The Division Of Nature (Periphyseon)

John Scotus Eriugena

Book I

TEACHER: Often I investigate as carefully as I can and reflect that of all things which can either be perceived by the mind or surpass its concentrated efforts the first and highest division is into what has and what does not have being (ea quae sunt, et ea quae non sunt). At such times the general designation of them all occurs to me, physis in Greek and natura in Latin. Or don’t you agree?

STUDENT: Yes, I do. Although I am just entering upon the path of reasoning, I find that it is so.

TEACHER: As we have just said, then, “nature” is a general name for all things, whether or not they have being.

STUDENT: It certainly is, for we can think of nothing at all to which such a designation does not apply.

TEACHER: Since we have agreed that this is a generic designation, I should like you to tell how it is divided into species by differentiae. Or if you prefer, I shall try to establish the divisions first and your task will be to judge them.

STUDENT: Please begin. I am eager and impatient to hear you give a true account about these matters.

[1] TEACHER: The division of nature seems to me to admit of four species through four differentiae. The first is the division into what creates and is not created (creat et non creatur); the second into what is created and creates (creatur et creat); the third, into what is created and does not create (creatur et non creat); the fourth, into what neither creates nor is created (non creat et non creatur). Of these four, two pairs consist of opposites. The third is the opposite of the first, the fourth of the second. But the fourth is among the things which are impossible, and its differentiae is its inability to be. Does such a division seem to you correct or not?

STUDENT: It surely does, but would you please go over it to clarify the opposition of the species just mentioned?

TEACHER: Unless I’m mistaken, you see the opposition of the third species to the first. The first creates and is not created, and its opposite is that which is created and does not create. Likewise the opposition of the second to the fourth, since the second is created and creates; the fourth, which neither creates nor is created, is contrary to it in every respect.

STUDENT: I see that clearly, but I am quite perplexed about the fourth species which you added. As for the other three, I should not venture to have any misgivings; for I judge that the first is understood in the Cause of all things which have and all which do not have being, the second in the primordial causes, the third in those things
known by generation in time and place. I see, therefore, that we must have a more
detailed discussion about the individual species.

TEACHER: You are quite right. But I leave it to your judgment to determine our
order of reasoning; i.e., to decide which species of nature should be discussed first.

STUDENT: I think that it would be proper, before dealing with the others to say what
our insight reveals to us about the first.

[2] TEACHER: All right, but I think that first we must talk briefly about the highest
and main division of all which, as we said, is the division into the things which have
and those which do not have being.

STUDENT: That is a very sound and judicious idea. I see that our reasoning should
begin no other way, not only because that is the first differentia of all things, but also
because it appears, and is, more obscure than the others.

TEACHER: Well, then, the original distinguishing differentia of all things demands
clear-cut methods of interpretation.

[3] Of these, the first seems to be the one by which reason persuades us that all things
subject to corporeal sense or the perception of intelligence can reasonably be said to
have being; but all that, by the excellence of their nature, elude not only the hylion,
i.e., every sense, but also intellect and reason, properly seem not to have being. They
are correctly understood only in God, matter, and the reasons and essences of all
things created by Him. And that is as it should be; for He Himself, who alone truly
has being, is the essence of all things, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, who
says: “The being of all things is Superbeing, Divinity.” Gregory the Theologian too
affirms by many reasons that intellect or reason cannot grasp what any substance or
essence is, whether it belongs to visible or to invisible creation. For just as God
Himself, in Himself, beyond all creation is grasped by no intellect, so also
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[“essentia” or “being”] considered in the innermost recesses of the creation made by
Him and existing in Him, is incomprehensible. Besides, whatever in every creature is
either perceived by corporeal sense or considered by the intellect is simply some
accident, incomprehensible in itself, as has been said, of an essence (accidens
essentiae). By quality, quantity, form, matter, some differentia, place, or time we
know not what it is (quid est), but that it is (quia est). This, then, is the first and
highest method of division of what is said to have and what is said not to have being. I
believe, however, that that method which it seems, in a way, possible to introduce,
namely the one based on privations of states in reference to substances, as sight and
blindness in reference to the eyes, must be utterly rejected. For if something wholly
lacks being and cannot be and does not surpass intellect because of the supernal
height of its existence, I fail to see how it can fit into the divisions of things; unless,
perhaps, one should say that the absences and privations (absentia et privatio) of
things with being are not absolutely nothing (non omnino nihil esse), but that they are
contained by some remarkable natural power of those things of which they are the
privations, absences, or opposites, so that, in a certain way, they have being (ut
quoddam modo sint).
Let us grant that the second method of being and not-being is the one considered in the orders and differentiae (ordinibus atque differentiis consideratur) of created natures. Beginning from the most exalted intellectual power stationed closest to God, it descends to the extreme of rational and irrational creation. To speak more clearly, I mean from the highest angel to the lowest part of a rational or irrational soul, the vital principle of nutrition and growth (for when the soul is considered as a genus, the part of the soul which nurtures the body and causes it to grow is the lowest). Here each order, including the bottommost order of bodies with which all division is terminated, can be said in a remarkable way to have and not to have being. What is stated affirmatively of the lower is stated negatively of the higher. Likewise what is stated negatively of the lower is stated affirmatively of the higher. In the same way, what is stated affirmatively of the higher is stated negatively of the lower; and what is stated negatively of the higher will be stated affirmatively of the lower. What is stated affirmatively of a man, that he is still mortal, is stated negatively of an angel. What is stated negatively of a man is stated affirmatively of an angel, and vice versa. For example, if a man is a rational, mortal, visible animal (animal rationale, mortale, risibile), an angel is surely not a rational, mortal, visible animal. Similarly, if an angel is an essential motion of the intellect focusing on God and the causes of things, surely man is not an essential motion of the intellect focusing on God and the causes of things. The same rule can be observed in all celestial essences until one reaches the highest order of all which is terminated above by the Supreme Negation. Its negative definition affirms that no creature is higher than It. There are three orders called homotageis (“of equal rank”). The first of these consists of Cherubim, Seraphim, and Thrones; the second of Virtues, Powers, and Dominations; the third of Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. In descending order, the lowest group of bodies merely negates or affirms what is higher than itself because it has nothing beneath itself to take away or add since it is preceded by all higher orders and does not precede anything lower than itself. Similarly for this reason, every order of rational and intellectual creature is said to have and not to have being. It has being insofar as it is known by higher creatures or by itself; it lacks being insofar as it does not allow itself to be comprehended by its inferiors.

The third method is fittingly observed in the things with which the fullness of this visible world (hujus mundi visibilis plenitudo) is made complete, and in their prior causes in the innermost recesses of nature (in secretissimis naturae sinibus). For whatever of the causes themselves is known by generation in time and place in formed matter is said, by human convention, to have being. Whatever, on the other hand, is still contained within the recesses of nature and does not appear in formed matter or in place, time, or the other accidents, is said, by the same human convention, not to have being. Clear examples of this kind abound, particularly in human nature. For God formed all men together in that single first man (primo atque uno) whom He made in His own image, but He did not bring them forth at the same time into this visible world. Rather, at set times and places in a sequence known to Himself He brings into visible essence the nature which He had formed together. Thus those who now visibly appear in the world and who have appeared are said to have being. Those who still lie hidden, but are destined to be, are said not to have being. This is the difference between the first and third methods. The first is seen generally in all things made once and together in their causes and effects. The third is seen specifically in the things which partly still lie hidden in their causes and partly are revealed in their effects; and of these the fabric of this world is properly woven.
To this method belongs the reason which considers the power of seeds (virtutem seminum considerat), whether in animals, trees, or grasses. The power of the seeds, while it lies still in the secret recesses of nature, is said not to have being because it does not yet appear. Once it has appeared, however, in the birth and growth of animals, flowers, or the fruits of trees and grasses, it is said to be.

[6] The fourth method, according to the plausible theory of philosophers, states that only those things grasped by the intellect alone (solo intellectu) truly have being; that whatever things are varied, collected, or dissolved through generation, by the expansion or contraction of matter, and by local and temporal motions—e.g., all bodies, which can be born and destroyed (nasci et corrumpi)—are truly said not to have being.

[7] The fifth method is the one which reason observes only in human nature. When through sin (peccando) it abandoned the dignity of the divine image (divinae imaginis dignitatem) in which it had properly subsisted, it deservedly lost its being and therefore is said not to have being. When it is restored by the grace of God’s only-begotten Son to the original condition of its substance in which it was created in God’s image, it begins to have being and to be alive in Him who was created in God’s image. It is evidently to this method that the following statement of the Apostle relates: “And He calls the things which have no being, just as those which do.” [Romans 4:17] That is, God the Father calls those lost in the first man and fallen to a kind of substancelessness to have being through faith in His Son like those already reborn in Christ. This method may also be understood, however as relating to those whom God daily calls from the hidden recesses of nature, in which they are thought not to have being, into visible appearance in form, matter, and the other things in which the hidden can appear. Perhaps a keener reason can discover something besides these methods (praeter hos modos), but I think that enough has been said about these matters for the present, unless you disagree.

STUDENT: Quite enough....