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# SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY FOR EVALUATION OF ERIUGENA'S DOCTRINE

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## **Abstract**

This article considers the phenomenon of the philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena (c.800 – c.877) as a source of modern philosophical systems. The author has undertaken to determine the unique place of this medieval philosopher's ideas in the context of ontological semantics. Comparative, concrete historical, typological, and systematic textual analytic methods of research were applied to understand and provide a scientific evaluation of the events and facts that triggered Eriugena's philosophical choices in respect to medieval thought. It was found that the philosophical categories developed by Eriugena were later used in the pantheistic systems of Spinoza and Schelling. Eriugena's ideas were rooted in Neoplatonism, which prevailed in Byzantine theology, and in the language of Hermeneutics. They transformed Western philosophy and created a special kind of 'natural' definition – logical and grammatical structures through which our language, engaged in the totality of all that exists, conveys a sense of things being. As a result, the 'grammatism' of Eriugena became a constructive principle in his theological reasoning and in his teachings on the division of Nature, or God. As a consequence, medieval thinking became full of cogitative content, which was still relevant to modern and postmodern philosophers (Berkeley and the idealist tradition, Emerson's natural theology, Husserl's phenomenology as a transcendental idealism). This article is useful in helping specialists find out how early medieval philosophy was able to anticipate the logical tendency of the late Middle Ages and the speculative natural philosophy of the modern era. The author's approach makes it possible to elicit the true meaning of the grammatical interpretation of the 'Book of Nature' as an existential challenge in current Philosophy.

*Keywords:* Eriugena, God, metaphysics, Spinoza, theology

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## **1. Introduction - grammatical interpretation of the 'Book of Nature'**

Medieval philosophy is of great interest in contemporary histories of philosophy, and in the general theory and History of science, where it is regarded as a source of modern and postmodern philosophical ideas [1, 2]. The most significant medieval thinkers are those whose teachings presented the first natural philosophical ideas on the essence and structure of nature, and nature's

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essential properties. They also made primary revisions to ancient natural philosophy, synthesizing it with the fundamentals of the Christian worldview. One such thinker was John Scottus Eriugena [3-10]. In his main work, 'On the Division of Nature', Eriugena was one of the first who addressed this complex synthesis [11]. He presented the first structuralization of natural and spiritual phenomena, which paved the way for further development of natural philosophical (as opposed to spiritual) interpretations of natural occurrences and processes.

Eriugena's rules for the grammatical interpretation of the 'Book of Nature', which attests to the divine logos in nature, similar to what Scripture teaches about nature in general, were intended to teach the religious consciousness to properly perceive the divine truth of the world as *ens creatum*.

Thus, Eriugena, to a certain degree, initiated the tradition of a grammatical interpretation of the world and the existence of God (Anselm of Canterbury), and contributed to the logical and syllogistic interpretation of Christian teachings of God, world and humankind (Thomas Aquinas) [12].

Eriugena's philosophical works demonstrated that medieval Western European thought had fully developed the ability to formulate metaphysical problems and to study them at the highest level of philosophical abstraction [13]. Categories conceived by Eriugena later entered the standard vocabulary of Metaphysics and Natural philosophy of, for example, Spinoza and Schelling [14, 15].

Thus, we can interpret Eriugena's emergence as an event that occurred at the crossroads of western theological tradition, which mostly gravitates toward the rhetorical discourse associated with daily preaching, and the Eastern church's 'gnosis' tradition, with its passion for terminological disputes [16-18] and sensitivity to words and to finding the ontological foundations of linguistic distinctions.

## **2. Analysis of the ambivalent character of Eriugena's doctrine**

The goal of this work is a discussion of Eriugena's 'miraculous' emergence in medieval scholasticism, i.e., his theological and philosophical discourses. The numerous interpretations of Eriugena's philosophy in Metaphysics and Natural philosophy reflect the dynamic process of forming new scientific approaches.

Just how unusual Eriugena's ideas and approaches were, is clearly indicated by the fact that, despite the admiration of later medieval scholars, his theology was censored by the Church. Eriugena's speculative rationalism, however, was not the only reason for this. Researchers have long ago noted the dual nature of his theology: it combines speculative pantheism with Christian theism [5, p. 41-48; 19]. Moreover, pantheism, rather than Orthodox Christian principles, was often more pronounced and sincere in his teaching since important questions could then be contemplated in a purely metaphysical

context. The ambivalence in Eriugena's theological views, however, made it very difficult to interpret them [20, 21].

Thus, the author proposes including Eriugena's thought in the broad context of traditional metaphysical discourse, and understanding it as a blend of speculative` pantheism and Christian theism. In this regard, Eriugena's 'theological grammar' represents a special form of Metaphysics from which he developed his unique theological and philosophical teaching. His reflections in this area have the vital features of scholasticism, and were fully established in the medieval theology of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Yet some of Eriugena's ideas anticipate and link him to the rational thinking of the modern era [22].

It is the ambivalent nature of Eriugena's theological doctrine that is the object of the author's research, as well as the methodology of the contradictory approaches used to study Eriugena's emergence as an event linked to the development of Neoplatonic ideas in the context of the Christian canons. That is, on the one hand, Eriugena was a staunch supporter of orthodox Christian principles; yet on the other hand, he was a follower and typical representative of Christian Neoplatonism in the Middle Ages, and he believed in the methodological primacy of Western metaphysics [5, p. 57-60; 23; 24].

This characterization, however, needs considerable refining. Eriugena also contributed to the development of medieval Nominalism [25] and hence he is linked to the development of formal-grammatical and logical-linguistic theories of reality going back to Aristotle [26, 27]. As Hegel noted, Eriugena had already set the stage for overcoming unambiguous ontologism, a type of absolute objectivism; and showed a tendency to validate the activity of the mind in its attempt to perceive reality through logical and grammatical structures. Dialectic began to be understood as a theory (and technique), or speculative constructions, that should precede any study. This understanding was, in a sense, subjective [28, 29]. As a result, Eriugena's interpretation of nature through the prism of logical and grammatical correspondence (the 'Book of Nature' declares that nature is created by God) is a constructive principle in his theological reasoning and is the mainstay of his teaching on the division of nature, or God [30, 31]. Thus, the author proposes combining the two above-mentioned approaches in order to study Eriugena's views more fully; that is, Eriugena's Orthodox Christian principles and Christian Neoplatonic ideas should be analysed in the light of early medieval Nominalism, which required changes in the philosophical language and cognition of reality through logical and grammatical structures.

### **3. The basic principles of Eriugena's doctrine of nature**

Eriugena was not only a forerunner of modern Natural philosophy; he was, in a way, a link between the Middle Ages and ancient philosophy. There are some themes in his works that connect ancient philosophy to modern intellectual thought, while there are others, those with a purely medieval

Christian content, that separate them. That is why it is important to consider Eriugena as a new type of thinker in his attitude to ancient metaphysics [32].

All medieval thinkers were influenced to some degree by ancient philosophy [33, 34]. Eriugena was in quite another situation. Though patristics had set the foundations of the medieval metaphysical canon, in the eighth and ninth centuries it was not yet binding. Intense thought sporadically burst into the intellectual world of the western Middle Ages, demanding creative effort, and changing the whole structure of traditional thought. This is what happened when the philosophical and theological Pseudo-Dionysian corpus entered the scholastic and religious world of late-Carolingian Europe. It was then necessary to change the logical and grammatical tools, i.e. discourse technique. The only source from which scholars could take the necessary intellectual material was Platonic and Aristotelian logic and categorical grammar. Most of the work on this new scholastic program was done by Eriugena [35]. In this sense, he is the founder of the rationalist tradition associated with the creative adaptation of Aristotle's categories and logic with their ontological bases [36].

Eriugena's 'Philosophy of Grammar' was based on his teaching of the categories, connected to Aristotle's treatise on 'Categories', which he used as an instrument to discover the structure of 'being' and the relations between its levels. The ontological status of categories based on Aristotelian metaphysics was unacceptable to Christian scholastics for many reasons, but primarily because Aristotelian categories could not express the fullness of the existence of God, who created the world from nothing. Since the categories are knowable and apply to the world of sense and intelligible things, they cannot in any way, except metaphorically, refer to God because they belong to the world of created things. The transcendental reason is that, because God is outside and above the world, God cannot be categorized, nor indeed be understood rationally [37].

Categorization of the creative world based on Aristotle's teaching demanded special attention to the language. According to Heidegger [38], we generalize and make conclusions about the essence and function of language and its key words, but we do not realize that they were developed by the Christian logic of Revelation. He notes a tendency in scholastics and later West European thinkers to avoid rhetorical and grammatical word explication. The latter is, however, especially pronounced in Eriugena's works and, later, in Anselm's works.

Although the grammatical formulas intrinsic to Eriugena's works were still far from meeting formal philological standards, still closely related to theological premises and based on a logical and categorical understanding of the unity of word, thought and being; nevertheless, they do indicate the beginning of a trend toward thought-language activity. Eriugena correlated the results of his analysis of the word and division of biblical text with Nature, thereby implying correspondence between the divisions of grammar and those of Nature. His work on language stimulated further development of philosophical thought on nature, the 'argumentum ex verbo' method upon which Thomas Aquinas later based his

philosophy, and the 'argumentum ex re' method, which cultivated thought in harmony with nature (for example, in Roger Bacon's works).

A special feature of Eriugena's position was his pantheistic orientation when considering the relationship between God and the world.

The 'Periphyseon' (The Division of Nature) presents a unique experiment in the development of Christian logic (the transition from Augustine's rhetoric to grammar) – a path in the history of thought which no one followed, but which subsequently led to the elaborately developed metaphysical systems of Spinoza and Hegel [39]. Eriugena's ontological semantics, i.e., the idea that the sense of the word directly represents the essential characteristics of being, is similar to the views which were known in early patristics and expressed in the mystical theological interpretation of naming. The history of discussions on the mystical interpretation of the Trinity and the relations among the persons of the Trinity clearly demonstrated the metaphysical value of the aforementioned categorical analysis, i.e., Christian logic.

The discussions were about terms such as 'essence', 'unity', 'substance', and so on. The formation of Christian terminology and dogmas was mostly based on the received logical and philosophical teaching of Plato and Aristotle and corresponding ontological categories. In a sense, Eriugena's activities in the natural philosophical explication of grammatical structure were in fact formally related to these theological discussions. But, because of their intrinsic qualities, they led to different results, creating the preconditions for forming a rational philosophy of nature. That is, they paved the way for the subsequent Christian grammar of Anselm of Canterbury (his a priori ontological argument for the existence of God), followed by the Christian logic of Thomas Aquinas (his a posteriori 'summas' in favour of the existence of God) [40].

Because Eriugena's thought could not be based on any empirical assumptions and theoretical traditions other than Plato's and Aristotle's teachings on Nature, it is natural that his first theoretical steps were in creating a generic division of nature based on the categorical structure of language (its grammar of nature), similar to that of antiquity (Cicero, Varro, Capella, Boethius) [41].

While historically inevitable, Eriugena's approach was not the only one in the development of the Christian method. Indeed, only a few holistic metaphysical positions developed by ancient thought and inherited by subsequent epochs prevailed at that time. On the one hand, Eriugena's emanation doctrine, and on the other hand, the Arab and Jewish schools of philosophical rhetoric based on 'grammatism' as abstracting classification, and committed to definitions and reasoning that would ensure proper consideration of the issues.

It should be noted that Eriugena's theoretical structure led to the development of certain ideas (mainly based on Neoplatonic thought) on the structure of knowledge, according to which rhetoric, grammar, and logic (dialectic) were the principal disciplines applied when introducing concepts on conditions, definitions and divisions of Nature, i.e., God. All these ideas of

medieval theocentrism, formulated in the language of abstractions, for the total unfolding of God (*explicatio Dei*) were fraught with radical pantheism, paving the way for the development of the New European metaphysics.

## **4. Discussion**

### ***4.1. Eriugena's teachings on Nature - a justification of nature or God?***

Although Eriugena followed the ontological formulas of Plato and Aristotle, he was certainly influenced by the works of Eastern Orthodox Church Fathers such as Saint Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor also [42].

Eriugena's conception of Nature, or God, is expounded in his treatise on 'The Division of Nature'. Its key principle is the art of making divisions and distinctions to establish differences in species. Eriugena stated that in our reflections we must differentiate corporeal nature from spatial nature since mixing them becomes the cause of many people's sin. After all, those who truly reflect upon and distinguish the nature of things do not combine place and body in the same species, but rationally separate them. So "we see that those things which are simple and incorruptible by themselves produce, when they come together with one another, something composite and corruptible" [43].

Given that the divisions concern incorporeal entities, they can only be achieved through grammar and categorical analysis of parts of speech – verbal forms of the imagined. This conception rests upon the mystical theological idea, that the whole world is the text of God's Word. Hence cognition is a competent reading of the Text. Correctly naming a body's place in the structure of the universe is to name its essence. Eriugena paid particular attention to the category of place, which was understood to be a natural definition of created beings.

Of all the ontological categories, Eriugena distinguished the body as a combination of matter and form, and therefore subject to change and destruction. The body's size is a quantitative characteristic and part of the universal process of change that characterizes the empirical world. The body's form, however, is immutable and enters the true life of the Universe. The destruction of the material body does not mean that its essential nature disappears. The correlation of body and spirit in Eriugena's conception brings up the question of the hierarchical structure of being, the possibility and extent of its knowability, the correlation of things and existence and, finally, the teaching about a higher, purer nature.

Further sections of Eriugena's natural philosophy consider the categories of matter and form, movement and immutability. His analysis concludes with the moral aspect of the nature of created things. His teaching on being is not an abstract, detached codification of cosmic order and description of the relationship and harmony of its structural parts. Rather, Eriugena states that nature implies a certain connection with Good, which covers all of God's creation. Good keeps nature from disappearing, while Evil aspires to its

destruction. But these tendencies are not of equal strength. Evil does not possess the same ontological definiteness as Good. Evil was introduced into nature to confirm the glory of Good. Since the essence of nature cannot be damaged, inasmuch as Good is absolute, Evil is outside of being and is without reason [44].

Thus, it should be emphasized that Eriugena created the first cosmodycy, that is, a justification of nature, whose main parts were developed based on grammatical principle, and which anticipated the logical tendencies in medieval scholastics and speculative philosophy of nature in the modern and postmodern eras [45].

#### ***4.2. On the problem of interpreting Eriugena's panentheism***

The significance of Eriugena's teaching in Spinoza's metaphysical system is as follows. Eriugena's main work, 'On the Division of Nature', is connected with clarifying what is God, or Nature, what is created nature, what is conceivable nature's place in the world, and what is the character of nature that is outside of thought. The answers to these questions are firmly associated with the concepts of division and hierarchy. The higher and lower levels of the hierarchy correspond to different levels of being, hence, unknowability and knowability. God, or Nature, that which is not created and creates (*natura, quae non creatur et creat*) is placed above all. This is true reality. God in His self-existence is incomprehensible. He is; but every 'whatness' (quiddity) is alien to Him. He transcends essence and is Nothing out of all that is, and is even above all affirmation and denial.

Ideas – lower beings and creative activities – are connected to the Word as their supreme cause. Since God, however, has no beginning and is infinite, He can be the cause of only Himself. The contradiction is that if God is cognizant of Himself as being, nature, and essence, then He is finite. However, according to Eriugena, God is infinite, therefore, to be, He must be *Necesse esse*; that is, the necessity to begin to be, which means to become other than Himself. This indicates that the Divine Substance Itself is created in all following natures. God begins to be in Ideas as soon as they begin to exist on their own. The entire species of concrete things, the third nature, that which is created and does not create (*natura, quae creatur et non creat*), is potentially contained within the unity of Ideas.

It seems that the cause-effect relation does not allow Eriugena to fully define the word 'create'. For God to create is to reveal Himself. Eriugena's further divisions of nature depend on divine epiphany. To 'create' means that unknowable God manifests Himself in everything, no matter what its level of hierarchy, and is known through unfathomable numbers of theophanies.

Thus, Ideas (*natura, quae creatur et creat*), the prototypes of created things that are equipollent with God, are, on the one hand, things created by flowing out of themselves, and at the same time they are internal divine illuminations flowing from God. Here it is important to emphasize that the creation of Ideas

from God's infiniteness is not the same as finiteness. As a direct and indifferent unity they constitute the 'Universe after God, established by God Himself'.

However, the world of ideas is God Himself, who creates in the lower nature of Himself. Here it should be noted that divine nature is understood ambivalently: it manifests itself simultaneously both as that which creates (*natura naturans*), and as that which is created (*natura naturata*). In other words, the hidden (not only to us, but above all to God Himself) mystery of the highest order of nature descended into itself without Revelation, to reveal and become known to Himself (and then to us) [46]. Thus, just as any creation, even the most insignificant, is only an illumination, a sign that allows us to recognize and contemplate God, so God illuminates the totality of things with His 'ontic' light, wherein all nature acquires the fullness of reality.

The fourth nature (*natura, quae non creatur et non creat*) is the final phase of the holistic theogonic process of the return (*apokatastasis*) of things to God, symbolizing universal salvation. Everything returns to where it came from, as its ultimate goal. The folded intelligible attributes shed their sensory shell and are reassembled in intelligible Person. Then human being, filled with intelligible essences, is transformed into the Divine and becomes one with God. This is the final deification (*teosis*). Then God reveals Himself to everyone in everything as He Who is not created, and no longer creates. "For when there is nothing but God alone, God will be all things in all things." [47]

Thus, God in His essence remains transcendent to the world, and, conversely, through His actions, which include any possible formation, movement and change, He is immanent in His creation, permeating all beings with Himself. In Eriugena's teaching, each of the four natures is a Deity, and in each one God unfolds Himself. In so doing, God recognizes and returns to Himself. In other words, his teaching is one of the first forms of religious pantheism (God in everything, but not everything is God). This brings him closer to Spinoza's pantheistic system. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that eschatology, Christology, and the theological process as a whole, have a dominant significance for Eriugena's doctrine, colouring it with all shades of medieval Christian mysticism. Eriugena's principle is that losing Christ is a torment for any intelligent being. Next is a discussion of the character of Spinoza's 'geometric' ethics and his position 'Deus sive Natura'.

### ***4.3. On the problem of interpreting the Spinozian pantheism***

According to Spinoza, God, Substance, or creating and eternally acting nature (*natura naturans*), is the cause of Himself, whereas all the rest is created nature (*natura naturata*), the cause-effect series of His actions, or modes devoid of self-sufficiency. As necessary, but finite manifestations of His being, thing-modes imperfectly express what God is in His perfect and unlimited form. Hence, Spinoza concludes, God does not act according to intention or will. Since, as the only cause (*causa sui*), God alone acts causally because, according to this principle, He cannot follow any other order than that of causality, or the



eternal necessity of nature. By contrast, no particular thing is caused by its own necessity [48].

The essence of God is absolute perfection. Therefore it follows that the order of things from eternity is determined to be as it is and not otherwise. Spinoza thinks of the transfer from God to the world as a transformation that takes place through attributes within God Himself. Neither substances nor attributes can be derived, but everything must derive from them.

Further, due to its nature, the mind does not consider things to be accidental, but to be necessary, that is, under the aspect of eternity. In God, as a superior cause, there is infinitely more perfection and, thereby, reality, than in natural things; however, all that God created, He created necessarily, because in the infinite mind of God there is no substance that does not exist in reality [48]. From this “we conclude that God could not have omitted doing what he has done, we derive this from his perfection, because in God it would be an imperfection to be able to omit what he does, without, however, assuming in God a subsidiary initiating cause, which would have moved him to act, for then he would not be God” [48, p. 81]. So, God and nature are identical because we are talking about a single acting nature as a complete, infinite and absolute plurality. In this regard, Hegel notes: “The establishing of itself as an other is loss or degeneration, and at the same time the negation of this loss; this is a purely speculative Notion, indeed a fundamental Notion in all speculation” [49].

From Hegel's point of view, this internally discriminate identity represents a moment in the process of a true deductive definition of substance as concrete within itself: “The individual, the subjective, is even in being so the return to the universal; and in that it is at home with itself, it is itself the universal. The return consists simply and solely in the fact of the particular being in itself the universal...” [49, p. 261] And then his famous definition: “Or... ‘Substance is that which is in itself and is conceived from itself;’ that is the same unity of Notion and existence. The infinite is in the same way in itself and has also its Notion in itself; its Notion is its Being, and its Being is its Notion; true infinity is therefore to be found in Spinoza.” [49, p. 263]

In summary: according to Spinoza, infinite motion and infinite mind are not all of the attributes, but are the ultimate modifications of God through which humans discover the world for themselves. The human soul as a mode of the infinite mind of God is interpreted by Spinoza as the love of God for Himself. Although a human and Substance are not identical, a human's love for God and the love of God for a person are declared identical by Spinoza. That is why intellectual love for God is a person's highest calling. A person cannot, however, pray or sacrifice to this God since one cannot bow in sacred and religious trembling before *causa sui* – because it is unacceptable to think of God anthropomorphically. Though unintentional, Spinoza's requirement clearly shows something else, something highly anthropomorphic and godless: love your neighbour, for only in a person does God love Himself.

Thus, Spinoza's metaphysics, unlike Eriugena's pantheism, undertook to bring a metaphysical basis for the liberation of humankind to its new freedom in self-assured self-government.

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the above, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Eriugena's 'theological grammar' can be considered a special form of metaphysics from which he developed his own theological and philosophical teachings. As a result, this 'grammatism' acted as a constructive principle in his theological reasoning as well as in his teachings on the division of nature.
2. Eriugena was the founder of a tradition connected with the creative adaptation of Aristotle's categorical grammar (logic) and its ontology. He showed that the grammatical division conforms to the division of Nature.
3. Although Eriugena shared Plato's and Aristotle's ontological argumentation, he was deeply influenced by the works of the Eastern Church Fathers, which ultimately determined the Christian and scholastic nature of his thought.
4. In assessing alternatives in early medieval religious and philosophical development in the Arab East, it should be kept in mind that Muslim thinkers' recognition of the intelligible components of mature ancient philosophy derived from their original desire for an unparalleled development of non-premise knowledge in order to elevate true philosophy to true religion.
5. The 'Periphyseon' (The Division of Nature) presents a unique experiment in Christian grammar – a path in the history of thought which no one followed, but did lead to the metaphysical systems of Spinoza and Hegel.

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