of the medieval period. Drawing from a broad range of thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor to name but a few, Eriugena sought to synthesise Neo-Platonism with his Christian leanings.

Considering this, his five modes of being and non-being will first be examined. The significance of the subjective mind will be discussed with regards his conception of being as perspectival in addition to examining what it is Eriugena
means when he refers to the being or non-being of something. Following this, the four divisions of nature will be analysed. Firstly taking on board what he means by the term nature as well as accounting for the significance of the human mind once again to this system, the dialectical method employed by Eriugena will be considered also from the perspective of it as not just a logical structure but also an ontological structure. Interestingly, it is not merely his ontology but the Pseudo-Dionysian influence of a hyper-ontology and meontology that defines Eriugena’s philosophy and this, it is hoped will be evident throughout the discussion. Taking all this into consideration, we see the contribution of the Irish man to be a significant one, highly notable for it’s originality inside such fixed disciplines.

In order to fully grasp Eriugena’s five modes of being and non-being, we must clarify what it is he means by the terms being and non-being. Being seems to be a straightforward concept, one that we often apply to physical phenomena or Platonic ideals, if we are so inclined. Conversely, non-being has traditionally carried the meaning of that which is not, a void, nothing through privation. However, according to Moran, Fredegisus saw the term “nothing” as problematic as all meaningful language signifies something. It is from the understanding we see Eriugena claim there to be reality beyond being, thus deconstructing the exclusivity of two terms seen to be synonymous with one another and introducing the concept of nothing par excellence. God is nothing because, (for want of a better term) his being is beyond being and is said not to be.

Throughout his five modes, it is interesting that given his ontology is based on perspective; being and non-being can be ranked differently. In this manner, we are not looking at a straightforward descending hierarchy of beyond being, being and what is not. Being is not the focus of his enterprise, but upon careful analysis we see that something has being is secondary to its being known to the subjective mind.\footnote{Dermot Moran, \textit{The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages}, p. 213 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990)} This insight clarifies any apparent contradictions that we see in explaining the five modes as they are relative to the perceiver.

The first mode defines being as what can be sensually perceived or intellectually grasped. This mode appeals primarily to our cognitive faculties to perceive and reflect upon things we think about or sensually engage with. Non-being in this first mode is seen to be greater because it has a reality that cannot be confined to what is apparent to humans. Eriugena’s meontological approach becomes evident here in how he describes what is not by virtue of what it is not. It is beyond being and can thus be no-thing. The second mode of being and non-being refers to a hierarchy and how things can be said to be or not be in relation to one another. To affirm that which is higher is to negate that which is lower and vice-versa. To affirm the being of an angel is to negate that it is a human. Likewise, a human is a non-angel as angels do not exist in the way that humans do. The negative theology of Eriugena, borrowed from Dionysius is evident in this stage. Indeed, it is the tool in which being known is prioritised over being itself. The third mode can be seen to be a derivative of the first mode, defining being by what actually is and what is not in a state of potentiality.
It is firmly rooted in the present moment, a seed is, while the tree it could potentially be is not. However, these are active categories and the seed can be said not to be when it grows. It is not subject to a Parmenidean critique that only that which is unchanged is said to exist. In this mode, being is seen to be greater than non-being. The fourth division shows quite a Platonic sympathy. Simply put, only intelligible and unchanging things are said to be. In one manner, we could perhaps cite a kind of Platonic form which is said to exist because it is intelligible and importantly, is not caught up in a cycle of change. In this way, we might say that the seed from mode three is not because it is in a process of change. The form that we extract from the seed, that being the idea of a seed, is said to exist in this case. In this way, mode four is in contradiction to modes one and three. Mode five is different given it applies directly to human affairs and is strictly theological. That which is, is because it is sanctified by divinity whilst what is not is not because of rejecting grace. As all is the self-manifestation of God to Eriugena, through rejecting God, we become a non-being through privation. Mode five also stands contrary to mode three if one considers the potentiality for human goodness, the prospect of redemption that affirms our existence in mode five and the actuality of an evil action.

The significance of Eriugena’s philosophy is clear not merely from his conception of being and non-being, but how he characterises this in his writings in a maximal way that can appear to be incompatible in an absolute sense but not subjectively. When mind enters and perceives, the being known is prioritised to being itself and is strongly rooted in what is being focused. The aim of his philosophy is not to be intrinsically coherent despite being constructed in a dialectical manner. The significance of the subjective pervades his work. Furthermore, Eriguena admits that
there could also be more than five modes and is strongly pragmatic in this regard. His
five modes of being and non-being represent a significant contribution to philosophy
in situating the human mind in a prestigious location to not just perceive what is and
is not, but add value to what is abstracted.

In his four divisions of nature, Eriugena attempts to describe the dynamics of
Neo-Platonic metaphysics of rest, procession and return in the One. Nature is
classified by all that is and is not, including God. The hierarchy Eriugena
describes is not one regarding the downward transcendence of grace and divinity,
with each subsequent stratum less real than before, but is instead processional with
divinity evident in equal proportions to the other divisions. The hierarchy of nature is
thus horizontal and not vertical. Nature is not an environment of matter and substance,
but includes order, cosmic hierarchy, natural law, natural order and the influence of
Boethius means Eriugena also includes the incorporeal in his definition. It is a place
where minds meet and is resolved by the mind. The reduction of the four divisions
back into the One displays this. The first and fourth divisions are generally taken as
representative of God, the uncreated creator and uncreating uncreated, divided only
by mental distinction. The second and third divisions constitute cause, effect and
indeed, the relationship between cause and effect. The second division is taken as the
Primary Causes, that which is created and creative. The third division is taken as the
world of effects, the uncreating created. Cause and effect are defined by their relation
to one another and often stratified vertically as effect owes it’s being to a cause.
Eriugena differs from other thinkers by placing these two on equal footing, their
definitions may be hierarchical but Eriugena sees their realities to be equal. God is
reflected in the causes and is ultimately resolved in himself and so, all is intrinsically
linked. One can see clearly that definition is what distinguishes the four modes from one another but they are fundamentally bound by their unity in oneness.

It seems trivial to detail four divisions if all is reducible to the One, yet this is the innovation of Eriugena once again; centralising the mind as a key determinant in defining the four divisions as epistemological categories to attempt to understand what is infinite. Hierarchy is merely a product of the mind and is essentially subjective as a result. Without hierarchy, the space between creator and created is lost, reducing all to one. The great value and power attributed to the mind is remarkable as it departs completely from prior conceptions of human reason and mental faculties as limited and unreliable.

Eriugena’s dialectic underlies his treatise on nature. While it guides his discussion, the dialectic is reflected in the four divisions themselves; division, definition, demonstration and resolution. Division represents the emanation out from the one, definition is a prerequisite to understanding something one hopes to reproduce in a demonstration prior to a reaching resolution. Dialectic is the tool of the mind which distinguishes the four divisions in the One since, as seen the dialectical method is intrinsic to the four divisions themselves. Furthermore, these processes are seen in a unity as they are in a state of continuity. God is realising and resolving itself through itself in the four divisions.

Eriugena’s four divisions of nature represent a significant contribution to philosophy in its use of dialectic, departing from an authoritative appeal to scriptural

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citation. Indeed, speaking on his use of dialectic, cited by Moran he claims to only use scriptural reference when, “the gravest necessity requires that human reason be supported for the sake of those who, being untrained in it, are more amenable to authority than reason.”4 His emphasis on logical structure and reimagining the dialectic in an ontological sense, not merely in an epistemological manner, displays a great ingenuity. This insight is expounded by Eriugena’s use of the dialectic also to bring forward the human mind in a completely different manner, a mind that orders and shapes the hierarchies of reality in accordance with its focus. This shatters all prior conceptions of the human mind as limited and fragile, applying new meaning to it and indeed, significant implications for what is valued and how it is valued in his metaphysics. The use of a hyperontology and a meontology adapted from Pseudo-Dionysius is important to establishing his treatise in developing a greater insight to being and non-being, how this dichotomy relates to the emanation, realisation and resolution of God in tandem with the significance of the perceiver to all these processes and states of reality. Eriugena’s contribution to philosophy is significantly overlooked, unfairly so considering his keynote innovations in redefining terms and metaphysics but fundamentally how he brings all these together and synthesises the influences of his predecessors with his own distinct perspective.

Bibliography


