

THE DIVISION OF NATURE (*PERIPHYSEON*) (in Part)

John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon (The Division of Nature)*, Chap. 1. 1 7; 11-12, 13-14 translated by I. P.. Sheldon-Williams, revised by John O'Meara (Washington, DC, and Montreal: Dumbarton Oaks and Editions Bellarmin, 1987).

CHAPTER 1

NUTRITOR:* AS I frequently ponder and, so far as my talents allow, ever more carefully investigate the fact that the first and fundamental division of all things which either can be grasped by the mind or lie beyond its grasp is into those that are and those that are not, there comes to mind as a general term for them all what in Greek is called *Physis* and in Latin *Natura*. Or do you think otherwise?

ALUMNUS: No, I agree. For I too, when I enter upon the path of reasoning, find that this is so.

NUTRITOR: Nature, then, is the general name, as we said, for all things, for those that are and those that are not.

ALUMNUS: It is. For nothing at all can come into our thought that would not fall under this term.

NUTRITOR: Then since we agree to use this term for the genus, I should like you to suggest a method for its division by differentiations into species; or, if you wish, I shall first attempt a division, and your part will be to offer sound criticism.

ALUMNUS: Pray begin. For I am impatient to hear from you a true account of this matter.

NUTRITOR: It is my opinion that the division of Nature by means of four differences results in four species, (being divided) first into that which creates and is not created, secondly into that which is created and also creates, thirdly into that which is created and does not create, while the fourth neither creates nor is created. But within these four there are two pairs of opposites. For the third is the opposite of the first, the fourth of the second; but the fourth is classed among the impossibles, for it is of its essence that it cannot be. Does such a division seem right to you or not?

ALUMNUS: Right, certainly. But please go over it again so as to elucidate more fully the opposition(s) within these four forms.

NUTRITOR: I am sure you see the opposition of the third species to the first-for the first creates and is not created; it therefore has as its contrary that [which is created and does not create-and of the second to the fourth, for the second both is created and creates; it therefore has as its contrary in all respects the fourth,] which neither creates nor is created.

ALUMNUS: I see (that) clearly. But I am much perplexed by the fourth species which you have introduced. For about the other three I should not presume to raise any question at all, because, as I think, the first is understood to be the Cause of all things that are and that are not, Who is God; the second to be the primordial causes; and the third those things that become manifest through coming into being in times and places. For this reason a more detailed discussion which shall take each species individually is required, as I think.

NUTRITOR: You are right to think so. But in what order we should pursue our path of reasoning, that is to say, which of the species of Nature we should take first, I leave it to you to decide.

ALUMNUS: It seems to me beyond question that before the others we should say of the first species whatever the light of minds has granted us to utter.

NUTRITOR: Let it be so. But first I think a few words should be said about the first and fundamental [division]-as we called it-of all things into the things that are and the things that are not.

ALUMNUS: It would be correct and wise to do so. For I see no other beginning from which reasoning ought to start, and this not only because this difference is the first of all, but because both in appearance and in fact it is more obscure than the others.

NUTRITOR: This basic difference, then, which separates all things requires for itself five modes of interpretation:

1. Of these modes the first seems to be that by means of which reason convinces us that all things which fall within the perception of bodily sense or (within the grasp of) intelligence are truly and reasonably said to be, but that those which because of the excellence of their nature elude not only all sense but also all intellect and reason rightly seem not to be-which are correctly understood only of God and matter and of the reasons and essences of all the things that are created by Him. And rightly so: for as Dionysius the Areopagite says, He is the Essence of all things Who alone truly is. "For," says he, "the being of all things is the Divinity Who is above Being." Gregory the Theologian too proves by many arguments that no substance or essence of any creature, whether visible or invisible, can be comprehended by the intellect or by reason as to what it is. For just as God as He is in Himself beyond every creature is comprehended by no intellect, so is He equally incomprehensible when considered in the innermost depths of the creature which was made by Him and which exists in Him; while whatsoever in every creature is either perceived by the bodily sense or contemplated by the intellect is merely some accident to

each creature's essence which, as has been said, by itself is incomprehensible, but which, either by quality or by quantity or by form or by matter or by some difference or by place or by time, is known not as to what it is but as to that it is.

That, then, is the first and fundamental mode [of division] of those things of which it is said that they are and those (of which it is said) that they are not. For what somehow appears to be (a mode of division) based upon privations of substances and accidents should certainly not be admitted, in my opinion. For how can that which absolutely is not, and cannot be, and which does not surpass the intellect because of the pre-eminence of its existence, be included in the division of things? [-unless perhaps someone should say that the absences and privations of things that exist are themselves not altogether nothing, but are implied by some strange natural virtue of those things of which they are the privations and absences and oppositions, so as to have some kind of existence.]

II. Let then the second mode of being and not being be that which is seen in the orders and *differences* of created natures, which, beginning from the intellectual power, which is the highest and is constituted nearest to God, descends to the furthest (degree) of the rational [and irrational] creature, or, to speak more plainly, from the most exalted angel to the furthest element of the rational [and irrational] soul [-I mean the nutritive and growth-giving life-principle, which is the least part of the soul in the general acceptance of the term because it nourishes the body and makes it grow]. Here, by a wonderful mode of understanding, each order, including the last at the lower end [which is that of bodies and in which the whole division comes to an end], can be said to be and not to be. For an affirmation concerning the lower (order) is a negation concerning the higher, and so too a negation concerning the lower (order) is an affirmation concerning the higher [and similarly an affirmation concerning the higher (order) is a negation concerning the lower, while a negation concerning the higher (order) will be an affirmation concerning the lower]. Thus, the affirmation of "man" (I mean, man while still in his mortal state) is the negation of "angel," while the negation of "man" is the affirmation of "angel" [and vice versa]. For if man is a rational, mortal, risible animal, then an angel is certainly neither a rational animal nor mortal nor risible: likewise, if an angel is an essential intellectual motion about God and the causes of things, then man is certainly not an essential intellectual motion about God and the causes of things. And the same rule is found to apply in all the celestial essences until one reaches the highest order of all. This, however, terminates [in] the highest negation [upward]; for its negation confirms the existence of no higher creature. Now, there are three orders which they call "of equal rank": the first of these are the Cherubim, Seraphim, and Thrones; the second, the Virtues, Powers, and Dominations; the third, the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Downwards, on the other hand, the last (order) merely [denies or confirms the one above it, because it has nothing below it which it might either take away or establish] since it is preceded by all the orders higher than itself but precedes none that is lower than itself.

It is also on these grounds that every order of rational or intellectual creatures is said to be and not to be: it is in so far as it is known by the orders above it and by itself; but it is not in so far as it does not permit itself to be comprehended by the orders that are below it.

III. The third mode can suitably be seen in those things of which the visible plenitude of this world is made up, and in their causes in the most secret folds of nature, which precede them. For whatsoever of these causes through generation is known as to matter and form, as to times and places, is by a certain human convention said to be, while whatsoever is still held in those folds of nature and is not manifest as to form or matter, place or time, and the other accidents, by the same convention referred to is said not to be. Clear examples of this mode are provided over a wide range (of experience), and especially in human nature. Thus, since God in that first and one man whom He made in His image established all men at the same time, yet did not bring them all at the same time into this visible world, but brings the nature which He considers all at one time into visible essence at certain times and places according to a certain sequence which He Himself knows: those who already [are becoming, or] have become visibly manifest in the world are said to be, while those who are as yet hidden, though destined to be, are said not to be. Between the first and third (mode) there is this difference: the first (is found) generically in all things which at the same time and once for all have been made in (their) causes and effects; the *third* specifically in those which partly are still hidden in their causes, partly are manifest in (their) effects, of which in particular the fabric of this world is woven. To this mode belongs the reasoning which considers the potentiality of seeds, whether in animals or in trees or in plants. For during the time when the potentiality of the seeds is latent in the recesses of nature, because it is not yet manifest it is said not to be; but when it has become manifest in the birth and growth of animals or of flowers or of the fruits of trees and plants it is said to be.

IV. The fourth mode is that which, not improbably according to the philosophers, declares that only those things which are contemplated by the intellect alone truly are, while those things which in generation, through the expansions or contractions of matter, and the intervals of places and motions of times are changed, brought together, or dissolved, are said not to be truly, as is the case with all bodies which can come into being and pass away.

V. The fifth mode is that which reason observes only in human nature, which, when through sin it renounced the honour of the divine image in which it was properly substantiated, deservedly lost its being and therefore is said not to be; but when, restored by the grace of the only-begotten Son of God, it is brought back to the former condition of its substance in which it was made after the image of God, it begins to be, and in him who has been made in the image of God begins to live. It is to this mode, it seems, that the Apostle's saying refers: "and He calls the things that are not as the things that are"; that is to say, those who in the first man were lost and had fallen into a kind of non-subsistence God the Father calls through faith [in His Son] to be as those who are already reborn in Christ. But this too may also be understood of those whom God

daily calls forth from the secret folds of nature, in which they are considered not to be, to become visibly manifest in form and matter and in the other (conditions) in which hidden things are able to become manifest.

Although keener reasoning can discover some modes besides these, yet I think at the present (stage) enough has been said about these things, unless you disagree.

ALUMNUS: Quite plainly so . . .

NUTRITOR: . . . And now, I think, we must return to the task we have set ourselves, namely to the division of Nature.

ALUMNUS: Certainly we must return to it: for in what is going to be said some sort of moderation must be observed if it is ever to come to a conclusion.

NUTRITOR: Well, then: of the aforesaid divisions of Nature the first difference, as has seemed to us, is that which creates and is not created. And rightly so: for such a species of Nature is correctly predicated only of God, Who, since He alone creates all things, is understood to be (*anarxos*), that is, without beginning, because He alone is the principal Cause of all things which are made from Him and through Him, and therefore He is also the End of all things that are from Him, for it is He towards Whom all things strive. Therefore He is the Beginning, the Middle and the End: the Beginning because from Him are all things that participate in essence; the Middle, because in Him and through Him they subsist and move; the End, because it is towards Him that they move in seeking rest from their movement and the stability of their perfection.

ALUMNUS: I most firmly believe and, as far as I may, understand that only of the Divine Cause of all things is this rightly predicated; for it alone creates all things that are from it, and is not itself created by any cause which is superior (to itself) or precedes it. For it is the supreme and unique Cause of all things which take their existence from it and exist in it. But I would like [to know] your opinion about this. For I am not a little perplexed when I so often find in the books of the Holy Fathers who have attempted to treat of the Divine Nature that not only does it create all things that are, but itself also is created. *For*, according to them, it makes and is made, [and] creates and is created. If, then, this is the case, I do not find it easy to see how our reasoning may stand. For we say that it creates only, but is not created by anything.

NUTRITOR: You have every reason for being perplexed. For I too am greatly puzzled by this, and I should like [to be able] to learn [by] your guidance how it can be that these (statements), which seem to contradict one another, are prevented from conflicting [with one another]; and how to approach this question according to right reason.

ALUMNUS: Please speak first yourself: for in such matters I look to you rather than to myself for an opinion, and for a lead in reasoning.

NUTRITOR: First, then, I think we must consider that name which is so commonly used in Holy Scripture, that is, (the Name of) God. For although there are many names by which the Divine Nature is called, such as Goodness, Essence, Truth, and others of this kind, yet that is the name which most frequently occurs in Scripture.

ALUMNUS: It is certainly seen to be so.

NUTRITOR: Of this name [then] an etymology has been taken over from the Greeks: for either it is derived from the verb (*theoro*), that is, "I see"; or from the verb (*theo*), that is, "I run"; or-which is more likely [since] the meaning of both is [one and] the same-it is correctly *held* to be derived from both. For when it is *derived* from the verb (*theoro*), (*theos*) is interpreted to mean "He Who sees," for He sees in Himself all things that are [while] He looks upon nothing that is outside Himself because outside Him there is nothing. But when (*theos*) is derived from the verb (*theo*) it is correctly interpreted "He Who runs," for He runs *throughout all things* and never stays but by His running fills out all things, as it is written: "His Word runneth swiftly."

[And yet He is not moved at all. For of God] it is most truly said that He is motion at rest and rest in motion. For He is at rest unchangingly in Himself, never departing from the stability of His Nature; yet He sets Himself in motion through all things in order that those things which essentially subsist by Him may be. For by His motion all things are made. And thus there is one and the same meaning in the two interpretations of the same name, which is God. For in God to run through all things is not something other than to see all things, but as by His seeing so too by His running all things are made.

ALUMNUS: What has been said of the etymology of the name is sufficient and convincing. But I do not satisfactorily see whether He may move Who is everywhere, without Whom nothing can be, and beyond Whom nothing extends. For He is the place and the circumference of all things.

NUTRITOR: I did not say that God moves beyond Himself, but from Himself in Himself towards Himself. For it ought not to be believed that there is any motion in Him except that of His Will, by which He wills all things to be made; just as His rest [is understood] not as though He *comes to rest* after motion but as the immoveable determination of His same Will, by which He limits all things so that they remain in the immutable stability of their reasons. *For* properly speaking there is in Him neither rest nor motion. For these two are seen to be opposites one of the other. But right reason forbids us to suppose or understand that there are opposites in Him-especially as rest is, properly speaking, the end of motion, whereas God does not begin to move in order that He may attain to some end. Therefore these names, like many similar ones also, are transferred from the creature by a kind of divine metaphor to the Creator. Not without reason; for of all things that are at rest or in motion He is the Cause. For from Him they begin to run in order that they may be, since He is the Principle of them all; and [through Him] they are carried towards Him by their natural motion so that in Him they may rest

immutably and eternally since He is the End and Rest of them all. For beyond Him there is nothing that they strive for since in Him they find the beginning and end of their motion. God, therefore, is called "He Who runs" not because He runs beyond Himself, Who is always immutably at rest in Himself, Who fills out all things; but because He makes all things run from a state of non-existence into one of existence.

ALUMNUS: Return to the subject. For these things seem to be not unreasonably spoken.

NUTRITOR: Please tell me which subject you mean. For in trying to say something about intervening questions we commonly forget the main one.

ALUMNUS: Was not this the task we set ourselves: to try our best to find out on what grounds those who treat of the Divine Nature say that *the same* (Nature) creates and is created? For that it creates all things no one of sound intellect is in doubt; but how it is said to be created is not, we thought, a question to be cursorily passed over.

NUTRITOR: Just so. But, as I think, in what has already been said considerable headway has been made towards the solution of this question. For we agreed that the motion of the Divine Nature is to be understood as nothing else but the purpose of the Divine Will to establish the things that are to be made. Therefore it is said that in all things the Divine Nature is being made, which is nothing else than the Divine Will. For in that Nature being is not different from willing, but willing and being are one and the same in the establishment of all things that are to be made. For example, one might say: this is the end to which the motion of the Divine Will is directed: that the things that are may be. Therefore it creates all things which it leads forth out of nothing so that they may be, from not-being into being; but it is (also) created because nothing except itself exists as an essence since itself is the essence of all things. For as there is nothing that is good by its nature, except (the divine nature) itself, but everything which is said to be good is so by participation in the One Supreme Good, so everything which is said to exist exists not in itself but by participation in the Nature which truly exists. Not only, therefore, as was mentioned earlier in our discussion, is the Divine Nature said to be made when in those who are reformed by faith and hope and charity and the other virtues the Word of God in a miraculous and ineffable manner is born-as the Apostle says, speaking of Christ, "Who from God is made in us wisdom and justification and sanctification and redemption"; but also, because that which is invisible in itself becomes manifest in all things that are, it is not inappropriately said to be made. For our intellect also, before it enters upon thought and memory, is not unreasonably said [not] to be. For in itself it is invisible and known only to God and ourselves; but when it enters upon thoughts and takes shape in certain phantasies it is not inappropriately said to come into being. For it does so in the memory when it receives certain forms [of things and sounds and colours and [other] sensibles]-for it had no form before it entered into the memory-; then it receives, as it were, a second formation when it takes the form of certain signs of [forms and] sounds-I

mean the letters which are the signs of sounds, and the figures which are the signs of mathematical forms-or other perceptible indicators by which it can be communicated to the senses of *sentient beings*. By this analogy, far removed as it is from the Divine Nature, I think it can be shown all the same how that Nature, although it creates all things and cannot be created by anything, is in an admirable manner created in all things which take their being from it; so that, as the intelligence of the mind or its purpose or its intention or however this first and innermost motion of ours may be called, having, as we said, entered upon thought and received the forms of certain phantasies, and having then proceeded into the symbols of sounds or the signs of sensible motions, is not inappropriately said to become-for, being in itself without any sensible form, it becomes formed in fantasies-, so the Divine Essence which when it subsists by itself surpasses every intellect is correctly said to be created in those things which are made by itself and through itself and in itself [and for itself], so that in them either by the intellect, if they are only intelligible, or by the sense, if they are sensible, it comes to be known by those who investigate it in the right spirit.

ALUMNUS: Enough has been said about this, I think.

NUTRITOR: You observe well. Here too is something which I see should not be passed over without consideration, and therefore I should like you to tell me whether you understand that anything opposed to God or conceived alongside of Him exists. By "opposed" I mean either deprived of Him or contrary to Him or related to Him or absent from Him; while by "conceived alongside of Him" I mean something that is understood to exist eternally with Him without being of the same essence with him.

ALUMNUS: I see clearly what you mean. And therefore I should not dare to say that there is either anything that is opposed to Him or anything understood in association with Him which is (*heterousion*), that is, which is of another essence than what He is. For opposites by relation are always so opposed to one another that they both begin to be at the same time and cease to be at the same time, whether they are of the same nature, like single to double or $2/3$ to $3/2$, or of different natures, like light and darkness, or in respect of privation, like death and life, sound and silence. For these are correctly thought to belong to the things which are subject to coming into being and passing away. For those things which are in discord with one another cannot be eternal. For if they were eternal they would not be in discord with one another, since eternity is always like what it is and ever eternally subsists in itself as a single and indivisible unity. For it is the one beginning of all things, and their one end, in no way at discord with itself. For the same reason I do not know of anyone who would be so bold as to affirm that anything is co-eternal with God which is not co-essential with Him. For if such a thing can be conceived or discovered it necessarily follows that there is not one Principle of all things, but two [or more], widely differing from each other-which right reason invariably rejects without any hesitation: for from the One all things take their being; from two [or more], nothing.

NUTRITOR: You judge correctly, as I think. If therefore the aforesaid Divine Names are confronted by other names directly opposed to them, the things which are properly signified by them must also of necessity be understood to have contraries opposite to them; and therefore they cannot properly be predicated of God, to Whom nothing is opposed, and with Whom nothing is found to be co-eternal which differs from Him by nature. For right reason cannot find a single one of the names already mentioned or others like them to which *another* name, disagreeing *with it*, being opposed or differing from it within the same genus, is not found; and what we know to be the case with the names we must necessarily know to be so with the [things] which are signified by them. But since the expressions of divine significance which are predicated of God in Holy Scripture by transference from the creature to the Creator-if, indeed, it is right to say that anything can be predicated of Him, which must be considered in another place-are innumerable and cannot be found or gathered together within the small compass of our reasoning, only a few of the Divine Names can be set forth for the sake of example. Thus, [God] is called Essence, but strictly speaking He is not essence: for to being is opposed not-being. Therefore He is (*hyperousios*), that is, superessential. Again, He is called Goodness, but strictly speaking He is not goodness: for to goodness wickedness is opposed. Therefore (He is) (*hyperagathos*) that is, more-than-good, and (*hyperagathotas*), that is, more-than-goodness. He is called God, but He is not strictly speaking God: for to vision is opposed blindness, and to him who sees he who does not see. Therefore He is (*hypertheos*) that is, more-than-God-for (*theos*) is interpreted "He Who sees." But if you have recourse to the alternative origin of this name, so that you understand (*theos*), that is, God, to be derived not from the verb (*theoro*), that is, "I see," but from the verb (*theo*), that is, "I run," the same reason *confronts you*. For to him who runs he who does not run is opposed, as slowness to speed. Therefore He will be (*hypertheos*), that is, more-than-running, as it is written: "His Word runneth swiftly": for we understand this to refer to God the Word, Who in an ineffable way runs through all things that are, in order that they may be. We ought to think in the same way concerning Truth: for to truth is opposed falsehood, and therefore strictly speaking He is not truth. Therefore He is (*hyperalathas*) and (*hyperalatheia*), that is, more-than-true and (more than-)truth. The same reason must be observed in all the Divine Names. For He is not called Eternity properly, since to eternity is opposed temporality. Therefore He is (*hyperaionios*), and (*hyperaionia*), that is, more-than-eternal and (more-than-)eternity. Concerning Wisdom also no other reason applies, and therefore it must not be thought that it is predicated of God properly, since against wisdom and the wise are set the fool and folly. Hence rightly and truly He is called (*hypersophos*), that is, more-than-wise, and (*hypersophia*), that is, more-than-wisdom. Similarly, He is more-than-life because to life is opposed death. Concerning Light it must be understood in the same way: for against light is set darkness. For the present, as I think, enough has been said [concerning these (matters)].