

Johannes Scottus Eriugena: The End of Thought

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Johannes Scottus Eriugena was born in Ireland in the first quarter of the ninth century.¹ His first certain appearance in historical records occurs around 850, when bishop Pardulus of Laon mentions Eriugena in a letter as *scotum illum qui est in palatio regis, Joannem nomine*. He was a teacher of the liberal arts at the court of Charles the Bald, grandson of Charlemagne. Because of his considerable familiarity with the Greek language, which was quite remarkable for a scholar in Western Europe in the Carolingian era, Charles the Bald asked Eriugena to undertake a new translation of the works of Dionysius the Areopagite, the enigmatic fifth century author who assumed the name of the Athenian disciple of Paul (Acts 17:34). After having completed his translation of the Dionysian corpus Eriugena went on to translate other Greek Christian texts, including Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio* and Maximus the Confessor's *Ambigua ad Ioannem*. The influence of the Greek texts he translated is remarkably present in Eriugena's own major work, the *Periphyseon*. This work was probably begun in the early 860s, shortly after he had completed the translation of Dionysius, and was finished around 867. He adopted some of Dionysius' main ideas, especially the distinction between affirmative and negative theology. Because of the importance of these ideas for the *Periphyseon* I will first consider the thought of Dionysius and negative theology.

The Paradox of apophatic speech

The basic premise of negative theology is that God is so far beyond human understanding that we can only hope to get nearer to the divine nature by focusing on what God is *not*. Its basic methodology is to replace the traditional positive statements about God by negative statements declaring what God *is not*, and this is a procedure with a definite and positive purpose. The language of negative theology is a language in which negative statements are used in order to rise by way of negation to the infinite and nameless One, that is beyond all finite comprehension. *Apophysis*, as the language of negative theology is also called, is a negative language with a well hidden but unmistakable positive element. After all, there must be a purpose to this negative speaking and we cannot characterize it just by saying what the reward for all these efforts *is not*. There must be some different, positive, way to name or indicate the goal of *apophatic* speech.

Apophaticism is the theology which is practiced against the background of the human ignorance of the divine nature. This, however, is not a pre-critical ignorance but an acquired ignorance, a *docta ignorantia*. This term reveals the deep paradox of negative theology. This paradox not only characterizes negative theology but generally surfaces when people, from a deep awareness of the limits of their knowledge, thought and speech, try to describe these limits and what lies beyond.² Speaking about the limits of thought or speech means having to deal with the paradox.

¹ Cf. Maïeul Cappuyens, *Jean Scot Érigène, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensée*. Brussels 1964, 3-30.

² Graham Priest's, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Oxford 2002, is an extensive study of ways of speaking of the limits of thought. 'Thought' is the possible content of a statement, or, as Priest says: (...) 'thought', here, should

Dionysius the Areopagite and negative theology

What apophatic discourse is must be established in relation to its pendant, kataphatic discourse, just as negative theology can only be explained as the counterpart of positive theology. These ways of speaking about God play an important part in the work of Eriugena, who found them in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite. The works of Dionysius show unmistakable Neoplatonic influences, especially in his view of the hierarchical order of the world, but he was the first to develop the apophatic paradox to the full.³ The *Corpus Dionysiacum* consists of *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Theology* and ten *Letters*.⁴ Dionysius mentions at least seven other works he claims to have written, but it is not known whether these works are lost or perhaps even never existed.

In *The Divine Names* Dionysius discusses all kinds of predicates and names we use of the divine nature. These names belong to different kinds and different levels: there is a hierarchy of names, a sacred order which is also the order of the created world. *Hierarchy* means that some predicates denote physical properties, while others name ever higher, spiritual qualities. We cannot know God in his nature, but we know him from the arrangement of everything because, says Dionysius, everything is in a sense projected out from him and this order possesses certain images of the divine paradigms.⁵ *The Divine Names* contains kataphatic, positive, theology. However, the names of God are just metaphors and can never give us any real knowledge of him. What then is the meaning of these names?

And if all knowledge is of that which is and is limited to the realm of the existent, then whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge.

How then can we speak of the divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding? How can we enter upon this undertaking if the Godhead is superior to being and is unspeakable and unnameable?⁶

The Mystical Theology, the shortest and most influential of the Dionysian writings, provides the answer to these questions and shows Dionysius' way to handle the apophatic paradox. It was also to become one of the central texts of the western mystical tradition.

be understood in its objective, Fregean, sense, as the contents of our intensional states, not our subjective consciousness.' (3).

³ Cf. Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Vol. I, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 157-182. As McGinn says 'More than any other patristic author, Dionysius used language (indeed a very special language of his own) to subvert the claims of language – a position that has remained controversial.' (176).

⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid, Foreword, notes and translation collaboration by Paul Rorem, Preface by Rene Roques. Paulist Press, New York Mahwah 1987.

⁵ *The Divine Names* 869D, Luibheid, 108.

⁶ *The Divine Names*, 593 A-B, Luibheid, 53.

The concept 'mystical theology' does not signify a certain kind of experience, but the knowledge that deals with the mystery of God in himself. The names of God must all be negated because they are never literally true of him. Dionysius does so systematically in *The Mystical Theology*, which thereby becomes the description of the mystical ascent. The negations of the predicates of God are placed in the hierarchical order of *The Divine Names*, starting from the predicates which are furthest removed from his nature, i.e. which are derived from perceptible creatures (e.g. God is material) and then moving upwards to the higher and more likely predicates, the conceptual names of God (e.g. God is good, God is wise). It is easier to deny that God is material than it is to deny that God is good or wise. In this way there is a hierarchy of negations which starts from obviously inapplicable predicates and moves to names and predicates that seem the most appropriate. Eventually all language is found to fall short: negative language does not lead to knowledge of God and has to be denied as well. Not just the names or predicates must be negated, but also the negations and the negations of negations, for the divine nature is beyond assertion and denial. Every negation is a step up the ladder of mystical ascent and in the end:

the most divine knowledge of God, that which comes through unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind, when mind turns away from all things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays, being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable dept of Wisdom.⁷

Chapters 4 and 5 of *The Mystical Theology* are a demonstration of the mystical ascent by means of negations, but in the end the supreme Cause of all is found to transcend all:

It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth - it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.⁸

In the mystical ascent there is a definite order of denials, derived from the (positive) order of predicates and although the sequence of denials does not reach its goal, the goal must somehow (positively) be made clear. We cannot know God, he transcends everything we can say, and yet we must know something about him to make the negations work. What we say about Him must make sense. Our assertions are at the same time true and not true of God. What are we to do about this paradox, that seems to be inherent in apophatic discourse? No predicate can truly be said of God, negations are superior to affirmations in speaking of God, negations are a 'higher' language than

⁷ *The Divine Names*, 872 A-B, Luibheid, 109.

⁸ *The Mystical Theology*, 1048 A-B, Luibheid, 141.

affirmative language. But Dionysius cannot deny the positive aspect altogether: there can only be a hierarchy of negations because there is a hierarchy of (positive) predicates. Negation does not only not solve the paradox, but it needs affirmation to serve a theological purpose. Creation is hierarchically ordered and so are the divine names and their negations and 'the goal of the hierarchy, then, is to enable being to be as like as possible to God and to be one with him.'⁹ Apophatic speech does not consist just of denials, it is a kind of performative language in which every negation is a step in the process. What was found to be impossible in kataphatic speech is now performed indirectly by negative speech. Without positive theology we would not know that apophatic speech involves an ascent or where it leads to. In this way kataphasis and apophasis are always connected, and the contradiction remains. In moving beyond the limits of affirmative and negative theology, we must understand God to be more-than-good, super-good, the super-excellent goodness, the super-divine divinity etc. He is more than ineffable and more than unknowable, beyond every assertion and denial.¹⁰ Negative theology does not stop at the end of negation, nor at the level of super-affirmation. Its fullest expression is reached when the mind leaves all knowing and all intellectual pursuits behind in unknowing, *agnosia*, beyond all affirmations and negations. The end of kataphatic and apophatic speech is the negation of all language, a contemplation beyond language. 'Beyond the outermost boundaries of the world, the soul is brought into union with God himself to the extent that every one of us is capable of it.'¹¹ In the end the paradox is solved only when language itself disappears. The conclusion is that there has been no need to take drastic measures against paradox but that it has served its purpose. Dionysius seems to have made good use of the paradox, but the question remains whether he has done so at the cost of the logical principles, especially the law of non-contradiction. And then, how bad would that be?

When it comes to apophatic discourse and speaking about God, logic in general is often considered to be an impediment, for different reasons and to different degrees. Graham Priest has studied languages which aim to go beyond the limits of the knowable and thinkable and want to say something of what lies beyond. He discusses a wide variety of philosophers, from Cratylus and Plato to Wittgenstein and Derrida, who have investigated the limits of thought and speech. Their presupposition was that there are matters, aspects of reality, that transcend the possibilities of ordinary language. In the end they all get entangled in paradox when they try to say something about the inexpressible or indicate what is beyond the limit of the expressible. Priest notices that this paradox keeps turning up. If one has solved the paradox in one place, it reappears at another. The purpose of his book is to show that there is no real way out, no consistent method that deals with paradox for good:

Limits of this kind provide boundaries beyond which certain conceptual processes (describing, knowing, iterating, etc.) cannot go; a sort of conceptual *ne plus ultra*. The thesis of the book is that such limits are dialetheic; that is, that they are the subject, or locus, of true contradictions. The contradiction, in each case, is simply to the effect that the

⁹ *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 165 A, Luibheid, 154.

¹⁰ *The Divine Names*, 640 D-641 A, Luibheid, 61.

¹¹ *The Divine Names*, 981 B, Luibheid, 130.

conceptual processes in question *do* cross these boundaries. Thus, the limits of thought are boundaries which cannot be crossed, but yet which are crossed.¹²

Dialetheism is the view that, contrary to the tenets of classical logic, there are true contradictions and that these are to be found at the limits of thought.

Michael A. Sells too argues that in the case of apophatic languages, the classical logical principles do not hold:¹³

The position taken here is that the paradoxes, aporias, and coincidences of opposites within apophatic discourse are not merely apparent contradictions. Real contradictions occur when language engages the ineffable transcendent, but these contradictions are not illogical. For the apophatic writer, the logical rule of non-contradiction functions for object entities. When the subject of discourse is a non-object and no-thing, it is not irrational that such a logic be superseded.

Sells adds that this is true of apophatic discourse as well as other kinds of language, e.g. poetry.

The last option is to jettison logical principles altogether and to place all speaking about God outside the bounds of any rational discourse. Many authors on negative theology, notably from the late nineteenth century onward, have tended to consider religion, and especially mysticism, as a matter not primarily of thought but of experience. Denys Turner calls the latter view 'experientialism'. In *The Darkness of God* Turner sketches the development of mediaeval Christian mysticism, starting with Dionysius the Areopagite. He emphasizes that the purpose of the so-called *via negativa* was not to allow a precise account of the human encounter with the divine but, on the contrary, to criticize a too explicitly experiential interpretation of it:

I have drawn the conclusion from my study that in so far as the word 'mysticism' has a contemporary meaning; and that in so far as that contemporary meaning links 'mysticism' to the cultivation of certain kinds of experience – of 'inwardness', 'ascent' and 'union' – then the mediaeval 'mystic' offers an *anti-mysticism*. For though the mediaeval Christian neoplatonist used that same language of interiority, ascent and 'oneness', he or she did so precisely in order to deny that they were terms descriptive of 'experiences'.¹⁴

As Turner contends, Dionysius does not want to put forward experience as a remedy for contradictions in thought, but keeps up rationality to the end.

(...) if we read the mediaeval Neoplatonic mystics – and increasingly they are being read – from within the perspectives of a contemporary 'experientialism' we will very grossly misread them, for we will find in them allies for a position which, in truth, they reject.¹⁵

¹² Priest, 3.

¹³ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Chicago 1994, 3-4.

¹⁴ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge repr. 1999, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

Dionysius' method is to face paradox and engage in the rational ascent by positive and negative speech and see where it takes him.¹⁶

Periphyseon

Eriugena's *Periphyseon* is an extensive work, intending to give an exposition of all available knowledge of its time, both of God and the whole of created beings. The *Periphyseon* (later known under its Latin name *De Divisione Naturae*) is divided into five books and is written as a dialogue between a teacher (nutritor, magister) and his pupil (alumnus, discipulus). It begins as follows:

Nutritor: As I frequently ponder and, so far as my talents allow, ever more carefully investigate the fact that the first and fundamental division of all things which either can be grasped by the mind or lie beyond its grasp is into those that are and those that are not, there comes to mind as a general term for them all what in Greek is called PHYSIS and in Latin Natura. Or do you think otherwise?

Alumnus. No, I agree. For I too, when I enter upon the path of reasoning, find that this is so. N. Nature, then, is the general name, as we said, for all things, for those that are and those that are not.

A. It is. For nothing at all can come into our thought that would not fall under this term.

N. Then since we agree to use this term for the genus, I should like you to suggest a method for its division by differentiations into species; or, if you wish, I shall first attempt a division, and your part will be to offer sound criticism.

A. Pray begin. For I am impatient to hear from you a true account of this matter.

N. It is my opinion that the division of Nature by means of four differences results in four species, (being divided) first into that which creates and is not created, secondly into that which is created and also creates, thirdly into that which is created and does not create, while the fourth neither creates nor is created (...)

A. (...) the first is understood to be the Cause of all things that are and are not, Who is God; the second to be the primordial causes and the third those things that become manifest through coming into being in times and places.¹⁷

The fourth species, by which Alumnus declares himself to be much perplexed, is identified as God, contemplated as the end to which the whole of creation will return.

Eriugena thus starts by making two divisions of nature (*natura*).¹⁸ The second division of nature in four species, or forms, determines the arrangement of the *Periphyseon* itself, which was meant to

¹⁶ Cf. Willemien Otten, 'In the Shadow of the Divine: Negative Theology and Negative Anthropology in Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena', in: *The Heythrop Journal* 1999, 438-455, and Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God, Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain 1995, 279-322.

¹⁷ Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Periphyseon (De Diuisione Naturae) Liber Primus, 441 A - 442 B. Translations for quotations from the book I, II and III are from: I.P. Sheldon-Williams & Ludwig Bieler (eds.), *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae) Liber Primus, Liber Secundus, Liber Tertius*. Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, vols. VII, IX, XI), reprint 1978; first published 1968, 1972, 1981. Translations from book IV and V are from the edition: *Periphyseon (The Division of Nature)* translation by I.P. Sheldon-Williams, revised by John J. O'Meara, Montréal 1987.

consist of four books. Book I is about the creating and not created form of nature, that is, God considered as creator, book II is about the creating and created form, that is the primordial causes, the subject of book III is the created and not creating form of nature, the things created in time and place. The fourth form of nature, the form that is not created and not creating is discussed in both book IV and book V. Because of the scope of his subject Eriugena finds himself compelled to add a fifth volume to his work, in which the discussion of the return of creation to its Cause is completed.

The first and foremost division of nature mentioned, into being and non-being, arises from the distinction between things that can be grasped by the mind and things that extend beyond the mind's reach. This division appears to have five modes of interpretation:

N. Of these five modes the first seems to be that by means of which reason convinces us that all things which fall within the perception of bodily sense or (within the grasp of) intelligence are truly and reasonably said to be, but that those which because of the excellence of their nature elude not only all sense but also all intellect and reason rightly seem not to be – which are correctly understood only of God and of the reasons and essences of all the things that are created by Him.¹⁹

The first division of nature into being and non being is therefore based on the judicial capacity of the rational faculty. God and the essences of all created things elude the grasp of the mind and *are not*. If we combine this first division of nature into being/non-being, in its first interpretation, with the second division, based on creating/not creating and being created/not being created, the fundamental paradox in Eriugena's starting point becomes clear. For if we apply the distinction into being and non-being, i.e. being knowable and transcending knowledge, to the second division which is to determine the rest of the *Periphyseon*, we find that three of four species of nature elude the grasp of the human mind. Eriugena still continues his work, although the major part of the *Periphyseon*, as we now have come to see, will be concerned with a subject that is in itself unknowable.²⁰ He addresses this problem at the outset of the dialogue. In the first book of the *Periphyseon*, of which the subject is the creative and uncreated form of nature, i.e. God viewed as creator, Eriugena establishes that there must be a way to speak of God although his nature transcends human speech. We must be able to speak about God in order to explain faith to those who demand from catholics a rational account of the Christian religion and to defend religion against those who wish to attack it.²¹ Then what can we say?

The Bible mentions many predicates that can be applied to God, not literally but metaphorically, which means that they are adjusted to man's limited rational faculty and are based on the relation between creator and creature. We can say that God is good because he is the creator of all goodness, wise because he is the creator of all wisdom etc. The meaning of the predicates has been transferred from creation to creator. Speaking about God is a rational and well founded way of

¹⁸ Cf. Dominic J. O'Meara, 'The Concept of Nature in John Scottus Eriugena (De divisione naturae Book I)', in: *Vivarium* XIX, 2 (1981), 126-145.

¹⁹ *Periphyseon* I, 443 A-B.

²⁰ Alumnus also establishes this paradox when he says: 'For in whatever way the Divine Substance is spoken of (...) it will be seen that it is not ineffable. For that is not ineffable which can be spoken of in any way.' (*Periphyseon* I, 461 A).

²¹ *Periphyseon* I, 456 A.

speaking, but in the first book of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena will show by logical means that the predicates used of God are *just* metaphors and involve no real knowledge of his nature. There can only be real knowledge of God if what we say is literally true, but the metaphors that have been handed down necessarily fall short of this. The negation of the literal meaning of the metaphors is even a more adequate way of speaking about God than the use of the metaphors themselves can be. Demonstrating the metaphorical nature of our speaking about God is primarily the proof of his *unknowability*.

At the same time as he sets out to establish the inapplicability of the categories to God, Eriugena refers to the difference between *kataphatic* and *apophatic* speech which he had found in the writings of Dionysius. About the divine nature he says:

For that which says: 'It is Truth', does not properly affirm that the Divine Substance is Truth, but that it can be called by such a name by a transference of meaning from the creature to the Creator; for, the Divine Essence being naked and stripped of every proper signification, it clothes it in such names as these. On the other hand, that which says: 'It is not Truth', clearly understanding, as is right, that the Divine Nature is incomprehensible and ineffable, does not deny that it is, but (denies) that it can properly be called Truth or properly be Truth. For all the significations with which KATAPHATIKH clothes the Divinity are without fail stripped off it by APOPHATIKH.²²

Of the *genus nature* God is the first species, the creating and not-created form, that is God considered as the creator of all, as well as the fourth species, the not-creating and not-created form, i.e. God considered as the end to which everything shall return. On the one hand God transcends all knowledge and is better known by not-knowing, on the other hand He is the goal of all beings and of all knowledge, and of all knowledge that the *Periphyseon* presents.

Eriugena does not solve the paradox, but his concern is, on the contrary, to show that there can be no way whatsoever to speak of the divine nature. Book I contains Eriugena's apophatic theology, but he does not, as Dionysius had done, present a hierarchy of negations of names or predicates to ascend to God. Eriugena uses logical means to prove that there are no adequate predicates that can be used of God, and although for him too negation is the better way to speak about God, Eriugena does not hold that the negative procedure brings us any nearer to Him.

In the first book of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena examines the applicability of the ten categories to God. He was familiar with Aristotle's *Categories* as transmitted in a Latin paraphrase, the *Categoriae Decem*, that was attributed to Augustine in the Middle Ages, and for that reason very influential. The *Categoriae Decem* is not an accurate reproduction of the *Categories*, but can best be described as a summary of Aristotle's book, interspersed with commentary.²³ The *Categories* is the first of the Aristotelian logical works and it begins by a consideration of linguistic facts. It distinguishes 'things said without combination' from 'things said in combination': words such as

²² *Periphyseon* I, 461 C-D.

²³ Aristoteles Latinus ed. Laurentius Minio-Paluello, *Categoriae vel Predaedicamenta 5. Anonymi Paraphrasis Themistianae (Pseudo-Agustini Categoriae decem)*. Bruges-Paris 1961. Cf. John Marenbon, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre; Logic, Theology and Philosophy in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1981; and John Marenbon, 'John Scottus and the 'Categoriae Decem'', in: W. Beierwaltes (ed.), *Eriugena: Studien zu seinen Quellen*, Heidelberg 1980, 117-133.

'man' and 'runs' are distinguished from propositions such as 'man runs'. Words uncombined are said to mean one or other of the following things: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, possession, acting, passivity. These are the ten categories. The primary category is substance, which is the substratum presupposed by all the others. The categories are a list of the widest predicates which are predicable of the various nameable entities and tell us what kinds of entity they really are. Eriugena is not interested in the theory of the categories for its own sake but he introduces them into the *Periphyseon* in order to establish God's transcendence over all of them. The proof is the same for every one of the categories: whatever predicate is used to say anything about God, it can be used only because we have transferred the meaning of the predicate from a creature to the Creator. By showing that none of the categories can really be applied to God, Eriugena provides a logical proof of the ineffability of the divine nature. He explicitly acknowledges Augustine's *De Trinitate* as a source for his view, but he contradicts Augustine on one important point: Augustine identified *ousia* (substance, essence) with God, whereas Eriugena insists that *ousia*, which is predicable of created things, cannot be predicated of God. All categories can be predicated not properly, but only metaphorically of God:

N. (...) what are we to say of these aforementioned ten genera, which are discerned not only in intelligible things but also in sensible things? Surely it is not to be believed that they are truly and properly predicated of the Divine and Ineffable Nature?

A. I think so too: that it is (not to be believed). So it is not *ousia* because it is more than *ousia*, and yet it is called *ousia* because it is the Creator of all *ousiai* (that is, of all essences).²⁴

In book II Eriugena will elaborate on the source of the categories, especially *ousia*. The categories are derived from questions we can ask about things: What? How great? Of what kind? and so on. The question what something is, is the question for a defined substance or essence. Now Nutritor says that if anyone were to assert as a truth of God that He is this or that, God will rightly occupy the first place of the categories, which will therefore be predicated of Him not figuratively but literally. If the divine nature is understood to be some defined essence, it is not infinite and uncircumscribed. The conclusion of this is not only that the divine nature is nothing of the things that are, but also that God does not know of Himself what He is, because He is not a 'what'. This does not mean that God does not know Himself, no ignorance is attributed to God, but only that He does not know *what* He is, being in everything incomprehensible both to Himself and to every intellect.²⁵ The divine nature is not part of the things that are.

However, it is not the category of *ousia* or substance that causes logical trouble in the first place, but the category of creating (making, doing). God is the creator (*factor*) of all things. Creating or making involves movement, not just of the things that come into being but also of the maker. In God there can be no movement because there is nothing outside God. Therefore there is no place from which He could move and no place for Him to move to. Only created beings can move. The conclusion is that *making* or *creating* are not literally predicated of God, but only metaphorically, just like the other predicates. *Agere* and *pati* are the last categories in *Periphyseon* I to be discussed. Only after their inapplicability to God has been proved, the argument is complete:

²⁴ *Periphyseon* I, 464 A.

²⁵ *Periphyseon* II, 588 B – 590 D.

N. Therefore, just as being is predicated of Him although He is not in the strict sense being because He is more than being and is the Cause of all being and essence and substance, so also He is said to act and to make although He is more than acting and making and is the Cause of all for making and acting without any motion that could be attributed to accident, being beyond all motion. For of all motions and of all accidents, as indeed of all essences, He is the Cause and Principle.

A. To this too I would unhesitatingly agree.

N. What is left, then, but that you should understand that it is altogether necessary that, just as strictly speaking being as well as acting and making are removed from Him, so suffering and being made are removed? For how that which is not liable to acting and making can be liable to suffering and being made I do not see.

A. Set an end to the book: for there is enough contained (in it).²⁶

The paradox that arises in speaking about God's ineffable nature has not been solved but is led to its most extreme consequences:

- All names and predicates we use in speaking about God are never literally true of Him, but only metaphorically. 'Metaphorical' means that the meaning of the names of created things has been transferred to the Creator.
- The *Periphyseon* is about the division of nature in four species, of which God is both the first form, God considered as creating and not being created, and the fourth form, God considered as not creating and not being created.²⁷
- The categories of creating (*agere*) and being created (*pati*) cannot literally be applied to God, but only metaphorically; they are based on His being the creator of all creating and being-made.

This means that the basis even for speaking metaphorically about God has become very thin. The ineffability of God's nature has been even more firmly established. The first book of the *Periphyseon*, which was to be about God as creator, has only served to remove Him entirely from the grasp of reason and make His transcendence absolute. At this point however Eriugena does not resign himself to a *docta ignorantia*, but he makes a fresh start in book II.

Theophany

After having discussed the first form of nature in book I, which turned out to be a discussion on the ten categories of things and the fact that they cannot be predicated literally on the creative Cause of all things, Eriugena in book II turns to the second form of nature, the primordial causes or ideas. These are the eternal species or forms of all things, after which and in which the visible and invisible world is formed and governed. They are created forms, but also eternal, for God created them in the Beginning, that is in his Word. The Word does not precede the things that were created in it, but God the Father and the Word and the causes created in It are co-eternal.

²⁶ *Periphyseon* I, 524 A-B.

²⁷ God considered as not creating means that in this view God does not create because all created beings have returned to Him.

So before his visible world proceeded through generation into the genera and species and all the sensible individuals, God the Father, before the secular ages (began), brought forth His Word, in Whom and through Whom He created in their full perfection the primordial causes of all natures, which, under the administration of Divine Providence, in a wonderful harmony, in their natural course bring to perfection, by their processions through generation at certain places and times and in the multiple differences of genera and species, this visible world from the start at which it begins to be to the finish at which it ceases to be.²⁸

The primordial causes are Goodness-through-itself, Being-through-itself, Life-through-itself et cetera. Whatever things are good are good by participation in Goodness-through-itself, whatever things subsist as beings and substances subsist by participation in Being-through-itself et cetera. The primordial causes play an important part in Eriugena's epistemology, which therefore is expounded at some length in book II.

At the beginning of the *Periphyseon* it was established that the division of the things that are grasped by the mind and those that are beyond its grasp is the division into things that are and things that are not. The human rational faculty is completely determinant of this division. In book I the categories are the means to prove that God, the first species of nature according to the second division, transcends human knowledge and speech and therefore *is not*, but there is no hierarchy of negations. The elaborate logical proof does not involve a scale of ascending to the divine nature. As God is the goal of Eriugena's enquiries, book II is still a preliminary to the knowledge of God. It addresses the question how man is equipped to perform the ascending to Him. In book II the analogy between reason and being is further elaborated on. In fact, it appears that thinking and being are corresponding processes, divided into the same stages. There is an isomorphism between thought and being which is both static, concerning the structure of reality, and dynamic. What happens in reason, happens in reality. This means that the characteristics of the human mind, or human nature, have to be examined and that the outcome will be of great importance for man's ability to know God. In the second book of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena focuses on the prerequisites for the eventual knowledge of God. He has to find the answers to the following questions:

- How is man equipped to gain knowledge of God?
- What are the parallel processes in thinking and being?
- What is the basis of our knowledge of God?

Man as *imago dei*

Man was created in the image of God, as one of the primordial causes. In book IV man will be defined as 'a certain intellectual concept formed eternally in the Mind of God'.²⁹ Precisely in this he is the image of God, for just as man is a concept in the Mind of God, the human mind contains the concepts, the essences, of the created beings. Man being the image of God also implies that the human soul is the mirror of the divine trinity:

²⁸ *Periphyseon* II, 560 A-B.

²⁹ *Periphyseon* IV, 768 B.

N. Contemplate, then, and, dispelling all the mist of ambiguity, understand with the sharpness of your mind how clearly, how explicitly the substantial Trinity of the Divine Goodness is revealed in the motions of the human soul to those who study them carefully. (...) For the likeness of the Father shines forth most clearly in the intellect, that of the Son in the reason, and that of the Holy Spirit in the sense.³⁰

We understand that the structure of the human soul gives us information about the divine Trinity, that man's knowledge of the soul is at the same time knowledge of God. The fundamental transcendence of the divine nature is unquestioned, but a possibility has emerged to acquire some knowledge of God by way of self-knowledge. The basis for the knowledge of God lies in the three parts (or movements) of the soul. The highest part is the intellect, the most excellent movement of the soul, an eternal movement around God. The second part, reason, can define God as the cause of all beings. The third part or movement of the soul is that by which the soul comes into contact with what is outside her. It starts from sense-data and connects these to their causes and eventually to the first Cause of all. Eriugena says that created nature can thus ascend above itself, although it needs the divine grace to accomplish this. Because of sin, man has no direct access to the knowledge that was created in him. In book V of the *Periphyseon* we will see the consequences of this view, in the discussion of the return of all things to God.

Procession and return (*processio* and *reditus*)

Processio and *reditus* are two of the Neoplatonic themes Eriugena took over from Dionysius. In fact, in the Neoplatonic view there is a triad, a group of three terms: monē (immanence), proodos (procession from the cause) and epistrophē (return to the cause)³¹, but Eriugena takes two of them and makes *processio* and *reditus* the organizing principles of the *Periphyseon*, where they reflect the relation of Creator and creature.³² *Processio* is the outgoing movement, starting from the absolute simplicity of the divine nature and ending in the manifold variety of beings. *Reditus* is the same movement, but in the opposite direction, which starts from the manifold of beings and returns to the supreme Unity. Therefore the *Periphyseon* is not only a discourse about the division of nature, but also a discourse about the return of created nature to the absolute One, it is as much about analysis as it is about division.³³ God unfolds himself in creation and creation will ultimately return to God by the same stages. The ontological development of *processio* and *reditus* is basically the same as the dynamic rationality of *divisio* and *analysis*. There is a fundamental isomorphism between thought and being, and Eriugena sees rational division as the method by which the infinite One is gradually expanded into a hierarchy of descending orders. Logic is not a human invention but:

³⁰ *Periphyseon* II, 579 A-B.

³¹ Cf. Proclus: 'Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts to it.' Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, A Revised Text with translation, introduction and commentary by E.R. Dodds, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2004 (repr.), 38-9.

³² Edouard Jeauneau calls them the *leitmotiv* of the *Periphyseon*. E. Jeauneau, 'The Neoplatonic Themes of Processio and Reditus in Eriugena', in: *Dionysius*, Vol. 15 (1991), 3-29.

³³ It follows the title given to the *Periphyseon* from 1681 onwards, *De Diuisione Naturae*, was not entirely correct. Cf. Jeauneau, 11.

(...) we may see that that art which concerns itself with the division of genera into species and the resolution of species into genera, which is called DIALEKTIKH did not arise from human contrivances, but was first implanted in nature by the originator of all the arts that are properly so called, and was later discovered therein by the sages who make use of it in their subtle investigations of reality.³⁴

The return to God is a rational process. Because of the basic affinity between modes of thinking and modes of being the dialectical stages of division and analysis reflect the fundamental ontological structure of the universe. The interdependence of intelligibility and ontology pervades all of nature. Systematically describing the process of nature's return to God is the same as performing it. Philosophy ascends from individual sense-knowledge and the ideas of created things to the highest understanding of the whole. The *Periphyseon's* own structure again doubles the structure of nature and its exposition follows the movement of nature. This shows Eriugena's great ambition in the *Periphyseon*. The goal of nature, and therefore of the *Periphyseon*, is the reunion of creation and God. The logical and ontological principles of division/analysis and procession/return govern the dynamics of knowledge and nature, but the fourfold division of universal nature consists basically of four ways of looking at what is in itself one and undivided.

The *Quaestio de Nihilo*

The conclusion of the discussion of the categories in book I was that there can be no knowledge of God whatsoever. In book II Eriugena discusses the features of man and nature that may be considered as the conditions of getting some knowledge of God after all. Man is created in the image of God, and the trinity of his soul resembles the divine trinity. Nature is hierarchically ordered and the counterpart of the movement in nature from the one God to genera and species, and the return of these to God, is found in the rational faculty. Knowing and speaking truly of God seem to have come within reach, but, again, how can we know God, how can we find names or predicates that are adequate, God transcending them all?

The subject of the third book of the *Periphyseon* is created and not-creating nature, i.e. all created beings. The *Periphyseon* here has taken the form of a *Hexaemeron*, a discussion of the seven days of creation, following Genesis. The consideration of what it means that God created all things out of nothing forms a prominent part of the dialogue. The so-called *Quaestio de Nihilo* begins with Alumnus asking:³⁵

But when I hear or say that the Divine Goodness created all things out of nothing I do not understand what is signified by that name, 'Nothing', whether the privation of all essence or substance or accident, or the excellence of the divine superessentiality.³⁶

³⁴ *Periphyseon* IV, 748 D – 749 A.

³⁵ For a detailed analysis of this part of the *Periphyseon*, see: Michael A. Sells: 'The Nothingness of God in John the Scot', in: *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 34-62.

³⁶ *Periphyseon* III, 634 A-B.

Both participants in the dialogue agree that there is a contradiction in the idea of being created from nothing. Something being created means that it did not exist before it was created. But God cannot at any particular moment in time have started creating, for then God would precede the things He creates and the creation of the universe would be an accident of God. This is impossible, the divine nature being one and simple. Because being the cause of all things cannot be an accidental property of God, they must eternally have existed in the Cause. The universe of all created things therefore is eternal in the Word of God. The conclusion is that all created beings are both created and eternal. Alumnus vehemently challenges this conclusion, maintaining that a cause must necessarily precede its effects. In the discussion of the categories the transition of a predicate from the effect to its cause was the basis for metaphorical speech. Now Nutritor puts it the other way round: we can say that all things are eternal in their Cause, because the Cause is eternally present in the effects. The link is established between the becoming of creatures and the appearing of God. All things appear out of God and thus are made out of the 'nothing' which the divine superessentiality is. God is not only the Creator of all beings, but He also creates Himself in all beings, i.e. all beings are *theophanies*:³⁷

A. But I beg of you to explain what Holy Theology means by that name of 'Nothing'.

N. I should believe that by that name is signified the ineffable and incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of the Divine Goodness which is unknown to all intellects whether human or angelic - for it is superessential and supernatural - which while it is contemplated in itself neither is nor was nor shall be, for it is understood to be in none of the things that exist because it surpasses all things, but when, by a certain ineffable descent into the things that are, it is beheld by the mind's eye, it alone is found to be in all things, and it is and was and shall be. Therefore so long as it is understood to be incomprehensible by reason of its transcendence it is not unreasonably called 'Nothing', but when it begins to appear in its theophanies it is said to proceed, as it were, out of nothing into something, and that which is properly thought of as beyond all essence is also properly known in all essence, and therefore every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany, that is, a divine apparition.³⁸

At last we appear to have found a name that is truly predicated of God: 'Nothing' is the name by which we can call the divine nature. He creates all things from nothing, that is from His own nature, in which they are eternally present. On the other hand He creates Himself in all things, and comes within reach of the human mind by way of his creatures, when they are viewed as *theophanies* of His nature.

In the notion of *theophany* God's absolute transcendence, denoted by the name 'Nothing', is combined with His immanence. *Theophany* is therefore the turning point between the view that the divine nature transcends all knowledge and speech, and God's self-manifestation in creation. By this notion it becomes possible to speak of God even after His ineffability has been logically established.

³⁷ Cf Hilary Anne-Marie Mooney, *Theophany The Appearing of God According to the Writings of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*, Tübingen 2009; Donald F. Duclow, 'Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena' in: *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 57, 1977, 109-123; and Werner Beierwaltes, 'Negatio Affirmatio: Welt als Metapher: Zur Grundlegung einer mittelalterlichen Ästhetik durch Johannes Scottus Eriugena' in: *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, Freiburg/München, 1976, 237-265.

³⁸ *Periphyseon* III, 680 C- 681 A.

God transcends the grasp of the mind and *is not*, and yet every being is a manifestation of the divine nature. He is the essence of all things, but His own essence remains hidden. It follows that all knowledge is somehow knowledge of God as well. 'By a certain ineffable descent' points to a hierarchical ordering, which Eriugena calls *participation*: in nature there is an order of participation. Reason can discover the order of nature, which is a logical order, and ascend by gaining knowledge. The more participations there are in something (e.g. a primordial cause) the higher it is placed in the order of nature. All things participate in the divine goodness. The moving force which lies behind the diffusion of all things is the free giving of God. The real subsistence of creatures is closely connected with their participation in God: '...they have no other subsistence than as participation in the one only Cause of all.'³⁹

The Return

Procession (*processio*) is the outgoing of the undivided and unknowable unity of God through the primordial causes that have been created in the Word of God, into the manifold of created beings. The return (*reditus*) is the same process, but viewed in the opposite direction, the motion of all created beings back to God. The discussion of the return of the whole of creation to God will in the *Periphyseon* amount to a discussion of the nature of man, who is to perform the return. The return of creation to God starts with the creation of man.⁴⁰ Man is created on the sixth day in the genus of animal, but he is also created in the image of God. This double characteristic of man will dominate the dialogue from book IV onward. Man is a rational being and the process of the return to God is a rational process, and just as man is a notion eternally present in the mind of God, so the notions of all created things are present in the human mind. Just as the divine mind contains within itself the knowledge of all things, so the human mind contains within itself the principles and notions of all things. Thus perfect human nature can be said to be the 'workshop' of all things, the *officina omnium* (a term which Eriugena derived from the work of Maximus the Confessor) because in him the notions of all things are made.⁴¹

Originally man has all knowledge of the essences of all created beings at his disposal, but because of sin his direct access has been blocked and he is now dependent on the information he draws from the senses to reach the knowledge that was created in him. By gaining knowledge man collects the notions of all beings in his mind. In his original perfect nature, which Eriugena calls paradise, all knowledge is available to him, but on account of sin he will have to rely on his senses. Paradise is not a place where man once dwelled in the past, before he was expelled from it because he had sinned, but 'paradise' is the name of the true human nature, his nature before sin, which has never yet been realized but will be gained when man will have performed the return of all created things to God. It is not a historical fact but a prospect for the future, the beckoning ideal state of man. In Eriugena's view of paradise there is not a historical difference of the time before and after

³⁹ *Periphyseon* III, 644 A.

⁴⁰ Cf. Willemien Otten, 'The Dialectic of the Return in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*', in: *Harvard Theological Review* 84:4 (1991), 399-421 and Willemien Otten, *The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*, Leiden 1991, 118-219. See also Brian Stock, 'The Philosophical Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena', in: *Studi medievali*, 1967, 1-57.

⁴¹ *Periphyseon* II, 530 D and *Periphyseon* V, 893 B-C.

sin, man without sin has not really existed, but 'paradise' is the true, original nature of man, which he eventually, but in fact only for the first time, will have to achieve.

The return of all created things begins with the creation of man. He collects in his mind the ideas of all created things and accomplishes the return of all of creation to God. Before returning to God all things return to man, who is the vehicle of the return of creation to God.⁴²

The discussion of the return is the discussion of man's situation after sin and his prospects of performing the return to God after all. Man is created in the image of God, his position has firmly been established as one of the primordial causes:

Just as the Creative Wisdom, which is the Word of God, beholds all things which are made in It before they are made, and that very beholding of all things which are beheld before they are made is their true and eternal and immutable essence, so the created wisdom, which is human nature, knows all things which are made in it before they are made, and that very knowledge of the things which are known before they are made is their true and indestructible essence. Accordingly, the knowledge in the Creative Wisdom is itself rightly held to be the primary and causal essence of the whole of creation, while the knowledge in the created nature is the secondary essence and subsists as the effect of the higher knowledge.⁴³

Originally, before sin, man's body was a spiritual one. God foresaw that man would sin and created the effect of sin, man's mortal body, simultaneous with man. The material, mortal body is a *corpus superadditum*, which means that the mortal body is not part of man's true nature.⁴⁴ What in the body is understood to be unchangeable and immortal belongs to the first creation, but everything in man that is subject to decline, was added later and is something outside human nature. We can now see how sin poses a problem in Eriugena's account of the return. By inhibiting the execution of the return, sin prevents the universe from reaching its final destination. If man had not sinned, he would have remained unchanged in his primordial cause as the image of God.

Here Eriugena's Christology becomes important. In Christ, the Word, the essences of all things (the primordial causes) are eternal, one and undivided. Christ shows the perfect knowledge that man would command if he had not sinned:

For He Who alone was born without sin into the world, to wit, the Redeemer of the World, never anywhere suffered from such ignorance, but as soon as He was conceived and born had understanding of, and could speak and teach concerning Himself and all things. This was so not only because He was the Wisdom of the Father, from Whom nothing is hid, but because in order that He might purify the corruption of humanity He put on an humanity which was incorrupt.⁴⁵

⁴² Willemien Otten, *The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*, 165-171.

⁴³ *Periphyseon* IV, 778 C- 779A.

⁴⁴ E.g. *Periphyseon* IV, 800 A, 803 A, 808 A, 846 B.

⁴⁵ *Periphyseon* IV, 777 B.

Christ is the perfect human being, human nature before the fall, who shows man how he can overcome the consequences of sin and yet reach his true original state, i.e. paradise.⁴⁶

In the discussion of the categories in the first book of the *Periphyseon* it was established that the divine nature transcends human knowledge, which means that it is utterly ineffable. 'Nothing' is the name of the divine superessentiality from which all beings are created. Now the human mind, the rational faculty, must perform the return of all beings to God, despite the impediments it finds in its way because of sin. From here it is not apophatic, but kataphatic, positive, speech that takes the upper hand, while the *Periphyseon* becomes more of an exegetical and theological work than a philosophical one. Ascending to God is not performed by a hierarchy of negations, but by the hierarchical ordering of the theophanies. Knowledge of created things, all being manifestations (theophanies) of God, is a process of ascending to God by rational means. The return is the process of the human mind in which every step of knowledge and insight is an ontological step toward God and the highest theophanies are closest to God. In the end it will be given to some to contemplate God face to face, which is the highest possible theophany. All human beings will return to paradise, but not all will eat of the tree of life. Eriugena distinguishes between a general return (*reditus generalis*) of all human beings to their original state, which is paradise, and a special return (*reditus specialis*), deification, of the elect, which is dependent on the grace of God.⁴⁷

So the change of human nature into God is not to be thought of as a perishing of the substance but as a miraculous and ineffable Return into that former condition which it had lost by its transgression. And if every subject which has unobscured intelligible knowledge becomes one with the object of the intelligible knowledge, why should not our nature when it contemplates God face to face become, in those who are worthy and as far as the capacity of our nature for contemplation allows, by its ascent into the cloud of contemplation become One with Him and within Him?⁴⁸

A certain part of mankind, the saints or the elect, will ascend further than the rest. The highest goal and highest theophany, *deificatio, theosis* is the unification with God, but what this deification means is beyond description. In the end nature is *one* again and there is nothing left but God. All of creation will return to its cause, but only the elect will have a direct contemplation of God and be one with Him. Eriugena explains the fundamental distinction between the general return of all and the special transformation of the elect by commenting on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in chapter 25 of the Gospel according to Matthew (Mt. 25:1-13).⁴⁹ Eriugena seizes upon the eschatological features of the parable. The ten virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom represent the general return, that is, the movement towards perfection that applies to all humans. Their lamps are

⁴⁶ Eriugena's christology was influenced by the ideas both of Dionysius and Maximus Confessor. Cf. Marcia L. Colish, 'John the Scot's Christology and soteriology in relation to his Greek sources' in: *The Downside Review*, 1982, 138-151; and Donald F. Duclow, 'Dialectic and Christology in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*' in: *Dionysius IV*, 1980, 99-117.

⁴⁷ Eriugena uses *reditus generalis* both for the return of all creatures to God and for the return of humankind.

⁴⁸ *Periphyseon V*, 876 B-C.

⁴⁹ Cf. Paul A. Dietrich and Donald F. Duclow, 'Virgins in Paradise: Deification and Exegesis in *Periphyseon V*', in: G.-H. Allard (ed.), *Jean Scot Écrivain, Actes du IVe Colloque international Montréal, 28 août-2 septembre 1983*, Montréal 1986, 29-49.

representative of the capacity for knowing the true light, but, even though all possess lamps, they will not all equally participate in the light. The five foolish virgins have a capacity for the true light but they do not have the Light itself. The five wise virgins are the ones who also possess the oil, and will receive the light. They represent the elect who will eventually be granted the highest theophany in God Himself. The prudent virgins who have furnished their lamps with the tallow of good works and the brightness of a pure knowledge are brought by the Bridegroom into the marriage feast, that is His deification, the supernatural grace of contemplation of Himself, while the others are left in the enjoyment of natural goods, but excluded from the heights of the ineffable deification. In the end it is impossible to say what the elect behold when the pure souls enter the darkness of the incomprehensible Light. The return of man is divided in eight phases or steps of the ascent to God. Of these, the last three lie beyond the limit of nature in God Himself:

(...) first the transformation of mind into the knowledge of all things which come after God; secondly, of that knowledge into wisdom, that is into the innermost contemplation of the Truth, in so far as that is possible to a creature; thirdly, and lastly, the supernatural merging of the perfectly purified souls into God Himself, and their entry into the darkness of the incomprehensible and inaccessible Light which conceals the Causes of all things. Then shall the night shine as the day, that is to say, the most secret Mysteries of God shall in a manner we cannot describe be revealed to the blessed and enlightened intelligence. (...) Then the fivefold number of the creature shall be united with the threefold number of the Creator, so that in nothing shall it be manifested save as God alone, in the same way as in the most purified air nothing is manifested save the light alone.⁵⁰

The End

With these words the dialogue of Nutritor and Alumnus ends, but this is not the end of the *Periphyseon*. The books I to IV of the *Periphyseon* have a formal ending in the form of concluding remarks, but this is not the case in book V or the *Periphyseon* as a whole. The dialogue ends abruptly and after the concluding remarks of Nutritor, quoted above, Eriugena takes over and addresses himself to the reader.⁵¹ In this epilogue Eriugena dedicates his work to God and to Wulfad, his friend, who has collaborated in his studies. He also apologizes to his readers for the shortcomings of his work, but, he says, no man, so long as he is burdened with his mortal limbs and fleshly senses, can attain the height of contemplation of the Truth, save only Christ.

As we saw, one of the most striking features of nature, and of the *Periphyseon*, is the interdependence of ontology and intelligibility. Being and knowing have the same limit: the things that can be grasped by the rational faculty *are*, the things that are beyond the grasp of the mind *are*

⁵⁰ *Periphyseon* V, 1020 D – 1021 B.

⁵¹ It is possible that there has been a conclusion which is now lost. Cf. É. Jeauneau, 'La Conclusion du *Periphyseon* Comment un dialogue devient monologue' in: *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought*, 223-234. Jeauneau argues that book V originally has had an ending like the first four books and that the end of book V of the *Periphyseon* can be found in Honorius Augustodunensis' *Clavis Physicae*, a work that summarizes the *Periphyseon*. In my view, there are good reasons for the lacking of the conclusion.

not. Notably God and the primordial causes *are not*. The things that are and those things that are not make up nature. As the *Periphyseon* is about the four forms of nature when it is divided according to being created/not being created and creating/not creating, having the entire universe as its subject, it presents a compilation of all knowledge of the early Middle Ages.

The ordering of participation from the One to the primordial causes and the created beings is called procession, the same ordering considered in the opposite direction, with the One as its goal, is called the return. The corresponding processes in the human mind are division and analysis. Reason can perform the return of all created beings, and especially of humankind, by gaining knowledge, starting from the data of the senses and ascending through the notions of all created beings that were created in the human mind. Because of sin this has become a difficult process and man needs the grace of God to accomplish it. Christ is the perfect human being who commands the knowledge of all things and can teach man about them. All human beings will return to God, they will be part of the general return, but some of them, the elect or saints will ascend higher than the rest in the special return and be one with God in the end, when they will enter the inexpressible Light (deification).

Up to here Eriugena has followed the process of nature by describing it, but having arrived at the utmost point of nature, when the elect are on the threshold of merging with God, he falters. This last step cannot be described, not at this point, not by him, unless he were one of the elect. In the end the task he has set himself cannot be accomplished. The ineffable is beyond description after all. Now for a moment we hear Eriugena's own voice, his uncertainty: '... I beseech my readers to be content with what they have already, considering that the powers of my poor intellect are weak...'

At the end of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena can only indicate what lies ahead for creation in general, for mankind and specifically for the elect. This final position where language stops is supported by the whole weight of logic, or all knowledge about nature. And yet it cannot be described. The paradox has not been solved, but its working was postponed till this point. Now that the paradox reappears in full force, the word is transferred to the reader:

Let every man hold what opinion he will until that Light shall come which makes of the light of the false philosophers a darkness and converts the darkness of those who truly know into light.⁵²

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⁵² *Periphyseon* V, 1022 C.