To the extent that the "history of ideas" in the narrow sense— that is, the study of tangible "sources and influences" as a way of grasping the meaning or assessing the importance of a given work— prevails in a modern approach to John Scot Eriugena, the ninth-century translator, poet and philosopher, his Peripheyseon can only remain ambiguous, and may indeed be easily consigned to a place of minor importance. The Peripheyseon may not have often read or closely followed by many theologians of the centuries to follow. Nor, when it was read, do we know to what extent it might have been perceived as a performance of great virtuosity in its own right. Eriugena was an early translator and importer of Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor into the language and hegemonic discourse(s) of Latin theology, hence, a major mediator of ideas and human values that would gain much acceptance in later medieval and renaissance culture. However, since Eriugena used much of what he translated in the Peripheyseon, the directness of his own contributions to later expressions of those same ideas and values is difficult to measure. In modern times, how many people in our century have had enough time and enough Latin to read the work as a whole? And for those who, like me, have relied on the recent Sheldon-Williams/O'Meara translation to read the whole Peripheyseon, what semantic and rhetorical dimensions of the Peripheyseon have been obscured?

In this articulate and readable book, Williamien Otten recognizes from the outset the necessity of fully grasping the plan of the Peripheyseon as a dynamic performance before attempting to interpret the meanings of this or that local passage. In this kind of work, ideas that unfold on a page do not have a simple face value— they co-signify as parts of a dynamic system. Williamien Otten announces her intentions thus (p. 1): "Of Eriugena's works the Peripheyseon, the magnum opus of this ninth century Irish philosopher and theologian, will be the centre of my attention. While analyzing the Peripheyseon, interpreters of Eriugena's philosophy have had to stretch their imagination to the utmost to include its five books in one philosophical frame of reference, and have often failed. Therefore I have taken my starting-point in the Peripheyseon's unbroken literary structure, thereby trying to give an analysis of the author's overall ideas. In doing so, I have been led to choose one central theme, namely the study of Eriugena's anthropology...."

What better "theme" than that of anthropology to explore the poetic of a masterpiece that dares to negotiate the radical tensions between the serene humanism of Byzantine Christian Platonism and the more austere vision of human alienation and sin inherent to the Augustinian West?

We are lead quickly to see, however, that Eriugena's anthropology is certainly no mere "theme," nor, in her terms, a "direct topic of discussion" (1). Indeed, "the position of man as the leading character in the vast universe Eriugena evokes was only gradually revealed...[and] put a definite stop to any distinction between man as the object and man as the subject of Eriugena's thought, making him instead the overall centre of the Peripheyseon's universe. With this unifying view of man as the central character in the Peripheyseon's literary structure, I think we can legitimately regard the work as a coherent exposition of ideas" (2). Preferring, thus, to analyze the Peripheyseon on its own terms, Otten forthrightly refuses to "explain his ideas as predominantly based on outside influences. I hold that as a historical achievement the Peripheyseonis fundamentally original to its ninth-century author" (2). Some readers (and I am one of them) might tend to see the success of that historical achievement embodied in his artful strategies for dialectically engaging the major ideas of, say, Dionysius the Pseud-Areopagite or Maximus the Confessor with those of Augustine and Gregory. I believe that Eriugena was proud of those strategies. However, I would also agree with Otten that the discursive operations of structuration and articulation that give rise to the Peripheyseon are indeed peculiar and original. (They are difficult to expose— all the more, I might add, in a book review.) However, could one not make similar claims about Augustine's City of God and his De Trinitate (not to speak of his Confessions)? It is difficult believe that Eriugena himself did not expect his readers consciously to weigh the boldness and drama of his own argumentation against the gravity and prestige of his discordant forebears, Eastern and Western.

If "anthropology" cannot easily be bracketed in Eriugena's text, so too his concept of natura is no less containable: "whatever rambling speculations we will come across, we will always have to take into account that in the Peripheyseon the description of man ultimately presupposes his position within the given context of natura"(3).

Already in her introduction we see that Otten's own thinking and writing resonate with certain broader discursive features of Eriugenaian thought. I find the following sentences stirring: "However, despite the gigantic scope of nature, it appears that the human mind, while contained by it like the rest of the world including God, serves as its leading principle. After all, natura is the sum total of all that is and that is not, whereby the fundamental difference between being and non-being is based solely on the comprehensive capacities of the human mind. This daring cosmology pivoting on human insight is generally seen as one of the most remarkable and innovative feats of the Peripheyseon"(4).

Although my own competence in questions of Eriugena's use of sources is limited (especially in the case of of works like Maximus's Ambigua, which seem never to have been translated into any modern language!), I am not wholly at ease with some of Otten's rather
casual laying out of categories— especially that of "the age of the Fathers," Otten writes, "For Eriugena the central problem is not why God brought evil into this world, but rather why it is that man lacks the means to execute his creative potential as the image of God in a near-divine attempt to restore the world to its original beauty. It is this shift of perspective that seems to distinguish Eriugena from his patristic predecessors" (5). From all of his patristic predecessors? From some (like Augustine) much more than from others (like Maximus?). Although Otten tends to play down the the underlying tensions between Eriugena’s Eastern and Western patristic sources, these tensions cannot fail to surface later in her book, especially when she discusses the nature and role of sin in salvation history.

Otten’s prose is dense and competent, and she is good at both generating extended arguments and summarizing them as she takes a new step forward. She keeps to a uniform pacing of ideas as she as she progresses through the body of her text. For these reasons, I have found it difficult in what follows to excerpt ideas from her text and to summarize and simplify her complex arguments as they unfold in chapters of unwieldy length. I should perhaps add that in this review I shall adhere to Otten’s use of the word "man" to imply (as does the Latin homo) humanity, and not maleness as gender.

Chapter 1 stresses to what extent Eriugena’s concept of nature is determined by the rational powers of the human mind itself as it ponders nature. If Eriugena posits the first division of nature into things that are and that are not, then his concept of nature derives not from what is intrinsic to nature, but from the rational powers of the soul that makes such discernments in the first place. If follows that the power of God’s non-being to elude human thought is a sign of God’s excellence and of the superiority of his non-being to being. "The divine excellence discloses a surplus of being, the overflowing profusion of which allows for and guarantees the existence of all other forms of being" (11). Otten continues by showing how the four subsequent modes by which the mind interprets the divisions of nature are subordinate to and implicated in the first. However, the structure of rational thought does not by itself determine the structure of nature, but is determined, in its capacities to act, by a divine plan rooted in God: "Thus we can in fact assemble all four modes of nature into an array of consecutive stages which at root expresses but a single development, namely that through which God unfolds himself in his creation" (38). Only at the last phase of that plan, when all things reach the return to God to which they aspire—the return to natura non creans et non creata—are the powers of division and analysis that characterize human rationality exhausted and fulfilled, that is, "when all of creation will have been led back to God in such a manner that there is not distinction whatsoever separating cause and effect" (38).

Chapter 2 opens with a discussion of the congruence of modes of being and with modes of thought, esse with apprehendi. Otten evokes the dynamism that links them as complementary processes comprising the divine plan. If being is that which can be understood, "by consciously integrating non-being into natura as its object of investigation, reason allows the totality of nature actually to stretch into infinity. Eriugena can be seen to employ the predicate of non esse for God as well as for the reasons and essences of created being, since they all transcend the grasp of the human mind" (43). However, it is still through negation that Eriugena "secures the unreachableness of God lest he should be compromised by condescending to the level of creation" (47). Otten then gives a clear and succinct sketch of Eriugena’s sense of the complementarity of the aphophatic and kataphatic (i.e., negative and affirmative ways) in theology. Since readers familiar with Dionysius are necessarily affected by the preponderance of the negative way in what survives of his corpus, it is satisfying to see Eriugena (after Maximus) restoring some kind of proportion to the two theological modes and to their discourses, even though in the end, all mystical understanding must ultimately remain negative.

However, as is the case with Dionysius, Eriugena cannot fail to encounter the potential of failure in the negative way. When vacuity of meaning becomes the only content of predication, language loses its power of expression. "It is therefore quite illustrative that in his excursus on the divine nihil in Book III of the Periphyseon Eriugena frequently returns to the termsuperroressials and its variants, and can also be found occasionally to speak in terms of God’s ‘supernatural’ state..." (60). The need for such a tactic was limited, though, by Eriugena’s transition to a new set of metaphors which allowed the divine nature positively to manifest itself in human language, yet remain unconstrained by it. Otten continues in this chapter to expose a shift in Eriugena both toward the theophanic aspects of God’s divinity, and toward nature itself as being essentially theophanic.

In Chapter 3, Otten restates Eriugena’s inevitable insistence upon the negative way as the final way of knowing, hence upon the shortcomings of created language. But she does so only to bring more care to evoking the possibilities and limits of Eriugena’s concepts of theophany and, indeed, of the dynamism of nature itself as theophanic and leading toward the eschatological union of creation with the divine (87). Otten describes how the principles of procession and return which relate the creation to the creator are matched by the rational powers of dialectics as a "theophanic art" (91). Otten then addresses the relationship between dialectics and that other important theophanic power, Scripture, which is knowable not only in letter but, just as importantly, through allegory. Not only are the human mind and nature ordained to each other, but "for its effective unfolding universal nature appears to rely ultimately on the integrity of human nature.... Forming in itself but a small section of natura non creans et creata, human nature in fact appears to be in charge of the entire operation of division and analysis, which in its concrete shape as the unique sequence of procession and reeditus will lead up to the eschatological reunion of God and creation" (113). Man must pave the way for the whole created world.

In Chapter 4, a bit merciless in length (71 pp), Otten moves the discussion away from "the broad contours of the Eriugenian universe" to deepen our understanding of the role of man in that universe, that is, "how the universe, by which is indicated the complete span of its dialectical development, is essentially tailored to the scope of man’s rational capacities" (118). "Man stands at the crossroads of nature’s development, as procession is about to turn effectively into its dialectical countermovement of reeditus. If man was created with such a place in natura, how is this complicated by the fact of his sinful nature? Given the dialectical structure of nature, of man’s mind, and of Eriugena’s own thought, sin comes to play a positive role in the unfolding of nature: “In this manner the problem of sin can be seen to function as a kind of catalyst for natura’s eschatological apotheosis in the Periphyseon. One may indeed wonder what, in the imaginary case of an eternally impeccable human nature, would have stopped the universe from going around in endless circular repetitions” (123). In other words, sin is part of the temporal economy of salvation— of a divine plan of salvation that is also a human history. Given the correspondences between nature and the mind of man, there is also an isomorphism in their dialectical trajectories: “Man must pass
through his own stages of divisio and analysis or, for that matter, processio and reditus, which run side by side with those according to
which Eriugena has arranged natura. In man's continuous development, the breach caused by sin forms the only fixed point, since it
seems to indicate where the movement of his return should start. Initiating the return of man, human sin thus begins the return of the
complete universe. So we develop a picture in which man and the universe form two concentric circles, so to speak, which act as two
interdependent constellations pivoting around the axis of human sin” (124).

Otten begins her tracing of man's itinerary in God's plan by returning to Eriugena's treatment of man's dual role as an animal among
other animals and as and a being made in God's image. The last object of the divine creation, man was created as a rational animal.
"Sin merely occurred when man's rational character surrendered to irrational passions, for which it received proper punishment" (140).
At this point, the procession of being in the creation has ended, and man has become an object of natura creatae et non creatae.

Otten is not concerned to explain how Eriugena might be at great pains, in his discussions of the creation of man and of sin, to mediate
carefully between his affinities for Eastern humanism and the burden of Augustinianism. Like Augustine, Eriugena discriminates
between man's character as image of God and the bodily man cleaved into two sexes, who procreates bestially, who must eat and
drink, etc. Allegorically, Paradise may be identified with human nature, with man equated with the mind, and woman the senses. With
sin, man falls from intellect into the senses, where he is dominated by carnal concupiscence and delight (171). Such grounds are
common to both traditions. However, Eriugena might be undertaken here with Augustine's De Genesi ad litteram as reference point.) The return to God can occur only when man regains his previous unity, as well as his spiritual body. This can occur thanks to divine intervention, with the birth of Christ.
The resurrection of Christ will become the basis for humanity's return to God. Paradise, then, is identified with the perfection of human
nature. And man, because he is made in God's image, can both know himself in his circumcision, and not know himself because he is
uncircumscribed. His not-knowing is a positive condition of own theophaic nature, and "In Christ man's nature has taken on the
concrete form of a limitless capacity of knowing. In this manner Eriugena inaugurates a new beginning for mankind, in which the
disastrous effects of sin are overcome not so much by the external infusion of grace but by an internal remedy in the form of intellectual
insight" (187). This implies man's coming to a full understanding of his own powers as a rational creature.

In Chapter 5, "Back to God. The Final Reditus of Man and Nature," Otten recapitulates her trajectory of earlier chapters. Because the
ideas involved are grandiose and majestic, I welcomed the repetition as she shows once again, and in considerable detail, how
exegesis, allegory, analogy and dialectical argumentation are carefully interwoven by Eriugena to evoke the psychological and
ontological conditions under which man—and, through man, the whole of nature—may return to God. Though sin eclipsed the divine
powers of rationality in humanity, the expulsion man from Paradise was also the beginning of the return to God (197), and the labor of
woman in childbirth is, allegorically, the difficulty of ratiocination in the fallen world (199). At the return to God, humanity will enjoy
immediate perception of things. However, in all of modes of human understanding, rationality remains a common denominator—indeed,
the way and the truth of man's perfection as a natural image of God.

However, man is no mere object of the creation: ontologically, he is among the primordial causes, which is to say that he is nothing less
than a notion in the divine mind. "Made in the image of God, man is not only an eternal idea in the divine mind, but he also contains in
his own mind all the images and notions of created things” (198). Intelligibility and ontology are inseparable, and for man to investigate
nature properly is to fulfill its existence. If the very necessity of understanding is a consequence of sin (201), on the other side of the
question, ignorance is also the potential for knowledge and the affirmation of free will as the cause for achieving knowledge. What is
more, not just knowledge, but self-knowledge—that is to say, man's understanding of himself as being made in God's image—"must
give direction to Eriugena's infinite universe as a whole, because it foreshadows the future reditus (206). "It is in man's thinking that we
can trace the movement of processio and reditus as the universe's line of direction and in the end it is to man's speculation on the self
that we are led to find that movement's roots” (207). Man's being and his understanding are interchangeable and identical, and man's
intelligence gives him the absolute certainty of his being (209). Even though that intelligence was marred by sin, an appetitus beatitudinis
endured in the human soul in spite of sin (210). Otten very briefly dissociates the Eriugenian cogito from the Cartesian interpretation of it
(210), but I wish that distinction had been developed, if only from a pedagogical point of view: to do so would give us a much clearer
guidepost for situating our own post-Cartesian suppositions in a more lucid historical perspective. If, for Eriugena, the return of of the
creation leads to oneness with God, that return turns entirely on the mind of man, which contains all things—indeed, the creation is all
but superfluous. However, humans are not solitary beings, and the dialogue between Master and Student that comprises the text of the
Periphyseon is a paradigm of how man fulfills the conditions of his being and his understanding. As Eriugena's Master puts it to the
Student, "when we engage in a discussion, we are made in each other. For when I understand what you understand, I am made in your
understanding, and in an inexpressible way, I am created in you” (212). How far we are from the Augustine and disciple of the De
catechizandis rudibus who languish in horror at their own eloquence and in the incommunicability of thought in speech!

So too, Eriugena's daring conflation of theoethy and theosis, or defication (217), is a gesture that must have shocked the Augustinians
in his midst— even though such suppositions were strongly anchored in his Greek-speaking Platonic philosophical and Orthodox
forebears. The twin processes of theoethy and defication occur in three phases, and Otten summarizes these in the following terms: "...the
first phase involves the transition of the mind, which is human nature in its purest form (i.e. its capacity as bearer of the divine
image), to a state of total comprehension of the things that are below God. The following stage is the transition from scientia to sapientia,
that is the contemplation of the intimate truth, albeit on the condition that it will indeed be granted to created nature. The final stage,
which pertains only to the purest of minds, is when the human mind, like the sun, will appear to set (occasus) in God himself; it is the
stage where man is confronted with the darkness of the inaccessible light. But the night will then become illuminated as if it were day” (218).
Though Otten is not concerned with such questions, I am struck by the coherence of an epistemological agenda that stretches
back to Plato's Republic and resonates afresh here in the Latin West. Conspicuously absent here is the Augustinian insistence upon
grace as the only condition of illumination.
On the other hand, what lacks in the Periphyseon, from the Dionysian perspective, is Eriugena's apparent reluctance to exalt erotic desire as a sacred impulse in the human soul. When I first read the Periphyseon (in translation), and while I read Otten's book, I only one thinker and writer in the West came to mind whose anthropology matches his, and that is Dante. However much Dante scholars themselves are wary of identifying the Periphyseon as a direct model for Dante's own anthropology as it matured in the Paradiso, I suspect that Eriugena's writing was an important part of Dante's later anthropological vision.

To conclude, Otten has given us a tenacious and lucid reading of the Periphyseon. She allows the grandeur of Eriugena's humanism speak for itself. The strength of her book is its assiduity in following the inner thread of Eriugena's discourse, showing, as she progresses, what choices Eriugena must have made in order to resolve many inherited conflicts and contradictions. Otten has grasped the poetics of the Periphyseon—by which, I mean the internal laws of its discursive production—in a way that students of "literature" will not fail to admire. The Periphyseon has, indeed, a boldness and adventuresomeness much more characteristic of epic poetry than of theology. Inevitably, Otten's refusal to be distracted by larger cultural issues at work in the Periphyseon is both a strength and a limitation of her book. What does not come across in her book is an appreciation of the Periphyseon's status as a major cultural event, one that synthesizes traditions that historically have remained at odds with each other even to the present day. This kind of range is best exemplified in the distinguished and lucid scholarship of Stephen Gersh, which Otten knows but does not exploit.

Nor does Otten involve herself closely with Eriugena's rhetoric. As is the case with all of Eriugena's major sources, both Eastern and Western, his theology is a highly rhetorical one, and at times Eriugena's rhetorical virtuosity is not only stunning, but integral to the expression of his negative theology. So too, Otten shuns examining the lexical reverberations of Eriugena's Latin, with respect to his Hebrew, Greek and Latin forebears. Almost all of the Latin quotations to which Otten refers are buried in an appendix to her book. However, let us not criticize a good book for what it does not do; rather, let us be grateful for its success in achieving its purpose—in this instance, an exalted one.

The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena | Willemien Otten | download | B–OK. Download books for free. Find books. Otten emphasizes Eriugena's account of human nature as emphasizing the rationality of the structure of the cosmos. She contends that patristic anthropology in general is concerned with the examination of the sinful state of human nature whereas Eriugena sought rather to explain why humans have not achieved their destiny to be imagines Dei. Human nature for Eriugena is not only the pinnacle of all created nature but the very medium, as it were, through which the exitus and reditus of universal nature (which includes the divine nature) is carried out.