Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena*

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In contemporary philosophy and theology, the themes of nothingness and creativity have taken on a fresh, novel importance. The crucial position of the notion of nothingness in the thought of Heidegger and Sartre indicates its centrality for phenomenology and existentialism. To suggest the importance of creativity for process thought, we need only recall that Whitehead accords it ultimacy as the "universal of universals" and "the principle of novelty."[1] But while the themes of nothingness and creativity are current, they also have a history. The very relevance of these themes requires that we attend carefully to their history, lest we absolutize our own interpretations of them and thereby become deaf to their full resonance.[2] In this essay we shall be concerned with a particular chapter in the medieval history of these issues, the chapter written by John Scotus Eriugena. I hope to demonstrate that John formulated the issues of nothingness and creativity in a remarkably clear and radical way and, further, that he set their interrelation within a theory of language and symbolic expression. While the essay will focus primarily upon the nothingness and creativity of God, John's emphasis on word and symbol will also involve consideration of man who, as *imago Dei*, manifests the dialectic of nothingness and creativity in his own symbolic articulations. Given the scope of these issues, the discussion will be limited to a thematic presentation of them in John the Scot and will prescind from a detailed comparison of Eriugena with either phenomenology or process thought.[3] Yet John the Scot's

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[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929; reprint ed., New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 25–26.

[2] As Heidegger himself remarks, in raising the question of nothingness, "we stand in a tradition" which must be taken into account (Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1961], p. 20).

[3] For an evaluation of Eriugena from the perspective of process theology, see W. Norman Pittenger's sympathetic and cautious account, "The Christian Philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena," *Journal of Religion* 24 (1944): esp. 252, 256–57.

possible relevance for contemporary reflection will nevertheless remain an open question throughout this discussion.[4]

DIVINE NOTHINGNESS: "NIHIL" AS A NAME OF GOD

The principal emphasis of John the Scot's discussion of nothingness falls upon the transcendence and unknowability of the divine nature. Prior to his creative self-disclosure in the division of nature, God subsists in a primordial unity and fullness which, from the limited perspective of created intellects and language, can be adequately described as *nihil*, nothing. Therefore, concerning the paradoxical use of "nothing" as a divine name, John states that *nihil* signifies "the ineffable, incomprehensible, and inaccessible brilliance of the divine goodness, which is unknown to all intellects, whether human or angelic, because it is superessential and supernatural. I should think that this designation [*nihil*] is applied because, when it is thought through itself, it neither is nor was nor will be. For in no existing thing is it understood, since it is beyond all things. . . . When it is understood as incomprehensible on account of its excellence, it is not improperly called 'nothing.' "[5] In this passage, two related points should be noted. First, in negating being of God, John is following the Pseudo-Dionysius's negative theology, in which negation signifies transcendent plenitude and excess rather than defect or privation.[6] Hence, as Pseudo-Dionysius correlates the divine names "not-being" and "superessential" (*hyperousion*),[7] John states that the divine goodness "is called nothing on account of its excellence." Therefore and second, divine

[4] See the suggestive remarks by Jean A. Potter, introduction to John the Scot, *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*, ed. and trans. Myra L. Uhlfelder (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1976), pp. xl–xli.

[5] John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* (*De divisione naturae*) (hereafter cited as *Periphyseon*), ed. H. J. Floss, Migne *Patrologia latina* (hereafter cited as *PL*) 122, 680D–81A: "Ineffabilem et incomprehensibilem divinae bonitatis inaccessibilemque claritatem omnibus intellectibus sive humanis, sive angelicis incognitam—superessentialis est enim et supernaturalis—eo nomine significatam crediderim, quae dum per se ipsam cogitatur, neque est, neque erat, neque erit. In nullo enim intelligitur existentium, quia superat omnia. . . . Dum ergo incomprehensibilis intelligitur per excellentiam, nihilum non immerito vociatur"; my translation. Published translations will be cited where available: *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*, trans. Uhlfelder (n. 4 above); and *Periphyseon* (*De diuisione naturae*), bks. 1 and 2, critical ed., trans. and commentary by I. P. Sheldon-Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968–72). These translations will be cited, respectively, as "Uhlfelder" and "Sheldon-Williams." In all cases, reference to *PL* 122 will be given in parentheses immediately following a citation. Wherever a translation is my own, the Latin text will be given in the notes.

[6] Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, trans. C. E. Rolt (1920; reprint ed., London: SPCK Press; New York: Macmillan Co., 1966), p. 147 (7, 1; Migne *Patrologia graeca* [hereafter cited as *PG*] 3, 865B–68A), also pp. 89–90 (4, 3; *PG* 3, 697A); *Periphyseon* 459D–60B.

[7] Ibid., pp. 53 (1, 1; *PG* 3, 588B), 89 (4, 3; *PG* 3, 697A), 97 (4, 7; *PG* 3, 704B). See also Maximus, *Scholia in librum de divinis nominibus*, *PG* 4, 185C–88A, 244C, 253D–56A; and *Periphyseon* 897D: "propter superessentialitatem suae naturae nihil dicitur." Regarding John's use of "superessential," see the important discussion at *Periphyseon* 462A–B.

nothingness must be radically distinguished from the *nihil privativum* of matter.[8] For privation presupposes a world of essences and objects, whose features are then removed and reduced to "matter"; formless matter is thus closest to the not-being of privation.[9] Divine nothingness refers, rather, to the transcendence of the uncreated nature as "thought through itself," ontologically prior both to the entire sphere of created, existing things and to their privation. As a name of God, *nihil* thus leads us to acknowledge the unconditional transcendence of the divine nature in its precision and truth.

With the basic, internal correlation between divine nothingness and transcendence thus established, we may now trace their further correlation with unknowability. Within the tradition of the *via negativa*, a recurring theme was the relation between divine transcendence and its hiddenness from all created intellects.[10] But John the Scot presses this connection to its utmost limits when, on the basis of the divine *nihil*, he denies knowledge of the divine essence not only to all created intellects but also to God himself. John insists that knowledge is contingent upon number and the differentiation among beings into wholes and parts, forms, genera, and species. For there to be knowledge, there must first be a region of determinate substances, susceptible to division according to the Aristotelian categories, in particular those of place and time.[11] Yet in its nothingness the divine nature remains prior to all being, essence, category, and division of nature generally—and hence to the conditions necessary for knowledge. As John asks,

> How, therefore, can the divine nature understand of itself what it is, seeing that it is nothing (*nihil*)? For it surpasses everything that is, since it is not even being but all being derives from it, and by virtue of its excellence it is supereminent over every essence and every substance. . . . *So God does not know of Himself what He is because He is not a 'what' (quid), being in everything incomprehensible both to Himself and to every intellect.* . . . He does not recognize himself as being something. Therefore He does not know that He is a 'what,' because He recognizes that He is none at all of the things which are known in something, and about which it can be said or understood what they are.[12]

[8] *Periphyseon* 634D, 499D–501A.

[9] Ibid., 546C–D: "nihilque uicinius ad non uere esse quam informis materia"; see also 606B, 686C–87A.

[10] A history of apophatic theology remains to be written. But see the suggestive remarks of Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke Co., 1968), esp. pp. 23–43; also B. J. McGinn, "Negative Theology in John the Scot," *Studia Patristica* 13 (1975): 232–38.

[11] See Marta Cristiani, "La Problème du lieu et du temps dans le livre I[er] du 'Periphyseon,' " in *The Mind of Eriugena*, ed. J. J. O'Meara and L. Bieler (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1973), pp. 41–47; also *Periphyseon* 471B–C, 481C, 483C, 487A–B.

[12] Sheldon-Williams, 2, 143–45 (589B–C); my emphasis. Regarding God's transcendence of the categories, See *Periphyseon* 588B, 596C–D, and 463A–B, where John cites the authority of Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5, 1, 2 (*PL* 42, 912). While the categories apply strictly to all created nature, categorical terms can be predicated of God only *translative* and *per metaphoram*, never *proprie*.

In this passage John suggests a coordination between knowledge and the determinate *quid* on the one hand and between ignorance and the transcendent *nihil* on the other. In negating the limits imposed by objective, definable substances, *nihil* simultaneously leads consciousness beyond the sphere of definition itself—and hence beyond knowledge. The radical negation of the *quid* brings the essential unknowability of God into sharper focus, as John draws the conclusion of an ignorance proper to God. For not only are created intellects ignorant of the divine essence; God himself does not know "what" he is, since in the purity of his nature God subsists in a transcendent nothingness.

In elaborating on this divine unknowability and ignorance, John links the theme of nothingness with that of infinity. Every created being is "confined in something within the limits of its proper nature by measure and number and weight"; but God "is not measured or numbered or ordered by anything or by Himself, and He understands that He is not confined by any measure or number or order since in none of these things is He substantially contained, for He alone truly exists in all things, being infinite above all things."[13] Created being is essentially finite and hence can be de-fined and known according to the limits within which it is confined. The uncreated nature, however, pervades and transcends all created being in virtue of its infinity. Transcending all finitude, the divine nature cannot be understood in its precision—that is, in its infinity—within the confines of finite being. For if God "were to recognize Himself in something He would show that He is not in every respect infinite and incomprehensible and unnameable. Thus He says: 'Why do you ask My Name?' . . . If, then, He disapproves the asking of His Name because it is unnameable above every name, what if one were to inquire of His Substance, which, were it in any finite thing, would not be without a finite name? But as He subsists in nothing because He is infinite, He lacks all naming because He is unnameable."[14] The infinity proper to transcendence can be neither understood nor adequately expressed within the sphere of the finite. For the limits necessary for every determination of a "what" (*quid*)—and hence for knowledge and language—render impossible the precise articulation of that nothingness and infinity which transcends every limitation. Hence it is the *negativity* of infinity which is John's central concern. For 'in-finite' is a negation, 'not-finite,' and designates that which exceeds all proportion and measure. Therefore, by negating the boundaries of finite, determinate being, infinity opens reflection toward God's unknowable transcendence. In this way, the themes of nothingness and infinity fuse into a unity within John's discussion of God's unknowability and self-ignorance.

[13] Sheldon-Williams, 2, 145–47 (590A–B). Concerning measure, number, and weight, see *Wisdom* 11:21. In particular, God's infinity transcends the measure of place and time: "Solus itaque deus infinitus est; cetera ubi et quando terminatur, id est, loco et tempore" (*Periphyseon* 482C).

[14] Sheldon-Williams, 2, 145 (589C–D).

Divine self-ignorance, however, must not be confused with *Urdummheit* or primordial stupidity. For here too John uses the Dionysian rule linking negation to plenitude and excess: just as *nihil* designates the transcendence of being, not its privation, so God's self-ignorance constitutes "the highest and truest wisdom."[15] John affirms this transposition when he asks the following rhetorical question: "Do you think that when we say that God does not *know* of Himself what He is we mean anything else than that He *understands* that He is not in any of the things that are?"[16] To clarify this dialectic of self-ignorance and wisdom, one commentator has suggested a distinction between the knowledge of definition or of the what (*quid*) and knowledge *quia est* or the self-awareness of the subject.[17] In light of this distinction, the "ignorance" of God indicates the impossibility of confining his primordial nature within the determinate sphere of being and knowledge; subsisting in itself, the divine nature cannot be grasped by the knowledge of definition. This ignorance coincides with divine wisdom when it indicates God's consciousness of his unconditional transcendence. "The highest and truest wisdom" thus consists in the full and perfect presence of the divine nature to itself,[18] and within this self-presence God understands himself as existing prior to his manifestation in the division of nature and "the things that are."

There is one further dimension to John's discussion of divine nothingness and self-ignorance. For the divine nature proceeds from its transcendent negativity and manifests itself throughout the creative division of nature. Within this self-disclosure, God comes to recognize himself as "the essence of all things."[19] As John states the paradox, "When, through a certain ineffable descent into the things that are, it [i.e., the transcendent good] is perceived by the sight of the mind in those things that are, it alone is found to be in all things. . . . Indeed, beginning to appear in its theophanies, it is said to proceed as though from nothing into something. What is properly judged [to be] above all essence is also known properly in every essence, and for this reason every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany, that is, a divine appearance."[20] Subsisting in itself, the divine nature remains above

[15] Ibid., p. 155 (594). See Maieul Cappuyns, *Jean Scot Erigène* (1933; reprint ed., Brussels: Editions Culture et Civilisation, 1964), p. 343: "L'ignorance de soi, qu'il met à Dieu est une ignorance transcendante, relevant de la théologie négative." For John's sources on this issue, see the discussions of "wisdom" and "mind" as divine names in Pseudo-Dionysius, pp. 146–51 (7, 1–2; *PG* 3, 877A–86A), and in Maximus, *PG* 4, 340C–44C.

[16] Sheldon-Williams, 2, 153 (593D).

[17] Bernard J. McGinn, "The Negative Element in the Anthropology of John the Scot" (paper presented at the conference on Eriugena studies held at Laon, July 1975). See also Cappuyns, p. 341; and *Periphyseon* 443C, 455B–C, and esp. 590C–D, where the Student says, "Non enim suades deum se ipsum ignorare sed solummodo ignorare quid sit, et merito quia non est quid."

[18] Here we confront the genesis of John's Trinitarian theology, since this self-consciousness of God is the divine *Verbum*. See Werner Beierwalters, "Das Problem des absoluten Selbstbewusstseins bei Johannes Scotus Eriugena," in *Platonismus in der Philosophie des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), p. 505.

[19] Sheldon-Williams, 1, 65 (454A), 208 (518A).

[20] *Periphyseon* 681A: "Dum vero per condescensionem quandam ineffabilem in ea, quae sunt,

all essence and being and hence is appropriately designated "nothing"; but as it turns toward self-manifestation in created being, it proceeds "as though from nothing into something."

The full force of this paradox of transcendence and theophany can be seen in John's discussion of creation *ex nihilo*. For John interprets creation out of nothing to mean creation out of the nothingness proper to the uncreated nature. John argues that this primordial "nothing" cannot be the privation of essence or condition (*habitudo*), because privation presupposes a prior essence or condition. A *nihil privativum* therefore posits the world whose genesis has yet to be accounted for or—if this be denied—leads into sheer nonsense, since it is incomprehensible "how the world was made from the absence or privation of things that never were."[21] Hence the "nothing" that is prior to creation can only be the superessential negativity of the uncreated nature in its precision, beyond all essence and condition:

> If someone were to say that neither the privation of condition nor the absence of some essence is signified by the name "nothing" but, rather, the universal negation of all condition and essence, whether of substance or of accident, and simply of all things that can be said and understood, the following conclusion would be drawn: God, who alone is properly alluded to by the negation of all things that are, must be designated by that name, because he is exalted above everything that can be said and understood. For he is nothing of those things that are and are not; and he is better known in not-knowing.[22]

Creation *ex nihilo* is therefore nothing other than creation *ex Deo*: it is the manifestation, the procession of transcendent negativity into the differentiat-

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mentis obtutibus inspicitur, ipsa sola in omnibus invenitur esse. . . . At vero in suis theophaniis incipiens apparere, veluti ex nihilo in aliquid dicitur procedere, et quae proprie supra omnem essentiam existimatur, proprie quoque in omni essentia cognoscitur, ideoque omnis visibilis et invisibilis creatura theophania, id est, divina apparitio potest appelari." See also 446C–D; and Eriugena's *Commentaire sur l'Evangile de Jean*, ed. and trans. Edouard Jeauneau, Sources Chrétiennes (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1972), p. 124 (*PL* 122, 302A–B). Compare Pseudo-Dionysius's claim that God "is All things in all things and Nothing in any" (p. 152 [7, 3; *PG* 3, 872A]).

[21] *Periphyseon* 686C: "Quomodo de absentia vel privatione rerum, quae nunquam erant, mundus factus est."

[22] *Periphyseon* 686C–87A: "Si vero quis dixerit, neque privatione habitudinis, neque absentiam alicujus essentiae nihil nomine significari, sed universalem totius habitudinis, et essentiae, vel substantiae, vel accidentis, et simpliciter omnium, quae dici et intelligi possunt, negationem, concludetur sic: eo igitur vocabulo Deum vocari necesse est, qui solus negatione omnium, quae sunt, proprie innuitur, quia super omne, quod dicitur et intelligitur, exaltatur, qui nullum eorum, quae sunt et quae non sunt, est, qui melius nesciendo scitur." See also 634D–35A; and Eriugena, *Expositiones super Ierarchiam Caelestem*, ed. H. F. Dondaine, *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen-Age* 18 (1950–51): 262 (4, 3): "Credimus enim ipsum [Deus] de nichilo omnia fecisse; nisi forte illud nichil ipse est qui, quoniam super omnia superessentialis extollitur et super omne quod dicitur et intelligitur glorificatur, quoniam in numero omnium quae sunt nullo modo collocatur." Contrast John's position here with Augustine's less radical interpretation at *Confessiones* 12, 3–9.

ed otherness of being and essence. In this way *nihil* signifies the divine nature not only as unconditional transcendence but also as the originating principle from which the division of nature springs. Indeed, John's interpretation of creation *ex nihilo* compels us to take divine transcendence itself as the ground for created being: the uncreated nature which creates does so out of the *nihil* proper to its transcendence. John's very insistence on God's transcendent nothingness thus opens the way toward a second major theme of his thought: theophany and its central metaphor, the self-creation of God.

THEOPHANY AND DIVINE SELF-CREATION

For Eriugena theophany is intrinsically linked to the division of nature. In describing his fundamental speculative framework, John enumerates a division of nature into "four species through four differentiae. The first is the division into what creates and is not created; the second into what is created and creates; the third, into what is created and does not create; the fourth, into what neither creates nor is created."[23] Now the relation among these divisions unfolds as a complex interlocking dialectic. The uncreated nature creates the primordial causes, which in turn produce "those things known by generation in time and place."[24] The fourth division, which neither creates nor is created, constitutes the final cause toward which created natures are directed and within which they will ultimately be restored to unity.[25] The two central divisions thus constitute the sphere of creation, while the first and fourth divisions indicate the divine nature, conceived, respectively, as efficient and final cause. In this way, John maintains a fundamental distinction between creation and the divine, uncreated nature. Since God is both the beginning and end of creation, the first and fourth divisions coincide in absolute simplicity; the distinction between modes of causality in these divisions is therefore a conjectural construct, arising from "the double direction (*intentio*) of our contemplation."[26] With the actual coincidence of beginning and end, the relatedness among the four divisions forms a dynamic circularity. Hence we must concur with Cappuyns's judgment that "Eriugena's explications of the four 'species of natures' show us that what is in reality hidden beneath his ingenious formulations is nothing other than the double schema of the Neoplatonists: the *processio* of the cause to the causes and down to the effects and

[23] Uhlfelder, p. 2 (441B).

[24] Ibid., p. 2 (442B). See also Cristiani.

[25] Regarding the stages of division and return, John follows Maximus the Confessor closely. See *Periphyseon* 893 ff.; and Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1969), pp. 396 ff. Thunberg provides a detailed account of the stages of return in Maximus and in his predecessors.

[26] Sheldon-Williams, 2, 11 (527B). The term *intentio* is difficult to translate. A possible alternative to "direction" is "intentionality," which both maintains the Latin root and carries the phenomenological sense of perspectival directedness toward the object of consciousness' act.

then the *reversio* of these [effects], through those [causes], up to the cause."[27]

Yet John the Scot does not simply repeat either the Neoplatonic schema or its modified formulations in Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor. Rather, he adapts this schema to a comprehensive metaphysic which bears a distinctively personal stamp, both in its novel framework of the *divisio naturae* and in the bold metaphor which articulates its internal dynamics: the self-creation of God. For although the themes of theophany, division of nature, and procession and return clearly implicate one another, their fusion into a unity is achieved through John's metaphor of divine self-creation.[28]

John was fully aware of the novelty and the radical character of this metaphor. Concerning the doctrine that "God Himself is both the Maker of all things and is made in all things," the Student remarks with unconcealed astonishment that, "like almost everyone else, I was unfamiliar with this view before and had not even heard of it. If it is true, anyone would immediately shout and proclaim: 'And so God is all things and all things are God.' Such a judgment will be regarded as monstrous."[29] Since in the division of nature the fundamental distinction is that between the uncreated and the created, does not this metaphor entail the collapse of the entire dialectic which has been so carefully elaborated? Indeed, the Teacher claims that "we should not therefore understand God and creation as two different things, but as one and the same. For creation subsists in God, and God is created in creation in a remarkable and ineffable way."[30] Confronted with this striking paradox, we may well share the Student's response and perhaps even his indignation. But we must also participate in his effort to comprehend this doctrine of divine self-creation.

John uses the metaphor of God's self-creation to express the relational dynamics inherent in conceiving creation as theophany. Hence, as the Teacher comments, "the correct interpretation of our statement that It [the divine nature] creates Itself is simply that It creates the natures of things. Its creation—i.e., Its manifestation in something—is surely the establishment of all existing things."[31] Similarly, John writes that the *Verbum* "is the creative Cause of everything and is created and made (*creari et fieri*) in everything

[27] Cappuyns, p. 310.

[28] *Periphyseon* 516C; also 452A–B, where both Teacher and Student admit their perplexity regarding this theme "in libris sanctorum patrum."

[29] Uhlfelder, p. 162 (650C–D): "Deus itaque omnia est, et omnia Deus."

[30] Ibid., p. 197 (678C); see also 528B and 517C–D: "D. Deus ergo non erat prius quam omnia faceret? M. Non erat. . . . [Si enim esset] temporeque praecederet actionem suam, quae nec sibi coessentialis erat nec coaeterna. D. Coaeternum igitur est Deo suum facere et coessentiale? M. Ita credo et intelligo." As Nicholas of Cusa remarks, in a marginal gloss to *Periphyseon* 517C–D, "Intendit ostendere deum prius non fuisse antequam omnia faceret, quia facere et ei [esse] dei unum sunt" (British Museum Codex Addit. 11035, 80^{r}; published by the Institut für Cusanusforschung in "Kritisches Verzeichnis der Londoner Handschriften aus dem Besitz des Nikolaus von Kues," *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 3 [1963]: 98).

[31] Uhlfelder, p. 18 (455A–B).

which It creates, and contains everything in which It is created and made."[32] In this convergence of *creare* or "creating" and *creari* or "being-created," the dialectic of manifestation and participation takes on a new clarity and force. For the divine self-creation not only coincides with theophany but also unfolds the constitutive dynamic which binds uncreated transcendence to the created order. The divine nature's creation of itself provides a middle term, so to speak, between the first and second divisions of nature. In a passage charged with the full impetus of the Neoplatonic tradition, John describes the divine nature's intentional emergence (*volens emergere*) from its infinite transcendence and unknowability and its creative descent through the primordial causes and into their effects. And this entire procession into the subordinate divisions of nature is expressed in terms of the uncreated divinity's *creare* and *creari*, so that the divine nature "is created and creates in the primordial causes; but in their [i.e., the causes'] effects it is created and does not create. And not without reason, since in these [effects] it establishes the end of its descent, that is, of its appearance. In the Scriptures, therefore, every corporeal and visible creature which falls under the senses is generally called—and not inappropriately—an outermost trace of the divine nature."[33] Theophanic immanence could scarcely receive a more radical expression than it does here, where the dialectic of *creare* and *creari* articulates the descending self-manifestation of God. Further, given the constitutive character of this descent as the unfolding of the divine unity, the creator "is said to be made in His creatures generally because in them He, without whom they cannot be, is not only understood to be, but also is their Essence."[34] The integrative power of John's metaphor is therefore clear, as divine self-creation provides a single, vivid expressive form for the coordinate themes of theophany, procession, division of nature, and God's "essential" inherence within the created order.

Here it may seem that any possibility for an *analogia entis* has collapsed into an undifferentiated *identitas entis*. In the tradition of Plotinus, Proclus, and the Pseudo-Dionysius, John's procedure is not to construct an analogical relation

[32] Ibid., p. 156 (646A). See also John's remarks about the divine will at 453C–D.

[33] *Periphyseon* 689B–C: "Creatur ergo et creat in primordialibus causis; in earum vero effectibus creatur et non creat. Nec immerito, quoniam in ipsis finem descensionis suae, hoc est, apparitionis suae constituit. Atque ideo omnis creatura corporalis, atque visibilis, sensibusque succumbens extremum divinae naturae vestigium non incongrue solet in Scripturis appelari." John cites in this connection 1 Cor. 15:28, "God shall be all in all" (689A); see 450D, where this passage is set in a properly eschatological context, "Erit enim deus omnia in omnibus, ac si aperte Scriptura diceret: solus deus apparebit in omnibus." In Bonaventure the term *vestigium* takes on a nearly technical sense as a description of the divine nature's immanence in sensible creation; see *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, chap. 2; and E. Cousins, "Myth and Symbol in Bonaventure," *American Catholic Philosophical Association Proceedings* 45 (1971): 90–91.

[34] Sheldon-Williams, 1, 205 (516C). The key term here, *fieri*, is rendered "to be made" by Sheldon-Williams and "to be acted upon" by Uhlfelder (p. 95). Both readings are justified, since the context is a discussion of the Aristotelian category of *passio* and also of divine activity or making. To support his interpretation, John cites Pseudo-Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy* (4, 1; *PG* 3, 177D), "Esse omnium est super esse divinitas"; see *Periphyseon* 632D–34A.

between entities or orders of being which are conceived as initially distinct and self-contained. For substances do not ground the relational structure of procession and return but, rather, emerge within it. Yet this primacy of the dynamic and relational may entail other modes of distinction than those between fixed substances. In fact John maintains a fundamental distinction between the divine nature subsisting in itself and its self-manifestation in the created order—that is, between transcendence and theophany. Hence John insists upon the properly metaphorical character of divine self-creation and states that, "when . . . God is said to be made, this is obviously by a figure of speech."[35] Yet this figure of speech is not simply an arbitrary fabrication, and this for two reasons. First, as we shall see in the following section, John views metaphor and symbol as ontologically rooted, that is, as the reflection in human language of the expressive dialectic of transcendence and theophany. And second, the metaphor of divine self-creation indicates the condition for all knowledge about the divine nature: "Divine Essence, which in its pure state surpasses all intellect, is rightly said to be created in the things made by, through, in, and directed toward Itself; so that It is recognized in Its creations through the intellect (if the creations are solely intelligible) or the senses (if they are sensibles) of those who search for it with proper zeal."[36] Conceived as theophany, the entire created order becomes a field of translucent symbols which yield knowledge of the divine nature, even though this position knowledge remains metaphorical and partial throughout. Further, this correlation between theophany and the knowability of God also modifies John's insistence on divine self-ignorance. For it is in his self-manifestation that God proceeds from his transcendent self-ignorance and comes to a self-knowledge of definition in the causes and their effects.[37] John's basic distinction between transcendence and theophany thus entails a noetic contrast between the unknowability of the divine nature subsisting in itself and its knowability in its expressive manifestations.

To sum up the argument thus far, John elaborates a thoroughgoing dialectic of transcendence and theophany, of divine nothingness and self-creation. If we may borrow the language of process thought,[38] we may speak of a *dipolar* conception of God in John the Scot. There is a primordial divine nature, characterized as transcendence and nothingness; and there is a consequent nature, characterized as theophany and divine self-creation. However, in borrowing Whitehead's terminology, it is only the dipolarity itself that we must emphasize, since the weight assigned to the individual poles is radically different for Eriugena and Whitehead. In sharp contrast to Whitehead, John

[35] Sheldon-Williams, 1, 205 (516C); see also 458A: "metaphorica . . . id est a creatora ad creatorem translata."

[36] Uhlfelder, p. 17 (454C–D).

[37] See *Periphyseon* 689A–B.

[38] See Whitehead, pp. 405–13.

insists that the primordial nature of God is a plenitude and actuality, which achieves only a limited and metaphorical expression in the consequent or theophanic nature. Recollecting this major difference, we may nevertheless note that John's conception of God is consistently dipolar. For as John's remarks on creation *ex nihilo* make clear, the full polarity must be maintained throughout: the divine *nihil* constitutes the ground for theophanic self-creation, which in turn cannot be thought apart from the transcendence which it manifests in the otherness of created essence and being. Therefore, far from collapsing into contradiction and mutual destruction, the themes of divine nothingness and self-creation require and condition one another; neither pole can be thought apart from the other or be sacrificed to the other without dramatically falsifying John's tensely paradoxical vision.[39]

THE ROOT METAPHOR: SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION

Now that the polarity of divine nothingness and theophanic self-creation is before us, one further issue remains unresolved. What is it that enables John to maintain this dipolarity? More specifically, can we discern a paradigm or root metaphor which underlies this polarity and lends it an internal coherence?[40] Significantly, John does posit an analogue for the transcendence and self-creation of God: man's intellect and its formative self-expression. In itself "invisible and known only to God and ourselves," the mind assumes sensible form in its *phantasiae* and symbolic expressions.[41] In general terms, a symbol's truth and origin lie in the reality and power which it makes manifest, yet apart from the symbol, this reality and power remain hidden and inaccessible. Symbols thus manifest or incarnate the expressive power of the mind in the limited sphere of sensible being.[42] Yet for John the intellect retains its simple unity in relation to its manifold expressions: "Our intellect . . . , although invisible and incomprehensible in itself, is both manifested and comprehended by certain signs when it is, as it were, embodied in sounds or letters or gestures. Although it is thus made apparent without, it always

[39] Retaining a dipolar structure throughout, John insists that even in the final *reditus* the distinction among created natures is preserved. See his gloss of 1 Cor. 15:28 at *Periphyseon* 876A–B; also 881C–82B.

[40] The theory of paradigms derives from Thomas E. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), esp. pp. 174 ff.; that of root metaphors, from Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), esp. pp. 89–114. Also relevant is Henri Bergson's notion of the "intermediary image"; see *La Pensée et le mouvant*, in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), pp. 1347 ff., available in English as *A Study in Metaphysics: The Creative Mind*, trans. M. L. Andison (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, & Co., 1965), pp. 109 ff.

[41] Sheldon-Williams, 1, 65 (454B).

[42] See *Commentaire*, p. 138 (304B): "Est igitur uox interpres animi. Omne enim, quod intra semetipsum prius animus et cogitat et ordinat inuisibiliter, per uocem in sensus audientum sensibiliter profert."

remains invisible within; and while it bursts out into various forms comprehensible to the senses, it does not abandon the always incomprehensible condition of its nature."[43] Man thus recapitulates within himself the entire dialectic of nothingness and self-creation. As a living image of God, man participates both in God's transcendence and in his expressive, creative power. For there is an indeterminacy, a negativity in human consciousness which transcends the limits of whatness (*quid esse*) and therefore remains beyond the knowledge of definition. Hence John argues that man's very self-ignorance marks him as *imago Dei*: our intellect knows only *that* it is, not *what* it is, and "if in any way it could understand what it is it would necessarily deviate from the likeness of its Creator."[44] Yet by its very nature consciousness is also marked by "an urgency for self-expression, for disclosure as source and origin."[45] Consequently the intellect "begins to become manifest to itself and to others in its form, which is reason,"[46] and in its further articulations in *phantasiae* and symbols. Human consciousness thus simultaneously expresses itself in language and symbols and transcends these symbolic creations in its power and negativity: "When it [i.e., the intellect] wishes, it is incorporated in words and letters; and when incorporated, it remains incorporeal in itself."[47] Eriugena thus develops a view of symbolic expression which allows man both his creativity and his transcendence.

With the model of the intellect and its symbolic expression before us, we may now return to John's elaborate paradoxes concerning divine transcendence and theophany and see them with a new clarity. Regarding the unity of God and creation, he writes that "creation subsists in God, and God is created in creation in a remarkable and ineffable way, manifesting Himself, and, though invisible, making Himself visible; and, though incomprehensible, making Himself comprehensible; and, though hidden, revealing Himself; . . . though superessential, making Himself essential; . . . though simple, making Himself compound; . . . though infinite, making Himself finite; though uncircumscribed, making Himself circumscribed. . . . The Maker of

[43] Uhlfelder, p. 140 (633B–C); see also 551C–D. In these passages, as in the preceding citation from his *Commentaire*, John echoes Augustine's teaching on the "interior word" and its sensible expression as an image of the *Verbum Dei* and the Incarnation; see esp. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15, 11, 20 (*PL* 42, 1071–73).

[44] Sheldon-Williams, 2, 135 (585B–C). See also 771B–C; Brian Stock, "The Philosophical Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena," *Studi Medievali*, 3d ser., 8 (1967): 21–23; and, in a related context, John D. Caputo, "The Nothingness of the Intellect in Meister Eckart's 'Parisian Questions,' " *Thomist* 39 (1975): 85–115.

[45] Thomas Tomasic, "Negative Theology and Subjectivity: An Approach to the Tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1969): 420.

[46] Sheldon-Williams, 2, 117 (577B–D). John also claims that the human soul *creates* its mortal body in order to manifest its internal, hidden actions (*Periphyseon* 580B); but he distinguishes this mortal body from the "primum corpus incorruptibile" which is created with the soul (584C). The mortal body itself thus constitutes the first and basic symbolic expression of the mind in the world of place and time.

[47] Uhlfelder, p. 140 (633).

all, made in all, begins to be eternal and, though motionless, moves into everything and becomes all things in all things."[48] Subsisting in itself, divinity remains transcendent and ineffable and cannot be known properly in the precision of its nature. Yet this uncreated first principle proceeds to create or manifest itself throughout the created, hierarchic order of being, just as the intellect manifests itself in symbolic expression. Moreover, this self-manifestation constitutes the "essence" of creation and thereby establishes the condition for the possibility of knowledge and discourse concerning the divine nature. Symbolic expression thus takes on an ontological bearing, since, as Chenu has remarked concerning Pseudo-Dionysius, "the symbol is the true expression of reality; or better yet, it is through it [i.e., the symbol] that reality fulfills itself."[49] In this way, both Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena come to see creation as a symbolic field, as the vivid self-expression of its transcendent Lord. And just as the intellect retains its unity and incomprehensibility when it bursts forth into sensible forms, so God remains hidden in his primordial nature while he proceeds to disclose himself throughout creation. John thus consistently views creativity, in both God and man, as formative self-disclosure in word and symbol.[50] The polarity of divine nothingness and self-creation must therefore be conceived as symbolic in the most comprehensive sense of the term, since symbolic expression provides a paradigm or root metaphor for John's ontological vision.

Further, John's use of an expressionist paradigm in this context is neither arbitrary nor isolated. Rather, it is firmly embedded in both his reading of Scripture and his Trinitarian theology. It is scarcely surprising that Eriugena, who turned again to the Johannine Gospel and to Augustine, should place symbolic expression at the core of his thinking. Indeed, explicitly verbal metaphors recur throughout Eriugena's *Homily* and *Commentary* on the Gospel of John. Here we shall cite only two passages which indicate the pervasive reach of the expressionist paradigm. First, the act of speaking provides an analogue for the Trinity: "Just as one who speaks, in the word (*verbum*) that he speaks, necessarily blows forth a breath (*spiritus*), thus God the Father at one and the same time begets his Son and brings forth his Spirit through the begotten Son."[51] Nor does John confine his verbal symbolism to the life of the Trinity. Rather, he insists repeatedly that the universe of things subsists in and

[48] Ibid., p. 197 (678C–D).

[49] M.-D. Chenu, *La Théologie au douzième siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957), p. 177. See also René Roques, *L'Univers dionysien* (Paris: Aubier–Editions Montaigne, 1954), p. 104.

[50] See Jean Trouillard, "Erigène et la théophanie créatrice," in O'Meara and Bieler (n. 11 above), p. 102.

[51] Eriugena, *Homélie sur le prologue de Jean*, ed. and trans. Edouard Jeauneau, Sources Chrétiennes (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1969), p. 242 (288A–B): "Ut enim qui loquitur, in uerbo quod loquitur, necessario spiritum proflat, ita deus pater simul et semel et filium suum gignit et spiritum suum per genitum filium producit." For a summary statement of John's Trinitarian theology, see *Periphyseon* 609B–10B.

through the divine *Verbum* and that creation is the expression of this *Verbum* in otherness and multiplicity.[52] In this way, creation continues the dynamic self-expression which originates in the interior life of the Trinity. Hence, when commenting on the recurring formula *Dixit deus* in the Genesis creation account, John presents the following extraordinary gloss:

> By the name *deus* we understand the Father, but *dixit* signifies the Word of God. And thus the Word of God cries out [*clamat*] in the most remote solitude of the divine goodness. And his cry is the creation of all natures. For he calls those things that are just as those that are not, because through him God the Father has created everything that he wanted to come to be. He has cried out invisibly, before the world was created, for the world to be created. He has cried out, coming visibly into the world, for the world to be saved. First he cried out eternally by his divinity alone before his incarnation; he cried out afterward through his flesh.[53]

Here, in a single, bold stroke, the integrative power of John's expressionist paradigm becomes evident. The Father cries out through the Word, and this cry first establishes all created natures, beginning with the basic division into those things that are and those that are not.[54] The Word's second cry occurs through the flesh and constitutes the Incarnation, which sets in motion the return of all things to God. John's verbal symbolism thus expresses the full movement of his thought, as it articulates the turn from the interior life of the Trinity toward the creative division of nature and finally toward the Incarnation and the redemptive return to the divine nature.

In conclusion, the vividly literal character of these two passages makes explicit the root metaphor of John's speculative structure. An expressionist paradigm underlies the dialectic of divine nothingness and self-creation, giving it coherence and binding it to the human experience of transcendence and creativity. In terms of this paradigm, John's system constitutes a self-consciously *symbolic* structure—that is, one in which symbolic expression itself

[52] See *Periphyseon* 642C–43B; Cappuyns, pp. 352–53; also the *Homélie*, pp. 230–32 (287A), 238–40 (287D–88A), 246 (288D), 288 (293C), and finally 268–72 (291B–C), where John argues for a correlation between the four senses of Scripture and the four elements of the world—a bizarre analogy until we recall that both Scripture and creation are expressions of the divine *Verbum*.

[53] *Commentaire*, p. 142 (304D–5A): ". . . dei nomine patrem intelligimus, 'dixit' autem dei uerbum significat. Clamat itaque uerbum dei in remotissima diuinae bonitatis solitudine. Clamor eius naturarum omnium conditio est. Ipse enim uocat ea quae sunt tanquam quae non sunt, quia per ipsum deus pater clamauit, id est creauit cuncta quae fieri uoluit. Clamauit ille inuisibiliter, priusquam fieret mundus, mundum fieri. Clamauit, in mundum ueniens uisibiliter, mundum saluari. Prius clamauit aeternaliter per solam suam diuinitatem ante incarnationem; clamauit postea per suam carnem." See *Periphyseon* 580C–D for John's etymology of *bonitas* from the Greek βοω, "I cry out." The association of *deus* with the Father and *dixit* with the Word derives from Augustine, *De genesi ad litteram*, 2, 6 (*PL* 34, 267–68); but John's development of this gloss seems to be uniquely his own.

[54] *Periphyseon* 441A.

becomes a symbol of remarkable power and scope.[55] From the neutral perspective of metatheory, John's system can thus be seen as a reflective and internally consistent unity. For John makes explicit his root metaphor and symbolic orientation and proceeds to work out their implications with dialectical rigor. Further, from the less neutral perspective of existential hermeneutics, the adequacy of John's speculative vision can be tested against the demands of religious experience. Within this context, two principal claims may be sketched briefly. First, John's expressionist paradigm delivers us from the false objectivity which would set the secular and human over against the sacred and divine. Since John focuses upon the distinctively personal creativity of self-expression as the meeting place for God and his human image, any *analogia entis* must occur precisely within man's creativity and the formation of culture as a human world. Second, John's consistent dipolarity allows him to account for two fundamental features of the God of religious experience: his transcendent otherness and his living presence as one to whom I can address myself.[56] With these final suggestions, we have clearly passed from historical interpretation into metaphysics and theology. Such a move may not be necessary to "understand" John the Scot, but it certainly is necessary if we are to evaluate his achievement and share in his quest for meaning.

[55] I. P. Sheldon-Williams has spoken of John's system as "meta-dialectics" ("Johannes Scottus Eriugena," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], p. 524). Without disputing the accuracy of this characterization, we may note that dialectic articulates the *structure* of the primary *act* of symbolic expression.

[56] To dispel any doubt concerning the religious impulse behind John's work, see the eloquent prayer at *Periphyseon* 1010B–D. Also note that John unfolds the religious meaning of the theophany-transcendence polarity in this prayer and that his context is explicitly hermeneutical, the interpretation of Scripture.