

# John Scotus Eriugena

*Attributed to Siegbert W. Becker*

## I. The Life of John Scotus.

1. Born in Ireland, 800/817, Scotus meant “Irish” and Eriugena, or Eriugona most likely means “born in Erin”. (DeWulf, p.121)
2. Having received his education in the Irish monasteries, he came to the court of Charles the Bald sometime before 850, where he became a favorite of the king.
3. As a contribution to the predestination controversy raging at the time, he wrote *de praedestinatione*, against Gottschalk. He satisfied neither side, for he denied predestination to sin on the ground that there is no real sin and a predestination to evil because there is no real evil and God damns no one.
4. In disappointment he turned to philosophy. He studied not only the Latin fathers, but also became proficient in the use of Greek, which was extraordinary in this period. (Burch, p. 5)
5. He translated several Greek works into Latin. Chief among these were the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a thoroughgoing Neo-Platonist. Also some of the works of Maximus the Confessor and of Gregory of Nyssa. (Burch says Gregory of Nazianzen, correcting other writers, p. 7.)
6. Between 862 and 866 he wrote his greatest work *de divisione naturae*, in which he sets forth a complete system of metaphysics and also propounds a theory of knowledge.
7. Shortly after this he disappears from history without a trace. There is a story which says that he was invited to teach in England by Alfred the Great, but his students, displeased with his lectures, stabbed him to death with their pens. (Burch, p. 5)
8. Some estimates of John Scotus: DeWulf: “The outstanding philosopher of the early middle ages.”(p. 74) “The greatest thinker, the isolated one, in the ninth century.” (p.134). Hughes: “The Catholic West’s one really constructive mind between Boethius and St. Anselm.” (p. 196) Burch: “Not really the first medieval, but the last ancient philosopher.” (p. 30)
9. After his death, his writings were repeatedly declared heretical.

## II. The Metaphysics of John Scotus. He divides nature, in his *de divisione naturae*, into four stages:

1. **Nature creating but uncreated.** This is God in His primordial, finite reality. God is non-being, not in the sense that He does not exist, but rather that He is more than existence. He is wholly transcendent. But there is something in God’s very essence that brings being out of non-being. God knows things, and by His very knowing of them they are. All things, being known by God, or created by Him, are of necessity eternal, good, made, and incorruptible. But in their essence, as known by God, they are unknown to us. (DeWulf, pp.125-126; Burch, pp. 12-13)
2. **Nature created and creating.** God, specifically God the Son, divides the created essence, pure being, into the eternal ideas. God engenders in Himself the forms or ideas, which John calls the primordial causes or primordial examples of all things. In this realm all things exist as notions in the divine mind. (Burch, p. 14; DeWulf, p. 126) For example, “the idea. and substance of man resides eternally in God, he is essentially the knowledge that God has of him. (McKeon, p. 101)
3. **Nature created but not creating.** This is the external world as effected by creating nature. God, specifically the Holy Ghost, brings about the effects of the eternal causes. By this process the eternal ideas are incorporated and externalized. The external world consists really of a multiplicity of manifestations of God. They are called theophanies. It is here that John lays himself open to the charge of pantheism. He says, for example: “*Nil (or non) enim extra (divinam naturam) subsistunt .*” (DeWulf, p. 127) Also: *Proinde non duo a seipsis distantia*

*debemus intellegere Deum et creaturam, sed unum et id ipsum.* (Ibid.) The physical world is merely a shadow or reflection of the real world.

4. **Nature uncreating and uncreated.** As all things flow out of God, so they also return to God. All motion in nature is cyclical, and all things terminate in their beginnings. The universal cause draws all things back into itself. As things cease to exist temporally they are not annihilated, but they pass back into their eternal causes and there exist as they have existed from eternity (DeWulf, p. 128; Burch, pp. 2-25). Such a scheme leaves no room for real evil, nor for the eternal consequences of sin (Hughes, p. 198). Neander says that such a system of metaphysics “carried out with logical consistency” leads “to an altogether pantheistic system of the world.” (p. 254)

### III. His Theory of Knowledge.

1. **The source of knowledge.** Scripture is the chief source of our knowledge about God. But there can be no distinction really between religion and philosophy, for the same God who manifests Himself in the manifold forms of nature is the God who reveals Himself in Scripture. Therefore Scripture must always be interpreted according to the norm of right reason. John is called “the father of medieval rationalism.” (DeWulf, pp. 123-124)
2. **Appeal to authority.** John was willing to appeal to authority for a time, but he held that only that which was established as true by reason has any real validity. He was willing to appeal to the authority of the fathers, but only because they were reasonable. He says in one place in the *de divisione*: “The opinions of the holy fathers need not be brought in, especially if they are known to most people, except where the gravest necessity requires that reasoning be fortified for those who, since they are untrained in reasoning, yield to authority more than reason.” (McKeon, p. 141) Very clearly, to John, faith is simply the first and lower step in the religious development of man. It gives way to real knowledge as man learns to use his reason properly (Fisher, p. 204).
3. **The Way to Knowledge.** The surest way to knowledge is by contemplation. We know God best by studying our own thoughts (Mourret-Thompson, p. 471). Man really knows only himself, but knowing himself he knows the essence which is in all things, for all things partake, in varying degrees, of the same essence. All things are one.
4. There are two ways of knowing.
  - a. The first, or lower way, of knowing begins with the external world and is called analytical.
    - aa. The exterior senses know corporeal objects and form images of these objects.
    - bb. The interior sense groups these objects into species and genera by a process of abstraction.
    - cc. The reason links up these groups or species with their causes, which are the ideas of these objects in the divine mind. The images of the sense are related to the ideas. The ideas are not formed on the basis of the images. They exist in the mind prior to experience, but the images become intelligible by the ideas. But by this process man becomes aware of the ideas and thus is raised to a state of contemplation.
    - dd. By a sort of intuitive process, the understanding identifies the exemplary ideas with God. And thus man comes to a knowledge *that* God is, although he can never know *what* God is (DeWulf, pp. 128ff.; McKeon, pp. 102-103).
  - b. The second way of knowing proceeds in the opposite direction.
    - aa. God is perceived as existing by the intellect. The nature which creates but is not itself created is present to the mind of man, for although the “what” escapes him, for God is not a “what,” yet he cannot escape the reality of God.

- bb. Reason has a knowledge of the primordial causes or ideas. In fact, knowledge is possible only because of the notions of things which are in the mind prior to experience. Things exist more truly in the mind than they exist in themselves. It is therefore in the mind that we find them truly.
- cc. The interior sense sees these primordial causes or ideas reflected in the genera and species of the external world (DeWulf, *ibid.*; McKeon, p. 105).

#### IV. An Example of John's Use of Scripture.

The Fall of man is interpreted allegorically, in a way that reminds one of Origen. Humanity (not individual man), called Adam, chooses the knowledge of visible things, seduced to this choice by the outer sense, called Eve. The serpent is the representation of a carnal delight in visible things. As a consequence of the fall, the serpent, the irrational, carnal desire is cursed, for it can never find fulfillment since the objects of its desire are not real. "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children"—humanity will have to reach truth the hard way, through the outer sense, through the first way of knowing. But Eve is made subject to Adam, and this is a promise of the subjection of the outer sense to the intellect. The flaming sword of the angel points the way back.

The second consequence of the fall is the creation by man, with the help of God, of a material body, since he needs this body as an instrument of sense knowledge. The third consequence is the division of humanity into two sexes, for if man had not fallen, he would have multiplied by pure thought, without sex. The fourth consequence of the fall is that the eternal, primordial ideas, which man chooses to know by the senses, are divided into sensible objects. Christ came to draw men away from the temporal to the eternal. By turning away from the world of sense to the real world, man is saved.

#### V. Bibliography.

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