The Concept of Natura in John Scottus Eriugena
(De divisione naturae Book I)

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The first book of John Scottus Eriugena's great philosophical dialogue, the De divisione naturae, begins as follows:

"Master. As I frequently ponder and . . . carefully investigate the fact that the first and fundamental division of all things which either can be grasped by the mind or lie beyond its grasp is into those that are and those that are not, there comes to mind as a general term for them all what in Greek is called φύσις and in Latin Natura. Or do you think otherwise?

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

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

P. It is. For nothing at all can come into our thought that would not fall under this term." ¹

The concept of natura introduced here will strike the reader as unusual and the emphatic presentation given it at the very beginning of the De divisione naturae would suggest that it is fundamental to the inquiry conducted by the Master and the Pupil in the remainder of the

¹ De divisione naturae I, 1, Migne, Patrologia latina CXXII, 441A; translation by I. P. Sheldon-Williams Johannis Scotti Eriugenae Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae) I, Dublin 1968, p. 36. The De divisione naturae, henceforth DDN (Periphyseon is the correct title of the work, but I follow the common usage here in referring to the DDN), will be cited by reference to column numbers in Migne, PL. The Latin text as edited by Sheldon-Williams reads as follows:

Nvtritor. Saepe mihi cogitanti diligentiusque quantum uires suppetunt inquirenti rerum omnium quae uel animo percipi possunt uel intentionem eius superant primam summamque divisionem esse in ea quae sunt et in ea quae non sunt horum omnium generale uocabulum occurrit quod graece ΦΥΣΙΣ, latine uero natura vocitatur. An tibi aliter uidetur?

Alvmnvs. Immo consentio. Nam et ego dum ratiocinandi uiam ingredior haec ita fieri reperio.

N. Est igitur natura generale nomen, ut diximus, omnium quae sunt et quae non sunt?

A. Est quidem. Nihil enim in uniuerso cogitationibus nostris potest occurrere quod tali uocabulo ualeat carere.

It might have been better to translate animo percipi by "perceived by the mind" (taking "perception" in the broad sense to include both sense-perception and intellection; cf. infra, pp. 132; 135) but Sheldon-Williams' "grasped by the mind" will be retained in the following. All translations from DDN I in this article are those of Sheldon-Williams (with slight modifications).
work. However, the meaning of this concept of natura has not yet been adequately determined, nor has its bearing on the work as a whole been made clear. In his excellent study of Eriugena, Cappuyns indeed claims that the “conception tant vantée de la φύσις” is almost completely forgotten after the first lines of the work.\(^2\)

In this article I shall attempt (I) to isolate as far as possible what Eriugena means by his concept of natura, by reviewing both the sources he was inspired by and his use of these sources in the elaboration of this concept.\(^3\) I shall then seek (II) to determine the bearing of this concept on the general inquiry conducted in the De divisione naturae by examining its relationship to conceptions presented immediately after it, i.e. the well-known fourfold division of nature and the fivefold classification of modes of being and non-being. Finally (III), the philosophical implications of Eriugena’s conception of a study of natura (physiologia) will be discussed briefly insofar as this study is suggestive of an unusual metaphysical project.

I

Although natura is a multiplex nomen, a word used in many different ways and which can take on many different meanings,\(^4\) the Master’s use of natura to cover all things grasped by the mind or transcending its grasp nevertheless seems to go beyond the wide range of meanings

\(^2\) M. Cappuyns, Jean Scot Erigène, Louvain-Paris 1933, repr. Bruxelles 1969, p. 311; R. Roques, Remarques sur la signification de Jean Scot Erigène, in: Divinitas, XI (1967) = Miscellanea André Combes, p. 253 finds that the distinction between being and non-being (which will be seen to be fundamental to Eriugena’s concept of natura) constituted a “problématique ... disparate” in relation to which Eriugena did not develop his system, preferring to it the fourfold division of nature. Problems involving not only the initial concept of natura but also other parts of Book I of the DDN and their unclear bearing on the rest of the work appear to have driven Sheldon-Williams to supposing that the DDN was, in its first stage of composition, “an essay in dialectic, perhaps abandoned before completion ... evidence of [this primitive version] may be seen in Book I of the final version” (op. cit., p. 5). Such a hypothesis need not however be adopted if Eriugena’s ideas in Book I and in the rest of the DDN can be shown to be related and to constitute an integral project.

\(^3\) Cf. Roques, art. cit., p. 247 n. 8: “L’inventaire de toutes ces sources [of Eriugena’s doctrine], l’évaluation de leurs dosages, de leurs amalgames et de leurs utilisations devraient éclairer beaucoup la signification de l’entreprise érigénienne.”

\(^4\) To paraphrase Gilbert of Poitiers, who quotes Cicero De inventione I, 24, 34 on the difficulty of defining natura (Commentary on Boethius’ Contra Eutychen et Nestorium, ed. N. Häring, The Commentaries on Boethius by Gilbert of Poitiers, Toronto 1966, pp. 242-3).