

THE AUTHORITY OF REASON: ON JOHN  
SCOTTUS ERIUGENA'S *PERIPHYSERON*, I.508C-  
513C

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INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Even reason herself teaches this. For authority proceeds from reason, but true reason certainly does not proceed from authority. For every authority which is not upheld by true reason is seen to be weak, whereas true reason is kept firm and immutable by her own powers and does not require to be confirmed by the assent of any authority. For it seems to me that true authority is nothing else but the truth that has been discovered by the power of reason and set down in writing by the Holy Fathers for the use of posterity.<sup>2</sup>

This astonishing passage comes at the end of a digression on the relationship between authority and reason following Eriugena's treatment of the ten Aristotelian categories in Book I of the *Periphyseon*.<sup>3</sup> The occasion for this digression is the problem of the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Eugene Thacker and Nicola Masciandaro for their insightful and helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, edited by E. Jeauneau, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievals [CCCM]* 161-165 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996-2003), I. 3052-3059; PL 122:513B-C. Translation: Eriugena, *Periphyseon (The Division of Nature)*, translated by I. P. Sheldon-Williams, revised by John J. O'Meara, (Montreal: Éditions Bellarmin, 1987), 110. Subsequent cross-references to the PL edition omit the volume number.

<sup>3</sup> On Eriugena's treatment of Aristotle's categories see: C. Erismann, "Processio id est multiplicatio": L'influence latine de l'ontologie de Porphyre: le cas de Jean Scot Érigène," *Revue de Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* LXXXVIII (2004), 401-46; J. Marenbon, "John Scottus and the

applicability of the categories of acting and suffering to God. The Alumnus, the student of the dialogue, is puzzled: the reasoning up to that point would suggest that these categories, as well as the previous eight, cannot be applied to the Creator due to the Creator's transcendence to substance. Moreover, to attribute the categories of acting and suffering to God would imply that accidents can be predicated of God's nature. But, on the other hand, denying the possibility of the applicability of those categories to the Creator would have as a consequence that no active or passive verb could be used in the case of God. This would imply that the Scriptures are deceiving when they say that God is loved or that he loves, that he is moved or that he moves.<sup>4</sup> The Alumnus is stuck between the danger of impiety—into which he would fall by attributing falsehood to the Scriptures—and ridiculousness, for, as he admits: “if I say it is false [i.e., that God does not admit acting and suffering], *reason itself* might easily make a laughing-stock of me.”<sup>5</sup>

In order to help the Alumnus out of his puzzlement, the Nutritor, the teacher of the dialogue, begins a digression which will lead him first to claim that the Scriptures cannot be in contradiction with true reason, and second, that reason has priority over authority. At the very beginning of this digression we find a long quotation from Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* (I.1), whose authority the Nutritor paradoxically uses in order to undermine the supremacy of authority over reason.

The conclusion reached by the Nutritor in agreement with the Alumnus, i.e. that reason has priority over authority, will determine the correct order of the inquiry and of the exposition: “And that is why reason must be employed first in our present business, and authority afterwards.”<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is not particularly surprising, when one considers both Eriugena's

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*Categoriae Decem*,” in *Eriugena : Studien zu seinen Quellen*, ed. W. Beierwaltes (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1980), 116-34; G. d'Onofrio, “‘Disputandi disciplina’: Procédés dialectiques et ‘logica vetus’ dans le langage philosophique de Jean Scot,” in *Jean Scot Ecrivain*, ed. G.-H. Allard (Paris: Vrin 1986), 229-263. On space and time in particular see M. Cristiani, “Lo spazio e il tempo nell'opera dell'Eriugena,” *Studi Medievali*, 3rd series, 14 (1973): 39-136.

<sup>4</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 2856-2868 (PL 508C-D).

<sup>5</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 2856-7 (PL 508 C).

<sup>6</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 3060-1 (PL 513 C); Sheldon-Williams, 110.

rationalistic attitude within the dispute on predestination between 850 and 851 and his peculiar solution to the problem of divine predestination and foreknowledge, which ended up causing him major trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>7</sup> In the *De praedestinatione liber*, Eriugena coherently applied his own rationalistic interpretation of the Augustinian claim that true philosophy is true religion, and *vice versa*, by using the arts of the trivium in order to reconstruct the true meaning of the *auctoritates*. As he shows in I.1, to say that true philosophy is true religion is to say that dealing with philosophy is identical to clarifying the correct rules of the inquiry into God, where the boundaries between rational investigation into God and religious veneration of God are blurred.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the interpretive methodology to be applied, while the scriptural text or a given sentence of a Church Father is the starting point of the interpretive process, the end point is the outcome of rigorous reasoning, largely resorting to the resources offered by grammar, rhetoric and dialectics. The guiding principle here is that whenever the *auctoritas* appears to contradict logical reasoning, we must have fallen into an interpretive mistake, which can be corrected by an adequate use of the liberal arts. As an index of this complex relationship between reason and authority in Eriugena's commentarial activity, one might see the fact that in the thirteenth century large excerpts of the *Periphyseon* were used as glosses to the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and were organized together into a commentary on the Mystical theology.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will first address the question of the relationship between *ordo verborum* and *ordo rerum* in Eriugena's thought. Then I will analyze the arguments Eriugena provides in order to reach and

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<sup>7</sup> On the political context and content of the debate on predestination and of Eriugena's intervention, see M. Cristiani, *Dall'unanimitas all'universitas: da Alcuino a Giovanni Eriugena: lineamenti ideologici e terminologia politica della cultura del secolo IX* (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il medioevo, 1978) and the introduction by E. S. Mainardi to Giovanni Scoto Eriugena, *De praedestinatione liber, Dialettica e teologia all'apogeo della rinascenza carolingia*, (Florence: SISMEL – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> *Iohannis Scotti de divina praedestinatione*, ed. G. Madec, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina [CCSL] 50 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978), I.1.

<sup>9</sup> See J. McEvoy, "John Scottus Eriugena and Thomas Gallus, Commentators on the *Mystical Theology*," in *History and Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena and His Time*, eds. M. Dunne and J. McEvoy (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 183-202.

support the claim that reason has priority over authority, paying particular attention to his peculiar use of the *De divinis nominibus*'s passage and of Dionysius's authority.

#### *ORDO VERBORUM AND ORDO RERUM*

In the *Expositiones in ierarchiam coelestem* (II. 124), Eriugena translates and comments on a passage from Dionysius's *De coelesti hierarchia* (II.1; PG 3:137A) in which Dionysius explains why intelligible beings in the Scriptures are represented through corporeal images and symbols.<sup>10</sup> Dionysius argues that the Scriptures have resorted to symbols appropriate to our capacity of understanding and has employed them *atechnōs*, i.e. without *technē*, or artlessly. The adverb *atechnōs* refers to the simple and artless way in which the Scriptures make themselves understandable to the human mind, a simplicity that Dionysius opposes to the artificiality of rhetoric and of the liberal arts.<sup>11</sup> As is well known, Eriugena mistranslates the adverb *atechnōs* as “valde artificialiter,” “highly artificial,” and then comments upon this passage by drawing a similarity between theology and poetry. Here theology is presented as an exercise for the mind aimed at an anagogic development of reason, progressing from sensible images to the perfect knowledge of intelligible things.<sup>12</sup> Following Roques, this is much more than a simple mistranslation or an interpretative mistake: Eriugena is actually inverting the meaning of Dionysius's passage because he cannot accept the notion of an opposition of the Scriptures to the liberal arts. The rules of the liberal arts,

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<sup>10</sup> For the critical editions of these works, see *Iohannis Scotti Eriugena Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem*, ed. J. Barbet, CCCM 31 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975) and Dionysius Areopagita, *De coelesti hierarchia*, in *Corpus Dyonisiacum*, II, eds. G. Heil and A. M. Ritter (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Roques stresses this opposition between divine revelation and the liberal arts in R. Roques, ‘Connaissance de Dieu et théologie symbolique d'après l'*In ierarchiam coelestem Sancti Dionysii* de Hugues de Saint-Victor,’ in *Structures théologiques de la gnose à Richard de Saint-Victor* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), 294-364.

<sup>12</sup> See on this W. Otten, “Religion as Exercitatio Mentis: Exegesis between Faith and Reason,” in *Christian Humanism. Essays in Honor of Arjo Vanderjagt*, eds. A. A. MacDonald, Z. R. W. M. von Martels and J. R. Veenstra (Leiden: London, 2009), 65-66.

indeed, are the same as the rules of intelligence<sup>13</sup> and, Eriugena later argues, there would be no Scriptures at all without the rules of the liberal arts.<sup>14</sup> These exist eternally in God's Wisdom and are the most perfect and highest image (*significatio*) of Christ.

At the very beginning of the *De divina praedestinatione*, where Eriugena deals with the correct order of the argumentation, we have found not only a strong praise for philosophy, but also the equation of true philosophy to true religion.<sup>15</sup> Both philosophy and religion, when they are true (i.e. enlightened by the intellect), share the same rules, so that loving wisdom is equated to striving to know God. Eriugena describes the different parts that constitute the study of wisdom (dialectics, heuristics, apodictic, and analytic) and insists on the justification of the use of dialectics in the theological domain. The initial justification for the resort to dialectics is the usefulness of the knowledge of the rules that govern a correct discourse in the struggle against heretical false arguments. Theology, furthermore, needs dialectics both in order to defend itself and in order not to be helpless in front of the sophisms and false syllogisms of the heretics.<sup>16</sup> The presupposition of this use of philosophy is that philosophical discourse can grasp truth *because* reality and true philosophical knowledge have the same structure, and because things themselves are not different from their being known. This means that there exists the possibility of a correspondence between *ordo rerum* and *ordo verborum*.

The rules for a correctly articulated argument are not a pure invention of the mind with no connection to the order of the world. On the contrary, such rules organize universal reality as such. As stressed by Moran, the arts are conceived by Eriugena both as identical to the primordial causes, i.e. to the unchanging ideas in God's mind, and as the faculties or powers of the human mind.<sup>17</sup> This is why they both play a mediating role between God and human being, and grant the possibility of true knowledge. Through the knowledge of the arts, a human mind can have access at the same time to the primordial causes of the whole reality, to

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<sup>13</sup> See R. Roques, “‘Valde artificialiter’ : Le sens d’un contresens,” in *Libres sentiers vers l’ériogenisme* (Roma: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1975), 45-98.

<sup>14</sup> *Expositiones*, I. 560-1; PL 140.

<sup>15</sup> *De praed.*, 1. 1, 16-18.

<sup>16</sup> *De praed.*, 1. 3, 45-47.

<sup>17</sup> D. Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena. A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 207.

reality as such, and to its own mind. The task of the philosopher, therefore, is to identify the laws of reality, the natural order of things, and to articulate his discourse in such a way that the order and structure of reality can be exposed as the order and structure of the discourse. This also explains why heretical claims can be unmasked and denounced as logical mistakes.

The notion of a correspondence between *ordo rerum* and *ordo verborum* is present in several passages of the *Periphyseon* (see for example *Periphyseon*, II.26; II.570-571), where it is often a matter of carefully choosing the order of arguments and how to proceed in the dialogue. Whereas sometimes it seems that the choice of the order of the arguments is dependent on the will of the Nutritor (*Periphyseon* I.3062, I.3240-3241, II.575) or related to the pedagogical relationship between the master and the student, in several passages the verbs used—*exigo*, *pono*, *expeto*—allude to a much more binding order (*Periphyseon*, I.3476-3478, II.40, II.2324-2325, III.2421).<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the recreation of the structure of the universe in thought requires the use of the liberal arts and a correct employment of logic indicates that a pure intellectual intuition of the universal substance escapes human beings. As noticed by d'Onofrio,<sup>19</sup> Adam, in his prelapsarian condition, does have access to the pure intellectual contemplation of divine truth without needing to resort to deductions. Since in the state of grace before the fall everything exists in its universal form, Adam *qua* genus, (i.e. *qua* universal human nature) contemplates the genera of things, and not the particulars. It is opportune to stress here that the prelapsarian condition of the creature is not to be understood as a

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<sup>18</sup> These oscillations could be explained as the sign of the coexistence of different orders (logical, pedagogical, and epistemological), which are intertwined within the treatise. On this line, see G. H. Allard, “Quelques remarques sur la ‘disputationis series’ du ‘De divisione naturae,’” in *Jean Scot Eriugène et l’histoire de la philosophie*, ed. R. Roques (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1977), 211-224. At the same time I find convincing Jeauneau’s insistence on the strong structural unity of the treatise. Jeauneau suggests that Eriugena operates as an architect and adopts an helicoidal trajectory in order to recreate the universe, by following a descendant and ascendant dialectics and progressively remodeling and recreating all the conceptual material he touches upon: E. Jeauneau, “L’homme et l’œuvre,” in *Études érigénianennes* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987), 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> G. d’Onofrio, “Disputanti Disciplina,” 246-251.

condition historically preceding sin, but rather as one *ideally* and *ontologically* preceding it: the prelapsarian man is the genus, i.e. human nature created as pure of sin and in full possession of its intellectual capabilities among the divine Causes. This idea is based on Gregory of Nyssa's distinction between the creation of man in the image of God, or ideal creation, and what God adds to this ideal creation, and to human nature, because he foresaw man's sin. While in temporal terms, Adam and Eve have been created with a sexed body from the very beginning, yet in ontological terms, the sexuation of the bodies is an accidental addition to the ideal human nature as originally conceived of by God.<sup>20</sup>

According to Eriugena, on an ontological level, the fall is the cause both of the determination of the genera *via* the rupture of the original unity and the process of particularization, and of a decadence of human intellectual capacities. This is why logical operations of reason, guided by the intellect, are needed in order to grasp the original truth of the universal substance. When they are correct, or, when reason is enlightened by the intellect and not deceived by the senses, then these operations are capable of recreating the order of the universe in thought.

It is now clear why, on the one hand, the question of the *ordo verborum*, of the correct articulation of arguments and of the form of exposition, is so relevant in Eriugena's work, and why, on the other hand, the liberal arts are indispensable.

#### *RATIOCINATIONIS VIOLENIA*

The digression on the relationship between reason and the Scriptures begins with the Alumnus's reference to the “violence of the reasoning” which forces the Alumnus to make conclusions seemingly in contradiction to the Scriptures. This reference to the *ratiocinationis violentia* is relevant because it attributes binding necessity to the conclusions reached through the correct use of reason. This necessity is not disavowed, but rather, even more strongly asserted in the Nutritor's answer:

Do not be afraid. For now we must follow reason, which investigates the truth of things and is not overborne (*opprimitur*) by any authority, and is by no means

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<sup>20</sup> See for example, *De hominis opificio*, 16, 184D-185A. On this topic see C. Arruzza, *Les mésaventures de la théodicée* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 263-268.

prevented from revealing publicly and proclaiming the things which it [both] zealously searches out by circuitous reasoning and discovers with much toil.<sup>21</sup>

Responding to the Alumnus's puzzlement, the Nutritor insists that *ratio sequenda est*, that we need to follow reason. Having stated this, the task of the Nutritor is to show that following reason cannot be in contradiction to the Scriptures. The argument articulated by the Nutritor can be summarized as follows: we have two sources of authority, one is reason, whose correct use leads to conclusions which have binding necessity, while the other is the Scriptures, which hide truth in *secretis sedibus*, in secret places. Whenever there is an apparent contradiction between the correct use of reason and the text of the Scriptures, we need to keep in mind first, that God is superessential and because of his absolute transcendence he escapes any possible definition, and second, that true reason teaches us that whereas affirmations about God can be wrong, negations are never wrong.<sup>22</sup> This means that the symbols and names used within the Scriptures need interpretation and should be understood as always metaphorical and never as properly predicated.

Since reason's correct deductions play a fundamental role in demonstrating the necessity of negations, and therefore in granting a correct understanding of the truth hidden under the symbols used by the Scriptures, it is clear that the Scriptures and true reason are not incompatible but rather, complementary. To this claim Eriugena also adds a metaphysical argument stating the common origin of authority and reason:

So do not let any authority frighten you away from the things which the rational deduction from right contemplation teaches you. For true authority does not conflict with right reason, nor right reason with true authority, since there is no doubt that both flow from the same source, the Wisdom of God.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 2869-2873; PL 508D-509A. Sheldon-Williams, 105 (translation partially modified).

<sup>22</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 2938-2939; PL 510C.

<sup>23</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 2973-2977; PL 511A-C. Sheldon Williams, 108.

Authority and reason, then, are two different, but reciprocally consistent manifestations of the same divine wisdom that ontologically undergirds them both. The Nutritor reassures the Alumnus (*nulla itaque auctoritas te terreat*), or rather, invites him to stand firm against any attempt at undermining the conclusions of true reason through an appeal to authority. This is apparently still not sufficient for the Alumnus, for despite being convinced by the master's reasoning, he asks him to provide more supporting evidence by resorting to the authority of the Holy Fathers.<sup>24</sup> This time, however, the Nutritor refuses to comply with his student's request. The *ordo verborum* must correspond to the *ordo rerum*, and since reason is prior to authority in dignity and nature, "that is why reason must be employed first in our present business, and authority afterwards."<sup>25</sup>

The Nutritor's argument for the priority of reason is quite confusing. He begins by saying that what is prior by nature has greater dignity than what is prior in time.<sup>26</sup> Then, referring to Augustine's *De ordine*,<sup>27</sup> he states that we were taught that reason is prior by nature, whereas authority is prior in time. Augustine's passage refers to the correct path for those who want to apply themselves to the study of divine things. In this passage, Augustine argues that in the process of learning we are guided both by authority and by reason, but that whereas authority is prior in time, reason is ontologically prior (*re autem ratio prior est*). The temporal priority of authority refers to the fact that authority is the access door for those who want to learn. In other words, authority is the proper starting point: whereas simple-minded people content themselves with authority, those who want to learn apply reason to authority's teachings, developing their capacity of reasoning beyond authority's nursery in order to grasp the universal principles and what transcends those universal principles.

In Eriugena's passage, however, Augustine's reference is followed by a commentary which overturns Augustine's suggestion while pretending to be a simple explanation:

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<sup>24</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 3042-44; PL 513A.

<sup>25</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 3060-1; PL 513 C. Sheldon-Williams, 110.

<sup>26</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 3045-6; PL 513B.

<sup>27</sup> Augustinus, *De ordine*, II.9. 26, ed. W. M. Green, CCSL 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970).

We have learned that reason is prior by nature, authority in time. For although authority was created together with time, authority did not come into being at the beginning of nature and time, whereas reason arose with nature and time out of the Principle of things.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of Eriugena’s “*enim*”<sup>29</sup> and of my attempts at a charitable reading of this text, I cannot see how Eriugena’s statement follows from Augustine’s text. Indeed, in my view, Eriugena is rather radically shifting the discourse from a consideration related to the correct pedagogical method to one concerning the metaphysical relationship between authority and reason. On a metaphysical level, reason precedes authority also in time, in the sense that while reason comes *together* with the beginning of time and nature, authority follows only later. In this way Augustine’s teaching about authority’s priority in time is overturned, for reason is shown to be prior both by nature *and* in time. And indeed, the conclusion of this reasoning is that the correct *ordo verborum* is the one which resorts first to reason and afterwards to authority. In other words, whereas the Alumnus’s request to provide some evidence coming from the authority of the Holy Fathers is consistent with Augustine’s pedagogical suggestion, the Nutritor’s conclusion is not.

#### THE FREEDOM OF THE COMMENTATOR

After having shown the pattern of Eriugena’s argument for the priority of reason, it is time to deal with his peculiar use of Dionysius’s passage from the *De divinis nominibus*. At line 2891, the Nutritor suggests they resort to the evidence provided by Dionysus in order to solve the apparent contradiction between true reason and the Scriptures, which is puzzling the Alumnus. Yet, a few lines later he suggests the reorganization of Dionysius’s *ordo verborum* in order to make this difficult and somewhat obscure text more understandable.<sup>30</sup> This apparently innocent clarification will prove to be not innocent at all because the reorganization of Dionysius’s text corresponds to a precise argumentative strategy.

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<sup>28</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 3048-3051; PL 513 B. Sheldon-Williams, 110.

<sup>29</sup> “Quamvis enim natura simul cum tempore create sit . . .”

<sup>30</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 2896-2900; PL 509 C.

First, Eriugena starts quoting Dionysius's text leaving out the beginning of the chapter.<sup>31</sup> What he leaves out, however, is not fortuitous, for in those lines Dionysius argues that the truth established about the divine things is not established through the persuasive discourses of human wisdom, but rather through the demonstration of the divine power inspired to the holy authors by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is the divine power, which moves those authors, that allows a supra-rational union with God, i.e. a union which transcends the limits of our narrow intellectual capacities. As in the case of the passage from the *De coelesti hierarchia* discussed above, Dionysius seems to want to oppose the power of divine wisdom, and therefore the truth revealed through the inspiration by divine power, to the limits of profane wisdom. Dionysius's passage is based on 1 Cor. 2:4: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words."

There is, however, no mention of this introductory passage in Eriugena's quotation and subsequent commentary—an omission which might reveal the same difficulty as accepting any opposition between the Scriptures and the liberal arts that we have already found in the passage from the *Expositiones* quoted above.

In the passages quoted by Eriugena, Dionysius is restating the basic principles of negative theology, namely, God's absolute transcendence with regard to being and intellect, and the impossibility of attributing any name to God in a proper way. God's absolute transcendence is the reason why the Scriptures have supreme authority and it is not allowed for human beings to say or think anything about God except what has been revealed to them by the Holy Scriptures. When he opens his commentary on this passage, Eriugena restates the necessity for following the authority of the Scriptures, arguing that this has been sufficiently proved by Dionysius's words.<sup>32</sup> Yet, he adds immediately after:

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<sup>31</sup> The first passage quoted is *De divinis nominibus* I.1, 108, 6-109, 2, ed. B. R. Suchla, in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, I (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990); PG 3:588A2-10. The second is *De divinis nominibus* I.1, 109, 7-110, 6; PG 3:588B1-C8.

<sup>32</sup> *Periphyseon*, I.2931-2; PL 510B: "Haec de sequenda auctoritate solummodo sanctae scripturae in divinis maxime disputationibus sufficient"; translation slightly modified.

Indeed reason (*ratio vero*) is wholly concerned with suggesting, and proving by the most accurate investigations into the truth, that nothing can be said properly about God, since He surpasses every intellect and all sensible and intelligible meaning, Who is better known by not knowing, of Whom ignorance is true knowledge, Who is more truly and faithfully denied in all things that He is affirmed. For whatever negation you make about Him will be a true negation, but not every affirmation you make will be a true affirmation.<sup>33</sup>

Now, in Dionysius's passage there is no mention of the role played by reason or its logical operations in this process. On the contrary, the whole text, and what follows in the subsequent chapters, insists on the constitutive weakness that characterizes human reason, on the necessity of overcoming its narrow boundaries, as well as on the boundaries set by language, by honoring the obscurity of the divine Thearchy through silence. While Eriugena approves of Dionysius's negative theology, he grants a crucial role to human wisdom and its tools by insisting on the divine origin of the liberal arts and of the correct logical reasoning in general. In this way he uses Dionysius's text for a purpose that is significantly different from the purpose for which it was originally written. Indeed, the apophatic approach to God appears, in Eriugena's commentary, as the outcome of the rigorous application of reason and of the liberal arts, which lead us to the overcoming of representation: the mystical contemplation of God is, then, the necessary outcome of an eminently logical process. It is certainly true that Dionysius stresses the necessity of a correct, non-literal understanding of the symbols adopted by the Scriptures in order to name God. However, for Eriugena, the impossibility of naming God more strongly opens a decisive space for human reason and for its proper tools.

The insistence on God's absolute transcendence is the argumentative dispositive adopted by Eriugena in order to arrive at the conclusion that reason is prior to authority and that right reason and right authority cannot be in contradiction because they have the very same source. The impossibility of taking literally the names given to God, attributes, in Eriugena's commentary, the

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<sup>33</sup> *Periphyseon*, I. 2931-2939; PL 510B-C. Sheldon-Williams, 107.

crucial role of negation to reason's operations. This opens a space of radical interpretive freedom in front of the text of the Scriptures, a space which is the proper domain of reason's accurate investigations, for these investigations alone are entitled to discover and expose the hidden truth in the Scriptures. Reason's freedom in this process lies in the fact that the correct conclusions of correct reasoning are binding (*violentia ratiocinationis*), so that in the last instance, reason, while honoring the Scriptures's authority, obeys its own necessity, i.e. the binding necessity of truth. This is the point of the passage at lines 3052-3059, quoted at the beginning of this short commentary. There, the Alumnus concludes that true reason does not require the assent of authority, or, that in the moment in which it grasps the truth, it is self-sufficient and does not require further proof. Authority, on the contrary, requires the assent of reason. Of course, here the Alumnus is talking about the authority of the Holy Fathers, and there is a difference between the authority of the Scriptures and that of the Holy Fathers, for only the former has been shown to be absolutely binding. Nevertheless, the fundamental idea remains that reason is bound by the revealed text of the Scriptures, because this text is *true*, as it has its origin in the very divine wisdom which is the origin of human reason and of the liberal arts. This means that the truth of the Scripture is its immanence to reason and that this truth can be discovered in its hiding places through reason's deductions.

## CONCLUSION

By briefly commenting on this passage from the *Periphyseon*, I have tried to show Eriugena's own freedom in using his sources, in this case, the short quotation from Augustine's *De ordine* and the long passage from Book I of Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus*. While being in agreement with Dionysius's insistence on negative theology, Eriugena uses Dionysius's text in order to reassure the Alumnus that reason and the liberal arts, which reason uses to carry out its investigations, are indeed the prominent source of authority—a conclusion which does not belong to Dionysius' text. On the basis of this conclusion, Eriugena interprets the apophasic climax of negative theology not as an irrationalistic move, but rather as the necessary logical conclusion of correct and rigorous reasoning, in which reason exhausts itself and its representational capacities, and both authority and dialectics are suspended. Finally, by quoting and commenting on this passage from *De divinis*

*nomibus*, Eriugena performatively grants to himself as a commentator the freedom he wants to grant to reason, which lies in the fidelity of reason to its own necessity, the necessity of truth.

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