

σῶμα ψυχικόν, σῶμα πνευματικόν:  
The Fate of Bodies in Origen and  
Eriugena

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INTRODUCTION

In a previous conference I presented a paper<sup>1</sup> in which I compared Origen's understanding of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, or universal return, with that of Eriugena's. While the latter largely derives his universalism from the former, I argued that the influence of the Latin, Augustinian tradition led to important modifications of this distinctly Greek notion. In the present paper, I shall focus upon one particular aspect of this controversial eschatological doctrine; namely, the fate of the individual and collective corporeality of the created cosmos in the *eschaton*, when God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). Once again, I hope to show how Eriugena is both profoundly influenced by Origen's eschatological speculations, and yet departs from the great Alexandrian in crucial ways. In essence, while both thinkers insist upon the ultimate transfiguration of the sensible, material reality, their respective understandings of what this entails differs considerably. For Origen (contrary to popular opinion), bodily matter is preserved and transformed, whereas for Eriugena the whole of corporeal reality is subsumed into its intelligible principles. For *both* thinkers this marks not the destruction of the body, but its ultimate *transfiguration*. Whereas previously I identified the Latin influence of Augustine as the principal modifying factor in Eriugena's "qualified" universalism, in this paper I aim to show how the

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1 Atlantic Classical Association, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S. 2014. Subsequently published as "Αποκαταστασις : The Resolution of Good and Evil in Origen and Eriugena", *Dionysius* Vol. 33, 2015, 195–213.

differences between Origen and Eriugena stem from developments within the Greek tradition itself. In sum, I shall argue that Origen's understanding of bodily resurrection is grounded in the hylomorphism of Aristotle, whereas Eriugena's is rooted in the Neoplatonic idealism of Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius.

#### PART I: ORIGEN'S HYLOMORPHIC UNIVERSE

It may come as something of a surprise to discover how profoundly hylomorphic Origen's conception of the universe in fact is. Even more surprising, perhaps, is how uncommon this "Aristotelian" view of Origen is – especially as there is compelling textual evidence in its favour. One of the reasons for this scholarly oversight has to do with an enduring tendency to regard Origen as a kind of soul/body dualist, a "Platonist" in the crudest sense of that term. This tendency is nothing new. The emperor Justinian, who played a prominent role in Origen's condemnation, explicitly links the "insanity" of Origen's doctrine of the pre-existence of souls to the teachings of "Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, and their followers".<sup>2</sup> Among the XV Anathemas against Origen one finds repeated accusations of Origen having taught such vaguely Platonic notions as an original noetic, *incorporeal* creation, the acquisition of spherical bodies, and of course the denial of a corporeal resurrection. To this day, the idea persists that Origen's heterodoxy is somehow linked to his overreliance upon Platonism.<sup>3</sup> What tends to be overlooked is the extent to which Origen's Platonism is mingled with and modified by his equally prominent Aristotelianism. As a result of this oversight, Origen's views concerning the eternity of the world, his repeated insistence upon the inseparability of soul and body, form and matter – crucial to his

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2 Justinian, *Letter of Justinian to the Holy Council about Origen and those Like-minded*, in "Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity: The Descent of the Soul in Plato and Origen", *Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 108.04, 2015, 596.

3 Cf. Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, (Darton Longman and Todd, 1973) 415. Henri Crouzel *Origen*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989) 207, 217.

philosophical and theological system – continue to be overlooked.<sup>4</sup>

That having been said, what immediately strikes one upon removing one's Platonist blinders is how deeply hylomorphic Origen's understanding of the cosmos is.<sup>5</sup> While Origen maintains that matter does possess a separate existence apart from qualities, he repeatedly insists that *in reality* there is no such thing as unqualified, formless matter: "Although...matter has an existence by its own right without qualities," says Origen, "*yet it is never found actually existing apart from them*" (II.I.4; cf. IV.IV.7). This is similar to Aristotle's statement in *De Generatione et Corruptione* that "we must reckon as an 'originative source' and as 'primary' the matter which underlies, *though it is inseparable from*, the contrary qualities" (329a30). Like Origen, Aristotle seems to posit here a kind of prime matter distinct from the qualities of hot, cold, wet, and dry; a matter which both underlies (*hypokeimenon*) the contraries and yet is inseparable from them. Leaving aside the arduous task of discerning what Aristotle's ultimate view of matter is, I want, for now, simply to draw attention to the hylomorphic character of Origen's position with its strong Aristotelian resonance. Like Aristotle, Origen holds the view that, as far as the created realm of *physis* is concerned, form and matter are inextricably joined together. Whether matter is theoretically<sup>6</sup> separable from qualities,

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4 A notable exception is Robert Berchman, whose monograph, *From Philo to Origen, Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico, California: Scholar's Press, 1984) has been invaluable to me in this regard.

5 Again, I cannot stress enough that, despite my juxtaposition of these terms, it is not ultimately a case of Plato vs. Aristotle. Origen is both a Platonist *and* an Aristotelian – and a great many others things too (a Stoic, a Christian, a Pythagorean). Simply put, Origen is a Christian philosopher well versed in all schools of thought current at his time. My contention here is simply that, in terms of the soul/body relation, Origen is more closely aligned with Aristotle than he is with Plato.

6 Cf. IV.IV.7: "And so, when our mind by a purely intellectual act sets aside every quality and gazes at the mere point, if I may so call it, of the underlying substance in itself and clings to that without in the least considering its hardness or softness or heat or cold or wetness or dryness, then by this somewhat artificial mode of thought it will apparently behold matter stripped of all its qualities."

or whether it is ultimately nothing other *than* the qualities – a possibility Origen entertains at one point and which will prove crucial for Eriugena – for all practical purposes they are inseparable. For Origen, both form and matter were created simultaneously “in the beginning” (ἐν ἀρχῇ; II.IX.1). As such, they constitute the two primary created natures of which all creatures are composed.

Origen’s insistence upon the inseparability of form and matter finds its analog in the inseparability of soul and body. One of the central axioms of Origen’s system is that only the uncreated Trinity is capable of incorporeal existence; created beings cannot exist apart from bodies (II.II.1). This being so, Origen concludes that, “while the original creation (*principaliter creatas*) was of rational beings, it is only *in idea and thought (opinionem quidem intellectu solo)* that a material substance is separable from them” (*De Princ.* II.II.2). This mirrors the statement above concerning the actual inseparability of qualities and matter. Just as matter is always enformed matter, so souls are always *embodied* souls. Thus, while matter *seems (videri)* to have been produced for the original *logika*, or after them (*pro ipsis vel post ipsas*), says Origen, “yet never have they lived nor do they live without it; for we shall be right in believing that life without a body is found in the Trinity alone” (*ibid.*). Given that, as with qualities and matter, the distinction between soul and body is purely conceptual, the “original creation” here cannot refer to an original bodiless existence – the so-called preexistence of souls. Instead, souls have possessed bodies since beginningless time and will continue to do so for all eternity.

Though some commentators insist that the above passages are merely Rufinian modifications,<sup>7</sup> there are numerous other passages that express precisely the same view. For example, Origen

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7 There is a long and vexed history of “hermeneutical suspicion” regarding the study of Origen in which his Latin translator Rufinus is assumed to have modified Origen’s text whenever the latter fails to accord with popular misconceptions and exaggerated condemnations regarding Origen’s thought. I have dealt with this issue in a separate article entitled, “Heresy, Hermeneutics, and the Hellenization of Christianity: A Reappraisal of Embodiment in Origen’s *De Principiis*”, *Arc Journal* Vol. 44; 2016, 49–67.

specifically raises the question as to whether, just as bodily matter once did not exist, it will someday be resolved back into non-existence. Can it possibly happen, he asks, for any being to live without a body? His answer is no. Bodily matter, he insists, “in whatever form it is found, whether carnal as now or as hereafter in the subtler and purer form which is called spiritual, the soul always (*semper*) makes use of,” will never be destroyed (*De Princ.* II.III.2; sc. IV.III.15, IV.IV.8). Instead, as the apostle Paul teaches, it will be transfigured, the corruptible body putting on incorruption. For Origen, a direct correlation exists between the soul’s spiritual state and the kind of body it possesses. In the same way that matter is capable of undergoing infinite qualitative transformations – earth transforming into fire, fire, into air, air into water – so the bodies of rational creatures are capable of undergoing infinite transmutations in keeping with their ever-evolving spiritual condition. Whether one possesses an ethereal angelic body or an earthy human body depends upon one’s spiritual merits. In essence, the body is a timeless externalization of the soul, an outer projection or reflection of its inner condition (cf. II.II.2).

This being so, the charge that Origen posited an original incorporeal creation and denied a bodily resurrection is, in my opinion, a gross exaggeration; it is a deliberate distortion of the subtlety of Origen’s actual position by those seeking his condemnation. Nor is it possible to simply attribute the many affirmative statements concerning the body to the devious hand of Rufinus. The inseparability of form and matter, soul and body is a fundamental principle of Origen’s cosmos serving to distinguish the Creator from the creature. The Trinity is simple, incorporeal, and immutable; creatures are compounded, corporeal, and subject to change. To put it in Aristotelian terms, only God is capable of separate substance; creatures belong to the realm of *physis* in which form and matter are inseparable. Indeed, in Origen’s cosmos it is precisely the contingency of the compounded condition that underlies the *freedom* of the creature. The simplicity of the Godhead means that its goodness is essential and unchanging; the composite nature of creatures means that their

goodness is contingent and changeable. Insofar as the diversity of ethical choices produce the diversity of beings in the world, the malleability of matter provides the necessary substratum for the radical freedom of creatures to constitute themselves and the cosmos (cf. II.III.3). Simply put, without changeable matter, beings would be incapable of change. To claim that Origen taught an original, incorporeal creation to which rational creatures, having shed their material bodies, will someday return, obliterates the crucial distinction between metaphysics and physics, essential good and contingent good, the simplicity of the Godhead and the compoundedness of the creature. To do so is to undermine Origen's entire cosmos transforming it into a kind of pantheism.

Having gained some sense of the hylomorphic, "psychosomatic" character of Origen's cosmos, how are we to understand his doctrine of the resurrection? Contrary to the accusations against him, Origen explicitly rejects the idea that the material body will be destroyed in the final restoration. Instead, the individual body along with the collective materiality of the entire universe will undergo a glorious transfiguration. In response to the Pauline statement that "the form of this world shall pass away" (1 Cor 7:31), Origen argues that "it is not by any means an annihilation or destruction of the material substance that is indicated, but the occurrence of a certain change of quality (*inmutatio quaedam fit qualitatis*) and an alteration (*transformatio*) of the outward form" (*DePrinc.* I.VI.4). Isaiah, too, declares that "there shall be a new heaven and a new earth" (Is 65:17). For Origen, this renewal (*innovatio*) of heaven and earth does not indicate the destruction of material substance, but its *transmutation* (*transmutatio*); in the *eschaton*, the cosmos will undergo a qualitative transformation from coarse corporeality to a subtle, ethereal matter. In this, Origen shows himself a true disciple of Aristotelian physics: in order for change to occur there must be some sort of underlying substance capable of receiving contraries, something *from* which and *in* which qualitative changes can occur, and which persists throughout, and survives beyond, these

changes.<sup>8</sup> Matter is the necessary subject (*subjectus/hypokeimenon*) of change characteristic of the realm of becoming. It is this Aristotelian understanding of *physis*, of created nature, that informs Origen's view that the cosmos cannot exist apart from matter, and creatures cannot live apart from bodies. Only God, who is immutable Being, is capable of separate, incorporeal existence (I.IV.4).

This being so, it should not come as a surprise that Origen affirms the survival of material bodies in the resurrection. When Paul speaks of the corruptible putting on incorruption and the mortal putting on immortality (1 Cor 15:53), "to what else," asks Origen, "can it apply except bodily matter?" (II.III.2). The matter of the body, which is presently corruptible, will someday put on incorruption "when a perfect soul, instructed in the doctrines of incorruption, has begun to use it" (*ibid*). As we noted above, the quality of one's body is in direct correlation to the quality of one's soul. In the final *apokatastasis* when all souls have been purified of their carnal lusts, they will be endowed with a correspondingly purified body. In accordance with divine providence, the body, as the instrument of the soul, is always perfectly suited to the spiritual state of the individual. Carnal minds find themselves endowed with coarse, earthy bodies, spiritual minds find themselves equipped with subtle, ethereal bodies (II.III.2; II.III.7). Yet Origen is adamant that this is *not* a case of shedding one's earthly body for a new and improved spiritual body. Instead, he insists that "if it is necessary, *as it certainly is*, for us to live in bodies, we ought to live in no other bodies but our own" (emphasis added, II.X.1; III.VI.6). What is cast off is the weakness and corruption of the present body in exchange for the glory of an incorruptible body (III.VI.6). This does not involve exchanging one body for another, but the qualitative transformation of a single body, *our* body.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Cf. *Physics* I.9 192A30.

9 It is for this reason that Origen rejects Aristotle's ether as a fifth element. The spiritual body is not a new body made up of some wholly other element, but the *same* body whose elements have undergone a profound transformation. This spiritualized body may indeed be described as "ethereal", but it is *not*

## PART II: ERIUGENA'S NOETIC UNIVERSE

Having gained some sense of the hylomorphic character of Origen's cosmos and its consequences for the fate of bodies, how does this compare to Eriugena's idealist conception of Nature in the *Periphyseon*? Is there a way in which bodily matter, however subtle, is preserved for Eriugena? Or is corporeal reality completely subsumed into its intelligible principles to the point that the resurrection body itself is merely a transitory phase on the way to a purely noetic existence? In order to answer these questions, we need to begin, as we did with Origen, by establishing Eriugena's basic presuppositions concerning the nature of reality.

Eriugena's worldview could be simultaneously described as "monist" and "idealist". It is monist in the sense that God is the sole *archē* – indeed the sole reality – of all that is. The four divisions of nature are essentially four progressive stages of – or better, *perspectives* upon – the unfolding and enfolding of the divine (*hyper*) *ousia*. In Plotinian terms, the four divisions of nature represent the procession of the One into the many and the resolution of the many back into the One. One of Eriugena's favorite metaphors for this dynamic monism is the dialectic of division and recollection. In the same way that the art of dialectic divides *ousia* into genera, species and particulars and then resolves them back into their original unity, so the multiplicity of beings proceed from the divine simplicity in which they eternally subsist and return back into it (PP.V. 869A–B). Crucially, for Eriugena, the return of multiplicity into unity is not a *dissolution*, but a *resolution*. When dialectic resolves particulars into species, species into genera, and genera into *ousia*, it does not destroy the particulars but recollects them into their overarching essential unity. The fact that the human is a species of life, and life a species of being, does not undermine the particularity of human existence – it simply points, in Eriugena's view, to the true nature of the human eternally rooted in the divine

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ether. The four elements of all bodily existence are not rejected but spiritualized, transfigured, *perfected*.



essence. For Eriugena, for whom these categories are not merely logical but *ontological*, all species and particulars are individual articulations of a single, universal *ousia*. Insofar as God is the sole *ousia* (kataphatically speaking), the sole reality whose unfolding and enfolding constitutes the cosmic drama of creation and restoration, Eriugena's system may be described as a kind of dynamic monism.

At the same time, as Dermot Moran so astutely observes, Eriugena's monism is also a form of idealism. God, insofar as he is anything at all is, at least analogously speaking, Mind. "No philosopher of nature doubts," says Eriugena, "that all things are contained in the Divine Mind" (PP.V. 925A). Following Dionysius and the blessed Ambrose, Eriugena argues that there is nothing to be found outside of, or apart from, the Divine Mind: "for the Divine Knowledge is the Cause of all existents" (PP.V. 925B–926A). Eriugena expresses a similar idea in terms of the Divine Will. The motion, or activity of the Divine Nature is nothing other than the Divine Will that beings exist (PP.I. 453D). As expressions of the Divine Will, beings in a sense *are* the Divine Will, they are the *theia thelēmata*, the divine volitions that Eriugena identifies with the Primordial Causes of his second division of nature (PP.II. 529B). In Book IV Eriugena explicitly states that God's knowledge of things *is* the very substance of things. Hence, the definition of the human as "a certain intellectual concept formed eternally in the Divine Mind", a definition that Eriugena extends equally to all created things. Everything is in essence an intellectual concept in the Divine Mind (PP.IV. 768C). In good Augustinian Trinitarian fashion, Being, Knowing, and Willing are one Nature, and, for Eriugena, this one Nature not only constitutes all beings in its knowing and willing but is *itself* constituted in its own noetic activity.<sup>10</sup>

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10 There is a great deal more that could be said concerning Eriugena's idealism in terms of the role of the human subject. This, however, would take us too far afield from our present concern with the question of embodiment. For an excellent treatment of Eriugena's idealism see Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989).

Given this monist idealism (or idealist monism), there is no place in Eriugena's system for Origen's dualism between separate substance and hylomorphic substance. For Eriugena, both God and creature share a single, noetic nature. In contrast to Origen, who distinguishes between God as simple and incorporeal, and the creature as compounded and corporeal, Eriugena distinguishes God from creature solely upon the basis that the former is uncreated and the latter is created, a distinction he derives from Gregory of Nyssa (PP.IV. 796C).<sup>11</sup> As the perfect image of its divine archetype, Eriugena maintains that human nature is not compounded, but "a simple indivisible nature, not susceptible to partition" (PP.V.941D). Unlike Origen, for whom the *logika* have always possessed some sort of material body, however subtle, Eriugena regards the original prelapsarian condition of human nature as one of simple, intelligible existence. While Eriugena affirms that human nature does possess a kind of intelligible, angelic body, this body is immaterial and inseparable from mind; it is, in fact, itself mind as the "reason" or "*forma spiritualis*" of the corruptible body (PP. IV. 801D; 993D–994A). Like the angels, humans were originally established as "immaterial spirits and spiritual bodies" (PP. V. 884D). For Eriugena, the mutable, material bodies regarded by Origen as the essential counterpart to creaturely freedom are alien to human nature. Having been added solely as a consequence of the fall, they will eventually resolve back into their intelligible principles within the divine Mind (PP.IV. 760D, 797D–800B; PP.V. 884B).<sup>12</sup>

Having established the simple, noetic character of human nature demanded by the logic of the *imago dei*, Eriugena is presented with a second problem stemming from his uncompromising

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11 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16:12.

12 This is not to say that Eriugena subscribes to the pre-existence of souls, a view typically ascribed to Origen. In order to avoid committing this heresy, Eriugena adopts Gregory of Nyssa's view of the simultaneity of creation and fall. According to this view, human nature has never existed in a disembodied state because God created bodies in anticipation of the fall. At the same time, material bodies were not part of the "original" plan of creation and do not, properly speaking, belong to the *imago dei*.

idealism. Granted that material bodies are a consequence of the fall, they nonetheless exist. How, then, does one account for these material bodies that have come to be associated with our fallen human nature? How can God, who is Mind and who creates the world *ex nihilo*, that is, from his *own* superessential nothingness,<sup>13</sup> produce the sensible, ostensibly material universe that we presently inhabit? Given the Neoplatonic maxim that the effect must resemble its cause, how can an immaterial principle produce matter?<sup>14</sup> Eriugena finds the solution to this problem in Gregory of Nyssa, who argues that matter is in fact nothing more than the conglomeration of immaterial accidents.<sup>15</sup> Following Gregory, Eriugena deconstructs the body showing how in reality there is no underlying material “something” to be found. When we remove the accidents of colour, weight, quality, quantity, extension, etc., we literally end up with nothing. Given that we cannot conceive of body apart from these accidental characteristics, Eriugena concurs with Gregory that the body is ultimately *nothing but* the concurrence of accidents (PP.I. 502B; 479C). Insofar as these accidents, when considered in themselves (*per se intellectae*) are *intelligible* phenomena, sensible bodies are ultimately intelligible, and matter is ultimately immaterial.<sup>16</sup> In Eriugena’s world, in which logic and ontology coincide, the conglomeration of intelligible accidents are capable of producing sensible bodies (or at least the *appearance* of sensible bodies).

Despite the provisional, ultimately noetic character of earthly bodies, Eriugena’s view of matter is generally positive. Though material bodies were added to human nature as a corrective to the fall, they are for all their corruptibility still an expression of the Divine goodness, of God’s providential concern for his fallen creatures (cf. PP.IV.802A–802B). As such, Eriugena resists the unqualified notion

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13 That is, *creatio ex deo*.

14 Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena*, 81; Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Props. 28&29.

15 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 24:1–2.

16 On the concept of intelligible matter see Plotinus II.4 (12).

that material bodies wholly perish in the Return. Citing Origen, Eriugena maintains that God never destroys that which he created for the purpose of existing (PP.V.930D). Instead, following Origen, he maintains that the consummation of the sensible world will not involve the *destruction* of its substance, but its *transformation* into something better (PP.V. 866D, 876B, 930D). How Eriugena understands this transformation, however, differs as radically from Origen as does his understanding of the nature of reality. In Origen's hylomorphic conception of the cosmos, the resurrection-body represents the qualitative transformation of the coarse, earthy body into a subtle, ethereal body – matter being capable of infinite qualitative transformations. In Eriugena's idealist vision of reality, in which "matter" is ultimately immaterial, resurrection is merely a synonym for the return of sensible bodies into their intelligible causes (PP.V. 907A). To speak of them as "perishing" is a way of talking about their "passing away" into their original, immutable natures within the Divine Mind (PP.V. 993B). In keeping with the Procline principle that "the lower is contained in the higher" (cf. Prop. 18) this "perishing" does not represent the diminution, but the *elevation* of matter – its return to a superior mode of being.

Perhaps Eriugena's most radical statement concerning the fate of bodies is found in his discussion of the successive stages of the return of human nature. According to one scheme,<sup>17</sup> Eriugena envisions the Return occurring in five stages. The first stage marks the dissolution of the body into the sensible elements at death; the second stage is the Resurrection when the body is reconstituted by those same elements; the third stage occurs when the reconstituted body is changed into soul; the fourth, when soul, indeed the whole of human nature, reverts to its Primordial Causes; fifth, when everything is absorbed into God "as air is absorbed in light" (PP.V. 876A). This final stage represents the *apokatastasis* when, to quote

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17 Eriugena in fact employs at least three distinct models when speaking of the stages of the Return, depending on the context. The fundamental point concerning the dissolution of the lower elements into the higher in a way that preserves the lower is central to them all – as is the metaphor of air and light.

a scriptural passage dear to both Origen and Eriugena, “God will be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). As we can see, Eriugena ultimately regards the physical resurrection-body as merely a provisional stage along the way to deification – a radical claim that places him in opposition to both Augustine and Boethius, and for which he turns to Gregory, Maximus, and the Greek-leaning Ambrose for support (PP.V.876D–878B). Bold though it may be, Eriugena’s understanding of the provisional nature of the resurrection-body is firmly rooted in his dialectical understanding of procession and return. In the same way that dialectic, in resolving individuals into species, species into genera, and genera into essence, does not destroy the prior terms but recollects them into their primal unity; so too, when body is absorbed into soul, soul into its Causes, and Causes into God, body and soul together with their Causes are not destroyed but *deified*. Like air dissolving into light, the whole of reality becomes God while remaining itself.

What, then, is Eriugena’s ultimate position concerning the body? Is it, or is it not, preserved? The answer, as one might expect, is both yes and no. From a materialist point of view, the answer is clearly no. Matter itself is immaterial and, insofar as Eriugena ultimately equates (one might even say conflates) resurrection with the return of the sensible body into its intelligible principles, nothing remotely resembling a corporeal body remains in the restitution of all things. On the other hand, for those willing to entertain Eriugena’s lofty idealism, the answer is an emphatic yes. The dissolution of the material body, which Eriugena compares to a shadow or an echo (PP. V. 914A), simply represents the “passing away” of the unreal into the real, the illusory into the actual. As any good Platonist knows, it is the *idea* that is primary, not the reflection of the idea in the quasi-existence of matter. Insofar, then, as the true body is intelligible and not sensible, bodies along with the whole of material existence are indeed preserved – in fact, elevated and perfected. As with so many things in the *Periphyseon*, whether or not bodies are preserved or destroyed in the *apokatastasis* depends upon one’s perspective.