
ERIUGENA AND FICHTE

VERA PHILOSOPHIA EST VERA RELIGIO

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Abstract

The authors analyse Eriugena's speculations. These have the typical features of scholasticism, which would be finally established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Additionally, some of the principles in Eriugena's teaching anticipate German classical philosophy, particularly the idealism of Fichte. Fichte's critical realistic idealism is a type of ontotheology with an egological structure. It addresses the problems of the antecedent synthetic perception. As a result of considering the philosophical concepts of Eriugena and Fichte, the authors have established that Eriugena's ontotheology and panentheism, as its intrinsic principle, and also his doctrine on the division of nature (or God) strongly correlate with the postulates of Fichte's egology.

Keywords: Eriugena, Fichte, idealism, metaphysics, ontotheology

1. Introduction - reasons to study Eriugena's legacy

Debates on the synthesis of Philosophy, religion and Science, or the relationship between Metaphysics and religion, objectivating religion by force of reason, have been in the forefront of various philosophical doctrines for thousands of years. A significant contributor to these discussions was the Irish philosopher and theologian Johannes Scottus Eriugena, who, undeservingly, remains on the outskirts of research in the history of Philosophy. As Gilson rightfully noticed, Eriugena's work is an "immense metaphysical and theological epic" [1]. Moran said, Eriugena is "the greatest immaterialist of Western Philosophy prior to Berkeley" [2]. We noted that Eriugena's doctrine corresponds better to Hegel's speculative principles and German idealism in general [3].

The religious significance of the logical process is that, for Eriugena, logic is none other than the self-disclosure of God, which took place prior to the world and the human being. Its content is the image of God just as he is in his eternal existence, before the creation of nature. This pursuit of logical form and argument using reason has naturally become a distinctive feature of Eriugena's

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doctrine. As his theology was not entirely based on explicating the Holy Scripture, the religious canons had first to be identified and contemplated from the standpoint of reason and Philosophy. Moreover, no one can ascend to the heavens otherwise than through Philosophy. That is why he said that that true philosophy is true religion, and true religion is true philosophy [4].

As Hegel emphasized that the source of scholasticism should be sought in Eriugena's religious, philosophical concepts: he was the first and "with him true philosophy first begins" [5]. The task of perceiving the depth of the author's thoughts seemed topical for scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and at present time.

2. Methods

The authors employed comparative and typological methods to describe Eriugena's theology and Fichte's egology; to analyse the differences between these two metaphysical paradigms in order to disclose their ontical basis; and to thematize and systematize the subject material. A method for systemic textual analysis was used in order to understand and provide a scientific assessment of the events and facts that provoked Eriugena's and Fichte's philosophical choices. Studying the key principles of their doctrines makes it possible to avoid using routine theoretical stereotypes.

In connection with the foregoing, the purpose of this work is to analyse the bases for ontotheologic principles of Eriugena and Fichte (based on metaphysics). The term 'ontotheology' was first introduced by I. Kant in his 'Critique of Pure Reason' in order to distinguish between two types of transcendental theology: cosmotheology and ontotheology. The latter, which proceeds from Anselm's ontological argument, has to do with comprehending the existence of a primary essence through concepts alone, without any help from experience [6]. Thus, when speaking of Eriugena's ontotheology, the authors of this article have in mind the original Platonic sense of the concept of the hierarchy of being [7]. Furthermore, Plato's mode of existence corresponds to the mode of cognition, i.e. the difference between the types of being is determined by the properties of the knowable and how it is known (Resp., 509d-511e). As with Plato, Eriugena's question of being is reduced to the study of the true being (being as such, which combines different types of things, is left without proper attention). There is a difference, however. Plato explained that essence (ousia) is 'what is', and is identical to 'being', but Eriugena and Thomas Aquinas approach the problem of being very differently: since essence (from the verb 'esse') means 'what a thing is', and existence indicates 'that a thing exists', then only in God's being do essence and existence coincide. God's being is His essence, and His essence is being for all things (essences). This way, the reduction of being to essence in God is substantiated. As a result, being as such remains in the shadow of the thing (essence) [8]. Meanwhile, according to, say, Aristotle, to be does not always mean to be something. Essence is only "the being of whatness", but not being in itself (Arist., *Analyt. post.* 89b 24-35; *Soph.*

el. 167a 2-7). This explains why M. Heidegger talks about ontotheology as the oblivion of Being in favor of different types of ‘beings’. Further, when asking what existence is, we are not just asking about existence as existence in general, but also about existence in the sense of a higher being. The scope of this question – the divine and God – is called theology. The two-sidedness of the question of being can be summarized by giving it the name “onto-theo-logical theory” [9]. As already mentioned, if in medieval philosophy God as ‘pure reality’ (*actus purus*) is introduced as the highest essence, as the primary cause, then the question of what is existence becomes redundant, for the being of existence lies in its creation. The being of existence in the sense of foundation is essentially presented only as *causa sui*, since only God is the Cause of Himself. This is the metaphysical name of God [10]. In relation to Hegel’s metaphysics, M. Heidegger also uses the expression “onto-theo-ego-logical” [11]. This means that in Hegel, God is already a part of all beings, and not a separate being. Here, ontology and theology act as kinds of ‘logic’, allowing things to appear before us and collecting them in order to consider them as a whole. They constitute ontotheology, which reaches the essence of things and serves as their basis. As we can see, the concepts ‘ontotheological’ and ‘metaphysical’ are closely related. In the history of Philosophy the word ‘metaphysics’ is often a synonym for philosophy. Aristotle himself attributed this kind of questioning thought to “the first philosophy”, which ordered “the wise” to study “the first principles and causes” (*Metaph.*, 982b5-10). It was also called the science of the divine and “theology” (*Metaph.*, 1026a19). Thus, the main feature of metaphysics is that it is ontotheology since it affects and justifies being as such and being itself as such [12].

We, therefore, defined the following tasks for this paper: to demonstrate that the common basis for comparing these two doctrines is the metaphysics of creation: the creation of the Universe by the Word – for Eriugena, the creation of the acts of the absolute and pure ‘*Self*’ – for Fichte; to study Eriugena’s views of nature (or God) and to draw conclusions.

3. The main trend of Eriugena’s doctrine

In his consideration of nature, Eriugena follows the logic of the divine names in the *Corpus Areopagiticum* as given in the following sequence: Good, Being, Life, Wisdom and the One. Eriugena equates Dionysius’ ‘Divine Names’ (*De divinis nominibus*), through interpretation of the five ways to define being and non-being [13], with the original causes and, thus, they clearly take the form of the Hexameron.

Note that the ‘Divine Names’ of Dionysius are so consistent with Augustine’s *Book of Genesis* (*De genesi ad litteram*) that in his teaching on the five ways to define being and non-being, Eriugena demonstrates a desire, if not obsession, to continue and perhaps even to re-interpret the theme of the world’s creation from nothing. Thus it becomes clear why Eriugena adds to his book, the *Periphyseon*, the peculiar logic of being and non-being in the spirit of the

synoptic Hexameron. (1) The first mode of definition, like Dionysius the Areopagite's 'Good', is all-embracing, extending from God to matter itself and further to non-being. (2) The second encompasses all that relates to Being. (3) The third concerns all that has the capacity for Life. (4) The fourth mode applies only to those who are partakers of Wisdom, and, finally, (5) the fifth type of definition refers to human nature, which for Eriugena is both the place of creation and the cause of the fall of all created things, and, therefore, the means by which everything returns to its place – to God as the One and Beginning.

Dionysius the Areopagite's 'Divine Names' does not at all, however, set the logic of the transition from one mode to another. The distinction between God and creation, which characterizes the first mode, is complicated in the second, when it is shown what it is to be one's self and that all that exists 'is' and 'is not'. For something 'is', insofar as it is cognized by higher ranks or by itself, but it 'is not', insofar as it does not allow cognition of lower beings on the hierarchical ladder of being.

God and the causes and essences of all things are among the not-being, since they do not allow the lower orders to know themselves. In fact, in the first mode of interpretation, Eriugena quotes the 'Celestial Hierarchy' of Dionysius the Areopagite (*De cel. hier.* IV.1) on the super-essentiality of God – that the being of all things is the super-being of divinity (*esse enim omnium est superesse divinitas*) [13, col. 443B]. This first method is fully consistent with the Greek apophatic (negative) understanding: God is not what is. Why? Because what is is perceived by the intellect; but God is higher and incomprehensible to the intellect, and therefore He is not.

Although privation (*privatio*) indicates not-being, it does not mean absolute not-being. It is important for Eriugena to show that creation *ex nihilo* does not mean creating "from nothing" [13, col. 686B]. Eriugena gives the following argument: God is the Creator of all things and, therefore, God in some respects is in everything created. God has an ambivalent nature: (1) God is completely within Himself, and (2) He does not reveal Himself through copious mediators and assistants (intercessor of the Logos or holy patriarchs, as in Philo of Alexandria), but directly in creation, while (3) remaining unchanged and distant in the primacy of his nature. Despite the fact that God manifests Himself in the universe as multiple, visible and accessible to human intellect, He Himself remains simple, invisible and closed in his Divine nature. The descent of God through everything into everything (*processio Dei per omnia*) and His remaining within Himself (*mansio in se ipso*) are not mutually exclusive, just as the human spirit, manifesting itself in speech and writing, uses audible syllables that are separated in time, and visible letters that are separated in space, and at the same time remain undivided, inaudible and invisible.

It is very clear that here Eriugena implies a deep ontological difference between God and creation: that which is behind the phenomena is inherently incomprehensible and transcendental, and is the only true being; created things are the manifestations of God. God does not stand far from the unclean and sinful world and does not send through the Logos his good will and mercy to the

sinful being, and the revelation of God occurs through His appearance in the being of the world (in the form of theophany). The world is something other than God, yet, nevertheless, it is a manifestation of God, something in which God takes on a certain form of being. God in His nature is infinite and incomprehensible, but in His manifestation He is finite. Therefore, God is finite and infinite. He is beyond being and in being [13, col. 454B–C]. In the process of creation, God creates not only the conditions for His appearance, but also His very appearance. Obviously, the use of the terms ‘theophany’, ‘manifestation’, ‘revelation’, and ‘phenomenon’ is intended to convey the similarities and differences between God Himself and the world as a manifestation of God.

In fact, there are not two substantial things, but one. However, since God cannot go directly from causes to effects, whose nature is alien to him, He is already within these effects-actions [13, col. 687B–C]. For Eriugena, God must be in the world, and not outside of it. That is why Divine immanence in the world is a prerequisite for understanding the ontotheology of Eriugena.

God and the world, the Creator and creation, are not, according to the above passage, significantly different: they are one and the same. This complex, if not contradictory, position in Eriugena’s teachings is, specifically, that in the process of creation, God creates nothing but Himself. More precisely, God, who is as such in Himself, does not affect creation as something separate from Him. Rather, He directs His actions to Himself and from His own being begets the being of creation. Creation does not become something completely other than God, but it is as if it is His outward expression. At the same time, creation is different from God, as a phenomenon is different from what appears. Thus, Eriugena’s teaching on creation *ex nihilo* deals with understanding how God reveals Himself. Creation is the revelation of God to the world. In addition, it should be remembered that for Eriugena, God is in no true sense a being. He is not-being or, more precisely, super-being. He is beyond being in the same sense held by Plotinus: being imposes limits and boundaries on all things, through a completed form the unknowable and invisible is made knowable and visible, which, of course, was not permissible for Eriugena’s God.

In relation to the world, which was created by the Creator from nothing, Eriugena develops the idea that the visible is created from the invisible. Visible bodies are made of invisible things [13, col. 498C]. In his discussion on the simplicity of the four invisible elements [13, col. 663B–664A], he explains that everything visible is composed of them [13, col. IV, 857D]. Something similar regarding the extent of the inexhaustible impact of Power on all nature, including fire and water, can also be found in Dionysius (Div. nom. 8.5). Once things have been definitively created by the Creator in their intelligible first causes, invisible to the visual sense, Life may then force them to accept existence through matter and form, i.e. become visible. It may be assumed that Eriugena was closely following the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa on man when Eriugena explains that the visible body is created by an invisible soul, combining intangible qualities into one and uniting them with quantity, which served as a kind of substrate for qualities [13, col. 580B]. In this case, Eriugena tried to

combine the theory of Creation with the teachings of the Neoplatonists about the origin of the One in the multiplicity of things. God's being not only creates the world, but also enters into it through the Son and the Holy Spirit, so that creation becomes a theophany or a manifestation of the Creator.

One of the most striking features of Eriugena's ontotheology is the constant use of opposites. The concept of opposites was built into the core of Eriugena's doctrine. At the very beginning of the *Periphyseon*, the concept of opposites or polarities is used in the fourfold division of nature: (1) creates and is not created, (2) creates and is created, (3) does not create and is created, and (4) does not create and is not created.

In the first division of nature, God is considered from the point of view of creation, i.e. as a Creator. God is presented here as the cause of all things, and a being whose own essence is not at all comprehensible. The absolute is the primary cause of all creatures included in the general term 'nature'.

The second type of nature is what Eriugena calls the original causes (*causae primordiales*) [13, col. 638A]. They mediate between the Creator God and creation. Eriugena equates the unity and totality of these original causes with the Logos of the Gospel of John. That is, Christ is the sum of primordial causes, and thus plays an important role in the act of creation. The creative act lies in the fact that God created the original causes in God the Son's being before the advent of the world, and the primary causes, in turn, give rise to the sensually perceived universe, i.e., the second type of nature is the cause of the third [13, col. 546A]. The being of the second division of nature (Jesus Christ – the Logos, or the intellect of the Universe) plays an extremely important role in creation, since it is the means by which creation is realized [13, col. 642A; 683A].

The third type of nature represents the world of created beings, called into being in time and earthly conditions. This division of nature is the opposite of the first. And this is logical, since the following definitions form corresponding pairs (the created beings of the third type are the opposite of the first, not-created, and the not-creating third is opposite to the creating first) [13, col. 442A]. God and creation are diametrically opposed to each other. Nevertheless, during the return of everything *ens creatum* to the Divine, there is an interweaving or mixing of creatures of flesh with God. In this third division, the Holy Spirit plays the role of organizing power and determines the essential task for man, and in him and all created nature, to find himself in God. For Eriugena, the Holy Spirit is the being responsible for distributing the causes created by the Father in the Son according to their special and general effects (*causarum distributionis Spiritus sanctus causa est*) [13, col. 601B]. As the power that governs the world of causes, the Holy Spirit is obsessed with the consciousness of God and thereby enriches the creative process by giving it a certain intense character. On the one hand, we can say that in this process there is a redundancy of God and His ideas in the image of the Logos, and on the other hand, there is a need and deprivation of existential completeness in the carnal world. Thus, the concept of the Trinity in Eriugena's ontotheology is closely connected with the

concept of creation. And yet, since everything carnal must be overcome, the true Trinity is understood as a reciprocal relationship in the Divine.

The fourth division of nature refers to God as the ultimate goal of everything. Here God becomes that being to which all nature returns. This is where the concept of dialectics is applied, which is not only an aspect of human knowledge, but also part of nature itself [13, col. 748D–749A]. Through the dialectical process inherent in nature itself, all things are predetermined to return to the Divine. The being, represented as the fourth division of nature, is that goal toward which, ultimately, all nature is directed. God is not only the Origin of everything, but also the final Cause that completes the world, whose most important truly living elements must be returned and preserved in the highest Beginning. The fourth kind of nature is the opposite of the second. The logically indicated opposite is reflected with the appropriate terms: the creating and created (Ideas); the not-creating and not-created (God as the ultimate goal of the movement).

In all of the divisions of nature God is seen in terms of creation and return. It should be remembered that the idea that God is absolutely transcendental and beyond the limits of being is extremely important in the teachings of Eriugena. As a super-being (not-being), the Divine appears in a certain sense and beyond the limits of nature. Thus, the Absolute is comprehended both in the divisions of nature and outside of them. However, it is important to emphasize that for Eriugena the term ‘nature’, as has been indicated, applies to all things, even including those that ‘are not’. Therefore, God, who is super-essential and infinite, is also included in ‘nature’. Eriugena’s final division of nature is far from unambiguous. On the one hand, there are things that are perceived by either the human intellect or the senses, or both. On the other hand, things that ‘are not’ are those that by their nature are neither contemplated nor perceived. In this regard, God, whose *esse non est percipi*, considered in Himself, represents this last class, i.e., those creatures that ‘are not’ and therefore transcend all forms of human understanding. Thus, the Platonic formula of ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’, which Porphyry denoted, respectively, as intelligible and sensible, received a multi-meaning interpretation from Eriugena, in order to connect the transcendence and immanence of God into one dialectical whole. Thus, the neo-Platonic character of this position in the teachings of Eriugena was preserved: knowledge in its value status is higher than a thing; therefore, ‘things are truer in their concepts than in themselves’. This meant that all created beings, contained in thought as an intelligible form, must be returned to God and restored to its intelligible essence in order to achieve ultimate salvation. On the other hand, Eriugena tried to stay within the ontological difference between the Creator and creation, emphasizing the immanent component. He understood the analogy under Otherness as a constantly exceeding proportion: similarity in greater dissimilarity. The greater the external resemblance is, the greater the internal dissimilarity.

4. Fichte - substantiation of religion through reasoning

Many scholars, both past [14, 15], and present [16–19], have raised several questions: How could such a profound doctrine suddenly, without any long-established philosophical tradition, evolve in the ‘gloom’ of the ninth century? Why did such a perfect work encounter an openly hostile reaction from the Roman clergy? Does this doctrine have anything in common with the philosophical systems of German idealism that substantiated the idea of religion within the limits of reason?

These and other questions were discussed by Wotschke. He tries to present the metaphysics of Eriugena and Fichte as a transition to the absolute system of Hegel and proposes a way to correlate Eriugena’s metaphysics and Fichte’s critical idealism. Wotschke thinks that Eriugena’s system has basic idealistic principles. In it, God is presented as an abstract and indefinite being identical to non-being [20].

The fact that Fichte’s ‘*Self*’ includes the possibility of its finiteness and self-limitation (everything that exists is inside the ‘*Self*’ and through the ‘*Self*’), demonstrates insufficient contemplation of the connection between being and thinking, the thing and representation. Is ‘*not-Self*’ the determining aspect only as something thought of, and has no reality outside of representation? Does not ‘*not-Self*’, as a fact, define ‘*Self*’? The focus of Fichte’s idealism on ‘*Self*’ leaves unresolved a most important issue regarding the external influences upon ‘*Self*’ that facilitate the formation of the representation. As a result, everything finite is treated by Fichte as something that must give way to the infinite – the absolute activity of ‘*Self*’.

According to Fichte, the main goal is to maintain the transcendental unity of apperception, i.e. the identity of consciousness as the unconditional veracity of the highest basic foundation. “Since there is no way of reconciling the not-Self with the Self, *let there be no not-Self at all!*” [21] In our opinion, this provision of Fichte’s focuses on a subjective and imperfect comprehension: for Fichte, a concept (anything that is thought), the absolute subject, is the actual creator of ‘*not-Self*’, i.e. the finite world. As to Eriugena’s doctrine, even though its idealism is not as clearly and definitely formed as Fichte’s, it manifests itself quite powerfully in pantheism as well.

It could express another serious reproach of Eriugena. When salvation is transferred to the mind, then the ethical and religious aspect of restoring human nature is completely pushed into the background. Therefore, in going deeper and adhering to Neoplatonic ideas, Eriugena acquired all the drawbacks and delusions imminent to pagan philosophy, which he expressed in his book on nature. Therefore, to cover his Neoplatonic, essentially, non-Christian doctrine, he turned to Christian terminology and theology. The same can be said about Fichte, who treats salvation as only related to consciousness and being, and using speculative knowledge.

The outlook of the medieval philosopher is aesthetical, not ethical. Wickedness, as Eriugena says, as well as the retribution for it, does not interfere with the beauty and harmony of the world, but sublimates it, just as shadows in a painting only exaggerate its beauty. Some researchers drew a very doubtful and biased conclusion: the basic mistake made by both Fichte and Eriugena is that, instead of a cosmological and anthropocentric viewpoint, both thinkers followed the dictate and prevalence of the Absolute, seeking to substantiate the Universe from the pure being as a theogonic and essentially transcendental process. Therefore, an erroneous path of perception yielded an erroneous result [20, p. 71].

Of course, some of both Eriugena's and Fichte's postulates are controversial and ambiguous. This is no surprise, as their philosophical doctrines are expressed in traditional notions, respectively, of scholasticism and Kant's transcendentalism. Furthermore, it would be unreasonable to blame them for not being able to see certain connections and duly define them. Even if we assume that some of Eriugena's ideas have a pantheistic character and are incompatible with religious thought, we must still analyse his absolutely unique form of pantheism because it is quite clear that, according to Eriugena, God, who includes the Universe and surpasses it, is perceived as a self-conscious subject (for example, here [13, col. 590C, 633A, 776A–D]).

As regards Eriugena's doctrine presented in the treatise *Periphyseon*, its essential and particular aspects should be noted: (1) the pure and secret Spirit, who made Himself into the Other in the form of material creatures, as Reason reflecting on Himself, returns from this alternative reality to the ideal spiritual state, i.e. to the Self; (2) the Absolute self-awareness necessarily implies the infinity of the conscious and its incomprehensibility, but God, as inexpressible Nothingness, presupposes and limits Himself as Nature in order to eliminate its original existence and start existing outside (initially, God neither knows nor reflects upon His own activity); (3) the *Logos* is an intermediate link between the uncreated and created nature, between the invisible and the visible; (4) in the *Logos* – the image of God – there is *theosis* of the world with the Spirit (God-human is an intermediate nature with the initially imminent possibility to return the human and, in his person, everything that exists, to God as uncreated Nature, which is not creating now); (5) the sensually perceived world was created by creative Thought in the intelligible Human, who is eternally present in It; (6) creation is generally understood as *Theophany*, i.e. as a manifestation of the inner nature of God, a manifestation of His absolute existence in everything that exists [7, p. 8].

The calling of everything that has been created and exists is in moving towards its death for the sake of freedom from everything finite, because the negative process in the sensual world is the positive and creative process in God. God's freedom in the world consists of His gradually shedding the 'scales' of created things and, finally, 'absorbing' them completely, returning from His alternative existence to absolute freedom. Natural existence is the cross on which divine reason is crucified, and there is just one way of resurrection from

that cross – into thoughts. According to this, the more perfect the image of the world is, the less ‘external’ it is, and the closer it is to the ‘inner’ intelligible element.

5. Conclusions

Thus, Eriugena’s and Fichte’s metaphysics can be described as a transitory stage to Hegel’s absolute system, if their ontotheological measurement (based on metaphysics) is differentiated and defined, i.e. when comparing Eriugena’s doctrine on the division of nature and Fichte’s philosophy of ‘Self’, we can see that the common feature in their thought is the supreme form of unity in the created and final plurality. For Eriugena it is the Word of God, whereas for Fichte it is a ‘reflecting Self’. In their doctrines, the Absolute retains an independent existence and does not interfere with its created and ‘enchanted’ world. At the same time, the authors suggest, that the Absolute is not an abstract indifference (existence is nothing), but the totality of definiteness. The ontotheological substantiation of Eriugena and Fichte raises the issue of consciousness as a notion that confirms our confidence in the truth of the world. Ultimately, it is postulated that, especially for Fichte, salvation is only in consciousness and due to consciousness. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that eschatology, Christology, and the theogonic process in general are predominant in Eriugena’s doctrine, colouring it in various shades of medieval mysticism.

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