

## Dialectic and Christology in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*\*

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John Scotus Eriugena's *Periphyseon* is notable not only for its scope and speculative power, but also for its pervasive use of Greek patristic sources. Aside from the Pseudo-Dionysian treatises, which John also translated, few other works presented the medieval West with so complete a system of Greek patristic and Neoplatonic thought. From one perspective, *Periphyseon* can be read as a vast compendium of the views of Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor and Gregory of Nyssa. Yet something peculiar occurs in John's appropriation of his Greek sources. As Marcia Colish has suggested,

John the Scot's Christology and soteriology are actually much more meta-historical and Neoplatonic than those of either Dionysius or Maximus. He certainly relies on these thinkers as sources of Neoplatonism as well as revering them as theological authorities. What he seems to have done was to extract the Neoplatonism from them, making it the basis for his own speculation on these topics, while ignoring or misinterpreting their other ideas.<sup>1</sup>

This judgment clarifies the problematic history of *Periphyseon*, with its alternating condemnations and resurgence in Platonizing thinkers like Honorius Augustodunensis and Nicholas of Cusa. Something may inevitably seem "wrong" with *Periphyseon* unless one shares John's strongly Neoplatonic vision.

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1. Marcia L. Colish, "John the Scot's Christology and Soteriology in Relation to His Greek Sources," to be published in *Downside Review*. See also I.P. Sheldon-Williams, "Eriugena's Greek Sources," in *The Mind of Eriugena*, ed. J. J. O'Meara and L. Bieler (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1973), pp. 1-15; and the different assessments of R. Roques, "Jean Scot Erigène," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. 8, col. 754; and Jean A. Potter, "Introduction" to John the Scot, *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*, ed. & trans. Myra L. Uhlfelder, with summaries by Jean A. Potter (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), pp. x-xxvi, xxxvii.

This study will explore one aspect of that vision: the relation between Neoplatonic dialectic and Christology in *Periphyseon*. Because of its obvious importance and novelty, John's dialectic has been the subject of extensive commentary. But his Christology has received little detailed analysis, perhaps because commentators have generally viewed it as a direct restatement of Greek patristic doctrine, and hence as unremarkable in itself. Here I shall suggest that Eriugena's Christology is not only remarkable, but also central to the entire dialectic of *Periphyseon*: John fuses his dialectic and Christology so completely that we may speak of a dialectical Christology or a Christ-centered dialectic. To develop this interpretation, I shall first sketch *Periphyseon's* Neoplatonic dialectic, and then present John's Christology in terms of this dialectic. The concluding section will use Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics to discuss Eriugena's dialectical Christology.

### I. *Dialectic in Periphyseon*

While dialectic is prominent throughout Eriugena's writings,<sup>2</sup> it plays an especially crucial role in *Periphyseon*. John calls dialectic "the mother of the arts,"<sup>3</sup> and accords it an epistemological and metaphysical primacy. For this art both "carefully investigates the common rational conceptions of the Mind," and "revolves around being (*ousia*) as around its own principle."<sup>4</sup> Although John discusses the Aristotelian categories at length in Book I, *Periphyseon's* dialectic is primarily Neoplatonic. A double movement characterizes this dialectic: first, "division" which proceeds from pure unity to the differentiation of genera, species and individuals; and second, "analysis" or reduction which moves

2. See Eriugena, *De praedestinatione*, PL 122, 358A, 382B; *Expositiones in Ierarchiam coelestem*, PL 122, 184C - 185A; *Versio Maximi*, praef., PL 122, 1195A - 1196A; and M. Cappuyns, *Jean Scot Erigène* (Brussels: Culture et Civilization, 1964 reprint of 1933 ed.), pp. 305ff.

3. *Peri* 870B. *Periphyseon* will be cited from the following editions and translations:

H. J. Floss, ed., in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 122.

I. P. Sheldon-Williams, ed. & trans., *Periphyseon, Liber Primus* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968), cited as "Peri S-W I".

I. P. Sheldon-Williams, ed. & trans., *Periphyseon, Liber Secundus* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1972), cited as "Peri S-W II".

M. L. Uhlfelder, ed. & trans., *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*, cited as "Peri Uhl".

In all cases, reference to PL 122 will be given in parentheses immediately following a citation.

4. *Peri* Uhl, p. 43(475A); and *Peri* 869A, my translation.

from individuals, through their species and genera, to unity.<sup>5</sup> For Eriugena this logic is not simply a heuristic device for identifying and classifying distinct entities. Rather, he claims that "the art of dialectic . . . was not fashioned by human devices, but *created in the nature of things* by the Author of all arts that are truly arts; and discovered by wise men and, by skillful research, adapted to use."<sup>6</sup> Dialectic is thus the human discovery of the pattern created within nature itself. More precisely, John's dialectic expresses a fully Neoplatonic ontology, since the logical movement of division and analysis reflects the ontological movement of creative procession from divine unity to created natures, and their unifying return to God. Sheldon-Williams therefore speaks of *Periphyseon's* "meta-dialectics which alone is applicable to the whole of nature (inclusive of Creator and creature)."<sup>7</sup>

John specifies the stages of this dialectic as follows:

The division of nature seems to me to admit of four species through four differentiae. The first is the division into what creates and is not created; the second into what is created and creates; the third, into what is created and does not create; the fourth, into what neither creates nor is created.<sup>8</sup>

Announced at the very beginning of *Periphyseon*, this fourfold schema provides a basic structure for the entire work.<sup>9</sup> Yet John's understanding and use of the schema seem to have changed profoundly as the work progressed. In particular, he may have shifted from a static, four-part classification of natures to a more ontological and dynamic dialectic of procession and return, whose interlocking phases are the four divisions. Evidence of this revision can be seen in John's handling of the fourth division, which "neither creates nor is created." When John first lists the divisions, he states that "the fourth is among the things which are impossible, and its differentia is its inability to be."<sup>10</sup> Neither

5. *Peri* 463B, 526A-C, 868D-869A; *Expositiones* 184C-185A. 'Division' renders John's 'diaretike' and 'divisio', while 'analysis' and 'reduction' render his 'analysis', 'resolutio', 'reditus', and 'collectio'. In contrast to modern usage, 'analysis' here indicates a unifying movement of the mind. See Sheldon-Williams' note in *Peri* S-W II, pp. 214-215; and Cappuyns, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

6. *Peri* Uhl, p. 215(749A); my emphasis.

7. I. P. Sheldon-Williams, "Johannes Scottus Eriugena," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 524.

8. *Peri* Uhl, p. 2 (441B - 442A).

9. See Sheldon-Williams, "Introduction" to *Peri* S-W I, pp. 6-7.

10. *Peri* Uhl, p. 2(242A).

creating nor created, the fourth division is an empty cipher which simply fills out the logical possibilities among the terms 'create' and 'created.' Later in *Periphyseon*, however, this fourth division designates God as the final cause of created nature's return. Far from being an impossibility, the fourth division then coincides with the first division which, uncreated and creating, designates God as the efficient cause of nature's procession. This shift from impossibility to teleology may be due to John's appropriation of Maximus the Confessor's *Ambigua*. For early in Book II John first identifies nature's fourth division with God as final cause,<sup>11</sup> and he follows this identification with a long paraphrase of Maximus concerning the dialectic of procession and restoration. Sheldon-Williams suggests that Maximus' influence on John's recasting of nature's fourth division is "the first of a succession of syntheses which carry him beyond his objective of rationalizing the quadripartition of nature to the reduction of quadripartite nature itself to the unity which is God."<sup>12</sup>

Beginning with Book II, the fourfold scheme of nature's division is fully assimilated to the dialectic of procession and return. The first three divisions mark the phases of the descent from divine unity, while the fourth indicates the return to the divine nature. Uncreated and creating, the first division is God as productive and self-diffusive cause, whose hidden essence comes to self-consciousness in the Trinity, and thence begins to manifest itself in the succeeding divisions. Created and creating, the second division contains the primordial causes, the essences or powers that bind the Godhead and nature's third division. This third division, created and not creating, includes the material universe, subject to the categories of space and time. Since this nature creates no further divisions, it marks the final stage of the descending dialectic, and the turning point toward reintegration in God as the fourth division. With this reintegration, the cyclical dialectic of procession and return is complete.

To conclude this summary of John's dialectic, one point needs clarification. This dialectic is not "mediated" in the sense of creation moving "outside" of a God who acts through the primordial causes as intermediaries. Rather, the movement among the divisions involves an immediate co-inherence between the

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11. *Peri* 526C - 527B.

12. Sheldon-Williams, "Johannes Scottus Eriugena," *Cambridge History*, pp. 523-524. See also his "Introduction" to *Peri S-W* I, pp. 5-7, concerning the stages of *Periphyseon's* development; and Cappuyens, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-311.

created and the uncreated. Hence, John states that the uncreated divine nature

is created and creates in the primordial causes; but in their [i.e., the causes'] effects it is created and does not create. And not without reason, since in these [effects] it establishes the end of its descent, that is, of its appearance. In the Scriptures, therefore, every corporeal and visible creature . . . is generally called — and not inappropriately — an outermost trace of the divine nature.<sup>13</sup>

In creating itself, the divine nature “creates the natures of things.”<sup>14</sup> Each phase of nature's procession is thus a theophany or self-manifestation of God. An adequate interpretation of this paradoxical doctrine requires that we examine its symbolic context: John's Christology, where the uncreated Word becomes “as though incarnate . . . in the forms and ordered ranks of things,” and where the Word's historical incarnation initiates the saving return to divine unity.<sup>15</sup> By tracing John's Christology through the divisions of nature, we shall discern the Christ-Logos as a crucial, unifying theme for the entire dialectic of *Periphyseon*.

## II. *Dialectic and Christology*

To correlate Eriugena's dialectic and Christology, this discussion will first present the role of the Christ-Logos in the descending dialectic of nature's first three divisions, and then outline the Christ-centered restoration to unity in the fourth division. It will also follow the order of *Periphyseon's* five books, and thereby trace the work's thematic development in terms of Christology and nature's divisions.

### A. *Christ-Logos and Nature's First Three Divisions*

Book I of *Periphyseon* can be viewed as a prologue to the succeeding four books because it outlines the schema of nature's divisions, and contains other basic distinctions and methodological considerations. Here John develops the Dionysian logic of

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13. *Peri* 689B-C, my translation. See D. F. Duclow, “Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena,” *The Journal of Religion* 57 (1977): 115-119; and S. Gersh, “Per Se Ipsum,” in *Jean Scot Erigène et l'histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions du Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1977), pp. 367-376.

14. *Peri* Uhl, p. 18(455A-B).

15. Jean Scot, *Commentaire sur l'Évangile de Jean*, ed. & trans. E. Jeauneau (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1972), pp. 156(307B) & 142(304D-305A).

affirmation and negation as ways of speaking about God, and also presents detailed commentary on the Aristotelian categories. These discussions emphasize God's essential transcendence of all categories, and thus the primacy of Dionysius' negative theology which denies all positive attributes to God.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as God subsists in himself, he remains beyond all speech and distinction, beyond even the fourfold division of nature.<sup>17</sup> Yet this hidden essence of God coincides with self-diffusive goodness, which discloses itself in nature's divisions, and thus makes possible the "metaphorical" truth of affirmative language about God.<sup>18</sup> Since Book I discusses God as both transcendent and self-diffusive, it has nature's first division as its dominant theme; that is, God remains *uncreated* insofar as he transcends all origination, and *creates* insofar as he is the origin of all subsequent being. However, the Christological dimension of the first division is barely sketched in Book I. John's Christology begins to develop in Book II, where he presents a full discussion of the Trinitarian aspects of nature's first division, and links the divine essence to the primordial causes through the Christ-Logos. Ostensibly, the main topic of Book II is nature's second division, the primordial causes.<sup>19</sup> Yet much of the book concerns the Trinitarian context for these causes, since John places their creation in the Father's generation of the Son. The Trinitarian structure of nature's first division contains the second division *in principio*, and the primordial causes unfold the creative power of the Christ-Logos. In this way, the Trinity marks the fundamental distinction within divine unity,<sup>20</sup> and initiates the dialectic of nature's division.

John's Christology begins with the Father's generation of the Son. In Book I John, following Augustine and Boethius, uses the category of relation to distinguish the Father, Son and Spirit within the single divine essence or nature.<sup>21</sup> He further states that these relationships proceed "from the ineffable fruitfulness of Divine Goodness," and that the Trinitarian bond exceeds all finite concepts of relationship.<sup>22</sup> Book II resumes and deepens these considerations. John speaks of "the secret recesses of the Father's substance" as the womb where the Son "is always being born, and

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16. *Peri* 518B, 510B-C.

17. *Peri* 525B - C.

18. *Peri* S-W I, p. 217(522A-B).

19. *Peri* 529A, 615D.

20. See Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* II, 5 (PG 3, 641D - 643A).

21. *Peri* 456C - 457C; Augustine, *De Trinitate* V, 6-7 (PL 42, 914-915) & IX, 1(PL 42, 961); and Boethius, *De Trinitate* V-VI (PL 64, 1253D - 1256A).

22. *Peri* Uhl, pp. 29-31 (464C-465C).

in which, while He is being born, He always remains."<sup>23</sup> As this fecundity proceeds through the Son to the Spirit, the Trinitarian procession is completed. Moreover, the full mutuality of Trinitarian life can be known only within the Trinity itself, since "it is impossible for the Essence of the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit and their Substances to be revealed to the creature directly as they are."<sup>24</sup> As the intersubjectivity that constitutes the divine essence, the Trinity enjoys a unique self-consciousness which, although communicated in participation to created intellects, cannot be exhausted by them. Here again we encounter the polarity of self-diffusion and transcendence which characterizes nature's first division. In sum, the Trinity manifests a divine fecundity which is the source and model for all subsequent creativity, and yet remains ultimately inaccessible to all created intelligence.

As the Trinity's self-diffusion turns toward creation, John specifies the creative role of the Christ-Logos. In virtue of its unity, the entire Trinity is involved in creating; yet each person or hypostasis also exercises a unique function.<sup>25</sup> As the Father begets the Son, he creates the primordial causes in him, while the Spirit distributes and orders these causes "into the differences of all genera and species and wholes and parts and individuals."<sup>26</sup> In this way, the Trinity creates its own image in the descending dialectic of nature's First three divisions: the pure fecundity of the Father is mirrored in the first division; the Word is the "form" which embraces the primordial causes in unity;<sup>27</sup> and the Spirit distributes these causes into nature's third division.

Within this context, the Son occupies a pivotal position, mediating the entire creative process. John expresses this mediation by giving the Son a variety of names, e.g., Wisdom, Word, Beginning, Power, Reason and Cause. Citing the Psalmist's authority, John writes that "in one act the Father brought forth His Wisdom and made all things in it," and similarly affirms the creation of all things in the Son as Beginning, Word and Power.<sup>28</sup>

23. *Peri S-W II*, p. 75(558B); a gloss of Psalm 109:3. John also self-consciously coordinates Greek and Latin Trinitarian terms; see *Peri* 567A-568B, 612B-613A.

24. *Peri S-W II*, p. 75(558A). See W. Beierwaltes, "Das Problem des absoluten Selbstbewusstseins bei Johannes Scotus Eriugena," in *Platonismus in der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, ed. W. Beierwaltes (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), pp. 484-516.

25. *Peri* 553D-554A, 562C-564A, 566C-D.

26. *Peri S-W II*, p. 87(653C-D)

27. *Peri* 547C.

28. *Peri S-W II*, p. 73(577A-C).

Eriugena also recognizes the multiple Latin meanings for the Greek term 'logos', including word (*verbum*), reason (*ratio*), and cause (*causa*). Each of these meanings is justified, since the Son

is the Word because through Him God, the Father, said that all things were being made. Or rather He Himself *is* the Father's speech, word, and discourse . . . . He is Reason since He is the Archetypal Exemplar of everything visible and invisible . . . . He is also the Cause since the occasions of all things subsist eternally and unchangeably in Him.<sup>29</sup>

A common structure underlies these various names and meanings: the Father begets the Son, who contains all things in their primordial causes.

Here we may note two related points. First, John inherits this structure from the patristic tradition, which assimilated the Platonic ideas to the *Logos* of the Johannine Gospel. For example, Augustine explicitly placed the ideas in the divine intelligence, and used the Johannine prologue to claim that all things exist in the living unity of the Word.<sup>30</sup> For Eriugena the assimilation of the ideas to the creative *Logos* yields a Christology of cosmic dimensions, as the Word both contains the ideas and manifests himself throughout created nature. Second, we can follow John's lead concerning the multiple meanings of 'logos'. If we take this term as the focus for John's Christology, we may distinguish among the Son's other names as follows: 'wisdom' and 'reason' express the 'word' as intelligible content or meaning; while 'power', 'cause' and 'beginning' present the 'word' as the event and act of speaking. In the complex history of 'logos' interpretation, the former sense of language is primarily Greek in origin, while the latter is primarily Hebraic.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the intelligibility of the Platonic ideas can be distinguished from the Hebraic emphasis on speech as effective power and creative action. Yet the fusion of these two features results not in a bastard concept, but in a more complete understanding of language and its symbolic possibilities.

29. *Peri Uhl*, p. 151(642B-C).

30. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, 46, 1-2 (PL 40, 29-30); *De civitate Dei* XI, 29 (PL 41, 343), and XII, 26 (PL 41, 376); *De Trinitate* IV, 1, 3 (PL 42, 888); and *De Genesi ad litteram* II, 6, 12-7, 15 (PL 34, 267-269). See J. Moreau, "Le Verbe et la création selon S. Augustin et J. Scot Erigène," in *Jean Scot Erigène et l'histoire de la philosophie*, pp. 201-209. For a general survey of this problem in the patristic era, see H.A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), vol. I, pp. 257-286.

31. See T. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 65-69.



Since speech is an activity that generates and embodies meaning, these two aspects of the *logos* are complementary, not mutually destructive. In its paradigmatic significance, this complementarity can be discerned in the Christ-Logos, which is the source of both energy and meaningful pattern.<sup>32</sup> More precisely, its creative activity contains and unfolds an intelligible order, which is articulated in the primordial causes and nature's third division.

To follow this unfolding, we may now turn to the primordial causes and their relation to the Christ-Logos. Claiming Dionysius' authority, John lists the causes as

Goodness-through-itself, Being-through-itself, Life-through-itself, Wisdom-through-itself . . . and all the *powers* and *reasons* which once and for all the Father made in the Son and after which the order of all things is woven from top to bottom, that is, from the intellectual creature which is next after God to the lowest order of all things in which bodies are contained.<sup>33</sup>

The causes both unify and distinguish the Trinity and the hierarchy of created being. "Made in the Son," they participate in the Logos' creative power (*virtus*) and intelligible pattern (*ratio*). They are the Platonic ideas, placed within the Logos and communicating its self-sharing energy to nature's third division. John thus views the primordial causes from a double perspective. On the one hand, they participate fully in the Word, and on the other they are the "principles of things."<sup>34</sup> This twofold character arises from the causes' status as nature's second division. As participations they are "created" in the Word, and as principles they "create" all subsequent being. John expresses this paradox in dynamic terms: "The principal causes, then, both proceed into the things of which they are the causes and at the same time do not depart from their Principle, that is, the Wisdom of the Father, in which they are created."<sup>35</sup> Insofar as the causes participate in the Word, they perpetually turn toward it as their Form, and "never anywhere depart from their formation" in it.<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the

32. Analogously, Augustine discusses the unity of *vox* and *verbum* as a model for the simultaneous creation of matter and form; *De Genesi ad litteram* I, 15, 29 (PL 34, 257).

33. *Peri S-W* II, p. 207(616C); my emphasis. See also *Peri Uhl*, pp. 127-129 (622B-624A), where John discusses the order among the causes in terms of Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*.

34. *Peri S-W* II, p. 205(616B).

35. *Peri S-W* II, p. 61(552A). See Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, ed. & trans. E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, 2nd ed.), p. 39, prop. 35: "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it"; also Dodds' commentary, pp. 220-221; and Gersh, *art. cit.*

36. *Peri S-W* II, p. 53(547C).

causes subsist in the eternal unity of the Word, and *are* the Word itself.

The reasons of all things, as long as they are understood in the nature of the Word, . . . I judge to be eternal. Whatever has substantial being in God the Word must be eternal, since it is simply the Word Itself. My inference, therefore, is that the Word Itself and the manifold and primal Reason of universal creation are one and the same.<sup>37</sup>

Prior to all differentiation, the causes coincide in the Logos as the one "Word, Reason and Cause" of all things. Just as in the monad all number coincides with unity, "all things in the Word are not only eternal, but are actually the very Word Itself."<sup>38</sup>

But John's dialectical Christology does not halt at this stage, since the causes' creative activity must also be considered. The causes proceed from the Logos into multiplicity, distinct genera and species, and space and time. From their simple causal unity, they are separated into their effects.<sup>39</sup> This procession and separation constitute nature's third division. Here the Spirit effects "the distribution and ordering of those things which in the Word are made simply, as of one form and one substance, into the differences of all genera and species and wholes and parts and individuals."<sup>40</sup> Further, given the causes' unity with the Word, this distribution can be nothing less than the distribution of the Word itself. The procession of the causes is the self-diffusion of the Logos:

He is simple because the universe of all things in Him is one undivided and inseparable whole. Surely the undivided and inseparable unity of all things is God's Word, for It is all things. It is deservedly understood as manifold because it is diffused to infinity through everything; and the diffusion of itself is the subsistence of all things.<sup>41</sup>

37. *Peri Uhl*, p. 151(642A). Concerning the co-eternity of the causes, Word and Father, see 561C-562A. Moreau, *art. cit.*, discusses the differences between John and Augustine on this point. E. Gilson criticizes John for regarding the causes as both created and identical with the Word; see *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 118; and *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952); p. 37.

38. *Peri Uhl*, p. 150(641A); with reference to John 1:3 & 1:13-14. Eriugena borrows the image of the monad from Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* V, 6 (PG3, 820D-821A).

39. *Peri Uhl*, p. 129(642A-B).

40. *Peri S-W* II, p. 87(563C-D); glossing Genesis 1:2.

41. *Peri Uhl*, p. 152(642C-D).

Here we confront John's paradoxical doctrines of theophany and divine self-creation. All creation manifests God, who in fact creates himself in nature's second and third divisions. Specifically, "the Wisdom of the Father . . . is the creative Cause of everything and is created and made in everything which It creates, and contains everything in which It is created and made."<sup>42</sup> Creation is co-eternal with the Word which "contains" it, and the Word is "made" in the creatures that manifest it. The primordial causes are the creative energies of the Word, and their effects express this very Word in nature's third division where generation in matter produces multiplicity and mutability. The dynamics of self-disclosure thus dominate the entire procession from nature's first through third divisions. At each stage of this self-disclosure, the Christ-Logos is central: in the Trinitarian life of God who is uncreated and creates; as the place and form of the causes that are created and create; and as diffused or "made" throughout those natures that are created and do not create.

#### B. *Incarnation and the Restoration of Nature*

The interplay between John's Christology and dialectic becomes clearer in light of the Incarnation. Indeed, an incarnational model may underlie the entire dialectic of the eternal and created Word. For the Word's "self-creation" is John's metaphorical extension of the Incarnation to the theophanic process of nature's divisions. Commenting on the Johannine Gospel, Eriugena writes that the Word becomes "as though incarnate . . . in the forms and ordered ranks of visible things."<sup>43</sup> The movement from nature's second to third division marks an "incarnation" of the Word, and thus prepares for the Word becoming man. Moreover, the third division itself results from God's prevision of man's fall, and the Word's Incarnation redeems man from both sin and its consequences in this division.<sup>44</sup> Hence, if John carefully distinguishes creation and Incarnation, it is because he also acknowledges the strong connections between them, and wishes to preserve a unique role for the Word's Incarnation as man (*inhumanatio*).<sup>45</sup> For while the

42. *Peri Uhl*, p. 156(646A); see also *Peri Uhl*, p. 187(671A-B); and Duclow, *art. cit.*, pp. 115-119.

43. Eriugena, *Commentaire sur l'Évangile de Jean*, p. 156 (307B); see D. Duclow, "Nature as Speech and Book in John Scotus Eriugena," *Mediaevalia* 3 (1977): 131-140.

44. *Peri* 563D, 540A; see T. Gregory, *Giovanni Scoto Eriugena: Tre Studi* (Firenze: Felice le Monnier, 1963), pp. 30-34, & 43-48.

45. *Peri Uhl*, p. 197(678C-D); and *Peri S-W II*, p. 194(611B).

Word's "incarnation" in the third division marks the term of nature's descending dialectic, his Incarnation as man initiates the return to divine unity as nature's fourth division. The Incarnation thus constitutes a threefold turning point in John's thought. In his dialectic it marks the turn from division to analysis or reduction; in his metaphysical scheme, from procession (*exitus*) to return (*reditus*); and in his Christology proper, from the creative Logos to the saving Lord.

John describes this threefold reversal in Books IV and V of *Periphyseon*. He begins by establishing the anthropological conditions for the Word's Incarnation. Here Christological issues become so prominent that John's basic question seems to be: what kind of being must man be for the Word's Incarnation to occur and to have cosmic significance? His response includes four related themes: man as *imago Dei*, as creature of the limits, as microcosm, and as fallen. As *imago Dei*, humanity is created in the Word and participates fully in its transcendence and creative knowledge.<sup>46</sup> While this image character relates man to nature's first division, it also binds him to the second and third divisions. For precisely as image, humanity dwells among the primordial causes, where its "created wisdom" is both the "effect" of the Word's creative wisdom, and the "second essence" of all creation.<sup>47</sup> Further, man is not only an image of God but also an animal, and thus stands at the limit between the intelligible and sensible. Hence, unique among all creatures, humanity is a microcosm, embracing all creation in its being and in its knowing power. "All creation, visible and invisible, was created in man alone, since no substance has been created which is not understood to be in him,"<sup>48</sup> Finally, this exalted human status is compromised by the fall. Fallen man requires redemption, which is accomplished by the Incarnation and humanity's free acceptance of its grace. Because of man's privileged position, this salvation is limited neither to individuals nor to the human species. Rather, by "taking on human nature, [the Word] takes on every creature. And on account of this, if he saves and restores the human nature that he takes on, he certainly

46. *Peri Uhl*, p. 252(778A-B); see B. McGinn, "The Negative Element in the Anthropology of John the Scot," in *Jean Scot Erigène et l'histoire de la philosophie*, p. 315-325.

47. *Peri Uhl*, p. 253(778D-779A).

48. *Peri Uhl*, p. 247(774A); see *Peri S-W II*, p. 28(536A-B); *Peri Uhl*, p. 295(893C), for John's use of Maximus' image of man as "*officina omnium*". On this entire issue, see J. Gracia, "Ontological Characterization of the Relation between Man and God in Eriugena," *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 16 (1978): 155-166.

restores every visible and invisible creature."<sup>49</sup> As microcosm and creature of the limits, humanity is the locus for creation's restoration in the Word. By leading man back to his status as *imago Dei*, the Word reappropriates all creation as well. In this way the saving movement of Incarnation, resurrection and ascension assumes cosmic dimensions.

In *Periphyseon* V, John presents two related schemes for this saving return. The first focuses primarily on the reintegration of nature's first three divisions. It begins with the body's death, resurrection, and transformation into spirit; then "the whole nature of man returns to the primordial causes"; and finally "nature itself with its causes is changed into God."<sup>50</sup> Here the Pauline *parousia* coincides with the fourth division of nature, where "God will be all in all" (I Cor. 15:28). Moreover, this unification will not destroy the substance of things; rather, they will "return to a better state by steps."<sup>51</sup>

The second scheme retraces Maximus the Confessor's division of nature. For Maximus,

The first division of all natures separates the created from the uncreated, namely God. The second divides the created into the sensible and the intelligible. The third differentiates the sensible into heaven and earth. The fourth distinguishes paradise and the world. The fifth and final division separates man into male and female.<sup>52</sup>

John traces the progressive reintegration of these opposites in Christ, from the overcoming of sexual differences in his resurrection, to his exaltation "'at the right hand of the Father,' a position to which no creature can attain."<sup>53</sup> This exaltation of Christ's humanity marks the final stage of reconciliation, since here created humanity coincides with uncreated divinity. Following the Greek patristic tradition, John says that man participates in Christ's divinized humanity, and speaks of a twofold deification (*theosis*) of man. First there is "the restoration of human nature as a

49. *Peri* 912C, my translation; see also *Peri* S-W II, p. 40 (541D-542B); and Gregory, *op.cit.*, pp. 43-50.

50. *Peri* Uhl, p. 287(876A).

51. *Peri* Uhl, p. 287(876B).

52. *Peri* Uhl, p. 295(893B).

53. *Peri* Uhl, p. 296(894C); see *Peri* Uhl, p. 298(895D-896A), where John quotes Maximus' statement of the return; and *Peri* S-W II, p. 16(530A-C) where John first cites this scheme. Stated at the beginning of *Periphyseon* II and repeated in *Periphyseon* V, this scheme forms a cycle of procession and return in the literary structure of the work.

whole in Christ,"<sup>54</sup> and in this restoration all creation returns to the Word. A second deification occurs through grace in select human beings who attain a privileged ascent to God himself. John's soteriology is thus embedded in a cosmic eschatology: humanity is at once the *condition* for the Word's saving of all creation, and the graced *participant* in that saving movement to "the right hand of the Father."

Although these two redemptive schemes differ in their details, they nevertheless share a common structure and focus. Their structure is the reduction of multiplicity to unity, and both occur in and through the Christ-Logos. While the Christology of Maximus' scheme is more explicit at every stage, John clearly posits the Word as the goal of the entire reversion. For as particular created beings return to their primordial causes, these in turn resume their identity in the Word. Hence John asks, "If the Father's Word, in whom all things exist and are made, is the cause of all visible and invisible causes, isn't this cause of causes the final goal (*finis*) of the world?"<sup>55</sup> We are finally led back to the fount of creativity in the Logos. "The beginning and the end of the world subsist in God's Word and, to speak more clearly, *are* the Word Itself . . . . Everything comes from Him and goes toward Him, for He is the Beginning and the End."<sup>56</sup> This reintegration of all natures in the Word brings John's dialectic and Christology full circle. Nature's fourth division coincides with the first, and the incarnate, saving Christ is identified with the creative Logos. John's dialectic of division and analysis or reduction articulates the Christological movement of creation and salvation. In this way, John the Scot presents a thoroughly Neoplatonic Christology whose essential moments unfold in the dialectic of nature's divisions. Our initial thesis is thus confirmed: *Periphyseon's* Christology is fully dialectical, and its Neoplatonic dialectic centers on the Christ-Logos.

### III. Conclusion

Now that the reconstruction of Eriugena's dialectical Christology is complete, how are we to evaluate it? From the appearance of his early work, *De praedestinatione*, John the Scot has been fair game for heretic hunters. Judgments of John's orthodoxy or heterodoxy may, however, suppress more fruitful critiques of his achievement. Therefore, rather than issue an edict concerning John's orthodoxy,

54. *Peri Uhl*, p. 334(978D).

55. *Peri* 892D-893A, my translation.

56. *Peri Uhl*, p. 295(893A).

I propose a hermeneutical inquiry into his fusion of Neoplatonic dialectic and Christology. Specifically, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the symbol provides a useful context for understanding John's Christology. Ricoeur claims that "the symbol gives rise to thought."<sup>57</sup> Symbol and thought belong together in the act of interpretation, which simultaneously explicates the symbol and initiates a new, reflective level of discourse. In this light, *Periphyseon* presents a dialectical exegesis of the Christ-Logos symbolism. The Christ-Logos and dialectic are related as symbol and interpretive structure. The core symbol of *Periphyseon* is the Christ-Logos, whose creative and saving dimensions find articulation in John's Neoplatonic dialectic. Conversely, John's dialectic both presupposes this symbol, and transposes it into a self-conscious metaphysics and theology. In one sense, this approach to John's Christology seems inappropriate, since a hermeneutic of the Christ-Logos as a symbol distances us from John's belief in the Christ-Logos as a fundamental reality. In this respect, hermeneutics is a meta-theory which describes *Periphyseon's* Christology in contemporary critical terms. In another sense, however, this description permits an authentic appropriation of John's doctrine. For Ricoeur speaks of the symbol's original, disclosive power, and has developed an ontology of metaphoric language.<sup>58</sup> Analogously, language and symbol are basic concerns for two of Eriugena's principal sources: Augustine's Trinitarian doctrine and theory of knowledge center upon the *verbum*,<sup>59</sup> and for Pseudo-Dionysius "the symbol was the true and proper expression of reality; nay more, it was through such symbolization that reality fulfilled itself."<sup>60</sup> Insofar as word and symbol have an ontological bearing for Ricoeur, Augustine and Dionysius, a hermeneutic of the Christ symbol may be appropriate to John's Christology. The test of this hermeneutical approach comes in confronting some basic issues: Eriugena's exegetical intent and concern with the Johannine Gospel, his consistently "verbal" ontology, and the relevance and limits of his Christology.

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57. P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 347-357; and *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 287ff.

58. P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), pp. 303-313; and *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 57-69, & 87-88.

59. See M. L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 8-81.

60. M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 126.

Hermeneutics, in the traditional form of Scriptural exegesis, is a basic concern for Eriugena. With Augustine and any number of medieval theologians, he emphasizes that faith and Scripture are essential for understanding. Repeating the standard mistranslation of Isaiah, "*Nisi credideritis, non intelligetis*," John says that faith leads into Scripture, and understanding then follows.<sup>61</sup> He expresses his exegetical intent in lyrical terms:

The reward of those toiling over sacred Scripture is pure and perfect understanding. O Lord Jesus, I ask of You no other reward, no other bliss, no other joy than that I may be free from the error of false speculation and may clearly understand Your words, which were inspired by Your Holy Spirit. This is the height of my felicity and the end of perfect contemplation . . . . As You are nowhere more fittingly sought than in Your words, so You are nowhere more openly found than in them.<sup>62</sup>

Insofar as *Periphyseon* and its dialectic explicate the Christ-Logos symbol, this exegetical intent informs the work as a whole. Because John's exegesis is almost exclusively allegorical, *Periphyseon* pays little attention to Scripture's historical or literal sense, but stresses the cosmic meaning and dialectical structure of the Christ symbol. A specific text may also underlie *Periphyseon's* dialectical Christology: the prologue to the Johannine Gospel. This Gospel occupies a central place in Eriugena's work, since it alone receives independent commentary in the *Homily* on the prologue and the partial *Commentary* on succeeding verses. As the primary matrix for Christian *logos*-speculation,<sup>63</sup> the Johannine prologue is especially important. Eriugena's *Homily* on this text presents his entire vision in brief, exegetical form: the Trinitarian dynamics of the Word, the creation of the causes in the Word, the Word's subsequent movement into creation and Incarnation, the mediating role of

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61. Jean Scot, *Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*, ed. & trans. E. Jeauneau (Paris: Editions du Cerf), p. 214(285A). The Isaiah passage (7:9) is from the Septuagint translation.

62. *Peri Uhl*, p. 345(1010B-D). Concerning John's exegesis, see E. Jeauneau, Appendix III to *Commentaire sur l'Évangile de Jean*, pp. 397-402; J. Potter, "Introduction" to *Peri Uhl*, p. xxxvi; Gregory *op. cit.*, pp. 59-76; and H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* (Paris: Aubier, 1959), vol. I, part i, pp. 121-127.

63. See A. Michel, "*Verbum*," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol. 15, part 2, cols. 2639-2662. For the sources of Eriugena's *Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*, see Jeauneau's "Introduction," pp. 61-72. Hans-Georg Gadamer has emphasized the importance of Christian *verbum*-speculation for contemporary hermeneutics in his *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 378ff.



humanity in the created order, and salvation as deification. By specifying the hermeneutical context for Eriugena's Christology, this *Homily* can itself be read as a prologue to *Periphyseon*.

This focus on the Johannine prologue also clarifies Eriugena's "verbal" ontology. Elsewhere I have suggested that symbolic, verbal expression is basic to Eriugena's speculative scheme.<sup>64</sup> Symbolic expression underlies John's polarity of divine nothingness and self-creation, of transcendence and theophany. For John envisions God as an intellect which both expresses itself in speech and yet remains transcendent in itself. We are now familiar with the details of this model. From the Father's silence is born the divine Word, in whom the primordial causes are eternally made. The Word's creative activity continues this speech into the objectified "book" of nature's third division. The Incarnation and saving return complete this movement by a "reading" and "listening" reappropriation of the expression. From a hermeneutical perspective, the entire cycle of nature's divisions is thus built upon a model of symbolic expression. This verbal ontology in turn depends upon John's Christology, where the transcendence and Incarnation of the Christ-Logos justify John's exaltation of language into a paradigm for understanding God and nature. In this sense, Christology provides the basis for *Periphyseon's* dialectic. If Eriugena is differentiated from his patristic sources by his explicit, radically Neoplatonic dialectic, he is simultaneously differentiated from the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Proclus by the Christ-centered focus of this dialectic. In *Periphyseon* dialectic is neither autonomous nor fundamental, but interpretive of the Johannine prologue's Christ-Logos. Dialectic articulates the deep structure of the Christ-Logos symbol.

With these issues before us, we may now assess the limits of Eriugena's Christology. Guiding this evaluation is the following hermeneutical principle: while the symbol gives rise to thought, no interpretation exhausts the symbol's multi-valent meaning. Since the symbol gives more than a single interpretation can capture, we may expect a multiplicity of interpretations. John himself discusses Scripture's multiple meanings in a beautiful image. "The understanding of God's words is manifold and infinite. Why, in one and the same feather of a peacock, a remarkable, beautiful variety of countless colors is seen in one and the same spot of a small part of the same feather."<sup>65</sup> When the symbol in question is the

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64. Duclow, "Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena"; and "Nature as Speech and Book in John Scotus Eriugena."

65. *Peri Uhl*, p. 216(749C); see de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

Christ-Logos itself, diverse Christologies highlight its infinitely various "colors". These multiple interpretations testify to the Christ symbol's richness of meaning and its power to speak in varied cultural settings and historical epochs. Further, insofar as the multiple interpretations of a symbol are complementary, we may speak of a cycle of interpretations organized around the central symbol.<sup>66</sup> Specifically, a cycle of Christologies articulates the various dimensions of the Christ symbol. We may now place Eriugena's Christology within this cycle. In the midst of the Carolingian period's doctrinal ferment,<sup>67</sup> John appropriated Greek patristic texts and heavily emphasized the creative and cosmic dimensions of the Christ-Logos. This achievement is double-edged, since it unquestionably enriched the Latin West's cycle of Christologies, but simultaneously neglected the historical and sacramental dimensions of the Christ symbol. Because these latter dimensions are fundamental to Eriugena's sources (Latin and Greek) and to subsequent developments in Christology, John's achievement is clearly limited. Indeed, his Christology seems especially anomalous in Western Christendom with its "emphasis on the historical Christ and redemption from evil as contrasted with the cosmic Christ and the completion of the universe."<sup>68</sup> This very anomaly, however, makes Eriugena's Christology interesting and relevant for contemporary theology, because it presents precisely what the dominant Western theologies lack: a Christ-centered vision of nature and eschatological hope. For John's Neoplatonic dialectic expresses the creative energy and teleological lure of Christ for the whole of creation. This vision can again enrich our cycle of interpretations, and remind us that historically oriented but acosmic theologies are neither complete nor faithful to the full cycle of Christologies.

In conclusion, two brief analogies may clarify the contemporary relevance of Eriugena's Christology. First, John presents one of the

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66. This cycle of interpretations adapts Ricoeur's "cycle of myths," which sets in motion the static typology of myths (*The Symbolism of Evil*, p. 309). But while Ricoeur discusses cross-cultural myths of evil from the standpoint of the Adamic myth, I suggest testing Christian theologies against the Christ symbol at their core. In contrast to Ricoeur, I thus presuppose a pluralistic but nevertheless unified tradition. To go beyond this would require us to question the limits of the Christ symbol itself; on this point, see the suggestive analysis of R. Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York: Orbis, 1973).

67. For a survey of the period, see J. Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 50-105.

68. E. Cousins, "Models and the Future of Theology," *Continuum* 7 (1969): 87.

few Latin analogues to Eastern Orthodox theology. Whatever his limitations, John does highlight those features of Greek patristic Christology that have generally been neglected in Western theologies. By emphasizing the Christ-Logos' cosmic power and significance, John expresses a dominant theme of his sources (particularly Maximus) and of Eastern Orthodoxy as a whole. The features of a Byzantine Pantocrator remain clearly recognizable in Eriugena's portrait of the cosmic Christ. A second analogy may be drawn between Eriugena's Christology and Teilhard de Chardin's vision of "Christ the Evolver"<sup>69</sup> and the Omega point. For Teilhard stresses Christ's active presence throughout nature, and the convergence of evolutionary history upon the Omega point.<sup>70</sup> This convergence mirrors the final phase of John's dialectic, because in both cases Christ becomes the integrative focus for nature's dynamic completion. In this way, Eriugena approaches contemporary conceptions of God and nature as dynamically "in process". These two analogies imply no identity between John the Scot, Eastern Orthodoxy and Teilhard de Chardin. We have already noted John's insufficient attention to history and sacrament, and this lack sets him apart from both Eastern Orthodoxy and Teilhard. It would also be difficult to credit Eriugena with foreknowledge of evolutionary theory, or Teilhard with a fully Neoplatonic dialectic. But these analogies nevertheless remain suggestive. For the family resemblance among these cosmic Christologies helps to explain the suspicion and misunderstanding which have greeted these theologies in the West. All three have come up against the strong historical bias of Western Christendom, a bias which has obscured the cosmic dimensions of the Christ-Logos. If this conflict of interpretations can be transformed into a complementary cycle of interpretations, then each perspective — historical and cosmic — can be seen as a valid, though partial, explication of the Christ symbol. Perhaps discussion of John the Scot's dialectical Christology may contribute to this irenic task.

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69. P. Teilhard de Chardin, "Christ the Evolver," in *Christianity and Evolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 138-150. The theme of Christ and evolution is, of course, ubiquitous in Teilhard's writings. For a discussion of Teilhard's Christology in historical perspective, see G. A. Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ from Paul to Teilhard* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), pp. 182-220.

70. The *locus classicus* for Teilhard's discussion of the Omega point is *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 257-272.