

Charles de Bovelles on God, Nihil and Negative Theology

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ABSTRACT

In *Liber de nihilo* Charles de Bovelles probes the meanings of ‘*nihil* / nothing’ in several registers: semantic, logical, metaphysical/theological, and symbolic. Yet a consistent concern is the relation of ‘*nihil*’ to God and creation, since God reportedly creates “*ex nihilo*.” This essay focuses on the work’s concluding chapters, where Bovelles analyzes the dialectic of affirmation and negation in naming God. Here ‘*nihil*’ ends a descending series of affirmative divine names, “truly proclaiming and mysteriously announcing that nothing is God (*nihil esse deus*).” ‘*Nihil*’ then becomes the first term denied of God in an ascending series of negations, which culminates in denying all divine names and a “learned ignorance” that signals a turn to mystical theology. The essay considers Bovelles’s mathematics and logic, and compares his analysis with its source, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s *Mystical Theology*, and its interpretation by Nicholas of Cusa.*

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— In 1495, sixteen-year-old Charles de Bovelles left his native Picardy for Paris, where he studied with Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples at the university's Collège du Cardinal Lemoine.¹ A quick learner and something of a prodigy, he soon became an active member of Lefèvre's circle of humanists and scholars. Here he began a life-long engagement with the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, Nicholas of Cusa, and Raymond Lull. Following Lefèvre, Bovelles's early works focused on mathematics, dialectic, the arts, and metaphysics. But in 1509 Charles turned to theology in his *Liber de nihilo* or *Book on Nothing* – the work we shall explore here. He published *De nihilo* in 1511 in

a volume collecting twelve of his works,² including his best known work, *De sapiente* (1504).³ *De nihilo* focuses on the relation of 'nihil' to God and creation, since God reportedly creates "ex nihilo." Bovelles thus engages an issue deeply embedded in Christian thought, and follows in the footsteps of Augustine and Boethius, the Carolingians Fredigisus and Eriugena, scholastics and Meister Eckhart.⁴ The path was difficult, since

2 Bovelles 1511; *Liber de nihilo*, 63r–74r. Charles dated the treatise 26 November 1509 (Bovelles 1511, p. 74r).

3 See Ferrari, & Albertini 2011. E. Cassirer published R. Klibansky's edition of *De sapiente* as an appendix to his *Individuum und Kosmos in der Renaissance* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927); see Ferrari, & Albertini 2010, p. 383.

4 On the early sources and the Fredigisus controversy, see Colish 1984; on Eriugena,

1 Victor 1978, p. 12.

Charles's predecessors occasionally provoked conflict and even condemnation: Fredigisus by reifying *nihil*; Eriugena by arguing that creation occurs out of God's own nothingness; and Eckhart by insisting that in themselves creatures are nothing. But Bovelles charged ahead, addressing issues of time and eternity as modes of duration, and probing the meanings of 'nothing /*nihil*' in several registers: semantic, logical, metaphysical / theological, and symbolic.

In his classic study of Bovelles, Joseph Victor speaks of *De nihilo*'s "troubled and unripe theology," and notes that it bears the marks of a first venture into new territory: "it was sketchy, hung together poorly, and was highly derivative." Yet it also "posed more questions than it answered and in doing so set the stage for the next phase of Bovelles' development."⁵ While the work is indeed roughly hewn and at times perplexing, it remains a rare and provocative work, and a major Renaissance exploration of the theme of *nihil*/nothing. As such, it surely merits our attention.

Here I shall focus on the work's final chapters, where Bovelles analyzes the dialectic of affirmation and negation concerning God and *nihil*. We shall examine two facets of this dialectic. First, we shall discuss Charles' account of naming God. Following Dionysius' conception of hierarchy, he traces a circle of affirmative and negative divine names.

'*Nihil*' is the last of a descending series of positive names, "truly proclaiming and mysteriously announcing that nothing is God (*nihil esse deus*)."⁶ '*Nihil*' then becomes the first term denied of God in an ascending series of negations, which culminates in denying all divine names and a "learned ignorance" that signals a turn to mystical theology. Second, we shall discuss Bovelles's related mathematics of zero, and his account of God as "pure affirmation" and *nihil* as sheer negation, and of the logical relations between them. Here too we shall find Charles's conception of hierarchy to be central to his project.

— HIERARCHY AND NAMING GOD

In the concluding chapter of *De nihilo*, Bovelles distinguishes three forms of theology: The first or philosophical form attends to sensible signs, from which the human mind draws forth conjectures about intelligible and divine things. In the second, the mind withdraws into itself where it meditates on ideas not derived from prior sensation or species, but of its own fashioning; Charles calls this "transcendent or metaphysical philosophy." The third and highest theology occurs by angelic or divine illumination, and lifts the soul in ecstasy to receive "the hidden vision of God" (122, 73r).

Bovelles tells us that he will focus on the first, philosophical form of theology. Following Dionysius, he says, "Clothed in

see Duclow 2006; on Eckhart, see Tobin 1986, pp. 45, 63–64. Eckhart also echoes Eriugena, and speaks of God as '*niht* / nothing'; see Tobin 1986, p. 181.

5 Victor 1978, p. 139.

6 Bovelles 1983. This edition will be cited by page number, followed by leaf in Bovelles 1511, as here: 126, 73v. Citations will generally appear between parentheses in the text. English translations are my own.

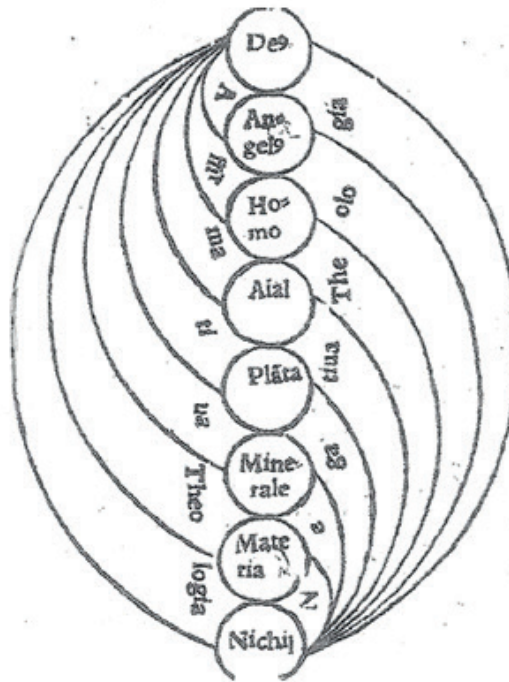


Figure 1. Affirmative and Negative Theologies. Bovelles, *Liber de nihilo*; Bovelles 1511, p. 75v. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

the variety of sensible and fleshly veils, the divine ray of light illumines us,” and adds that the human mind can only “ascend to the spiritual understanding of heavenly things if it is led there by the likenesses and forms of mortal things” (124, 73r). In this *manuductio*, Charles links two Dionysian themes: hierarchy,⁷ and the dialectic of affirmation and negation in naming God. His hierarchy or “substantial order” begins with the standard philosopher’s chain of being – God, angels, human beings, animals, plants, minerals or rocks – and adds matter, “beneath which is nothing [*nihil*]” (128, 73v). Bovelles shared Raymond

Lull’s fascination with diagrams, and **Figure 1** is among his more elegant images.

It illustrates how the affirmative and negative theologies circle through the hierarchy. He writes, “Both theologies have the same extremes or endpoints [God and *nihil*] and the same middle terms. There is a single line which both follow in opposite directions – from God to nothing, and from nothing to God” (126, 73v). *Affirmation* – the diagram’s left, descending swirls – traces the hierarchy from those things highest and closest to God down to the lowest and least like God, while *negation* – the diagram’s right, ascending swirls – first strips away the lowest divine names and proceeds to deny all names up to the very highest. Charles’s preferred terms

7 On hierarchy in Dionysius, see Perl 2007, pp. 65–81.

for affirmation and negation are ‘*positio*’ and ‘*ablatio*’: *Positio* affirms or imposes names for God, while *ablatio* negates or removes them. *Positio* first ascribes to “the one who rules everything and creates all things” the name ‘God/*deus*’, which Charles explains using Eriugena and Cusanus’s derivation of the Greek ‘*theos*’ from ‘*theiotes*’ as ‘seeing all things.’⁸ God is one who sees. Other names follow: “angel or intellect – here is the reason [*ratio*] and cause of all things; next, sense or feeling [*sensum*] wandering through many things”; then life and the very substance [*substantia*] of all things. The series of names continues: potency, privation, the beginning and start [*initium et inchoationem*] of all things – which indicate “the foundation [*subsidentium*] and true basis of all things, supporting... and carrying the whole of things within itself” (128, 73v). This cluster of names suggests matter, which Bovelles describes as “the lowest of beings” which exists only in potency, not in act.⁹ Below matter – and hence below the entire chain of being – lies

‘nothing’, the ‘*nihil*’ from which God creates; it simply is not, “being neither in act nor in potency.” *Positio* then concludes with an extreme paradox, as it “imposes and applies the name of ‘nothing/*nihil*’, finally calling [God] ‘not-being /*non ens*’, and saying of him – who by his exalted essence (appearing in the burning bush) proclaims himself to be the one who exists – that he is nothing.”¹⁰ Since Augustine, commentators had taken the book of Exodus’ proclamation, “I am who am” (Ex 3:14), to mean that God is the fullness of being.¹¹ But Bovelles follows Dionysius in affirming God to be nothing and not to exist – or more precisely, to be beyond both being and not-being.

As the last name affirmed of God, ‘*nihil*’ marks the turning point to negative theology, which reverses the course we have followed, as *ablatio* strips away the names imposed on God. It ascends through the entire hierarchy, declaring that God is neither ‘*nihil*’, nor the potency of things, nor substance, nor life, nor intellect. It finally denies the very name ‘*deus*/God’ (128, 73v). Charles then summarizes the Dionysian dialectic of affirmation and negation. When we speak of God who is “above all affirmation (*positio*),” our positive naming fittingly starts from what is nearer (*propinquier*) the divine. For it is truer to declare that God is life or good than

8 *Liber de nihilo*, 128, 73v. See Eriugena, *Periphyseon* (*De divisione naturae*), PL 122, 452B-C; and Cusa, *De quaerendo deum*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. IV, pp. 14–15, n. 19: “Theos dicitur a theoro, quod est video et curro.” Since Eriugena and Cusanus derive ‘*theos*’ from ‘*theoro*’, Bovelles’s use of ‘*theiotes*’ – which is not a proper Greek word – is puzzling. Working from ‘*theoreo*’, he may have formed a verbal noun to parallel ‘*videntem*’, with a Greek accusative ending, -en. I thank Isabella Reinhardt for this suggestion.

9 Early in the treatise, Bovelles discusses matter as the “medium” between being and *nihil* in terms of potency or “*posse esse omnium*” (*De nihilo* 42–44, 63v). Prime matter as potency was a common

theme in scholastic thought; see, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *De principiis naturae* 17.

10 *Liber de nihilo*, 128, 73v. See Miernowski 1998, pp. 81–82.

11 See Augustine, *De Trinitate* V, 11, 3 (PL 42, 912); and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II, Q. 13, a. 13.

air or stone. But when we speak of the divine that “surpasses all negation (*ablationi*),” we properly begin by removing the most “unlike” names, those derived from the lowest ranks in the hierarchy. For it is more accurate to deny that God is drunk or angry than that the divine can be understood.

Yet in this cycle of saying and un-saying, affirmation and negation are not of equal value. For Charles – again following Dionysius and Cusanus – considers theological negations to be more truthful than affirmations.¹² Whereas God is simple unity, *positio* speaks of the divine nature in terms of division, change, composition, and sensible images. It parcels God out, so to speak, by leading our minds to see and name the divine through the ranks of creatures “which are numbered between God and nothing” (130, 74r). However, *ablatio* strips all these veils away, separates us from creatures, and leads us into (*insinuant*) God’s “pure, simple and naked [nature] as it is in highest darkness and most eminent privation and ignorance” (130, 74r). Negative theology thus works as a severe, ascetic discipline, directing our gaze toward God’s transcendent simplicity and unity. Hence, Bovelles writes that “the end or goal (*finis*) of these negations (*ablationum*) is God, so that they bring and restore our mind to God” (130, 74r). Negative theology thus becomes mystical theology, and

follows Dionysius’ path towards union with God.

Charles continues the dialectic with an extended paraphrase of Book I of Cusanus’ *De docta ignorantia*. He notes that we perceive and know the finite and infinity quite differently. We mentally mark out the finite’s limits “with reason, number and measure” (Wis. 11:20). However, the infinite escapes all measure and understanding. Hence,

We only know *that* it is infinite, namely that it is not limited (*finitum*) and cannot be confined or conceived by the mind, since it has no reasoned order (*ratio*), explanation, measure, quiddity or knowledge. Hence, the truest and highest knowledge that we attain of the infinite act – that is, of God – is a certain negation and unknowing (*ignorantia*) by which we know *that we cannot know* what is always hidden from us, always beyond our mind, and infinitely exceeds our mind’s capacity. (130–132, 74r; my emphasis)

Charles concludes with a hyperbolic but illuminating claim: “The most true, highest and most complete theology is this: to know that God cannot be known, to know that God is unknowable... And many call this ignorance of God ‘learned ignorance’ and the noblest knowledge of all.” (132, 74r) Bovelles’s hyperbole consists in forgetting that he has been discussing the first and lowest of his three forms of theology. He seems to have trespassed into “transcendent or metaphysical” theology, and to the very border of

12 See Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, ch. 1, PG 3, 1000B; in Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 136; and Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. I, ch. 26; *Opera omnia*, vol. 1, pp. 54–56, nn. 86–89; Hopkins 2000, vol. 1, pp. 44–46.

inspired, ecstatic theology. Yet the illumination comes in using the Cusan tag of ‘learned ignorance’ to describe the theology that he has presented. Charles gets this exactly right.

In the closing pages of *De nihilo*, Bovelles thus shows himself to be a faithful reader of Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa. This is not surprising, given his work with Lefèvre d’Etaples, who edited the works of Dionysius and Cusanus.¹³ However, Charles may read these texts differently than Lefèvre.¹⁴ In particular, he is refreshingly direct in tracing Dionysius’s theological program in the treatise on *Mystical Theology*, which consists in cutting away – like a sculptor – “every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image.” Yet Dionysius cuts more deeply than any sculptor, removing *all* images and names so that – he says – “we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which is itself hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid things, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings.”¹⁵ The *Mystical Theology* ends in iconoclasm and total *apophasis*, placing the divine beyond all imagination and understanding, outside any predication of being or non-being, and beyond both “assertion

and denial.”¹⁶ Not only does negation remove positive names and images for God, it also reflexively denies its own adequacy and truth in – to use a venerable phrase – the negation of the negation. Here negative theology itself becomes mystical theology. Bovelles accurately restates this Dionysian program, and links it to Cusanus’s learned ignorance.

Here it is important to note what Charles does *not* import into his reading of Dionysius. To his credit, he does not emphasize the affective and experiential turn toward love beyond knowing that had been common since the twelfth century.¹⁷ Nor does he appeal – like Aquinas and others – to a third theological way above affirmation and negation, a way of “eminence” that re-casts positive names in a supposedly higher form.¹⁸ In Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*, Bovelles rightly sees a rigorous logic of affirming and negating names of God, and in this respect he also echoes Cusanus.

Yet Charles’ account is not without novelty. For Bovelles probes ‘*nihil*’ in extraordinary detail, and accords it a major role within both hierarchy and the dialectic of affirmation and negation vis-à-vis God. With *nihil* at its base, Bovelles’s hierarchy is not simply the “great chain of being.” As “being in potency” or “*posse esse*”, matter becomes

13 The Dionysius edition (1499) published the Latin translation of Ambrogio Traversari. On the Cusanus edition (1514) and Lefèvre’s preface, see Renaudet 1953, pp. 661–664.

14 For a comparison and critique, see Gandillac 1973.

15 Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, ch. 3, PG 3, 1025B; in Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 138.

16 Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, ch. 5, PG 3, 1045D–1048B; in Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 141. See Rorem 1993, pp. 193, 210–213.

17 See Rorem 1993, pp. 214–225. On this history and Cusanus’ role in the fifteenth-century debate over mystical theology, see McGinn 2005, pp. 445–456.

18 For example, see Gilson 1955, pp. 82–83.

“the first and last of beings”; above it rise the ranks of beings, blending potency and act; and beneath it lies *nihil*, void of potency and act, and having neither substance nor existence.¹⁹ Yet God creates in this nothing as the “*locus*” or place where being can be received and sustained (p. 84, 68v). Hence, at creation *nihil* does not disappear – being nowhere, where could it go? Rather, it remains created being’s indispensable base and vacuous milieu. Adding ‘nothing’ also highlights the polarity of hierarchy’s extremes, God and *nihil*. While God always exists and is above all created beings, *nihil* is below all beings and “infinite non-being” (102,70v). By ringing endless changes on this contrast, Charles makes the polarity itself inescapable: to think about God, we must think about nothing – and vice versa.²⁰ This leads to Bovelles’s distinctive logic of affirmation and negation. To clarify these considerations, let us turn to Charles’ mathematics and logic.

ZERO AND A SQUARE OF OPPOSITES

Eugene Ostashevsky has noted parallels between *De nihilo* and Bovelles’s novel analysis of zero. In the *Liber de duodecim numeris*, Charles proposes “that the very nothing (*nichil*) that is before all numbers and after which unity emerges into light be noted down before them by the

sign of privation or nullity. So before all numbers write nothing, that is, the meager little circle of privation 0 (*privationis orbiculum* o). Then write one, then two... all the way to nine”.²¹ Bovelles’s originality here is striking. Ostashevsky says that the *Liber de duodecim numeris* “is the earliest text I have found to put zero at the origin of the number sequence: 0.1.2.3...”²² Charles certainly goes beyond Cusanus who insists that in numbers “the minimum than which there cannot be anything less” is unity,²³ while for Bovelles the minimum is zero, which is clearly less than one.

As Maurice de Gandillac has noted, Charles extends zero’s role to geometry in a remarkable diagram in the *Ars Oppositorum* (Fig. 2). The specific proportions within the diagram are familiar: unity and point, dyad and line, triad and surface, and tetrad and solid or body. But Bovelles adds a new note by linking these proportions to nothing and zero. He writes,

In every series nothing is prior to the first [principle]. Nothing is simpler than the most simple. Just as in number nothing is before unity,

19 *Liber de nihilo*, 42, 63v. See Breton 1992, p. 23; and Aristotle, *Physics* I, 9, 182a.

20 See Breton 1992, p. 32. Ostashevsky similarly sees God and nothing as “mirror images of each other” (Ostashevsky 2000, pp. 178–179).

21 Bovelles, *Liber de duodecim numeris*, as cited in Ostashevsky 2000, p. 183.

22 Ostashevsky 2000, p.181.

23 Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia*, Bk. I, ch. 53; *Opera omnia*, vol. 1, p. 12, n. 13: “necessarium est in numero ad minimum deveniri, quod minus esse nequit, uti est unitas.” Speaking mathematically and metaphysically, Cusanus says “Monas... est numeri principium” (*De filiatione Dei*, ch. 4; *Opera omnia*, vol. 4, p. 53, n. 72). On Cusanus’ Pythagorean theology and Petrus Bungus’ use of it, see Blum 2010, pp. 21–42.

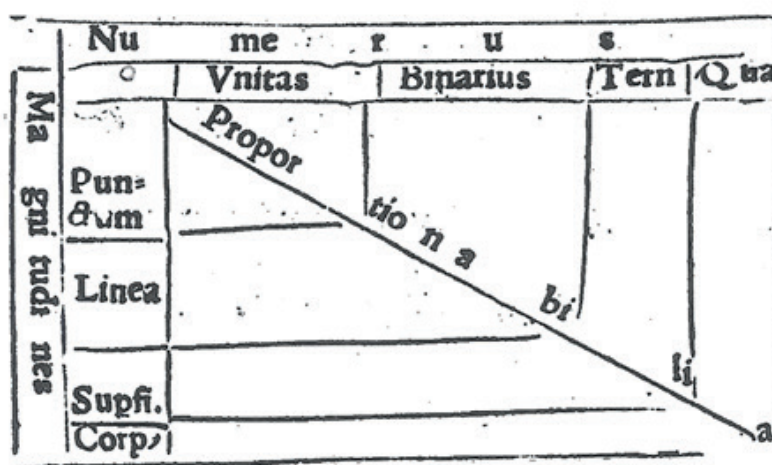


Figure 2. Zero, Number and Magnitude. Bovelles, *Ars oppositorum*; Bovelles 1511, p. 95r.
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

and less and simpler than it; so also in magnitudes we find something (*aliquid*) less and simpler than the point. Therefore, numbers are set out along one side of the angle, and magnitudes along the other. Nothing will be inscribed at the apex of the angle, which is either left empty, or indicated with the little mark of privation (*privationis notula designandus*).²⁴

Indeed, in the upper left corner, a diminutive zero anchors the diagram.

While placing zero before one was a major innovation in mathematics, extending it to number theory, geometry and theology causes problems – especially vis-a-vis the Pythagorean monad and its symbolic authority. Ostashevsky sees this conflict in the *Book of Twelve Numbers*, where zero threatens to unseat

the one. Bovelles attempts to honor both by affirming the monad as the origin and source (*fons*) of number, and zero as “the seat (*sedem*) of simple numbers.”²⁵ But zero begins to usurp the monad’s throne when Charles writes, “the seat which is noted by the circle of privation is to these numbers as God is to the immaterial substances of angels. For theologians exempt God from the angelic orders. They define him by privation and negation.... They name him the seat, support, state and position of angelic orders, and the perpetual custodian of being.”²⁶ Here zero provides an analogy for God, an analogy at once apophatic and ontological. For as a sign of negation prior to all numbers, zero represents God as transcendent nothingness and the power sustaining all being. As Ostashevsky argues, this analogy follows

24 Bovelles, *Ars oppositorum*, in Bovelles 1511, p. 95r; Bovelles 1984, p. 171. See Gandillac 1982, pp. 165–166.

25 Bovelles, *Liber de duodecim numeris*, as cited in Ostashevsky 2000, p. 183.

26 Bovelles, *Liber de duodecim numeris*, as cited in Ostashevsky 2000, p. 184.

Bovelles's method throughout the *Liber de duodecim numeris*, a numerological treatise guided by ontological reasoning: "Zero precedes the number sequence because, as nothing, it is like God, and God is the origin of things. And numbers are things."²⁷ In this respect the treatise works differently than the *Liber de nihilo*, which distinguishes between an order of "nature" or ontology, and an order of "reason (*ratio*)."²⁸ To clarify this distinction and its implications, we must look more closely at *De nihilo*'s dialectic.

Bovelles develops a distinctive logic of the extremes or limits of hierarchy – God and *nihil* – and their affirmation and negation. He illustrates this logic in several schemes based on a sharp distinction between the order of nature and that of reasoning or discourse. In each scheme, these two orders oppose each other, as thought-experiments reverse conclusions according to nature (112, 71v). One example will suggest how these schemes work. Charles writes,

According to nature, God is the affirmation and true positing (*positio*) of all things, and *nihil* is the true negation and removal (*ablatio*) of all things. But according to reasoning and understanding, divine affirmation and positing are... sterile and without issue, bearing neither offspring nor consequence. But the affirmation and positing of nothing – of non-being or what does not

exist – is most fertile and extensive, establishing the whole of things. On the other hand, in the understanding, divine negation is most potent, negating and destroying whatever exists. But negation of what does not exist remains sterile, negating only nothing (*nihil*). So the *negation of affirmation* is stronger and more productive than that of negation, and similarly the *affirmation of negation* than that of affirmation. For the negation of affirmation negates all things, and the affirmation of negation posits all things.²⁹

Bovelles illustrates this scheme with **Figure 3**.³⁰ Here the horizontal bars across the top and bottom represent the sterile reduplication of affirmation and negation, while the diagonals represent the paradoxical cross-fertilization between affirmation and negation.

Bovelles's argument and diagram may seem a mere logical game – a playful exercise in the "order or reason" – unless we grasp his view of how hierarchy works. He cites a standard Neoplatonic rule: "By nature, higher and prior beings can exist and subsist without later

27 Ostashevsky 2000, p. 181.

28 On this key distinction, see Miernowski 1998, pp. 79–80; and Ostashevsky 2000, pp. 180–181, 185–186.

29 *Liber de nihilo* 114, 72r; my emphasis. See Breton 1992, pp. 27–28; and Miernowski 1998, pp. 79–81.

30 This figure is typical of Bovelles's adaptations of Aristotelian logic's square of opposition. Instead of opposing propositions ("Every S is P"; "No S is P"), he opposes single terms within the square. A relevant example occurs in the *Ars oppositorum*: a square with *Deus* and *Nihil* in the top corners, and *Esse* and *Non-esse* in the lower corners (Bovelles 1511, f. 82v). See Banks 2008, pp. 393–395, 400–401; and Victor 1978, pp. 79–81.

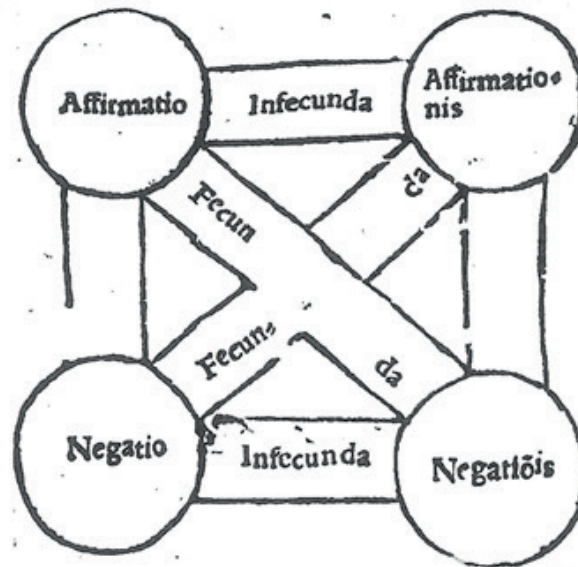


Figure 3. Affirmation and Negation. Bovelles, *Liber de Nihilo*; Bovelles 1511, p. 72r. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

and lower beings” (116, 71v), but succeeding beings cannot exist without the higher beings on which they depend. The lower stages of hierarchy are contingent upon those above them, and the whole structure upon its divine source. But in thought-experiments of reason, we can deduce nothing about the lower stages from the higher. Hence, if we affirm God’s existence, our affirmation is sterile because it tells us *only* that God exists; it implies nothing about the lower ranks of angels, human beings, and minerals – not even that they exist.³¹ The view from below, however, is quite different. If we affirm that minerals and rocks exist, their very contingency requires us to affirm that the higher ranks exist, up to God. Charles’s novel twist was to

extend this hierarchical order and logic beneath beings and matter to nothing or *nihil*, and to highlight its dialectical relation to God at hierarchy’s summit. Hence, to negate nothing or *nihil* is a sterile tautology, stating what we already know by definition: that *nihil* does not exist. But because *nihil* forms the base of Bovelles’s hierarchy, to affirm *nihil* – to suppose or posit that in some paradoxical sense it is or exists – is also to affirm that the entire hierarchy exists above it, all the way to God’s creative being. Hence the productive power of affirming the negation, *nihil* itself.

CONCLUSION

In *De nihilo* Charles de Bovelles gives us an impressive first venture into theology. But it certainly was not his last word. For as Joseph Victor has shown, Charles’s theology developed and

³¹ Magnard emphasizes Bovelles’s rejection of “*toutes formes d’émanatisme*” and “*nécessitarisme*” (Bovelles 1983, p. 143, n. 84).

changed in later works, including the *Theologicarum conclusionum libri decem* (1515). By 1515 Charles had left Paris for his native Picardy, where he lived on his family's estates and as a canon of Noyon cathedral until his death in 1567. He continued to write and publish, and two works reflect his longstanding contemplative bent and interest in mystical theology: the *Divinae caliginis liber* (1526), and the *De raptu divi Pauli libellus* (1531).³² In the latter Bovelles takes an experiential and ascetic turn as he discusses Paul's experience on the road to Damascus in terms of vision and rapture, and examines biblical narratives of Abraham and the prophets. He thus looks towards theology's third and highest form, where divine illumination leads the soul into ecstasy and "a hidden vision of God" (*De nihilo* 122, 73r). In contrast, *Divinae caliginis liber* revisits familiar terrain with Dionysius and Cusanus, but adds numerous biblical texts and exempla – thus marking a shift from his austere rational works like *De nihilo*.³³ Yet the speculative themes and structures remain intact, as Bovelles surveys Cusanus' geometrical images and learned ignorance vis-à-vis the divine, and expands on the dialectic of affirming and negating names of God in Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. Whereas *De nihilo* focused mainly on the *nihil privativum* beneath creation and matter, here Charles emphasizes the transcendent *nihil* of excess as naming God above being. For in the end, as Victor comments,

"Nothingness was the most universal negation for it negated all positive attributions concerning the divine, even God's position as Supreme Being. In this way the divine transcendence, unity, infinity, and eternity were stressed and brought into the sharpest possible focus, for only after God was nothing could He transcend all things and... be and not be all things and no things simultaneously."³⁴ This treatise thus continues and clarifies the theological agenda that Bovelles began in *De nihilo*.

Bovelles's *Liber de nihilo* was well timed, since 'nothing' came to flourish as a topic in Renaissance rhetoric, poetry, and academic disputations and texts. This became a mixed, "joco-serious" tradition, with both satiric works on 'nothing' and earnest theoretical analyses – often bound within the same books. Although Stanislas Breton suggests that Bovelles set this trend in motion,³⁵ a more likely candidate is Jean Passerat (1534–1602), a poet and professor of Latin at the College de France. Passerat's poem "*De nihilo*", published in 1583, was widely reprinted and provoked imitations and responses throughout the seventeenth century. Echoing Fredigius, the poem reifies '*nihil*' as naming an existing reality, only to launch into an extravagant praise of Nothing: "Nothing is more precious than gold.... Nothing is greater than Jove."³⁶ While this poem exemplifies the tradition's comic, absurdist strain, we see its

32 On these developments, see Victor 1978, pp. 145–147, 167–178.

33 Victor 1978, pp. 170–171.

34 Victor 1978, p. 177.

35 Breton 1992, p. 22.

36 Passerat 1583. See Archdeacon 2020, pp. 143–144.

more serious, speculative side in disputations and lectures on *nihil* in Marburg (1608), Wittenberg (1624), Jena (1764), and elsewhere. Venice became the scene for a carnival about nothing in 1634–35, when its presses published five works on the topic. Two of these are of special interest to us, because Bovelles figures in the exchange between Luigi Manzini and the French humanist Jacques Garafel. Responding to Manzini's lecture *Il niente*, Galafel published *Nihil, fere Nihil, minus Nihil, seu De Ente, non ente, et medio inter ente et non ens* – a title clearly

echoing Bovelles's *Liber de Nihilo*. Not surprisingly, Galafel also highlights negative theology, and cites Dionysius and Bovelles.³⁷ And like Charles, Manzini and Galafel link zero to *nihil*. Yet the high point in Bovelles's treatise's *Nachleben* came in 1661, when the Dutch philosopher Martin Schoock published his *Tractatus philosophicus de nihilo*. For Schoock not only commented on the *Liber de Nihilo*, but appended the entire text, along with Jean Passerat's poem *De nihilo*.³⁸ Today we can continue this tradition in our own modest ways.

37 See Archdeacon 2020, pp. 150–151; and Breton 1992, pp. 13–15, 17–18.

38 See Archdeacon 2020, pp. 143, 151–152; and Victor 1978, p.139.

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