On Eriugena’s *Periphyseon I*

In Book I of his *Periphyseon*, John Scottus Eriugena speaks concerning the nature of the universe, the human soul, and, most importantly, God. Incidentally, the three are related, but in order to make these relations clear, Eriugena first divides all of nature into four different categories. Ultimately, Eriugena says that there are two branches of theology—Affirmation and Negation—and from these we understand that all of nature can be divided into that which is, and that which is not. Nature is further divided into four species: that which creates and is not created; that which is created and also creates; that which is created and does not create; and that which is neither created nor creates. Eriugena also lists ten categories into which Aristotle divides nature: Essence, Quality, Quantity, Relation, Situation, Condition, Place, Time, Action, and Affection. Throughout the rest of Book I, Eriugena uses both his four species and Aristotle’s ten categories to draw conclusions about the nature of all things in God. Ultimately, as Eriugena explains later on in the book, these divisions all add up to two categories: that which can be perceived by the senses and that which is invisible and can be contemplated by the “eye of intelligence” (484B).

There are some entities, however, that seem to resist neat categorization, especially those divisions suggested by Aristotle. Eriugena addresses first the question of the role of angels, and then, in much more detail, the nature of God. Angels, he says, are one of those things that it is impossible for the human intellect to fully understand; however, there are ways in which we may begin to understand angels, and, therefore, also the nature of God. Eriugena calls these theophanies, explaining that God reveals himself in certain manifestations to humanity; a theophany is twofold—a condescension of the Divine Word along with an exaltation of human nature to the Divine Word (449B). Eriugena further explains how human nature can be elevated
to the Divine and quotes Maximus, who wrote that whatever the intellect comprehends, it becomes, and Gregory the Theologian, who said, “The bodies of the saints shall be changed into reason, their reason into intellect, their intellect into God” (451A). As God is the creator of all things, then he is also the end of all things—all things strive towards him, and will be deified, enveloped in God and share in his Divinity in the end.

This, then, leads to a discussion of the nature of God and motion. Eriugena makes it clear that as God is the creator of all things, he is in all things; yet he also transcends all things and all of the categories into which Aristotle divides nature. It is only by God’s will that anything occurs; nothing is good apart from God, and nothing exists apart from God. Even seemingly opposing forces come from one beginning, but this discord of opposition is temporary. According to Eriugena, eternity and unity are synonymous, so everything must eventually culminate in God.

As part of the nature of God, Eriugena also addresses the Trinity, acknowledging that the concept of trinity is incomprehensible and seems to contradict the notion of God as unity. However, Eriugena explains that the Trinity is not about substance, but rather, relation. Accordingly, Eriugena notes that while God transcends all categories of nature, Aristotle’s category of Relation seems to be the only one into which God might fit. In keeping with the understanding of God outside of human intellect however, Eriugena concludes that God as relation must also be metaphorical. Relation and proportion, then, become important ideas throughout the rest of *Periphyseon I.*

Next, Eriugena connects nature, humanity, and God with the Seven Liberal Arts when he defines “spirit,” noting that the arts are defined in similar terms. Eriugena calls music “the art which by the light of reason studies the harmony of all things that are in motion that is knowable
by natural proportions,” and astronomy, “the art which investigates the dimensions of the heavenly bodies and their motions and their returning at fixed times (475B).” These definitions seem most applicable to his earlier discussion of motion, proportion, and unity. He goes on to suggest that the liberal arts “are eternal and immutably attached to the soul forever, in such a way that they seem to be not some kind of accidents of it, but natural powers [and actions] which do not and could not withdraw from it, and which do not come from anywhere but are innate in it as part of nature” (486C). Note that the arts are both perceived by the senses and able to be contemplated by reason and the “eye of intelligence.” The art of music is both descriptive of the material, “the harmony of all things that are...knowable by natural proportions,” and eternal, attached to the soul. In a sense, the arts—music—act as theophanies, between the divine and the material, and as they are attached to the soul, they are also a means by which, as Maximus suggests, the soul may share in Divinity, as the intellect becomes what it comprehends.

Eriugena says that all things emerge from a unified God, diverge into discord and opposition, and by motion, come back together to rest in unity in God. The motions of the arts, especially music, approximate analogous motions in the universe and the motions of the human soul returning through intellect to unity and Divinity.

Works Cited