

# Ἀποκατάστασις: The Resolution of Good and Evil in Origen and Eriugena

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## INTRODUCTION

**W**hile the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, or universal return holds a central place in the thought of many Patristic writers, it has received relatively little scholarly attention. In what follows, I hope to redress this imbalance by analysing and comparing two of the greatest proponents of this doctrine: Origen (3<sup>rd</sup> cen.) and Eriugena (9<sup>th</sup> cen.). Although separated by obstacles of time, tradition, and language, the influence of the former upon the latter is well attested. Nowhere is this so evident as in Eriugena's discussion of the universal return of human nature in *Book V* of the *Periphyseon*. In the course of this exposition, I hope to demonstrate both the deep continuity that exists between Origen and Eriugena – the former the greatest ancient advocate of *apokatastasis* and the latter its greatest mediaeval proponent – as well some crucial ways in which they differ. While Eriugena's discussion of the return shows him to be a true, latter day disciple of the “blessed Origen,” his Augustinian influences result in significant qualifications to the *apokatastasis* doctrine. As such, Eriugena's treatment of the universal return offers a unique example of the creative encounter between the Eastern and Western theological traditions.

## ORIGEN: ΑΠΟΚΑΤΑΣΤΑΣΙΣ AS THEOSIS

To begin with, what is meant by the Greek term *apokatastasis*? As Ilaria Ramelli tells us in her recent, exhaustive study of this topic, the noun ἀποκατάστασις, is related to the verb ἀποκαθίστημι, which means “to restore, reintegrate, reconstitute, or return.” As a noun, ἀποκατάστασις thus carries the fundamental meaning of “restoration, reintegration, or reconstitution.”<sup>1</sup> As a Christian

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1. Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), 1.

and late-antique philosophical doctrine it “came to indicate the theory of universal restoration, that is, of the return of all beings, or at least all rational beings or all humans, to the Good, i.e. God, in the end.”<sup>2</sup> While Origen is typically regarded as the chief proponent of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, its roots go back to Stoic philosophy. Eusebius (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cent.) uses the term ἀποκατάστασις to indicate the Stoic doctrine of the return of the universe back into its original state at the end of each aeon.<sup>3</sup> This Stoic succession of aeons “is determined by periodical conflagrations (ἐκπυρώσεις) in which everything is resolved into fire, i.e. the aether or Logos or *pneuma* – which coincides with Zeus, the supreme but immanent divinity – in order to expand again into a new “whole””.<sup>4</sup> Despite its endless cycles of aeons and its materialist theology, the Stoic understanding of the return as a dissolution of the universe into God by way of a cosmic conflagration is an important precursor to the Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*.<sup>5</sup>

With Origen, we encounter the perfect assimilation of the Stoic doctrine of universal return to Christian eschatology. The key scriptural passages for him are found in Acts 3:21 and 1 Cor 15:28. In the first, Peter speaks of “the times of restoration of all things” (χρόνων ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων). Rendered into Latin by Rufinus as *restoratio omnium*, this is a key phrase for Origen. In the second scriptural citation, Paul speaks of the subordination of all things to God so that “God may be all in all” (πάντα ἐν παῖσιν), another endlessly repeated refrain of Origen’s. Notably, Origen cites both of these passages in *On First Principles* 2.3.4-5 where he overtly criticises the Stoic understanding of *apokatastasis*. While Origen rejects the deterministic character of the Stoic doctrine, in which each successive universe will be identical to the last, he fully embraces the idea of successive worlds (αἰῶνες) – albeit characterized by diversity and free will. In addition, Origen ‘corrects’ the Stoic doctrine to bring it in line with New Testament eschatology. *Apokatastasis* no longer refers to an endless succession of cosmic dissolutions, but to the ultimate dissolution of *all* aeons,

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2. *Ibid.*

3. Ramelli, 4.

4. Ramelli, 7.

5. That Origen was well acquainted with this doctrine is seen from the fact that he overtly criticizes it in at least two places (CC 4,12; 4, 67-68; *Princ.* 2,3). See also Ramelli 8-9. For Eriugena’s remarkable assimilation of Stoic ἐκπυρώσεις to the Christian conflagration, see Jeauneau’s exemplary article “La Métaphysique du Feu,” *Études Érigéniennes*. Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1987, 299-318.

“when all things are no longer in an age, but ‘God is all, and in all’” (*Princ.* 2.3.5).<sup>6</sup> While Ramelli emphasizes the distinction between the Stoic and Christian doctrines of *apokatastasis*,<sup>7</sup> of greater interest is in fact the *continuity* between the two, which points to the indebtedness of the latter to the former.

If the Stoics remain an important source for Origen’s cosmological and eschatological speculations, the chief pillar of his doctrine of universal return rests upon the unshakeable foundations of Platonic and Aristotelian ontology. In *Comm. In Io.* 2,13 Origen states:

It is the good God who says so [sc. “I am the One Who Is”], and it is the same God whom the Saviour glorifies when he says: “No one is good but God the Father.” The one who is *good*, therefore coincides with the One who *is*. On the contrary, evil and meanness are opposed to the Good and non-being to Being. As a consequence, meanness and *evil are non-being* [οὐκ ὄν].<sup>8</sup>

In this striking passage, Origen unites the Platonic Good with the Aristotelian Being and, undoubtedly influenced by Philo, identifies them both with the God of Exodus 3:14.<sup>9</sup> This understanding of God as Good and Being, to which evil and non-being are opposed, lies at the heart of Origen’s understanding of *apokatastasis*.<sup>10</sup> All beings derive their existence from participation in God as the Source of being (*Princ.* 1.3.6), while their turning away from God necessarily involves a fall into non-being and evil.<sup>11</sup>

Because the only thing that truly *is*, is God/Good, while evil, as a diminution of good has no positive ontological status whatsoever, it is impossible for evil to endure. Consequently, for Origen, *apokatastasis* involves the eventual abolition of every trace of sin and evil and the perfect restoration of all rational creatures to the Good, when God will be “all in all”. Origen states: “So, too, we must not suppose that any evil reaches that end, lest when it is said that “God is in all” he should be said to dwell even in some vessel of evil” (*Princ.* 3.6.2). In the final consummation, when God

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6. Origen, *On First Principles* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2013), 110/

7. Ramelli, 8-9.

8. Ramelli, 141.

9. Origen expresses this same idea at *Princ.* 1.3.6, where he explicitly quotes Exodus 3:14.

10. For a more extensive treatment of this point see Ramelli, 141-156.

11. “Now to withdraw from the good is nothing else than to be immersed in evil; for it is certain that to be evil means lacking in good.” *Princ.* 2.9.2.

will be all things to all beings “there will no longer be any contrast of good and evil, since evil nowhere exists” (*Princ.* 3.6.3). As we shall see, this dissolution of all difference is in sharp contrast to Eriugena’s conception of a cosmic harmony, in which good and evil, saint and sinner are embraced within the overarching unity of Divine Goodness.<sup>12</sup>

Origen’s understanding of *apokatastasis* as involving the total annihilation of evil leads to several momentous conclusions. To begin with, Origen envisages the return as *universal*: saint and sinner alike will be restored to their original goodness in which God will be “not in some few or in many things but *all things*” (*Princ.* 3.6.3). The reason for this is, once again, ontological: “things which were made by God for the purpose of permanent existence,” Origen maintains, “cannot suffer a destruction of their substance” (*Princ.* 3.6.5). All beings *are* and are *good*, only insofar as they participate in God as the eternal ground of their being and goodness. As such, they must also partake of the eternity of these divine characteristics (*Princ.* 4.4.9). Only evil and death, which were not created by God, i.e. have no ontological reality, will be destroyed in the final consummation. Origen imagines this universal restoration as taking place over the course of immeasurable aeons, during which each rational soul in accordance with its capacities will freely subject itself to a process of correction, culminating in its reconciliation with God (*Princ.* 3.6.6).

This leads to a startling but inevitable conclusion: the devil himself will be redeemed in the final restoration.<sup>13</sup> Origen is clear

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12. Indeed, for Eriugena it is precisely the contrast between good and evil, the inequality and diversity of existence that accounts for the beauty of creation. See also Jauneau, “Le Thème du Retour” *Études Érigéniennes*, 367-394.

13. Elsewhere Origen takes a more cautious approach to this controversial question. At *Princ.* 1.6.3 he advises the reader to judge for themselves, “whether it be true that long-continued and deep-rooted wickedness turns at last from a habit into a kind of nature,” thereby becoming incurable. In a letter, “To Friends in Alexandria,” he strongly denies ever teaching the redemption of the devil, but, in a dialogue with the Gnostic Candidus, he acknowledges it as a real possibility. See Jennifer L. Heckart, “Sympathy for the devil? Origen and the end.” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60, no. 3-4: 49-63. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, p. 333. The topic of the ultimate fate of the devil perhaps belongs (as with the non-eternity of hell) to those things of which Origen declares: “It is not right to explain to everybody all that might be said on this subject” (*Contra Celsum*, 6.26). The logic of Origen’s ontology seems to require the conversion and ultimate restoration of the devil. For the same point in relation to Eriugena, see n. 19 below.

that the process of restoration will continue, “until it reaches even to the last enemy, who is called death [i.e. the devil],<sup>14</sup> in order that he, too, may be destroyed and remain an enemy no longer” (*Princ.* 3.6.6). This destruction, however, does not entail the destruction of substance, but merely that of the “hostile purpose and will,” so that the devil will be “no longer an enemy, no longer death” (*Princ.* 3.6.5). Like all rational creatures, the devil and his demons are not evil by nature (for being is a good, and insofar as something *is*, it has a certain goodness), but came to be so as a result of their own, freely willed choices. Consequently, it is just as possible for them as it is for every other rational nature to be rehabilitated and experience a conversion to the Good. And this, in fact, must be the case, if God is truly to be “all in all.”<sup>15</sup> In the final restoration, then, there will be only God, only Good, and the diversity of creatures will, without exception, be restored to their original being, goodness and unity in God.

Implicit in Origen’s ontological argument lies another fundamental principle of Platonic theology: God can only ever be the source of good, and never of evil. Thus, as Plato insists, whenever God does punish beings, he does so solely for the moral improvement of the sufferer (*Rep.* 379a-380b). In keeping with this Platonic principle, Origen understands the punishments of sinners, not as acts of divine retribution, but as providential measures aimed at the rehabilitation of sinners (*Princ.* 1.6.3). As such, he does not conceive of these otherworldly punishments as eternal. Not only is it difficult to reconcile the idea of an infinite penalty for a finite evil with a belief in divine justice, such a penalty bestows no actual *benefits* upon the recipient. Thus, while Origen affirms the reality of otherworldly punishments, he understands them not as eternal retributions, but as restorative measures:

The end of the world and the consummation will come when every soul shall be visited with the penalties due for its sins ... We believe, however, that the goodness of God through Christ will restore his entire creation to one end, even his enemies being conquered and subdued (*Princ.* 1.6.1).

As we noted above, the ‘enemies’ that are vanquished do not refer to individual natures, but to the adventitious evils they

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14. Rufinus conceals this overt reference to the devil; see *On First Principles* note 12, p. 462. Eriugena makes this identification explicit at *Periphyseon*. V. 924B

15. See Ramelli, 144-156 for a detailed discussion of this controversial topic.

have accrued.<sup>16</sup> In keeping with the divine goodness, Origen understands the punishments of sinners both in this life and the next as “very stern methods of correction” by which, over the course of many ages (αἰῶνες), souls are “renewed and restored” (*Princ.* 1.6.3; 3.5.8). It is only after this lengthy process of purgation has been accomplished that the final *apokatastasis* will take place. In this way, ontology and theology provide the foundation for Origen’s doctrine of universal restoration.

Before turning to Eriugena, a final aspect of Origen’s understanding of the return needs to be mentioned; namely, his identification of restoration with deification. In truth, the identity of restoration and deification has been implicit in our discussion throughout. Origen’s tireless insistence that God will be “all in all,” that after the total abolition of evil all rational creatures shall return to their original unity in God, indeed *become* God (*Princ.* 3.6.2), shows that for him *apokatastasis* means nothing other than *theosis*. Origen explicitly invokes the Platonic notion that “the highest good is to become as far as possible like God,” an ideal that stands as the collective aim of every rational nature (*Princ.* 3.6.1). Just as all rational natures possess a single *archē* in God, so too, they share a common *telos* in a collective deification, marked by the dissolution of diversity into a primal unity. The differing capacities and relative merits of individuals do not result in a hierarchy of rewards, as we shall see when we get to Eriugena. Instead, for Origen difference is worked out according to a temporal order: the best will be the first to be deified, followed by the next best, and so on. In this way, says Origen, “every rational nature can, in the process of passing from one order to another, travel through each order to all the rest, and from all to each” (*Princ.* 1.6.3). In the final *apokatastasis* all beings without exception will experience deification when God will be “all in all.” For Origen, *apokatastasis* and *theosis* coincide.

### ERIUGENA: PART I – THE ETERNAL QUESTION

If Origen stands as the greatest ancient advocate of *apokatastasis*, Eriugena is arguably its greatest mediaeval proponent. In *Book V* of the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena provides us with a thorough, deeply

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16. See *Princ.* 1.6.1-2 where Origen assimilates the notion of subjection to salvation.

considered treatment of this important doctrine. Of the numerous fascinating innovations that Eriugena introduces, I shall focus primarily upon one: his distinction between nature and will, in which he diverges significantly from Origen. I shall argue that this difference, and the consequences that flow from it, stems from Eriugena's attempt to reconcile the opposing theologies of (broadly speaking) Origen and Augustine.

Like Origen, Eriugena's eschatological speculations are rooted in a strong ontological monism: only God/Good has any true reality, while evil is merely a privation of good, a diminution of being.<sup>17</sup> Because God as the sole Existent is eternal, so too are all derivative existences, which are nothing but participations of God as the fundamental Reality. Nutritor asks Alumnus:

I imagine you have no doubts about the eternity of the Divine Nature and of all things which are created in It and through It and for It and from It, and It alone is truly and uniquely eternal, and that every eternal [thing] is eternal through participation in Its eternity? (*Peri.* 5.926A)

This passage echoes Origen's view that, as participations of God, all creatures must likewise participate in the eternity of God. As eternally created natures, all beings share a common origin in God and shall return to God at their collective consummation for, as both Origen and Eriugena repeatedly insist, the beginning must resemble the end. Like Origen, Eriugena argues that God does not destroy his own creatures, but only that which he did not create; namely, evil (*Peri.* 5.923C-D). Only wickedness and death, which were not created<sup>18</sup> by God, i.e. possess no ontological reality, will be abolished in the final restoration. Consequently, Eriugena agrees with Origen that even the transgressing angels, insofar as they are created, will not undergo a destruction of natures. Instead, just as with human transgressors, God "will rather extinguish in them their wickedness and impiety and baneful power," so that "their eternal damnation will consist of the total abolition of their wickedness and impiety" (*Peri.* 5.923D). While Eriugena shows greater caution in discussing the controversial subject of the devil's redemption (*Peri.* 5.941B), the logic of his ontology unambiguously

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17. Ramelli, 805.

18. For Origen and Eriugena the language of creation is basically that of participation. God is the fundamental creative Ground, indeed Creativity Itself, from which everything derives its existence and to which it returns.

speaks for itself.<sup>19</sup>

In all of this, Eriugena follows Origen's middle (or neo) Platonic ontology faithfully. All created natures have their beginning in the Uncreated Nature and will return to it in the final restoration when "God will be all things in all things" (*Peri.* 5. 876B). Alumnus, however, raises a fateful objection. Given the universal return of all created natures, he asks, "What has become of the eternal punishments which the impious shall incur?" (*Peri.* 5.921D) If the whole of human nature is to be restored to the Divine Logos, "what remains to be handed over to everlasting damnation?" (*Peri.* 5.924A) Alumnus protests: "It will look as though I am going against Holy Scripture which explicitly threatens eternal punishment to the devil and all his hosts" (*ibid.*). While Scripture insists upon the reality of eternal punishments, reason demands that evil cannot endure indefinitely in opposition to an infinite Good.

Remarkably, Origen makes no mention of this apparent contradiction in *On First Principles*. The reason for this is quite simply because, for him, the problem doesn't exist! That is to say, for Origen as with other early proponents of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, scripture never actually affirms the reality of eternal punishments. The key to this startling conclusion lies in the ambiguity inherent in the Greek term, αἰών (adj. αἰώνιος). This term, as our Greek lexicon shows, primarily means "a period of existence," "a definite space of time, an era, epoch, age, period." While "eternal" is also among the many possible definitions of this polyvalent term, it is far from being its primary, undisputed meaning.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while NT references to a πῦρ αἰώνιον ('aeonic' fire), or a κόλασις αἰώνιος ('aeonic' punishment)<sup>21</sup> may indeed

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19. See Jeauneau: "L'excuse alléguée pour ne point traiter le problème du salut du démon, à savoir le silence de l'Écriture et des Pères, n'est guère convaincante. Tout se passé comme si Jean Scot avait, pour des raisons de prudence, renoncé à tirer une conclusion que la dynamique de sa pensée imposait logiquement." "Le Thème du Retour," 389.

20. For a thorough treatment of this topic see: Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan, *Terms for Eternity: Aïōnios and Aïdios in Classical and Christian Texts* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2007).

21. See Matt 18:8, 25:46. The term κόλασις is worth noting here: "according to Aristotle *Rhet.* 1369b13, *kolasis* 'is inflicted in the interest of the sufferer,' whereas *timōria* is inflicted 'in the interest of him who inflicts it, that he may obtain satisfaction.' Now, in the New Testament, punishment in the world to come is invariably indicated by *kolasis*, never by *timōria*." If this Aristotelian usage holds true for the NT it points to the nature of punishment as *purifying* rather



be interpreted as teaching eternal damnation, Ramelli argues that, “the adjective αἰώνιος in the Bible never means ‘eternal’ unless it refers to God, who lends it the very notion of absolute eternity.” In all other references, it simply means “‘belonging to the future world’.”<sup>22</sup> The Greek word for eternity in the absolute sense is ἀίδιος, a term that scripture never uses in conjunction with punishments. Instead, the latter are only ever referred to as αἰώνια.<sup>23</sup> Rather than signifying an infinite *duration*, Ramelli contends, the πῦρ αἰώνιον, or the κόλασις αἰώνιος are instead references to “otherworldly” punishments belonging to some future aeon.

While Ramelli’s interpretation is controversial, it has its ultimate source in Origen who primarily understands αἰών in the sense of “age,” “epoch,” or “world.” This is brought out clearly (in addition to the numerous allusions found in *On First Principles*) in his *Commentary on Romans*:

In the Scriptures “eternity” (*aeternitas* = αἰών) is sometimes recorded because the end is not known, but sometimes because the time period designated does not have an end in the present age, though it does end in the future. Sometimes a period of time, or even the length of one man’s life may be designated as eternity. (VI.5.9)<sup>24</sup>

Origen goes on to cite Exodus 21:5-6 which states that if a slave, on account of his love for his family, wishes to remain in servitude to his master, “his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him forever” (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα; KJV/XXL). As Origen points out, εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα obviously does not mean “eternal” here, but rather indicates a finite lifetime.<sup>25</sup> Similarly in Ecclesiastes we read that “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever” (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα; KJV/XXL).<sup>26</sup>

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than retributive. See Ramelli/Konstan, 67-68.

22. Ramelli, 26.

23. *Ibid.* Admittedly, scripture rarely uses the term ἀίδιος at all. Both the Septuagint and NT are unique in their overwhelming preference for αἰώνιος, used indiscriminately to indicate eternity, age, epoch, generations, world, etc. The ambiguity of scriptural usage of this term thus provides rich ground for diverse and even radically opposed views concerning our present topic. See *Terms for Eternity*, 37-70.

24. Origen, Scheck, Thomas P, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2002) 16.

25. Recognizing this obvious fact, the Vulgate here renders εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα as *in saeculum*, rather than *aeternus*.

26. Vulgate: *generatio praeterit et genetatio advenit terra vero in aeternum stat.*

Here again, as Origen rightly indicates, “forever” does not mean eternal in the sense of infinite duration; instead, it signifies the finite duration of this world, i.e. the present age, or αἰών.<sup>27</sup> In fact, scripture is filled with numerous, diverse examples in which αἰών and its adjectives are used in ways that cannot be understood to mean eternity in the absolute sense of the term.<sup>28</sup>

While the αἰῶνες, or ages understood in the eschatological sense may indeed be of immense temporal duration, they are not, strictly speaking, eternal. Instead, as we noted earlier, Origen affirms the existence of “aeonic,” or “otherworldly” chastisements whose duration lasts only as long as necessary to rehabilitate sinners. In other words, while punishment shall indeed await sinners in the age to come (αἰών), there is no indication that these will endure for eternity (ἀίδιος). Instead, having passed through the purifying flames of hell, an eventual, universal restoration will take place in which *all* souls, including the damned, will be restored to their origin in God.<sup>29</sup> It is precisely the rich ambiguity inherent in the Greek αἰών, its multivalent character, which allows Origen to avoid the impossible impasse that so vexes the Alumnus.

Given the elegance of this linguistic solution, the question arises as to why Eriugena did not avail himself of it. To begin with, it is important to recognize that the full scope of meanings inherent in the Greek αἰών becomes entirely lost in Latin translation, since the Vulgate renders both αἰών and ἀίδιος by one and the same adjective, *aeternus*.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the Greek term, the Latin *aeternus* lacks the rich polyvalence implicit in the Greek αἰών. Whereas αἰών offers multiple interpretive possibilities, *aeternus* is primarily<sup>31</sup>

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27. *Comm. Romans* VI.5.9.

28. See also Henri Crouzel: “La raison essentielle pour laquelle l’expression πῦρ αἰώνιον ne paraît pas à Origène implique nécessairement l’éternité du châ-timent tel que nous l’entendons, c’est que l’adjectif αἰώνιος conserve pour lui tout l’ambiguïté du mot dont il dérive αἰών. Dans le deux Testaments à côté de la signification <éternité> conçue comme une durée sans fin, on trouve celle, que nous traduisons par <siècle> de longue période de temps, spécialement de durée de monde actuel – de là synonymie entre <monde> et <siècle> - ou de monde futur.” *L’Hadès et la Géhenne selon Origène*, Gregorianum Vol. 59, no. 2. 1978, 320.

29. On the purificatory nature of the divine fire, see also *Contra Celsum* 4.13. For a wonderfully clear and explicit expression of this point of view see Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Ch.7 “Why is Purification Painful?” A faithful disciple of Origen, Gregory draws a striking comparison between the πῦρ αἰώνιον and the purifying fire of the goldsmith.

30. Ramelli, 670.

31. As our Latin lexicon shows, *aeternus* does possess the possibility of being

limited to the narrow sense of “eternal.” While the austerity of the Latin term might provide a sufficient explanation in the case of some Latin mediaeval philosophers, it is clearly inadequate in the case of our Irish exegete. Not only does Eriugena quote the Septuagint at key points in the *Periphyseon*, he shows himself fearlessly capable of exploiting any linguistic ambiguity that might bolster his argument.<sup>32</sup> Why, then, does he choose not to do this when it comes to the crucial question of eternal punishments?

There are at least two possible answers to this question: The first has to do with the so-called Origenist controversies which arose in the 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, culminating in 553 with Origen’s condemnation and the anathematization of various Origenist doctrines, among them the doctrine of *apokatastasis*.<sup>33</sup> Subsequent to this catastrophic event, it becomes much more difficult for thinkers to openly affirm Origenist ideas. Thus, while Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), writing prior to 553 makes explicit references to universal salvation, Maximus (580-662), writing after the Origenist controversy makes only veiled allusions concerning the ultimate restoration, a mystery he prefers to “honour with silence” on account of its spiritual profundity.<sup>34</sup>

While it is important to keep this historical context in mind when dealing with Eriugena, it scarcely provides a satisfactory answer to our present question. If indeed there was a condemnation of

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interpreted in a looser, more general sense as “indefinite duration” or “age.” In contrast to the Greek term, however, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the strict meaning of eternal as “infinite duration.”

32. I refer here in particular to his bold reworking of the Greek “*ne*” particle in Genesis, which turns the conventional reading completely on its head. See Dairde Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95.

33. Whether or not Origen was actually condemned and the fifteen anathemas directed against him were in fact formally approved by the Fifth Ecumenical Council remains a subject of debate. See Prat, Ferdinand. “Origen and Origenism.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. 24 Jul. 2015 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11306b.htm>; Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All? Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and St. Isaac the Syrian,” *The Collected Works Volume I The Inner Kingdom*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press Crestwood, New York 2001, 193-215. P.4; Ramelli, *Apokatastasis* 724-738.

34. Whether or not Maximus fully embraced the doctrine of *apokatastasis* remains a subject of scholarly debate. Von Balthasar and Polycarp Sherwood are among those who argue in favour of this position; see Ramelli, 742. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003) 354-358.

Origen (a verdict which is far from unanimous),<sup>35</sup> Eriugena seems not to have taken any notice of it. In his discussion of the return in *Book V* he unapologetically quotes Origen, inserting whole passages from *On First Principles* into his *Periphyseon* (929A-931A). Eriugena praises “the great Origen” highly, calling him “that most diligent enquirer into the nature of things” (929A). He even goes so far as to call him “the blessed Origen” (922C) – a most peculiar epithet for a condemned heretic! While Eriugena shows greater caution when it comes to the controversial topic of the devil he, in contrast to Maximus, openly embraces the doctrine of *apokatastasis*. Thus, while not discounting it entirely, it is nonetheless difficult to account for Eriugena’s rejection of Origen’s linguistic solution solely on the basis of historical circumstances. Instead, I shall argue that the real answer lies with Augustine.

While Alumnus frames the problem as a conflict between reason and scripture, we have seen how, from the Greek point of view, this is something of a false dichotomy. It only becomes an obstacle for those Latin thinkers (such as Augustine) for whom the broader implications of the Greek term, including the distinction between αἰών and αἰδιος have become obscured.<sup>36</sup> While the early Augustine was sympathetic to the works of Origen, he (along with Jerome) increasingly distanced himself from the latter following the above-mentioned Origenist controversy.<sup>37</sup> As with many Latin thinkers, Augustine interprets scriptural references to eternal punishments in the sense of infinite duration, that is, not as αἰώνιος, but as αἰδιος.<sup>38</sup> In *The City of God*, for example, Augustine criticises Origen and other proponents of *apokatastasis* on account of their magnanimous views concerning universal salvation: “those kind-hearted people of ours (*miseri cordibus nostris*) who will not believe that punishment will be everlasting (*poenam sempiternam*)” (21.17). Augustine’s position on this issue is uncompromising: “I have no doubt at all,” he declares, “that the punishment (*supplicium aeternum*) of the damned will be without end” (21.23). Scripture

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35. See note 37 above.

36. While αἰών is the preferred term for scripture, αἰδιος remains the proper term for eternity in the Greek philosophical lexicon. The distinction between them would have been perfectly understood by Greek thinkers, but not necessarily by Latins.

37. Ramelli, 669.

38. In a passage from his *Hexameron* quoted by Eriugena in the *Periphyseon*, Augustine makes strong references to an “eternal” and “everlasting” fire prepared for the punishment of the devil and his angels (*Peri.* 5.928B).

speaks of eternal punishment and, as far as Augustine is concerned, there is no ambiguity – eternal means eternal in the strict, temporal sense of the term. Thus, the opposition that emerges in Eriugena's discussion of the return is not ultimately, as Alumnus frames it, between philosophy and scripture, but broadly speaking, between Origen and Augustine. In other words, the opposition is between two opposing *philosophical interpretations* of scripture.<sup>39</sup>

It is worth noting that it is Alumnus who objects to the doctrine of *apokatastasis* on the grounds that it conflicts with the eternal punishments mentioned in scripture. Alumnus, as many commentators maintain,<sup>40</sup> represents Eriugena before his encounter with the Greeks, while Nutritor represents Eriugena illuminated by his Greek theological education. From this point of view also, what is portrayed in the *Periphyseon* as a conflict between reason and scripture could in fact be seen as an opposition between the eschatological views of Origen and those of Augustine. More specifically, it represents a poignant example of Eriugena's endeavour to reconcile the Eastern and Western theological traditions within his own thought.

### ERIUGENA: PART II – APOKATASTASIS AS HIERARCHY

By refusing the linguistic solution to the problem of eternal punishments, Eriugena considerably modifies Origen's doctrine of universal return. On the one hand, Eriugena never wavers in his commitment to Platonic ontology/theology: as the Supreme Good, God can only be the source of good and never evil (*Peri.* 5.944A). As such, he does not destroy his own creatures but only that which he did not create; namely, wickedness and impiety (*Peri.* 5.923C-D). On the other hand, Eriugena is determined to uphold the reality of eternal punishments supposedly mentioned in scripture. As a result, he is faced with the formidable task of reconciling the immutability of natures with the reality of punishments. His solution is both ingenious and paradoxical: every created *nature* will be restored in the final consummation, while every evil *will*

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39. Alumnus himself points out in this passage that the conflict in fact exists within scripture itself, which also proclaims the ultimate destruction of death and hell (*Peri.* 5.924B-C).

40. See, for example, Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 201.

shall be subject to eternal punishment.<sup>41</sup>

By drawing a distinction between nature and will Eriugena diverges sharply from Origen, for whom the final restoration means nothing *other* than the conversion of every rational will to the Good after an appropriate course of purifying punishment. For Origen, the restoration of substance means precisely the *rehabilitation* of the will. The destruction of the devil, as he makes clear, is not the destruction of his substance but of “the hostile purpose and will” so that the last enemy will be “no longer an enemy, and no longer death” (*Princ.* 3.6.5). What this means is that the perverse will of the devil will eventually be eradicated – with the result that he will cease to be demonic. As such, he, along with all the other rehabilitated souls, will eventually come to enjoy the blessedness of deification. Augustine, whom Eriugena quotes here in conjunction with Origen, offers a radically different perspective. While Augustine agrees with Origen that the devil is not *substantially* evil, but came to be so due to the corruption of his own will, he nonetheless affirms the reality of the devil’s condemnation: “we must believe that it is certainly not his nature, which God created, that must submit to the punishment of the everlasting fire, but his own evil will” (*Peri.* 5.928B). It is here, in Augustine, that we encounter Eriugena’s distinction between nature and will. While God does not punish any created nature, he *does* punish the evil will that he did not create and for which, as the Good, he is not ultimately responsible.

It is worth noting here the remarkable sleight of hand by which Eriugena brings Origen and Augustine into accord. Having cited both of them at length on the immutability of all created substances – devil included – Nutritor concludes: “Therefore St. Augustine has taught you that ‘in the Devil God shall punish

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41. There are two passages in *Periphyseon V* that in fact suggest the *non*-eternity of punishments (*Peri.* 5.950d & 977b). Intriguing as these passages are, Eriugena offers no substantial argument in support of this (possibly private, Origenist?) view. Consequently, I differ sharply from Ramelli who claims that Eriugena follows Origen on the finitude of ‘eternal’ punishments, culminating in an unqualified, universal restoration. In her argument, Ramelli fails to fully take into account a number of subtle yet crucial distinctions that Eriugena clearly articulates in the course of his argumentation, most crucially the all-important distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘will’. For Ramelli’s treatment of Eriugena, see *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 773-815. See also Jean Trouillard, *Jean Scot Érigène: Études* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2014) 177-178.

not that which he created but that which He did not create;’ and Origen that the substance of the Devil shall never be done away with, but only his evil” (*Peri*. 5.931A). Here, the opposition between Origen and Augustine is ostensibly overcome. Yet, if we read this passage carefully we notice that, while both thinkers agree upon the immutability of created natures, they differ radically in their understanding of the destruction of evil. For Origen, the destruction of evil means the purification of sinful natures leading to their ultimate deification, while for Augustine it means the enduring punishment of the wicked will. Thus, while they seem to be saying the same thing, their understanding of ‘punishment’ is in fact entirely different. For one it signifies a finite, restorative measure, for the other an infinite retribution.

By trying to bring these contrary views together, Eriugena introduces tensions into the doctrine of universal return not present in Origen. On the one hand he emphatically affirms the universal restoration of the whole of human nature; on the other hand he insists that the perverse wills of sinners shall be subject to everlasting punishment. *Qua nature*, all beings will enjoy the blessedness of paradise; *qua will* some shall endure eternal chastisement. While the former indicates the immutable essence of humanity, the latter are accidental accretions (*Peri*. 5.942C-943B). This raises an important question: who or what remains to be punished if the whole of human nature, the totality of human subjectivity is restored? How, asks Alumnus, “can the torments of the damned exist without a subject to afflict?” (*Peri*. 5.940B) What *is* suffering, after all, if not a subjective experience?

In order to explain how the evil will can be punished apart from the nature, Eriugena turns to the example of worldly justice. Just as a human judge does not punish the criminal but the crime, so the Divine Justice does not punish the nature that he has created, but merely the evil will that he did not create. While worldly judges inadvertently punish the criminal along with the crime, God “liberates and isolates from the crime that which He has created, and in a mysterious manner acquits that which he has created, and punishes, or rather allows to be punished only that which He has not created” (*Peri*. 5.944A). By means of this example which has a decidedly Augustinian ring to it, Eriugena tries to show how, in some inexplicable manner, the immutable natures of sinners will go unharmed even as their incidental evils are punished.

For the remainder of the argument, Eriugena’s sole concern is

to reconcile the immutability of human nature with the enduring consequences of evil. He tirelessly reiterates his unwavering conviction in the goodness of the rational nature, which, as a participant in the Supreme Good, remains everywhere “unmenaced, undamaged, unharmed, uncontaminated, incorruptible, impassible, immutable” (*Peri.* 5.944C). Be it sinner or saint, the whole of human nature remains “whole and perfect and the Image of her Creator” (*ibid.*). Thus, in the final restoration, no wickedness, corruption, or death will be found in the nature of things. And yet, he simultaneously insists, the “lawless will of wicked men and angels” *will* be subject to the torments of their own depraved memories and remorseful consciences (*Peri.* 5.944D). In order to ease the tension between universal redemption and enduring damnation, Eriugena strongly affirms the reality of the former, while reducing the latter as far as possible to illusory memories and ephemeral phantasies.

For Eriugena, as with Origen, the problem is at once ontological and theological. While his ‘agathontology’ holds him to the immutability of created natures, his theology prohibits him from making God the source of evil (*Peri.* 5.944A). Origen, as we saw, resolved the problem by interpreting the ‘otherworldly’ punishments as therapeutic measures aimed at the rehabilitation of sinners. Eriugena, for whom this is not an option, is forced to take a different approach. Instead of framing punishments as expressions of divine providence, he chooses to absolve God of all responsibility. It is not God who punishes sinners (for God does not condemn his own creatures); instead, evildoers are tormented by their own consciences. Condemned to empty imaginings and vain phantasies, says Nutritor, they shall “burn with a tardy remorse, as with an inextinguishable fire” (*Peri.* 5.961B). Punishment, like the sin of which it is the consequence, stems not from the Divine Goodness, but from the inexplicable evil of the perverse will. As such, it has no positive ontological status, but persists as phantasy.

All of this leads Eriugena to a remarkable conclusion. The entirety of human nature – saint and sinner alike – will return to its Principle in the final *apokatastasis*. As eternal participants in God, as created in the Divine Image, none may remain outside the infinite scope of the Supreme Good. Following Origen, Eriugena affirms that, *qua nature*, God will be “all in all;” heeding Augustine, he maintains that *qua will*, the consequences of sin shall endure. In the final restoration, every rational nature will be confronted



with the Truth; yet each “shall behold that Vision in his own way” in accordance with his merits (*Peri.* 5.945D). Thus, while the deified will enjoy blissful theophanies in ascending levels of contemplation, the damned will endure wretched phantasies in a descending hierarchy of evil imaginations (*Peri.* 5.946A). All creatures will be included in the final restoration. Yet, how each *experiences* the Divine Nature will differ according to merit: the saints will experience God as illuminating wisdom, while sinners will experience God in a painful and distorted manner. One experiences a theophany of light, the other a phantasy of darkness.

This juxtaposition of theophany and phantasy is a purely perspectival one. In the final *apokatastasis*, the whole of human nature will be absorbed into the whole of the Divine Nature so that God “will be all in all.” However, as Eriugena puts it, while “all shall *see* the glory of God,” not all shall *enjoy* this beatific vision (*Peri.* 5.967D).<sup>42</sup> The damned, like those suffering from an eye disease, will experience the Divine Illumination as painful and will try to flee from it, to hide themselves in darkness (*Peri.* 5.968A). This darkness is none other than the obscure imaginings of their own distorted phantasies. Confronted with the blinding Truth, the damned will seek refuge in the shadowy, familiar pleasures of their past lives – yet to no avail. For “of those things which in this life [the perverse will] had lusted after, and the future life it had hoped to obtain,” says Eriugena, “nothing will be found” (*Peri.* 5.944D). The torment of the wicked consists of insatiable desire for things that no longer exist, an eternal yearning after hollow phantasies of finite goods. In the final restoration, both saint and sinner will experience the same, universal Truth. For the former, whose lives were oriented towards wisdom this is a joyous encounter, the affirmation of all their hopes and aspirations; for the latter, whose days were consumed by vain pursuits it is a source of anguish, the eternal privation of what they held most dear. In this way, theophany and phantasy are simply different perspectives upon a single, fundamental Reality – one involves an unconfused apprehension of the Good, the other a fragmentary perception distorted by the perverse will.

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42. As Michael Harrington aptly puts it: “In the general *eschaton*, Eriugena promises this [i.e. the beatific vision] to everyone, with the proviso that not everyone may find it pleasant [!]” “Eastern and Western Psychological Triads,” in *History and Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena and His Time*. (Leuven: University Press, 2002) 462.

Between these two extremes, there exists a full spectrum of experience, an ordered hierarchy of rewards and punishments. While Origen envisions the final return as resolving in temporal fashion over the course of countless ages, beginning with the restoration of the saints, followed by sinners, and lastly the devil, Eriugena converts the return into a kind of “spatial” hierarchy.<sup>43</sup> For him, the words, “in My Father’s house there are many mansions,” point to the all-embracing unity of heaven, in which virtuous and non-virtuous alike will find an eternal dwelling place determined by their merits (*Peri.* 5.945D; 982C).<sup>44</sup> Like the priestly hierarchy of Solomon’s Temple, all souls will be assigned a station in the celestial court: some will dwell in the outer porticos of the temple, while others will abide in the inner regions. The deified will reside in the innermost sanctuary, the Shrine of Wisdom that is Christ; the damned, as the story of Abraham and the rich man demonstrates, will abide, so to speak, in the dungeons of the heavenly Jerusalem (*Peri.* 5.982C-983D). While all are universally assured a place in the paradise of human nature, not all are promised an equal share of beatitude. Instead, a theophanic hierarchy governs the celestial court – a hierarchy constituted by the multiplicity of spiritual perspectives. In contrast to Origen, for whom all beings (given enough time) are destined for deification, Eriugena takes a more qualified approach. For him, “all share the same nature but not all share the same Grace” (*Peri.* 5.983B). Where Origen essentially equates *apokatastasis* with *theosis*, Eriugena carefully distinguishes between a General and a Special return. As such, he arrives at an understanding of *apokatastasis* as hierarchy.

## CONCLUSION

Eriugena’s discussion of the return in *Book V* of the *Periphyseon* offers a unique example of the question of Eriugena’s Greek and Latin influences. While the doctrine of *apokatastasis* is

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43. See Ramelli, 809. For a superb treatment of this topic see Donald F. Duclow and Paul A. Dietrich “Hell and Damnation in Eriugena,” in *History and Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena*, 347-366.

44. In *Homily XXVII.2 on Numbers* Origen identifies the many mansions with the encampments of the Israelites in the desert in Exodus, interpreting them as temporary stages, or levels of spiritual realization that each soul passes through on its way to the Father. See *Classics of Western Spirituality series, Origen trans.*, Rowen A. Greer. (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979) 248.

a characteristically Greek idea, most prominently found in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Eriugena's appropriation of it is significantly modified by his Augustinian theological formation. As we have seen, the influence of Augustine lies hidden beneath the veneer of a familiar and seemingly legitimate opposition between reason and scripture. This example provides us with an important insight into the subtlety of this Augustinian influence. Despite the fact that Eriugena frequently shows preference for the Greeks over Augustine and the Latin Fathers, the influence of the latter nonetheless remains operative in ways not always easily discerned. In the case of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, we find a profoundly Greek notion filtered through, and importantly altered by, a Latin, Augustinian mind set.

While Eriugena follows Origen in teaching the universal return of rational nature, his Augustinian influences ultimately lead him to a more qualified understanding of *apokatastasis*. His philosophical commitment to the primacy of the Good and the insubstantiality of evil compels him to embrace the idea of universal restoration. Yet at the same time he is reluctant to relinquish the real and enduring consequences of sin associated with scripture. All creatures are restored, and yet not all are redeemed. Evil is abolished and yet persists as phantasy. Eriugena's doctrine of universal restoration could be described as a kind of unity in multiplicity, a cosmic hierarchy that manages to embrace both heaven and hell, saint and sinner, without ever confusing one for the other.