CHAPTER TWO
ERIUGENA AND HIS FOLLOWERS

The problem of the eternity of the world seems to have been largely forgotten during the formative period of Latin Christianity from the seventh to the ninth centuries. The traditional Christian version of the world's beginning was frequently asserted, but the question was not argued, nor was there any attempt to reconcile Genesis with the philosophers. When the question was revived by John Scotus Eriugena in the mid-ninth century, it was considered in a form quite different from the one it had taken among the Latin Fathers.

Eriugena devoted much of book 3 of his Periphyseon to a discussion of how things could be both eternal and made. Augustine had been concerned to show that the world had an absolute beginning, along with time, contrary to those philosophers who had held that it was without a beginning. Eriugena was deeply influenced by Augustine, as well as Boethius and Calcidius, but his knowledge of the Greek Fathers Gregory of Nyssa, ps.-Dionysius, and Maximus led him to consider the question from a different point of view.¹ He did not deny that the present state of the universe had a beginning, but he insisted that there was nevertheless a sense in which the world was eternal, namely in its eternal causes, so that the world could rightly be considered to be both eternal and to be made from absolutely nothing. He was fully aware that this was a difficult and apparently contradictory opinion, and he employed the same rhetorical strategy that Augustine had used in his Confessions, puzzling over seemingly insuperable obstacles, confessing and rejecting former errors, gathering his resources for a final assault, and finally achieving his goal.

There are four main elements in Eriugena's lengthy, redundant, and tentative argument. First and most important is his assertion that "[w]e conclude about the primordial causes of all things that they were made by the Father eternally, just once and all at once in his inborn Word, i.e.,

¹ On Eriugena's concept of time, see H. Bett, Johannes Scotus Eriugena: A Study in Medieval Philosophy (Cambridge, Eng., 1925), pp. 36-41; and M. Cappuyns, "Le plus ancien commentaire des Opuscula Sacra et son origine," RTAM 3 (1931) 259 and Jean Scot Erigène, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensée (Louvain, 1933), 344-47.
his Wisdom." But these are not coeternal with him, since a cause precedes its effect, just as the understanding of an artisan precedes the understanding of his art. "The art itself precedes all things which subsist in it, through it, and by it, for it is their cause. From this it is established that all things are eternal in the Wisdom of the Father, but not coeternal with him. ... Therefore it is clear that the universe of creatures is eternal in the Word of God." The student then illustrates this by the examples of all numbers subsisting causally in the simplicity of the monad and all radii subsisting causally in the simplicity of the center, "and although they flow forth from them in many forms, nevertheless they do not cease to be in them according to a uniform eternal law [ratio] and unchangeable state."4

His second point is to reconcile the simplicity of God with his manifold causality. "Whatever is substantially in God the Word," he says, since it is not anything besides the Word itself, is necessarily eternal. And for this reason, it is concluded that both the multiple and the most principal reason of the entire established universe is the very Word itself. ... Therefore, since the Son of God is the Word and Reason and Cause, it is not incongruous that the Reason and Cause, the simple and in itself infinitely multiple creator of the established universe, is the Word of God. And thus we come back to the assertion that the Word of God is simple, and in itself the infinitely manifold creator of the established universe, and the Reason and the Cause -- simple, because the universe of all things is one undivided and inseparable thing in him, ... manifold, since it is diffused through all things to infinity, and this diffusion itself is the subsistence of all things.5

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2 Periphyseon 3, 5 (PL 122, 635): "Confectum est enim inter nos de primordialibus rerum omnium causis, quae a Patre in verbo suo ingenti, hoc est, in sua sapientia et simul et semel sunt aeternaliter facta."

3 Ibid. 3, 5-7 (635-39): "Ipsa vero ars praecedit omnia, quae in ea, et per eam, et ab ea subsistunt; eorum namque causa est. Hinc conficitur, in Patris sapientia omnium aeterna esse, non tamen ei coaeaterna. ... Totius ergo creaturae universitatem aeternam esse in Verbo Dei manifestum est."

4 Ibid. 3, 8 (639-40): "Et dum ab eis multipliciter profluent, uniformi tamen ratione aeterno atque incommutabili statu in eis esse non desinunt."

5 Ibid. 3, 9 (642): "[Q]uinam non alius praeter ipsum Verbum est, aeternum esse necesse est. Ac per hoc conficitur, et ipsum Verbum, et multiplicem totius universitatis conditae principalissimamque rationem id ipsum esse. ... Quoniam igitur Dei Filiius et verbum, et ratio, et causa est, non incongruum dicere, simplex et in se infinite multiplex creatrix universitatis conditae ratio et causa Dei Verbum est. Ac sic recurreret, Dei verbum est simplex, et in se infinite multiplex creatrix universitatis conditae, et ratio, et causa. Simplex quidem, quia rerum omnium universitas in ipso unum individuum et inseparabile est. ... Multiplex vero non inmerito intelligitur esse, quoniam per omnia in