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“Nothingness exists”.

Why Fredegisus’ argument is not valid. Starting from the Romanian translation of the *Letter on the Being of Nothing and Darkness*

(Fredegisus, *Despre substanța nimicului și a întunericii*,
Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2015, 240 p.)

The Letter of Deacon Fredegisus (Fridugisus, Fredegisi, Fredegair; a respected exegete believes that, in Old English, the name might have been Friþugisi), represents, without doubt, a very interesting moment in the reflection on the status of the term “*nihil / nihilum*”. The Romanian translation of this difficult work is worth being saluted.

Fredegisus was the disciple of Alcuin of York, who calls him “*puer*” in a letter. Fredegisus followed his master to Schola palatina in France, during the rule of Charles the Great (Charlemagne). He instructed one of the emperor’s sisters, Gisla, and, then, one of his daughters, Rotruda. Later he became a deacon, then an archdeacon (in year 800, when he also wrote the epistle), and, finally, abbot of the monastery Saint-Martin of Tours. After the death of Charles the Great, Louis the Pious appoints him *chancellor* (cancellarius) of the empire. He will maintain this position until 832. He dies on the 10th of August 833 / 834.

In June 801, Charles the Great sends a letter to the Irish monk Dungal. The curt imperial epistle also includes Fredegisus’ treaty on nothing and darkness. The emperor asks Dungal for an opinion concerning Fredegisus’ affirmations. Unfortunately, Dungal’s answer was not preserved. However, the fact that Fredegisus’ reflections were an echo of the discussions on the status of negative terms held among the scholars of Schola palatina is obvious. Moreover, his reflections were not only an echo, but also an impulse for future debates.

The problem of the negative terms and, especially, the problem of the undefined names are old. Before Fredegisus, Boethius, Augustine and Alcuin, among others, had also addressed it. In *De magistro*, Saint Augustine remarks that there are numerous terms/signs without referents (and even meaning). As examples, he mentions conjunctions and prepositions, and also refers to the name “nothing”. According to Augustine, the term “nothing” does not refer to a reality outside the mind, but it represents a “mental disposition”, *affectio animi*. It is a similar situation for the term

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“shadows/darkness”. Saint Augustine says that “whoever examines attentively what shadow is, will find nothing but the absence of light”. Nothing and shadows are *privations* (as blindness or ignorance is).

Alcuin does not judge the problem very differently. In *Disputatio Pippini*, a funny collection of enigmas, Alcuin believes that “nothing” only has a nominal existence. It would be false to say that the noun “nothing” names something real, and actual. Nothing exists and, in the same time, it does not. As a name, it exists; as a reality, it does not. However, after Fredegisus’ death, Ratramnus of Corbie strongly emphasizes the fact that the sentence “nothing is something” is a contradiction, and, as any contradiction, it is beyond human comprehension. In other words, the terms “nothing” and “something” cannot stay together.

The most impressive thing about Fredegisus’ epistle is its dialectic structure. The author avoids being expositive. He doesn’t want to present a summary of previous opinions on “nothing”. Using his own metaphor, Fredegisus finds a tangled knot and wants to disentangle it. He aims to solve a problem that intrigued scholars before him. And, to do so, he builds an argument. Only when he arrives to something that goes beyond the capacities of the human mind, he appeals to the authority of the Church, as he does when he says that nothing refers to something big, shiny and out of the ordinary: “*nihil magnum quiddam ac praeclarum est*”.

One may bring the following objection: Fredegisus believes that the term “nothing” is a *nomen finitum*. He seems to ignore the etymological analysis proposed by Isidore of Seville in Book X of the *Etymologiae*. The bishop Isidore takes one of Varro’s affirmations and shows that the noun “*nihilum*” comes from “*nil*” (non) and “*hilum*” (part, fragment). Of course, the Latin term “*nihil*” does not express negation as strong as the English “no-thing”, or as the Romanian “*ne-mica*” (no fragment). In my opinion, the word “*nihil*” is, without doubt, *vox significativa*, as Fredegisus points out, therefore it arouses meaning in the mind of those who hear or read it, but it is not, in any way, a *nomen finitum*. Aristotle would have most probably characterized it as an *onoma aoriston*, *nomen infinitum* in Boethius’ translation. Meaning does not imply existence. I don’t believe that Fredegisus ignored these venerable contributions. He just needed the opposite idea (“*nihil*” as *nomen finitum*), for the beauty of the argument. Besides, Boethius had also affirmed that nothing is something.

Moreover, Fredegisus writes in the paragraph 10 of the epistle: “So, if ‘nothing’ is a name at all, as the grammarians claim [it is], it is a finite name”. He seems to suggest that at least some dialecticians, who followed Aristotle’s observations in *De interpretatione*, had a different opinion, and conceived nothing as “*onoma aoriston*”.

There would be something more to say. Medieval logicians recognized pretty fast the difference between “meaning” and “reference” for words.

Any word points to a meaning – unless it is a simple incomprehensible gathering of letters, such as “bubu”, to use a famous example - it is a *vox significativa*. However, there are plenty of words (Augustine’s prepositions and conjunctions) that do not have a reference, a denotation, although everyone can easily understand them. In other words, these terms do not refer to something (“*aliquid*”, “*res existens*”, as Fredegisus said). The fact that the words themselves exist is sufficient. It is not necessary for every name, including the term “*nihil*”, to be connected to something in the sensible/visible world. We can understand the word without it having a sensible referent.

I do not agree with the suggestion that Fredegisus’ laconic “treatise” had a ludic purpose (and an unnamed recipient), even if Alcuin’s enigmas definitely had such a finality. I cannot grasp the reason for Fredegisus to compose a cryptic text.

To conclude, I would like to mention the accuracy of the Romanian version of the epistle, and the richness of Florin Crișmăreanu’s commentaries. No aspect remains obscure. The bibliography used by the exegete is exhaustive. However, an *index nominum* and an *index rerum* would have been helpful.

Post scriptum

I will try to reconstruct two of Fredegisus’ arguments.

Argument A.

1. Any finite name always signifies something (see Aristotle).
2. Nothing is a finite name (see Boethius; see grammarians’ opinion)
3. Being a finite name, nothing signifies something sensitive (from 1 & 2)
4. It is impossible for that defined something, to whom nothing refers, to be not something
5. Hence, nothing is something defined (from 3 & 4).
6. Therefore, nothing exists (is *res existens*) (from 5).

Fredegisus approaches the term nothing as *nomen finitum*, which it is not the case.

Argument B.

1. Nothing is *vox significativa* (it evokes meaning in one’s mind)
2. If it means something, nothing / *nihil* names something (*aliquid*).
3. That something named by nothing exists.
4. Nothing exists.

Fredegisus confuses, perhaps deliberately, meaning with reference, denotation.