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ERIOGENA ON THE ETERNITY AND  
CREATION OF THE WORLD

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The topic of the creation of the world was a source of intense and fruitful debate throughout the Middle Ages, as thinkers belonging to all three major Abrahamic religions concerned themselves with developing a philosophically rigorous account of the origin (or lack thereof) of the cosmos. The debate itself dates back to late antiquity and is rooted in Christian-Pagan polemics in the late Neoplatonic Academy,<sup>1</sup> but only began to mature into its most technical and developed forms in the medieval period. To better understand the development of this debate and the various competing philosophical strands that operate in the background, I intend to focus on the account of the creation of the world given in John Scotus Eriugena's *Periphyseon* which has been somewhat neglected in the larger conversation on the topic. Eriugena, often standing apart from the rest of the tradition due to his eclectic methods and views, develops a unique account of the creation of the world that deserves to be treated in detail in order to better contextualize later developments in medieval philosophy.

It is worth noting, therefore, that the third book of the *Periphyseon* is almost entirely devoted to this question and attempts to tackle a number of related issues around the creation of the world. In the first half of the book, Eriugena wants to provide a philosophical justification for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, as well as give an answer to the

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<sup>1</sup> On the origins and development of the debate, see Prince & Marmodoro 2015, 1, and Sorabji 2006, chs. 13-15.

question of whether the cosmos was created at a specific time or existed eternally. The second half deals with this question in relation to the book of Genesis and it is here where Eriugena's debt to Saint Augustine's *Hexameron* is most clearly on display. This paper intends to focus solely on this first portion, and in particular chapters 5-10, which is where the core of the discussion takes place. This is clearly an important topic due to the amount of space devoted to it in Eriugena's text, so it behooves us to engage in a careful reconstruction of the argument that will undoubtedly have significant bearing on a number of other questions and themes.

In order to accomplish this aim, this paper will focus on providing a reconstruction of the argument given in these chapters (*Periphyseon* III.5-10). In order to do so, I will begin with some brief background to the debate to contextualize the basic philosophical and theological commitments Eriugena is working from as he attempts to synthesize the nuances of the various views into a single unified position. Finally, I conclude with some brief notes on how this conversation is situated within his broader philosophical framework and its relevance to the work as a whole.

### *1. Contextualizing the problem*

The core issue demarcating two sides in the debate around the creation of the world can be understood as an answer to the following question: was the world created? Those who answer in the negative must reject any cosmological framework wherein the universe comes into existence at a certain moment in time. Certain orderings of the heavens and the world, of course, may come into existence, but there is nonetheless something that exists eternally, out of which the current world-order emerges.<sup>2</sup> Those who answer in the affirmative, on the other hand, must postulate that the universe is temporally limited because there is a moment, in one sense or another, where the universe comes to be when previously it did not yet exist.

The divide, as spelled out so far, roughly maps on to two distinct

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<sup>2</sup> See Sorabji 2006, 193-4.

religious traditions in the Mediterranean world: Greek paganism and the Abrahamic faiths, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The view that the world was eternal was accepted nearly universally among Greek philosophers,<sup>4</sup> from the pre-Socratics to Neoplatonists, while the creationist picture found its support first and foremost in sacred scripture. A further subdivision of these camps can be made, however. Among those who accept creationism – i.e., that God brought the world into existence at a certain time – one can distinguish between those who accept a creation *ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) and those who reject that as a possibility, instead proposing that the cosmos was created out of an unformed matter.<sup>5</sup> The former is tasked with accounting for the possibility of creating something out of nothing, as the latter maintains a basic principle that all creation must be out of some pre-existing matter or other substance. So, while the latter view does maintain a commitment to philosophical creationism, it is a weaker form of the position that concedes that something must exist eternally that cannot be created or destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

This basic schema will always pass over certain nuances and variances among the different positions held by various philosophers. In regards to the classification of Eriugena, we will see in the following sections that he is rather orthodox in his adherence to a fairly strict sense of *creatio ex nihilo*, as all things must ultimately trace the source of their existence back to God. God, as the first principle of all things, will establish for Eriugena that the other alternatives – creation out of matter or an uncreated cosmos – cannot be acceptable options, given his basic framework.

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<sup>3</sup> «Christian philosophers faced a particular difficulty with questions about creation, as their commitments bade them reconcile the emerging doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in the Church with the strenuous denial of this – even as a metaphysical possibility – by the Greek philosophical heritage that they also wanted to accept» [Prince & Marmodoro 2015, 1]. See also Otten & Allen 2014, 185: «The concept of creation (that is, biblically, ‘creation from nothingness’) can consequently be considered as one of the major watersheds between pagan and Christian thought».

<sup>4</sup> One notable exception can be found in Atticus and Plutarch, both of whom take the account given in the *Timaeus* as literally true and, therefore, describing the creation of the world in time. See Prince & Marmodoro 2015, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Maimonides, for example, describes these three positions as the only coherent cosmological accounts in II.13-14 of the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sorabji 2006, ch. 14.

## 2. *The argument*

This section aims to provide a reconstruction of Eriugena's position on the createdness of the world based on the arguments provided in *Periphyseon* III.5-10. The structure of the presentation here intends to follow the structure given in the text, focusing on three core propositions that make up the position in its entirety. First, Eriugena presents a series of arguments for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, specifically in regards to how it can be said that both intelligibles and formless matter are created out of nothing by God.<sup>7</sup> Second, Eriugena turns his attention to the challenging and seemingly paradoxical thesis that «everything is at once eternal and made».<sup>8</sup> Finally, the third and final subsection will focus on how this all is brought to bear in regards to the sensible world; here, Eriugena attempts to reconcile his commitment to the eternity of creation with a rejection of the eternity of the sensible world.

### 2a. *Creatio ex nihilo*

Eriugena's fundamental guiding intuition in regards to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is one shared by most orthodox Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages: if one rejects *creatio ex nihilo* for the view that God shaped the world out of pre-existing matter, matter becomes a second principle of creation existing co-eternally with God.<sup>9</sup> God, however, must be the sole cause of creation. Any other view is tantamount to heresy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Eriugena here is heavily indebted to Augustine on a number of points made in *De Genesi ad Litteram*. See O'Meara 1992, 269-285. While Eriugena's reading of Genesis is not the primary focus of this project, it bears noting that many of his basic exegetical practices that are brought to bear on this question can be traced directly back to Augustine.

<sup>8</sup> [*H*]oc est quomodo omnia simul et aeterna et facta sunt (638B). The phrasing of this is itself remarkable in its similarity to Augustine, as both take *facta* to be synonymous with *creata*.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Saadia Gaon, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, I.2. For an opposing view, see Gersonides, *The Wars of the Lord*, VI.1.18.

<sup>10</sup> The Nutritor speaks of the «secular philosophers» who are «blinded by the mists of their own false reasoning» and, as a result, posit that matter is co-eternal with God

The Nutritor, accordingly, begins by establishing the meaning of *nihil* as it is used in this context.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, Eriugena wants to avoid hypostasizing «nothingness» and treating it as some kind of material out of which God fashions the whole of creation:

By the term *nothing* no matter [*materies*] is thought of, no cause of existing things, no procession or occasion followed by the creation of those things with being followed, no thing coessential or coeternal with God, no thing outside God subsisting by itself or derived from some source from which God, so to speak, took some matter [*materiam*] for fashioning the world (634C-D).<sup>12</sup>

*Nihil*, therefore, is complete and utter non-existence.<sup>13</sup> Granting any degree of substantiality or ontological reality to *nihil*, for Eriugena, is a distortion of the actual meaning of *creatio ex nihilo* which requires an «absence of all essence [*absentia totius essentiae*]» (635A) of the created thing prior to the instance of its creation.

With this established, the Alumnus points to a seeming contradiction that confronts the participants in the dialogue. Eriugena's ontological schema, as established in the previous two books of the *Periphyseon*, includes many eternal things. Sheldon-Williams articulates this tension

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(637A-B). The arguments against this position will be treated in greater detail later on in this subsection.

<sup>11</sup> There is initial uncertainty on behalf of the Alumnus in regards to whether *nihil* ought to be understood as pure privation or, conversely, «the excellence of the Divine Superessentiality» (634B). Ultimately, Eriugena is going to see both definitions as being true in a certain sense; cf. Duclow 1977, 114, and Colish 1984.

<sup>12</sup> All translations of the *Periphyseon* are taken from Uhlfelder's translation unless otherwise specified.

<sup>13</sup> Eriugena here is most likely responding to Fredegisus of Tours, who was working in the generation prior and controversially proposed that the *nihil* of *creatio ex nihilo* had to be some kind of substance, rather than pure non-being. His argument, as expressed in lines 34-37 of his letter, is as follows: «Every signification is what the thing it signifies is. 'Nothing,' however, signifies something. Therefore, the signification of 'nothing' is what the thing it signifies is – namely, an existing thing». Translation taken from Jun 2003. See also Colish 1984 for a much more detailed account of Fredegisus's view and the response from contemporaries such as Alcuin of York.

succinctly in his introduction to the text: «the problem therefore is to determine how the Divine Wisdom which is eternal is also created, and how the world created out of formless matter is also eternal».<sup>14</sup> The so-called «primordial causes» of things – the second division of nature<sup>15</sup> – are «eternally [all] at once and together» (635C), which leads back to the previous problem of granting the existence of something co-eternal with God. Likewise, Eriugena still has yet to account for how matter itself factors into the schema. This argument, therefore, will proceed by examining how the eternal existence of intelligible forms and formless matter is compatible with the previously established understanding of the meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*.

At first glance, the Alumnus's concern appears impossible to overcome: «I therefore do not see how these two points can fail to be in conflict, and how all things are both eternal in God's Wisdom and also made from nothing – i.e., how they had no being before they were made» (636A). This problem should be intuitive to modern and medieval readers alike, as it is not readily apparent how one can speak about any kind of «before» in relation to an eternally existing thing. For Eriugena, the solution rests in a certain understanding of causality<sup>16</sup> adopted from Neoplatonic principles: the presence of the effect in the cause and that successive effects/emanations have a lesser degree of unity than the cause.<sup>17</sup> When applied to this case of eternal intelligibles,

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<sup>14</sup> Iohannis Scotti Eriugena 1981, 5; cf. *ibid.* 9-11.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. I.1; this designation is treated more fully in the second book of the *Periphyseon*.

<sup>16</sup> Two aspects of the Neoplatonic theory of causality ought to be highlighted here. First, Neoplatonists maintained a commitment to a general principle that *like causes like*, i.e., that a certain cause produces an effect that is of the same kind as itself. This is accounted for in terms of the effect of the cause being, in one sense or another, present in the effect. In terms of temporality, for example, eternal causes produce eternal effects. For more on *like causing like* and the way in which this enters into patristic debates, see Prince & Marmodoro 2015, 94-110. Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 21. Second, every effect is less unified and less powerful than that which caused it. This allows them to establish a hierarchical ordering of various causes and effects which ultimately leads back to a single first principle. Cf. *Liber de Causis* I.1-5 and Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, props. 7 and 24.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see III.1: «separation is what happens to [the primordial causes] in their effects» (624B). While there are many other instances of his thought that can be pointed to as being directly inherited from Neoplatonism, these are the two general

their plurality and the participatory nature of their existence<sup>18</sup> indicates their ontological inferiority compared to God.<sup>19</sup>

Because the many proceeds from the one, the primordial causes must be secondary to God as the first cause. This much is acknowledged by the Alumnus, who states that, «thus in their primordial causes, all things are eternal in the Wisdom of the Father, *but not coeternal with Him*; for a cause precedes its effects» (635D, emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> The priority of God to creation is established, therefore, on causal grounds. Even eternal things must be said to be created specifically because God is causally prior to them; without God's creative activity, they would be nothing.

God's creative act, therefore, must be eternal as well.<sup>21</sup> In the same way that «a whole river flows from its source» (632B), God brings forth the eternal intelligibles in a process of «changeless motion» (633D).<sup>22</sup> All of creation, including eternal beings, did not always have being, and as a result they are properly said to be created, at least in a logical, causal

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causal principles that have the most bearing on the discussion at hand.

<sup>18</sup> «The first order of the created universe [i.e., the primordial causes and other eternal intelligibles] participates in the single First Principle of all and is participated in by creatures that come after itself» (630C).

<sup>19</sup> A similar argument is made in *Periphyseon* III.11-12 in relation to number. Numbers are eternal in the monad (657B) and, despite being the same in the monad and the intelligible realm, in the latter they are present in a different sense. The infinite multiplicity of intelligible numbers speaks to them being «actually and functionally» present; therefore, even number can be spoken about in the same manner as being both eternal and still made (658C-659A) by virtue of its procession from the monad. Cf. similar arguments in Plotinus, *Enneads* V.1.5 and VI.6.

<sup>20</sup> In versions III and IV, the following gloss on this passage has been preserved: «Quod enim uidet uera ratio praecedere, necessario rerum ordinem praecedit». This reinforces the sense in which God remains prior to eternal created things, as He is both logically and causally prior to them. See Iohannis Scotti Eriugena 1999, 252-253; cf. Otten & Allen 2014, 192.

<sup>21</sup> Eriugena never argues this point explicitly. Historically, it was taken as essentially self-evident that the creation of an eternal being must be an eternal act as well, even well into the early modern period. The alternative would be to introduce change into God and thereby diminish His perfection.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Moran 1998, 249: «in this eternal outpouring, God at once eternally creates himself [sic] and all other things».

sense.<sup>23</sup> Even though there was never a moment when the primordial causes were not being created by God, the whole of their existence comes from God alone.

Moving now to the question of matter, we have already seen how Eriugena rejects *prima facie* the ontological independence of matter as a profoundly misguided philosophical delusion.<sup>24</sup> In order to defend this position against those who posit uncreated matter, he begins by stating something structurally quite similar to what has been previously offered in defense of the createdness of intelligible things. He writes, «for all things with being, whether formless or formed, proceed from a single First Principle» (637A). This, however, is not so much an argument as a declaration of principles;<sup>25</sup> proponents of the opposing view merely have to deny that all things that exist proceed from a single cause. In an attempt to show that matter must be created and derive from the same cause as the rest of creation, Eriugena will attempt to show that formless matter is actually a composite (or, at the very least, derivative) substance.<sup>26</sup> Here we will see one of Eriugena's most intriguing positions

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<sup>23</sup> See *Periphyseon* III.15 and fn. 21.

<sup>24</sup> «I do not see at all how anyone can say that the causes of all things have been eternally created in the Word of God, but that formless matter lacks its own cause. If matter is included in the sum of universal creation, then, it necessarily follows that its cause is not excluded from the number of causes eternally created in the Wisdom of God» (636B). This discussion here parallels earlier debates within pagan Neoplatonism on the origin of matter. See Opsomer 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Eriugena in some sense seems aware that this alone is not sufficient to philosophically disprove the opposing view: «we, on the other hand [...] *believe by faith* and observe, *insofar as our intellect permits*, that everything – the formlessness of all things, the forms and everything in them, whether essential or accidental – has been created by the single cause of all» (637B, emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> Although there is an additional discussion of God's creative power as it relates to the principle of *like produces like* at the start of III.6, unfortunately space does not permit a digression into the topic. Even granting this, the complexity of the current topic alone does not permit me to make a full reconstruction of the argument for the composition of matter by means of intelligibles and I will merely restate the argument as it is given with minimal reference to the various philosophical difficulties surrounding the question of Eriugena's idealism. On the topic of the *like produces like* principle, the following passage from Moran 1999, 58-59 will have to suffice: «The act of creation is understood by other Gregory [of Nyssa] and Eriugena to be



in full display: the idea that all things – matter, form and bodies – are all derived from immaterial Forms.<sup>27</sup>

The Nutritor makes the following statement about the imprecision that comes about when speaking about the immaterial forms being present in matter:

Don't you realize that you went astray in saying that forms [*formae*] and colors in themselves can be subject to the senses only in some matter, although matter itself, devoid of form and color, is wholly invisible [*inuisibilis*] and incorporeal [*incorporea*]? You must therefore give an account of how forms and colors, although of incorporeal nature, can be subject to the senses in matter which is incorporeal when considered by itself, i.e., without form and color. It would therefore be more reasonable to say that formless matter becomes sensibly apparent in colors and forms than that forms and colors do so in matter (662D-663A).

The idea of matter being itself incorporeal may strike a modern reader as strange to the point of being incoherent, but the idea has a relatively well-furnished precedent in philosophy going back at least to Plotinus.<sup>28</sup> Matter has no positive quality or determination of its own, but rather is defined by its ability to take on various contraries given to it when forms are made present to it.<sup>29</sup> Because matter possesses no qualities in

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an exemplification of the principle that like produces like. Gregory, and subsequently Eriugena, postulate the immateriality of reality in order to preserve the integrity of *creatio ex nihilo*».

<sup>27</sup> I once again owe much of the reconstruction of the argument here to the accounts given in Moran 1999 and Prince & Marmodoro 2015. Eriugena, on this point, closely follows the arguments made by Gregory of Nyssa, rather than Latin philosophers like Augustine.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see II.7.2.29-33 and III.6.6-19 in which matter is explicitly described as incorporeal. The passage in II.7 in particular is especially relevant given the close argumentative parallel to the passage here; both matter in itself and forms are incorporeal – hence the need for Plotinus to consider a distinct form of corporeity (σωματότητα) in order to account for how sensibles can be solid and extended.

<sup>29</sup> Matter here cannot be understood as Aristotelian ὕλη, the «wood» that serves as the raw material to be carved into a certain shape or given a particular form; rather, matter for Eriugena is better understood as the Platonic χώρα of pure potentiality,

itself, matter *qua matter* cannot be properly be spoken of as extended or having a shape; such a thing (i.e., innately extended matter) would require matter to possess a formal property, and therefore being actualized in some way, while nonetheless being purely potential. This is a contradiction and, as such, matter on its own is not a body, or even truly present in the sensible realm.<sup>30</sup> Rather, matter is a condition of possibility that, when united with various forms, allows for bodies to be encountered within the world.

Given this, Eriugena has already made a number of steps toward his ultimate goal of showing that matter too is subject to the same conditions of creation and causation as the intelligibles. Matter, much like the primordial causes, is immaterial, incorporeal and unchanging. But the stronger claim has yet to be touched upon; how is matter, even understood as pure potentiality, supposed to be a composite substance? The Nutritor gives a passing description that will be adequate for our present purposes: «Do you recall what conclusion we reached about matter in the first book, where we argued that it is made by the coming together of intelligibles? Quantities and qualities, indeed though incorporeal in themselves, produce formless matter when they come together» (663A).<sup>31</sup> For Eriugena, matter is composed of the accidents of quality and quantity; these accidents are part of the primordial causes, which are created by God (as has already been established).<sup>32</sup> Therefore, all things – matter, form and bodies – can be directly traced back to God as their ultimate source and cause.<sup>33</sup> *Creatio ex nihilo* appears to be safe on all fronts.

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even if he himself uses Aristotelian terminology to speak about matter. For more on the Plotinian background to this position, see Noble 2013.

<sup>30</sup> This is, in part, why Moran 1999 describes Eriugena and his Patristic forerunners (primarily Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus Confessor) as «sidestepping» the Aristotelian idea of creation as an impression of form on matter. See also, Wolfson 1970.

<sup>31</sup> To put things succinctly, «bodies are born from bodiless things [*Ex rebus itaque incorporalibus corpora nascuntur*]» (663A); Iohannis Scotti Eriugena 1999, 370-371.

<sup>32</sup> See John the Scot 2011, xxxiv-xxxv on the corporeal world as being the blend of incorporeals processing from the primordial causes.

<sup>33</sup> Kijewska 2011, 35-36.

2b. *The eternity of the world*

We turn our attention now to the question that takes on the central role of the dialogue, undergirding the discussion all the way through III.17. Here, we will focus on the statement that draws out this prolonged discussion: «everything is at once eternal and made» (638B). Stated at the end of the Chapter Six, the following chapter consists almost entirely of the Alumnus's exasperation and bewilderment at the teacher's dictum: «things made are opposed to the eternal. Hence, if they were made, they are not eternal; if they are eternal, they were not made. I can't conceive of how the same things may be shown to be at once both eternal and made» (638C). This section, therefore, will focus on the Nutritor's response in III.8; here, Eriugena will attempt to show that there is nothing contradictory about ascribing eternity to creation.<sup>34</sup>

At first glance, this appears to be a continuation of the discussion given in 2a on *creatio ex nihilo*, yet the argument proceeds quite differently than anything that has been presented so far. The chapter begins with the reassertion of the conclusion to a prior discussion: God, by definition, cannot receive accidents.<sup>35</sup> God's nature is «simple and more than simple, free from all accidents and more than free» (639A). Therefore, the creation of the universe (*uniuersitas*) cannot be accidental to God. And, as Scripture reveals, God did actually create the universe, so whatever this creation is has to proceed in a non-accidental manner.

Given that God did in fact create the universe, this creation cannot be understood as happening within time. As the Nutritor states, «He did not subsist [*subsistens*], then, before He created the universe. Otherwise, the creation of things would be accidental to Him» (639B).<sup>36</sup> Any creation within time is, therefore, accidental, as this would establish a relation of «before» and «after» in regards to God as creator. There would be a time before God created the world and God's actions would occur

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<sup>34</sup> For more on the way in which Eriugena deals with contradiction and division within his schema, see Sushkov 2015, 148-161, 207-216.

<sup>35</sup> This is first demonstrated in *Periphyseon* I.15-21; cf. Guiu 2019, 84.

<sup>36</sup> God has no accidents, so creation cannot be accidental to God. A similar view is expressed by Aquinas (*ST* I.45), as well as many other medieval thinkers. Iohannis Scotti Eriugena 1999, 267, notes discrepancies here between version IV and the other manuscripts, with *conderet* instead being rendered as *concederet*.

within time; but, following the understanding of divinity laid out by his Neoplatonic predecessors, God cannot be understood as operating within time (at least in any conventional sense).<sup>37</sup> God, as the Cause of the universe, «is not accidentally causal, but always is, was, and will be a cause» (639C).<sup>38</sup>

The consequence of God's eternal and essential act of creation is that all created things are, counter to the intuitions of the *Alumnus*, eternal as well. Eternal things proceed from an eternal cause: «the universe is eternal in its Cause since it participates in its Cause. It is obvious, therefore, that *the universe of all creation is eternal* [...] insofar as we have being, we are merely our reasons eternally sanctioned in God» (639C-640A, emphasis added).<sup>39</sup> This is given a second treatment later on in Chapter 15 as well, where the *Nutritor* once again concludes that «all things which the whole universe of creation contains are at once eternal and made in God's only-begotten Word» (664D).<sup>40</sup> These various passages, therefore, appear to bring a resolution to the question at hand. The world is, therefore, *both* eternal and created. It is created in the sense that it owes its existence to the continual action of God who exists prior to creation as a cause to an effect, and eternal in that the act of divine creation itself is eternal, with every eternal cause producing an eternal effect.<sup>41</sup>

Upon reaching this conclusion, it seems as if more questions are raised than answers provided. If all of creation is eternal, how are we to deal with the seemingly self-evidentiality of generation and corruption? If God's act of creation is not in time, when and how does time come about? Eriugena seems to recognize this, as even the *Nutritor* is forced to admit that «perhaps I myself do not yet clearly discern how the two conditions [of subsisting as both eternal and made] can be reconciled»

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Moran 2002, 490-491.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Carabine 2000, 45-66.

<sup>39</sup> See also Otten on "*Natura's Bond*" in Guiu, 195-6, and Moran 1989, 231-234, for more detailed discussion of the eternity of creation.

<sup>40</sup> While space does not permit an extensive discussion of Eriugena's theory of the Divine Word, it bears mentioning that all causes and effects are eternal in the Word (665A-C) and the Word is the source from which all things derive their existence as created things (641A-D).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Moran 2002, 494.

(641D). So, ultimately what has been established is at best a confused or partial truth that, upon closer examination, needs further clarification and refinement in order to properly reconcile the eternity of creation with our own experience of the sensible world. This will be the subject of the third and final portion of this section.

*2c. The sensible cosmos and the finite world*

Chapters nine and ten present an interesting reversal in the dialogue. Although the chapter is inaugurated by a lengthy monologue from the Nutritor attempting to convince the Alumnus of the possibility of an eternally created thing by means of reference to Augustine, Dionysius and Scripture, the Alumnus responds by clearly outlining the fundamental contradiction undermining the whole discussion. To quote in full,

I consider this very contradictory, and rightly so, for these two things seem opposites, the eternal to the made and the made to the eternal. Eternal things never begin to be and never cease subsisting; and there was never a time when they had no being. They always had it. Whatever things have been made, however, have received a beginning of their making. They have begun to be because there was a time when they had no being; and they will cease to be because they have had a beginning. Right reason, of course, tells us that whatever has a temporal beginning is not allowed to endure forever. Whatever begins to be in time must turn toward that final end where it must perish (647B-C).

This distinction draws a hard ontological gap between eternal and created things. It is true by definition that an eternal thing had no beginning in time – otherwise it would not be eternal, but finite – while anything created had to come into existence and will eventually pass away. There is no middle ground here: all things are exclusively either eternal or temporally finite, and there is no thing that comes to be that does not pass away.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The Alumnus is careful to specify that «passing away» is not the dissolution of

The relevance of this for the cosmos is immediately clear to the medieval philosopher. The universe – or at the very least, the bodies within it – is present in time and, according to the account in Genesis, created by God. For the Alumnus, this naturally leads to the straightforward conclusion that the cosmos, just like all the beings within it, is temporally finite: «human bodies, too, and the bodies of other animals are said to perish when they are dissolved [...] such a view is generally held, and fittingly so, about this whole visible universe [*uniuersitate huius mundi uisibilis*]» (647D). The argument itself is straightforward. «Since it has received a beginning of being, it will inevitably receive an end of its essence. As there was a time when it was not, so there will be a time when it will no longer be» (647C). This is essentially just the consequence of a consistent application of the Alumnus’s definition of being-made to the whole of creation itself; therefore, one must follow «right reason» and deny any eternity to the cosmos.

So, while the conclusions arrived at in *2a* have functionally eliminated the possibility of an eternal, uncreated cosmos<sup>43</sup> and the Alumnus’s initial argument seems to establish the absolute finitude and contingency of the universe, the moderate, «middle ground» view must be addressed. Specifically, this would be a view that allows for certain things, once created, to exist eternally in time.<sup>44</sup> Eriugena is not philosophizing on this question in a vacuum and he shows an acute awareness that there have been historical disputes around this, particularly in regards to whether the heavenly bodies possess an everlasting existence in time. So, we turn our attention now to the two-pronged attack launched against those who propose that the stars and planets can exist eternally after being created by God.<sup>45</sup>

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created things into absolute nothingness or nonbeing, but rather that corporeal things naturally have their end in their dissolution into their material constituents (647C).

<sup>43</sup> This is, broadly speaking, the view of pagan philosophers in classical Greece and late antiquity. See Sorabji 2006.

<sup>44</sup> This view is actually quite common in medieval thinkers following Eriugena. For an excellent exploration of the variety of views on this in medieval Jewish philosophy, see Rudavsky 2000. Cf. Grant 1996.

<sup>45</sup> The Alumnus here specifies two distinct camps within those he is criticizing. Both are united in their belief that a created thing can exist eternally, but they understand

On one hand, Scripture seems to deal a devastating blow to the idea that the heavens are given special status in the grand scheme of the cosmos. Citing Matthew 24:35, the Alumnus states that «if, then, the part of the world which is greatest in expanse, most beautifully bedecked by the sublime splendor of the constellations, most pure in the subtlety of its nature [...] will perish according to the testimony of Scripture, surely we must not think that the parts within, much inferior to it, will endure» (648A). For the medieval mind, the stars and heavens are clearly superior to sublunary beings, but this alone does not grant them status as an exception to the definition of a created thing being utilized here.<sup>46</sup> That being said, this initial attack cannot be definitive, as the Alumnus's opponents themselves are able to point to Biblical passages that seem to support the eternity of certain created things. Ecclesiastes 1:4, «the earth stands firm forever», for example, is deeply puzzling when contrasted with the aforementioned passage from Matthew, and ultimately the Alumnus is forced to launch a second critique on philosophical grounds.

The philosophical critique, therefore, must target why specifically

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this in different ways in relation to the resurrection. The first group proposes that there will be a harmony or stability of change such that the universe will always be able to exist in the same sort of state: «others argue that the natural motion of the elements will never cease» (648C). Those who adhere to this view, the «eternal motion of the changeable», are not given as lengthy of a treatment in comparison to the other camp, which believes that «change will put an end to the generation of all animals, shrubs, and trees, and to the growth and decline of everything contained within the circuit of the moon [...]. Hence, since they think that all creation is and will be in place and time, they do not doubt that places and time, i.e., the spaces of the world and its movement marked by intervals of periods, will always endure» (649A-B). Eriugena describes this view in far greater detail, though he seems to find the literality and physicality of its treatment of heaven, hell, and the resurrection to be a «mockery of reason». For more, see Dietrich & Duclow 2002.

<sup>46</sup> It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Alumnus's interpretation of Matt. 24:35 is immediately justified in reference to their understanding of the meaning of createdness. They say, «such is my statement to distinguish the eternal from the made. There is no slight difference between what neither begins nor ceases to be and what begins and cannot always endure. It is with cause, therefore, that the minds of those with imperfect understanding of such matters are shaken when an attempt is made to persuade them that the eternal are made and the made are eternal» (648B).

it is improper to ascribe eternity, or even «semi-eternity»<sup>47</sup> to anything in time. For one, there is already something deeply problematic about the idea of «all creation is and will be in place and time» as this now seems to run counter to the principles established in *2a* on the question of *creatio ex nihilo*. If all creation occurs in place and time, there now are eternal accidents and God's creation is going to be constrained by something external to Him; that is to say, if God cannot create anything outside of space and time, He cannot be said to properly transcend it. This may be convincing, but it still remains far too rooted in a generally theological mode. Eriugena, therefore, provides one final critique on straightforwardly metaphysical grounds at the start of Chapter 10. The Alumnus, in reference to the words of «the fathers who have investigated such matters», says the following: «Since there is no body in it [i.e., the world or sensible cosmos] which is not a compound, and every compound will be dissolved into the elements from which it is compounded, this whole visible, corporeal, compiled world will be dissolved and only simple nature will remain.» (649C-D). In other words, any composite or compound thing, therefore, cannot be fundamentally real; rather, because it is composed of ontologically prior constituent parts, one cannot suppose that the whole will be able to have a degree of reality greater than or equal to its parts. Sensible things, as ultimately reducible to incorporeal formless matter and intelligible forms (as established in *2b*), cannot ever be taken as eternal. Rather, it is their nature to decompose back into their parts after enough time has elapsed.<sup>48</sup>

If one takes the Nutritor as being Eriugena's sole philosophical mouthpiece, this is a mere digression: the Alumnus once again fails to properly understand the subtlety of the master's point and draws too

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<sup>47</sup> Eriugena makes explicit reference to his opponents views as «semi-eternity [*semiaeternitatem*]» in 649c.

<sup>48</sup> Of course, certain things (eg., the stars, planets, etc.) are going to be more unified and enduring than others, but all compositions of form and matter have this innate tendency to separate back into being their parts. This general mereological concern seems to be what is underpinning the general assertion about the concept of eternity and being-made that was presented first by the Alumnus at the beginning of this subsection.



stark a line in the sand. And yet, Chapter 10 sees the Nutritor not only yield the conversation entirely to the Alumnus, he even admits that he too once adhered to the false beliefs being excoriated by the student. He says, «I was formerly deceived by the false reasoning of human opinions far removed from the truth. When I was still untrained, I gave assent to all or nearly all of them» (649D), admitting that he too fell prey to the view that there are parts of the sensible cosmos capable of everlasting existence.

The student, not the teacher, provides the reader with the account of the sensible cosmos in these passages. The Nutritor, perhaps to the detriment of the reader, remains with his head in the clouds and it is up to the conventionally-minded novice to demonstrate the radical contingency of corporeal things. Here, perhaps more so than anywhere else in the proceeding chapters, we see a straightforward and philosophically concise position being presented. All creatures exist for a finite period of time, the universe was created, and therefore it cannot be eternal. The plaintext reading of Genesis is restored<sup>49</sup> and a hard distinction is drawn between the world of creation and the Divine domain.

### *3. Reconciling the conflicting accounts*

After examining the various arguments detailed in the second section, additional work must be done in order to account for how they are capable of coexisting within the same philosophical system of a single thinker. In regards to the primary guiding question of this paper – the creation and eternity of the universe – I will therefore give the greatest focus to the way in which *2b* and *2c* are going to be reconciled.

As they have been given, the conclusions of *2b* and *2c* produce a strikingly paradoxical juxtaposition of positions:

(P1) All things produced by an eternal act are also eternal.

(P2) God's act of creation is eternal.

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<sup>49</sup> For more on Eriugena's interpretive methodology as it relates to the book of Genesis, see O'Meara 1992, 245 and 269-286.

(P3) God's act produces all created things.

∴ *All created things are eternal.*

(P1') All temporal things have a beginning and end in time.

(P2') The cosmos is a temporal thing.

∴ *The cosmos has a beginning and end in time.*

So, how can all of creation be at once both eternal and temporally finite? This question, in one sense, reflects the same puzzlement of the Alumnus, and it cannot be resolved simply in reference to the discussion in *2a*. Yes, it is perhaps permissible to speak about created things – forms, intelligibles, etc. – as created and eternal, but this gets us nowhere in answering the more immediate and pressing question in relation to the cosmos. Here specifically we see the most acute contradiction, as the argument in *2c* directly seems to refute that of *2b*, and vice-versa.

In order to square the seeming contradiction, one can perhaps speak about the two positions as reflecting a certain *perspective* on reality; the Nutritor gives us the view from God, in which all creation is eternal, while the Alumnus speaks from the point of view of the sensible world, speaking to the way in which all things around us come into being and pass away.<sup>50</sup> But to reduce this is a mere difference in perspective misses the nuance and brilliance of Eriugena's position. Instead, both positions are actually *true*. In regards to the sensible world, *2c* is correct: all things that exist in time are absolutely contingent and will dissolve back into their constituent parts at the end of time. But, simultaneously, the true reality of things – the spiritual, pure Forms that the sensible cosmos derives its existence from – is rightly described by *2b* as eternal and constantly created by God.

In this sense, Eriugena evades true contradiction by resorting to a two-truths doctrine: the universe as it exists in the Word of God (*2b*) is eternal and proceeds necessarily from God,<sup>51</sup> while the sensible universe

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<sup>50</sup> This, in a certain sense, would give us a solution to the problem reminiscent of Boethius. God sees things «all at once» from the point of view of eternity, whereas humanity is accustomed to seeing things from the more narrow, provincial perspective that is caught up in the flux of becoming.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Duclow 1977, 111.

(2c) is bounded by a beginning and end in time. However, the problem now seems to be the following: how is the sensible world created, then, if all things coming from God's creation are eternal? Either the sensible world has an independent existence – violating 2a – or is the result of something other than God; this latter option, we have seen, is the route pursued by Eriugena.

It must be the case, therefore, that the sensible world for Eriugena is essentially contingent. Nothing in it, strictly speaking, has to exist. As such, the sensible world *itself* does not exist necessarily and, following 2b by *modus tollens*, cannot be the product of God. Rather, it is the result of the Fall of man into sin,<sup>52</sup> the departure from Eden: «time, or certainly the kind of time involving running down and decay, enters the world as a consequence of the Fall».<sup>53</sup> The physical, corporeal world is, therefore, the product of man's sin, not God, and hence God is not responsible for bringing about a state of affairs that is finite, temporal, incomplete and inadequate.<sup>54</sup> So, while it initially seems strange that the sensible world does not come from God, Eriugena skirts the potential theological minefield of having the world be the product of sin by having it be the case that nothing new *per se* is produced by this fall into time. Therefore, «we should think of a '*natura rationalis et intellectualis*', which is not capable of corruption, but which, on account of sin, did not retain its original perfection».<sup>55</sup> It is not as if the universe is created out of whole cloth, a human *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather is more properly understood as a kind of perversion and degradation of the perfectly ordered and eternal world generated by God in the Word.<sup>56</sup> When the

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<sup>52</sup> «Eriugena's unusual position that Adam's creation rather than his fall serves as the starting point for cosmic return separates him also from the more linear cosmic views of Augustine. Representing a unique brand of medieval idealism, Eriugena goes so far as to consider humanity's physical creation the material reflection of its superior and unified status in the divine mind as primordial cause» [Otten 2005, 235].

<sup>53</sup> Moran 2002, 491; cf. Otten & Allen 2014, 194 ff.

<sup>54</sup> Moran 1999, 55-56.

<sup>55</sup> Stock, 1967, 17; Cf. *Periphyseon* IV.5 col. 760C-D.

<sup>56</sup> «For Eriugena, time belongs to the self-expression, self-externalization, self-manifestation or self-creation of the creator God *and also* to the self-articulation of *nous* into sensibility, which brings about the Fall of human nature» [Moran 2002, 488]. A similar parallel can be made with Eriugena's reading of the creation of Eve:

human soul turns its attention away from God and instead focuses on sensibility,<sup>57</sup> time and space is «super-added»<sup>58</sup> to the eternal world as a consequence.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Eriugena's account of the world and its relation to time serves as a sort of microcosm through which we can get a glimpse of his most unique methodological and philosophical contributions to medieval philosophy. The dialectical movement between opposing positions has been highlighted in a number of scholarly treatments of the *Periphyseon*<sup>60</sup> and speaks to the deep desire for a philosophical syncretism that underpins much of Eriugena's creative reading of his sources. The attempted unification of Greek and Latin church fathers, classical philosophy, and his responses to contemporaneous Carolingian debates result in a highly complex, yet critical and nuanced result.

Simultaneously, I believe this exploration of Eriugena's argumentation gives us a better sense of his project as one focused on solving immediate and pressing problems in philosophy. Eriugena considers certain deep philosophical problems – in this case, the createdness of the universe – to be as of yet unsolved and in need of

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«sexual reproduction is not inherent in human nature, but results from Adam's choice. For if human nature, 'created in the image of God,' had retained its original integrity, it would be sexless and multiply like the angels, not like the beasts of the field» [Otten & Allen 2014, 240]. Just as sexuation marks the fallen and corruptible body, space and time mark the fallen and corruptible cosmos.

<sup>57</sup> Moran 2002, 489.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> This, however, does not mean that a divide has been introduced between two levels of reality. On the contrary: «Eriugena is manifestly preoccupied with avoiding a radical dualism between God and creation, wishing to bring everything back to the oneness of God's nature, but at the same time, he carefully avoids lapsing into cosmic monism or pantheism, that is the confusion between created realities and God» [Otten & Allen 2014, 208]. God's transcendence is maintained by varying degrees of creation, while His immanence is maintained in that the sensible world is not generated out of whole cloth by human sin, but from what God has already eternally created.

<sup>60</sup> Such as Sushkov 2015, Stock 1967, Duclow 1977, and Moran 1989.

new, rigorous argumentation. The confidence with which he attempts to provide a solution to this problem presents an interesting contrast when compared to later philosophers such as Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas whose views of the resolution of the question were much more skeptical in regards to whether a satisfying conclusion could ever be reached. Eriugena, therefore, reflects a sort of philosophical optimism: through the reconciliation of seemingly contrary opinions through the light of reason and Scripture, mankind can transcend certain conceptual dilemmas and enter into a deeper understanding of the world itself.

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## Keywords

Eriugena; cosmology; creationism; Neoplatonism

## Abstract

John Scotus Eriugena devotes a substantial portion of his *Periphyseon* to a longstanding cosmological question of whether the cosmos is eternal or created at a moment in time. This paper explores his examination of the question in light of the broader history of cosmology, as he straddles both antiquity and the Middle Ages

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by trying to integrate a Platonic ontology within a particular Christian framework. As a result, Eriugena produces a highly original solution to the debate that has been hitherto neglected in the broader conversation on this question. Finally, the paper situates this within Eriugena's broader philosophical system and its significance in relation to his methodological approach.

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