

Alcuin's Theory of Signification and System of Philosophy

SHIMIZU Tetsuro

My aim in this article is to analyse the beginnings of the medieval philosophy of language in the Carolingian period, especially that of the theory of signification. Examples of philosophical investigation into the nature of language during that period are found in Alcuin's Grammar and Dialectic composed as parts of textbooks on the liberal arts. Thus I would like to show first that Alcuin recognized already the main issues concerning the differences between grammar and dialectic—these issues, after being ignored for a while, became apparent again among the scholars of the late 11th and 12th centuries—and that he gave priority to grammar over dialectic, and understood *significatio* on the basis of the grammar of Priscian.

The theory of language could also be examined in the context of theological investigations, i.e., in Alcuin's understanding of God's words, or Word; for these had been at least one of the main bases for the conception of language in the Augustinian tradition. In this present essay, however, a second aim is to show that an aspect of this Augustinian tradition has been lost in Alcuin's thought; i.e., there is not a theory of creation by God's speaking.

Thirdly, I would like to add a further piece of evidence for the theory of language which can be recognized in Fredegisus' famous argument to prove that *nihil* is something, and show that the same conclusions can be applied to him as we will apply to Alcuin.

1 ALCUIN'S *PERIHERMENIAE*

As a whole, Alcuin's *Dialectica* is based on Isidore's dialectic in the *Etymologiae*, which in turn depends on Cassiodorus' dialectic in the

Institutiones.¹ Isidore's dialectic hardly differs in any essential points from Cassiodorus', but is mainly a copy of the latter. By contrast, Alcuin's dialectic includes some remarkable revisions. As to the chapter on categories, for instance, Alcuin does not use the *Etymologiae* but makes a new description on the basis of Pseudo-Augustine's *Categoriae Decem*: this is one of the most distinctive points in Alcuin's *Dialectica*.²

In the present article I wish to focus my attention on the chapter on the *Perihermeniae*,³ and investigate how Alcuin has revised the textual tradition of Cassiodorus/Isidore.

1.1 COPYING AND REVISING ISIDORE'S TEXT

The following remarks show in general how far Alcuin copies Isidore's words and how far he revises them, in the chapter on the *Perihermeniae*.

(1) Isidore and Cassiodorus describe dialectic according to the order: *Isagoge*, *Categoriae*, *Perihermenias*, *Formulae syllogismorum* (Syllogismi), *Diffinitiones*, *Loci* (Topica). By contrast Alcuin treats the *Perihermeniae* as the last part of the book. In the medieval tradition of dialectic after Alcuin, the *Perihermenias* remains the third part, after the *Isagoge* and *Categoriae*; scholars did not follow Alcuin's revision. Thus it is worth enquiring why Alcuin makes such a revision in the order of contents.

(2) Cassiodorus quite briefly explains the seven subjects: *nomen*, *verbum*, *oratio*, *enuntiatio*, *affirmatio*, *negatio*, *contradictio*. Isidore almost exactly transcribes Cassiodorus and only adds a *praefatio*.

Alcuin's dialectic is written in the form of a dialogue between Charlemagne and Alcuin himself, so Alcuin had at least to revise Isidore's description into the form of dialogue.

(3) As to Isidore's *praefatio*, Alcuin partly copies it and makes a few comments on it.

(4) As to *nomen*, *verbum*, *oratio*, *enuntiatio* and other subspecies of *oratio*, he does not follow Cassiodorus/Isidore's description, but bases

¹Lehmann[1917] examines the relationship between Cassiodorus, Isidore and Alcuin in detail.

²Minio-Paluello[1961: lxxvii-xcvi] shows the close relationship between Alcuin's *Dialectica* and the *Categoriae Decem*. Marenbon [1981] analyses the role of the *Categoriae Decem* in the Carolingian period.

³I would use 'Peri(h)ermeniae', according to Alcuin's usage, specially to refer to the chapter of that name.

himself on some other material—presumably Boethius' first commentary to Aristotle's *De interpretatione* (*Editio prima*) or some scholia or extracts based on it, as shown below—and gives a much more detailed explanation.

(5) As to *affirmatio* and the rest of the parts, Alcuin merely transcribes Casiodorus/Isidore's descriptions (aside from recasting the sentences into the form of dialogue).

The fourth point shall be analysed in detail in the following section.

1.2 DIALECTICA AND GRAMMATICA

Writing the chapter on the *Perhermeniae*, Alcuin is explicitly concerned with the relationship between dialectic and grammar. For the subspecies of *Perhermeniae*—i.e., *nomen*, *verbum*, *oratio* etc.—are the subjects of grammar as well, and students have been taught about them already when they come to the present chapter. Alcuin explains that dialectical teachings concerning these subjects are subtle, while grammatical ones are simple.⁴

In the *Grammatica* too a similar reference to this relationship is found. Despite this explanation, however, his exposition of each subject does not to show dialectical subtlety, but seems to put priority on grammatical simplicity. We shall recognize this point throughout the following examinations.⁵

⁴Alcuinus, *Dialectica*, PL 101, 973A: 'C. Quot species sunt Perihermeniarum?

A. In septem species praedictus philosophus [*Al.*, ipse Aristoteles] eas dividit, id est, nomen, verbum, orationem, enuntiationem, affirmationem, negationem, contradictionem.

C. Num me iterum per grammaticam ducere disponis?

A. Dispono, sed excelsiore gradu. Et si interrogas, videbis, quantum distat dialectica [*Al.*, dialecticae] subtilitas a grammatica simplicitate.'

⁵Irvine[1994: 320-324] concludes that Alcuin interweaves Priscian's grammatical definitions with those in Aristotle's *De interpretatione*. He also shows that Alcuin uses Boethius' commentary on *De interpretatione* to explain *vox* in his *Grammatica* (PL 101, 854C-D). I would agree with Irvine so far. Nevertheless, my present point is to show on which discipline Alcuin put priority when the conclusions of grammar and dialectic contradict each other.

Nomen

Alcuin introduces the definition of name,⁶ which is essentially the same as the one shown as ‘philosophica definitio’ in his *Grammatica*.⁷

C. Nomen quid est?

A. Vox significativa secundum placitum, sine tempore, *definitum aliquid significans in nominativo casu, cum ‘est’ aut(et) ‘non est’, in obliquis casibus nihil*, cujus nulla pars est significativa separata. (PL 101, 973A)

Evidently this is composed of Aristotle’s definition in *De Interpretatione*,⁸ i.e., the non-highlighted part of the preceding quotation, and Alcuin’s addition, i.e., the highlighted part.

In the context of explaining his definition, Aristotle adds that ‘non-homo’, for instance, is not a name but an infinite name (nomen infinitum) and that a name in an oblique case is not a name but a case of a name.

The concluding definition by Boethius in *Editio prima* is in accordance with Aristotle’s intention, as follows:

nomen est vox significativa, secundum placitum, sine tempore, cujus nulla pars significativa est separata, *definitum aliquid significans, cum ‘est’ aut ‘non est’ juncta faciens enuntiationem*. (PL 64, 306B)

Here the highlighted parts are Boethius’ additions to Aristotle’s definition, of which the first part, ‘definitum aliquid significans’, excludes infinite names like ‘non-homo’ from names; the second part, ‘cum est aut etc.’, excludes oblique cases.

To formulate his addition to Aristotle’s definition, Alcuin uses the very phrases and terms in Boethius’ addition, whether he knows it directly or indirectly through some extract, or scholium, of *Editio prima*. Nevertheless he completely ignores Boethius’ and Aristotle’s intentions. For by this addition Alcuin does not exclude from names infinite names or cases of names, but on the contrary counts names in oblique cases as names (i.e., oblique cases are subspecies of a name). As a result, this definition becomes consistent with the notion of name (noun) in grammar. This means that Alcuin rejects elements in Aristotle-Boethius’

⁶I would use the term ‘name’ for the Latin word ‘nomen’, even if this latin word is often better translated as ‘noun’, especially in the context of grammar. For my main concern is with a field of discussion common to grammar and dialectic, where the term ‘nomen’ was used univocally.

⁷Alcuin, *Grammatica*, PL 101,859B.

⁸cf. Arist., *De Int.*, c. 2., 16a19 (Boethius’translation): ‘Nomen ergo est vox significativa secundum placitum sine tempore, cujus nullapars est significativa, separata.’

definition that contradict with the corresponding notion in grammar and revises the definition in order to become consistent with it. Thus he puts priority on grammar over dialectic, or *Perihermenias*, in this respect. It is remarkable that as a result of this Alcuin's definition corresponds to the later theory of *unitas nominum*.

Alcuin goes on to explain his definition in detail; his notion of *significatio* is worth attention:

C. Lucidius hanc philosophicam diffinitionem explana.

A. Nomen est *vox significativa*. Nam *omne nomen aliquid significat*, visibile vel invisibile, substantiale vel accidens

C. Quid est, 'diffinitum aliquid significat'?

A. *Omne enim nomen in nominativo casu cum verbo substantiali 'sum' aliquid certum significat*, in affirmatione vel negatione; ut, 'homo sum, homo es, homo est'. 'Arbor non sum, non es, non est'. In obliquis vero casibus nihil certum significat, nisi additis aliis partibus ab plenam significationem, ut, 'Hominis istius est liber iste'; ut, 'Huic homini da hunc librum'; ut, 'Hunc hominem legere fac librum istum'; ut, 'Ab hoc homine librum istum didici'. (PL 101, 973B-D)

Here, by 'philosophical definition' Alcuin makes a contrast with the grammatical one.⁹ As to the phrase 'nomen est vox significativa', Alcuin relies on his theory of categories. 'Visibile' and 'invisibile' correspond to substance and accident respectively.¹⁰

Thus he definitely distinguishes names of substances from those of accidents. Substances are sensible things, while accidents are only intelligible.¹¹ In both cases, signification by Alcuin is an act of words in terms of things, i.e., substances or accidents, and not of intellect or concepts.

In the preceding quotation, after explaining 'secundum placitum' and 'sine tempore', Alcuin goes on to 'diffinitum aliquid significat', in which phrase he inverts Aristotle/Boethius' explanation. He does not accept 'diffinitum aliquid' as distinguishing names from infinite names, nor a name combined with 'est' or 'non est' as making an enuntiation, as Boethius did. By contrast, by uniting these two parts, he takes 'diffinitum aliquid' as 'a certain thing' and contrasts it with 'something'

⁹cf. Alcuinus, *Grammatica*, PL 101, 859B.

¹⁰cf. PL 101, 956B-D: 'Nam id quod corporari sensu discernitur, *usian*, id est, substantiam dici jusserunt. Illud autem, quod animi tractatu solum colligitur, aut saepe mutatur *symbebcos*, id est, accidens nominari maluerunt.'

¹¹It is notable that qualities and quantities are accidents; we will return to this point again later.

in ‘aliquid significat’, which he has used to explain ‘vox significativa’. That is, ‘vox significativa’ signifies something, while ‘nomen in nominativo casu’ combined with ‘est’ or ‘non est’ signifies a certain thing. Thus *significare* in the latter case is taken as a function of designating a certain individual when a name is put in a context. It is remarkable that Alcuin introduces such a function, which is later called *suppositio personalis*.

Verbum

As to the definition of *verbum*, Alcuin seems simply to follow Boethius’ Commentary (*Editio prima*), abridging it somewhat, and to recognize no discrepancy between the tradition of the *Perihermenias* and the grammatical notion:

Vox significativa secundum placitum, cum tempore difinitum aliquid significans, et accidens.¹²

Alcuin introduces, however, the grammatical viewpoint in terms of categories by the last phrase of the definition:

C. . . Sed expone, quid sit difinitum aliquid significans et accidens?
 A. Nam omne verbum certam significat actionem et [*Al.*, vel] passionem, ut video vel videor. Et cuilibet substantiae illa actio vel passio solet accidere, ut, puta, homini videre vel videri.
 C. Si omnia actum¹³ vel passionem significant, unde aliqua dicuntur neutralia?
 A. Non ideo, quod unam ex his non habeant significationem; sed quia uniformiter semper proferuntur, id est, vel actum solum, ut ‘manduco’, ‘curro’; vel passionem, ut, ‘vapulo’, ‘venero’. Sed haec alias. (PL 101, 974B)

One of the possible sources of Alcuin’s interpretation is the following passage of Boethius’ *Editio prima*, which precedes the conclusion of his definition of the verb:

Omne verbum significat aliquod accidens, quod accidens semper de altero praedicatur. Nam si omne verbum aut actionem aut passionem designat, actio vero et passio in accidentibus numerantur . . .

¹²cf. Boethius, *Editio Prima*, PL 64, 309B: ‘Verbum est vox significativa secundum placitum cum tempore, cujus nulla pars extra significativa est separata, difinitum aliquid significans, praesentis significationem tenens.’

¹³The same expression is found in Alcuin’s *Grammatica* so that the correction to ‘actionem’ in PL does not seem necessary.

Another source of the interpretation is Priscian's *proprietas verbi*, which Alcuin essentially copies in his *Grammatica*:

Verbi proprium est actionem vel passionem sive utrumque cum modis et temporibus significare.¹⁴

Again, it is concerning this *proprium verbi* that Alcuin makes a more detailed explanation about 'neutralia' in his grammar, so that when Alcuin says in his interpretation, 'sed haec alias' ('but I would argue this point elsewhere'), he must refer to the very explanation in grammar. Thus Alcuin introduces a grammatical point of view concerning the verb as well.

Alcuin's interpretation of 'difinitum aliquid significans' is based on his former interpretation of the same expression concerning a name. A verb signifies a certain action or passion: i.e., by the examples, 'video' (I see), and 'videor' (I am seen), Alcuin seems to refer to a certain particular action, or passion, concerning the subject 'ego'. Thus 'signifying a certain thing' is not the verb's function by itself, but its activity when it is used in a sentence (*oratio*).

By *accidens* Alcuin shows his interest in Aristotelian categories: actions and passions are accidents as two species of the ten categories, in which substance alone is not an accident. Thus the object that a verb signifies is a certain action or passion as an accidental inherent in a substance. Signification of a verb, like that of a name, exists in the relationship between the verb, i.e., a *vox*, and individual accidents.

Oratio

The definition of *oratio* is another example of the revision by which Alcuin, recognizing the discrepancy between grammar and dialectic, tries to establish consistency between them:

Congrua partium ordinatio, perfectam sententiam demonstrans, cuius partium aliquid separatum significativum est.¹⁵

The first half of this definition is taken from Priscian. This suggests that Alcuin is not satisfied with Aristotle's definition. Presumably this is because 'homo albus', for instance, is counted as an *oratio* according

¹⁴PL 101, 859A. cf. Priscianus, *Institutiones Grammaticae*, II 18: ed. Keil., II, 55.

¹⁵PL 101, 974C. cf. *id.*, *ibid.*, II, 15: K., II, 53; Alcuinus, *Grammatica*, PL 101, 858A.

to the latter. Thus Alcuin recognizes the difference between what is called later imperfect and perfect *oratio*.¹⁶

Thus, Alcuin is concerned with the difference between grammar and dialectic by the definition of *oratio* as well.

1.3 PRIORITY OF THE THEORY OF CATEGORIES

Alcuin, however, does not simply follow Priscian's theory. In his *Grammatica*, Alcuin quotes Priscian's definition as 'secundum grammaticos' (PL 101, 859B; cf. 973A) with some revision:

nomen est pars orationis, quae unicuique corpori vel rei communem vel propriam qualitatem distribuit; et est nomen dictum quasi notamen, eo quod hoc notamus singulas substantias vel res, communes, ut: 'Homo', 'disciplina'; vel proprias, ut: 'Virgilius', 'arithmetica'. (PL 101, 859B)

The corresponding passage of Priscian is:

nomen est pars orationis, quae unicuique subjectorum corporum seu rerum communem vel propriam qualitatem distribuit. dicitur autem nomen vel a Graeco, vel, ut alii, nomen quasi notamen, quod hoc notamus uniuscuiusque substantiae qualitatem. et communem quidem corporum qualitatem demonstrat, ut: 'homo', propriam vero, ut: 'Virgilius', rerum autem communem, ut 'disciplina', 'ars', propriam, ut 'arithmetica Nicomachi', 'grammatica Aristarchi'.¹⁷

That he makes a revision seems to indicate that he is not satisfied with Priscian's definition, especially in terms of *qualitas*. Though he admits that 'nomen . . . qualitatem distribuit', he goes on to explain, 'we mark by this name singular substances or things', instead of Priscian's 'we mark by this name a quality of each substance'. Thus what is marked, or denoted, by the name is a substance or substances, and not a quality.

Alcuin's revision is more explicit in respect to another of Priscian's definitions:

¹⁶As to the latter part of the definition, Alcuin follows Aristotle/Boethius. As Alcuin himself explains in the following passages, he is following Boethius in taking 'aliquid' in 'cujus partium aliquid separatum significativum est' as accusative (cf. 'orationis pars aliquid separata significat') and explaining 'separatum' as 'per se'. According to Aristotle, a sentence can be cut into parts in many ways, and in a way the parts remain significative by themselves. According to Boethius, on the other hand, the parts are none other than the *nomen* and *verbum*.

¹⁷Priscianus, *ibid.*, II, 22: K., II, 56.

Proprium nominis est substantiam *et* qualitatem significare.¹⁸

Alcuin's corresponding remark is apparently a revision of this, i.e.:

Proprium nominis est substantiam *vel* qualitatem *vel* quantitatem significare. (PL 101, 858D)

The background to this revision must be Aristotle's theory of categories, or more exactly Pseudo-Augustine's *Categoriae Decem*, which Alcuin especially follows in his chapter on categories, and which has reportedly a special connection with the *Dialectica*.¹⁹

Revising the phrase as 'substantiam *vel* qualitatem *vel* quantitatem', he recognizes that Priscian's theory contradicts Aristotle's, and gives priority to the *Categoriae* over Priscian's grammar. Thus the order of priority is: *Categoriae*, Priscian's grammar, Aristotle's *Perihermenias*.

I would like to add that Alcuin was thus aware of the problem of whether a name signifies substance and quality at the same time or not, i.e., the problem with which later grammaticians and logicians at the time of Anselm are concerned.²⁰

The reason why he selects three categories—substance, quality and quantity—from the ten can be understood as follows. In the ten categories, *facere* (agere), *pati*, *jacere* (situs), and *habere* (habitus) correspond to verbs, and *ubi* and *quando* to adverbs or adverbial expressions.²¹ Thus only *substantia*, *quantitas*, *ad aliquid* and *qualitas* correspond to names. As to *ad aliquid*, however, Alcuin places it as a subspecies of *nomina appellativae* (common nouns) and explains it:

Alia ad aliquid dicta ut 'filius', 'servus'. Dicendo enim filium et servum, patrem significamus et dominum. (PL 101, 860A-B)

Although Alcuin says, 'by saying *son*, we signify father', his intention must be that by saying *son*, we signify both a person referred to by the name 'son' and another one who is the person's father. Thus it is substances that the name signifies. From this explicit mention, we can conclude, for instance, that 'maius' (greater) signifies quantities, so that the signification of a name of relation can be explained in terms of substance, quality or quantity as Alcuin actually says.

¹⁸*Id.*, *ibid.*, II, 18: K., II, 55.

¹⁹See note 2 above.

²⁰cf. Anselm, *De grammatico*. I would argue this point elsewhere in the near future.

²¹PL 101, 962A: 'Quid aliud, nisi quod *ubi* in loco et *quando* in tempore significant? ... Haec in loco et tempore esse debent; non locus et tempus.'

In sum, Alcuin's approach is to use the theory of categories to interpret Priscian's grammar, so that the signification of a name, or a verb, is a function of a type of vocal sounds in relation to things that belong to a certain category.

2 ALCUIN'S PROJECT OF LIBERAL ARTS

2.1 MAKING GRAMMAR AND DIALECTIC THOROUGHLY CONSISTENT

As examined above, Alcuin's revision in dialectic reflects grammatical notions of terms that are basic for grammar. When grammar and dialectic use the same term with different definitions, Alcuin prefers the grammatical one, and it is in his chapter of *Perihermeniae* that the terms used by dialectic and grammar in common are found.

This approach also provides an answer to the question why Alcuin changed the traditional order and placed the *Perhermeniae* at the end of his *Dialectica*.²² The *Perhermeniae* is the only chapter on dialectic which understands a word as a *vox*, while this understanding forms a basis for grammar as a whole. Consequently Alcuin must have intended to describe dialectic first without understanding words as *voces*, and then to pay attention to the signification of words as *voces*.

This last point may be confirmed as follows. As a result of this change in order, Alcuin has to add some introduction at the beginning of the chapter 'de argumentis', or 'formulae syllogismorum', to make up for the absence of the *Perihermenias*, which, in its usual order, performed the role of introducing *enuntiatio* or *propositio* for the theory of the syllogism. Thus Alcuin begins the chapter 'de argumentis' with 'enuntiatio', and defines it as 'oratio verum vel falsum significans' (PL 101, 964C-D). This means, he cut off the parts which describe *nomen*, *verbum* and also *oratio* as subspecies of *vox significativa*.

From the preceding points, we can conclude that Alcuin's revision and repositioning of the *Perihermeniae* are for the sake of establishing consistency between grammar and dialectic. Why, then, does Alcuin think it necessary to establish such consistency?

Alcuin, the co-ordinator or director of *artes liberales*, must have intended to put the seven arts in order and to make a consistent system,

²²See p. 2 above.

or course of, education. That is, if students first study grammar and, for instance, the definition of name, and then go on to study dialectic only to find another definition that contradicts the first one, then they will become confused by such an inconsistency.

Thus Alcuin's revision referred to above seems to be for the sake of making a consistent system of liberal arts.

2.2 SYSTEM OF PHILOSOPHY

I would like to add one more point. Alcuin's project of establishing the philosophical educational system based on the seven arts can be recognized also by the following facts. First, the *Grammatica* includes a short part at its beginning that is reportedly called '*Disputatio de vera philosophia*' according to one manuscript (PL 101, 849A). This part seems to show that students should make their way through the seven arts as parts of philosophy in order to reach the realm of true philosophy. This suggests that Alcuin has written this part as an introduction of the whole system of the liberal arts.

Secondly, his work on rhetoric is combined with moral philosophy and named '*Dialogus de rhetorica et virtutibus*', *vel sim.* in different manuscripts (PL 101, 919-920). Alcuin also seems to have changed the order of the *trivium* and to have put dialectic before rhetoric, for grammar, rhetoric and dialectic is the order according to Isidore and Cassiodorus. These facts suggest that Alcuin intended to add moral philosophy between the rhetoric, which is the last part of the *trivium*, and the *quadrivium* (see figure 1 below). As a result, his system presumably is composed of a preliminary discipline (grammar); two disciplines of *logica* (dialectic and rhetoric); a discipline of *ethica*, which is again composed of four parts (the four virtues); and the *quadrivium*, which he ascribes to *physica* (PL 101, 952B-C). All I would like to emphasize at this point is that Alcuin presumably intended to make a consistent system of philosophical disciplines and from this viewpoint the revision in his dialectic can be adequately understood.

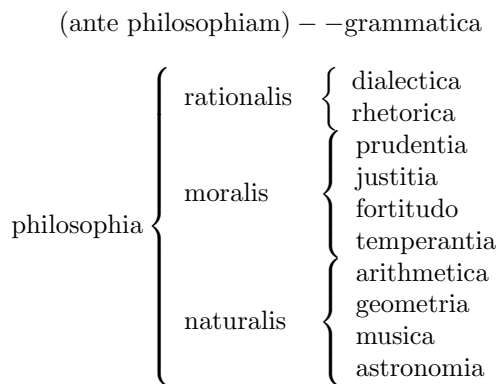
We can, moreover, recognize Alcuin's project in his notions of *philosophia* and *vera philosophia*. The three-part division system shown above is the system of *philosophia*, which he seems to distinguish from *philosophia vera*. For in the '*Disputatio de vera philosophia*' mentioned above, he insists that we should improve our knowledge through the seven arts and reach the realm beyond the arts (PL 101, 853D-854A).

Again, he places at the beginning of ‘*Dialectica*’ an introduction to philosophy in general, following the tradition of Cassiodorus/Isidore, which includes the two-part division system as well as the three-part one. Alcuin seems mainly to choose the three-part division of philosophy, but then he adds the following two-part division:

Theologica est, quae Latine inspectiva dicitur,²³ qua supergressi visibilia de divinis et coelestibus aliquid mente solum contemplamur. Nam et in has quoque duas partes *philosophia vera* dividitur, id est, in inspectivam et actualem. (PL 101, 952C-D)

Here *philosophia vera* treats the realm beyond the visible realm (‘supergressi visibilia’), while the *visibilia* are the objects of philosophy, i.e., the liberal arts with moral philosophy. Thus Alcuin must think that a man should be trained through the course of *philosophia*, the course shown in figure 1, and then, passing beyond the realm of visible objects (‘supergressi visibilia’), enter into the realm of the true philosophy, which is probably the realm of theological wisdom, theoretical as well as practical.

figure 1.



²³He intentionally or unintentionally mistakes ‘theoretica’ and ‘theologica’. The corresponding phrase in Isidore lacks the Greek term, while Cassiodorus put the correct Greek word with the Latin ‘inspectiva’.

3 CREATION BY GOD'S SPEAKING?

3.1 ALCUIN'S INTERPRETATION OF *GENESIS* 1: 3-5

From the preceding points we could say that in Alcuin a word is definitely a kind of vocal sound and nothing else, and that every name signifies some thing. How, then, does this fit in with the tradition in Christian thought that God created the world by speaking words? For these words cannot be accepted as any vocal sounds, nor should it be possible for a vocal word to exist without the existence of corresponding things, i.e., without having a function of signifying some thing(s). Here I would like to show that Alcuin did not recognize creation by speaking words.

Alcuin seems to know the theory that the primordial forms were in God before creation as follows:

Interrogatio 19. Quot modis est operatio divina?

Responsio. Quatuor. Primo, quod *in verbi* [Dei] *dispensatione omnia aeterna sunt.* Secundo, quod in materia informi 'qui vivit in aeternum, creavit omnia simul'²⁴. Tertio, quod per opera dierum sex varias distinxit creaturas.²⁵

Compared to the second stage, where the materie without any form have been made, and to the third stage, where diverse kinds of creatures has been made, by the first stage, 'in the dispensation of God's word, all are eternal', Alcuin refers to the status before creation, when the creatures, though they had not yet been made, were about to be made, and therefore existed in one sense, i.e., existed in the Word of God. Here Alcuin shares the traditional Christian thinking with reference to John 1: 3-4, 'quod factum est in ipso vita erat' ('that which has been made was a life in him i.e., the Word'). Thus he presumably shares the thought as well that it is the primordial forms of the creatures that were in the Word of God before their creation.

Nevertheless he does not interpret Genesis 1: 3-5 in terms of God's speaking:

Inter. 31. Quid est quod dicitur: 'Dixit Deus, fiat lux'?

Resp. 'Dixit', *pro fecit, scriptor posuit, ut celeritatem vel facilitatem operis Dei ostenderet.*

²⁴Ecclesiasticus 18: 1.

²⁵Alcuinus, *Interrogationes et responsiones in Genesin*, PL 100, 519A.

Inter. 32. Quid est: ‘Appellavit Deus lucem diem’?
Resp. Id est, appellari fecit. (PL 100, 520A)

Here Alcuin only says that *God spoke* means *God made*, showing that God created the world as quickly or easily as saying something. Thus he does not recognize here the traditional theory of God’s word.

3.2 FREDEGISUS AND THE EXISTENCE OF *NIHIL*

Another relevant text from the circle of Alcuin concerning the present subject is found in the work of Fredegisus.

He, in his *De substantia nihili et tenebrarum*, constructs a famous, but undervalued,²⁶ argument to prove that nothing is something. The argument is based on the theory of signification of Fredegisus’ time. Here he seems to recognize a difference between grammarians and dialecticians, as does Alcuin.

Signification of nihil

Fredegisus puts forward three arguments, each of which is based on the theory of signification. The framework of the first argument is:

1. Every name signifies something finite. (so every name is a finite name.) [based on Aristotle–Boethius’ notion of name]
2. ‘Nothing’ is a name according to Grammarians,
- 2’. so it is a finite name. [from 1 & 2]
3. Every name signifies something finite. [1]
- 3’. (Consequently ‘nothing’ signifies something finite.) [from 1, 3 & 2]
- 3”. (And nothing that is signified by ‘nothing’ is something finite.) [from 3’]
4. It is impossible for something finite not to be something.
5. Consequently it is impossible for nothing which is something finite not to be something. [from 3’ & 4]
6. and thus nothing exists.²⁷ [from 5]

²⁶cf. Marenbon[1981: 63].

²⁷Fredegisus, ed. C. Gennaro, 126.: ‘(1) *Omne nomen finitum aliquid significat, ut homo, lapis, lignum: haec enim ut dicta fuerint, simul res, quas significant, intelligimus. Quippe hominis nomen, praeter differentiam aliquam positum, univer-*

Here it is apparent that, for Fredegisus also, signification exists between a name and a thing or things and that every name has a corresponding thing it signifies. This is just what Alcuin includes in his definition of the name. Again, when he adds 'as grammarians admit', he presumably understands that dialecticians do not admit 'nihil' as a name, for Aristotle's *Perihermenias* does not count, for instance, '*non-homo*' as a name.

This analysis shows that the dialectical and grammatical notions of a name are mixed together to constitute Fredegisus' ontological argument of 'nihil'. That is, we can recognize the same points as we have seen in Alcuin's case.

Nihil as a Divine Entity

Fredegisus refers to the naming of the darkness as 'night', but he only refers to the imposition of names on created things.²⁸ From this he goes on to claim, 'The creator imposes names to the things he has created, . . . He has not created any thing without its appellation, nor has he instituted any appellation unless the subject for which it has been instituted existed'.²⁹ The name (*nomen*, *vocabulum*) he is concerned with must be a type of vocal sound, for it has a characteristic of being imposed for the corresponding things, i.e., the characteristic 'post rem'. Thus concerning creation his interest is in words as vocal entities.

From these we can conclude that Fredegisus, in common with Alcuin, did not accept the idea of God's word as a vocal entity, nor the idea of creation by God's speaking.

Again that Fredegisus does not acknowledge the idea of creation by God's speaking can be concluded from his notion of *nihil* itself. For when he presents the argument to prove that *nihil* is something, he seems to understand the *nihil* as a divine entity from which the world was created. Concerning this point I agree with John Marenbon that

salitatem hominum designat: lapis et lignum suam similiter generalitatem complectantur. (2) *Igitur nihil, si modo nomen est, ut grammatici asserunt, finitum nomen est.* (3) Omne autem nomen finitum aliquid significat, (4) Ipsum vero aliquid finitum, ut non sit aliquid, impossibile est. (5) Impossibile est ut nihil, quod finitum est, non sit aliquid, (6) ac per hoc esse probabile est.'

²⁸Fredegisus, *op. cit.*, 133,128-134,54.

²⁹Fredegisus, *op. cit.*, 134,41-45: 'Conditor etenim rebus, quas condidit, nomina impressit, ut suo quaeque nomine res dicta agnita foret. Neque rem quamlibet absque vocabulo formavit, nec vocabulum aliquod statuit, nisi cui statueretur existeret.'

some scholars' identification of unknown matter and vacuum with the *nihil* is without good reason.³⁰ I would, however, add that, by contrast, the *nihil* in Fredegisus can have some relationship with one of the two alternative interpretations by which John Scottus explains *nihil*.³¹ That is, that *nihil* in '*creatio ex nihilo*' means the absolute privation of all being, or the Divine Superessence.

The reason why Fredegisus' *nihil* should be understood as the latter alternative is as follows. First, Alcuin knows the thought 'all creatures are eternal in the Word of God';³² so presumably does Fredegisus. This means that they have to interpret this thought and the thought 'all creatures have been created *ex nihilo*' with consistency.

Again, Fredegisus explains the *nihil* as follows:

...inconcussa fide tenere confitetur divinam potentiam operatam esse ex nihilo terram, aquam, aëra et ignem, lucem quoque et angelos atque animam hominis.....

Haec est enim quae praedicat ea, quae inter creaturas prima ac praecipua sunt, ex nihilo condita. Igitur nihil magnum quiddam ac praeclarum est: quantumque sit, unde tanta et tam praeclara sunt, aestimandum non est, quippe cum unum horum, quae ex eo genita sunt, aestimari, sicuti est, ac definiri non possit.³³

Fredegisus' list of things that have been created directly from the *nihil* is almost the same as Alcuin's, i.e., the four elements, light, angels and the human soul.³⁴ Then he compares these first and most excellent things among the creatures with the *nihil* and say, 'the *nihil* is some great and very bright (praeclarum) one', i.e., much greater and brighter than those things. These descriptions do not seem suitable to the matter without form, for it is the first created thing in which all have been created at once according to Alcuin,³⁵ and not the one from which the first creatures have been created. Rather, the description, especially the expression 'praeclarum', is suitable only to the divine superessence, or at least to the things that are said to be eternal in the Word of God. Thus we can conclude that Fredegisus refers to some divine entity by 'nihil'.

³⁰Marenbon[1981: 64].

³¹Johannes Scotus, *Periphyseon* III, chs. 5-23; 634A14-690B4.

³²See p. 13 above.

³³Fredegisus, *op. cit.*, 128,57-129,70.

³⁴cf. Alcuinus, *op. cit.*, PL 100, 519B. Alcuin's list lacks fire, but adds the heavens instead. Soon after, however, he lists fire among the four elements.

³⁵See the first quotation in p. 13 above.

If he, however, correctly received the Church Fathers' theory of creation from nothing, he would not have understood *nihil* in such a way. In the Christian tradition, the theory of creation from nothing was understood in the sense that there preceded no material entities before creation, and this conception was combined, from its origin, with the theory of creation by God's speaking. For the theory is a result of the Church Fathers' attempt to interpret 'In principio creavit Deus ...', by asking what 'principium' (*archē*) means. That is, the eventual conclusion was, on one the hand, that no material thing can be an *archē*, and, on the other hand, that the word of God is the *archē*.³⁶ Consequently, the fact that Fredegisus does not acknowledge the first conclusion means that he does not accept the second one either.

CONCLUSIONS

Alcuin's philosophy of language was formulated in the process of establishing a consistent system of education on the basis of the liberal arts. As to the theory of parts of speech, he placed priority on Priscian grammar, interpreting it in terms of the theory of categories. As a result, he accepted a word only as a type of vocal sound and held signification to be a function of a word in relation to things that the *Categoriae* treats.

Alcuin's philosophy of language consequently seems to contradict that of the Augustinian tradition. For according to Augustine mental concepts are words and they correspond to God's Word; by speaking this eternally God created the world. Again, an expository tradition since Philo combined the story of creation with Plato's *Timaeus*, identifying primordial ideas in God's mind before creation with God's words, or Word. Alcuin, however, ignored the traditional theory of God's creation by speaking, while maintaining the theory of primordial ideas in God's mind, and thus he was able to maintain his philosophy of language without recognizing the contradiction referred to above.

Additionally, Fredegisus held the same views as Alcuin concerning these points.

The beginning of the medieval philosophy of language as examined in this paper seems to determine the viewpoint of the theory for a while, even after the Carolingian period. For Abelard in the first half of the

³⁶I have examined this point in detail in one of my Japanese articles: Shimizu, T., *Archē* and *creatio ex nihilo*, in *Tojo*, 22, 1993: 3-20.

twelfth century proposed his theory in the face of exactly the same viewpoint as that which Anselm was attacking.³⁷

Tohoku University, JAPAN

REFERENCES

- Gennaro, Concettina, *Fridugiso di Tours e il "De substantia nihili et tenebrarum"* (edizione critica e studio introduttivo), Padova, 1963.
- Irvine, Martin, *The Making of Textual Culture: "Grammatica" and literary theory, 350-1100*, Cambridge, 1994.
- Lehmann, P., Cassiodorstudien, in: *Philologus*, Bd. 74, 1917: 351-383.
- Marenbon, J., *From the Circle of Alcuin to the school of Auxerre*, Cambridge 1981.
- Minio-Paluello, L., Praefatio, in: *Aristoteles Latinus I*, 1-5, Bruges, 1961.

³⁷The present article is essentially based on my Japanese articles 'Philosophy of language and *Nihil* in Carolingian period'(1994) and 'Alcuin and Fredegisus: concernig Grammar. Logic and Theology'(1995), though it also contains many revisions. It is also a revision of the first section of the paper, entitled 'Words and Concepts in Anselm and Abelard', read at the conference held on 25-26th, March,1998 at CNRS in Paris. In the process of making English version, I have received the multifarious suggestions of Dr. Charles Burnett (Warburg Institute, London) and of Professor William Friert (Gustavus Adolphus College, Minesota) as to written English.