

ABELARD'S ANSWERS TO PORPHYRY*

ABELARD inherited a tradition that began philosophical investigation with the initial questions of Porphyry's *Isagoge*, a tradition putting metaphysics, and in particular the problem of universals, at the centre of philosophy. In Abelard's version of Boethius's Latin translation, Porphyry's questions are as follows:¹

Mox de generibus et speciebus illud quidem siue subsistant siue in solis nudis purisque intellectibus posita sint siue ipsa subsistentia sint corporalia an incorporalia, et utrum separata an in sensibilibus et circa ea constantia, dicere recusabo.

As regards genera and species, for the present I shall refuse to say whether they subsist or are postulated in understandings that are alone and bare and pure; or whether, if they subsist, they are corporeal or incorporeal; and whether they are separated from sensibles or are postulated in sensibles and things going along with them.

Abelard acknowledges the tradition but wants no part of it:²

Among dialecticians there is always a special question about universals on this score, one so important that Porphyry, although he wrote about universals in the *Isagoge*, did not also venture to settle it, declaring "Matters of this sort are the most profound"... as though the whole art of dialectic were summed up in the theory of universals!

In his extended literal glosses on the *Isagoge*, namely the first book of the *Logica 'ingredientibus'* and the only surviving book of the *Logica 'nostrorum*

* All translations are my own. For textual details and citations, see the Bibliography at the end. I give references to Geyer's editions of the *Logica 'ingredientibus'* and the *Logica 'nostrorum petitioni sociorum'* for convenience; the texts given here are taken directly from the manuscripts.

¹ Porphyry, *isag.* 1.9–13: αὐτίκα περὶ τῶν γενῶν τε καὶ εἰδῶν τὸ μὲν εἶτε ὑφέστηκεν εἶτε καὶ ἐν μόναις ψιλαῖς ἐπινοίαις κεῖται εἶτε καὶ ὑφεστηκότα σώματά ἐστιν ἢ ἀσώματα καὶ πότερον χωριστὰ ἢ ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς καὶ περὶ ταῦτα ὑφεστῶτα, παρατηρησομαι λέγειν... I have assembled Abelard's version of Boethius's translation from his lemmata. The variations from Minio-Paluello's critical edition of Boethius's translation (5.10–14) are minimal—Abelard's text here is closest to Minio-Paluello's C^b, with *subsistunt, sint*, and *sint corporalia* for *subsistent, sunt*, and *corporalia sunt* respectively.

² Abelard, *hist. cal.* 65.91–66.100: Et quoniam de uniuersalibus in hoc ipso praecipua semper est apud dialeticos quaestio ac tanta ut eam Porphyrius quoque in Isagogis suis cum de uniuersalibus scriberet definire non praesumeret, dicens: Altissimum enim est huiusmodi negotium... quasi in hac scilicet de uniuersalibus sententia tota huius artis consisteret summa.

petitioni sociorum;³ Abelard holds that Porphyry’s questions are merely examples of the sorts of questions that could be raised, and that as they stand they are conceptually confused; only by extensive reinterpretation can they be made to make sense—roughly, by being recast as questions in semantics rather than metaphysics, in which guise they can be answered straightforwardly. Hence the ‘problem of universals’, far from being at the centre of philosophy, involves such deep confusion that it is best dismissed or interpreted away rather than solved: the moral of Abelard’s nominalism.

The focus here is on what Abelard understands to be involved in Porphyry’s questions and what they entail, not on the details of his critique of realist theories of universals, or even the details of his own positive account of universal words; these aren’t needed to understand Abelard’s claims about Porphyry. Section 1 focuses on Abelard’s claim that Porphyry’s questions do not have a special status. Section 2 considers Abelard’s twofold way of construing of Porphyry’s final phrase “and things going along with them.” Section 3 takes up Abelard’s strategy for dealing with the traditional reading of Porphyry’s questions. Section 4 describes Abelard’s many answers to Porphyry. I conclude by reflecting on whether Abelard’s strategy is successful.

1. “Other Questions Similiarly Difficult”

Porphyry’s rationale for raising and then dismissing his questions at the start of the *Isagoge* had long been lost by Abelard’s time. The meagre philosophical inheritance of the twelfth century was concentrated in the fixed cycle of seven works comprising the *logica vetus*:⁴ Porphyry’s *Isagoge*; Aristotle’s *Categories* and *De interpretatione*; Boethius’s *On Division*,

³ Some abbreviated literal glosses on the *Isagoge* purportedly by Abelard also survive, the *Introductiones paruulorum* (if indeed these are to be identified with the text so-named and edited by Dal Pra), but the discussion of Porphyry’s questions there is perfunctory, taking less than a page. Presumably Abelard discussed Porphyry’s questions at length at the beginning of his *Dialectica*, which we do not now have. The anonymous *Glossae ‘secundum uocales’* is not an original work of Abelard’s but a pastiche of the *Logica ‘ingredientibus’* and the *Logica ‘nostrorum petitioni sociorum’*, along the lines of other student commentaries, and accordingly I shall ignore it.

⁴ Abelard, *dial.* 146.10–17: Sunt autem tres quorum septem codicibus omnis in hac arte eloquentia latina armatur. Aristotelis enim duos tantum, Praedicamentorum scilicet et Periermenias libros, usus adhuc Latinorum cognouit; Porphyrii uero unum, qui uidelicet de quinque uocibus conscriptus (genere scilicet, specie, differentia, proprio et accidente), introductionem ad ipsa praeparat Praedicamenta; Boethii autem quattuor in consuetudinem duximus, librum uidelicet Diuisionum et Topicorum cum Syllogismis tam Categoricalis quam Hypotheticis.

De topicis differentiis, *Categorical Syllogisms*, and *Hypothetical Syllogisms*.⁵ Porphyry and Aristotle were known in Boethius's translations, accompanied by Boethius's commentaries—two on the *Isagoge*,⁶ one on the *Categories*, two on the *Perihermeneias*. The position of the *Isagoge* at the beginning of the cycle made it natural to read it as an introduction to not merely Aristotle's *Categories* but the whole of philosophy, as represented in the *logica vetus*. Since Porphyry's questions are the first philosophical questions raised in the *Isagoge*, on the heels of his introductory remarks, their position alone guaranteed them attention; Porphyry's repeated characterization of them as 'profound' (*altissimum* = βαθυτάτης) and fit only for advanced enquiry made it all but inevitable, no matter what Porphyry's intentions may have been, that his questions would be regarded as among the most fundamental.

Porphyry's *Isagoge* did not travel alone. It arrived in the twelfth century accompanied by Boethius's greater commentary, which put the finishing touches on the 'traditional' way of understanding Porphyry's questions. Boethius takes them to pose a problem which he represents as a dilemma (1.10): genera and species are either real items in the world or mere fictitious concepts; they cannot be real, since no thing is really common to many; but if they are mere fictitious concepts, they do not accurately portray the world; thus the metaphysical enterprise should be abandoned.⁷ Whatever one may think of the dilemma—Boethius himself rejects it in the end as sophistical (1.11)—the implications for the status of Porphyry's questions are clear. Boethius takes them to pose a *single* problem,⁸ one that revolves around the conundrum of metaphysical commonness. Furthermore, the philosophical stakes are higher than Porphyry suggested. Not only is the problem of universals one of the most fundamental, it is the very foundation of metaphysics, which cannot proceed until it is properly resolved. Hence the centrality of the problem of universals in twelfth-century metaphysics. Porphyry's questions, thus understood, pose *the* central problem of philosophy.

⁵ Boethius's commentary on Cicero's *Topics* was known but not considered part of the cycle; so too Calcidius's partial translation of and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. Abelard breathlessly reports having seen a Latin translation of Aristotle's *De sophisticis elenchi*, the first of the *logica noua* to be available in his day.

⁶ Boethius's lesser commentary on the *Isagoge* did circulate in Abelard's day, though he himself makes no use of it, and perhaps did not know it.

⁷ Boethius, *in isag. maior* 1.10 163.21–22: omnis haec sit deponenda de his quinque propositis disputandi cura.

⁸ Boethius achieves this unity by assimilating all Porphyry's questions to the first, which poses the stark alternatives (*ambiguitas*) of his dilemma.

Abelard, however, does not accord Porphyry's questions the special role they were granted traditionally. After citing Porphyry's text, Abelard immediately adds:⁹

Other questions similarly difficult can also be framed about genera and species, such as one about the common cause of the imposition of universal nouns—which is this: according to what do diverse things agree?—or even about the understanding of universal nouns, in which no thing seems to be conceived; nor is any thing dealt with by the universal utterance, and many other difficulties.

There is nothing privileged about Porphyry's questions; "other questions similarly difficult" could easily be raised, and, to prove it, Abelard offers some examples, gesturing at "many other difficulties." Porphyry has at best taken only a step in the right direction.

The traditional reading is correct in thinking that Porphyry's text points to philosophical problems that have a life of their own. Yet Abelard thinks it doesn't draw the proper moral from this conclusion. The traditional reading puts the problem of metaphysical commonness at the centre, inspired by a particular interpretation of Porphyry's text. Abelard offers an way to frame the discussion that does not presuppose the answer to be a matter of metaphysics.¹⁰

Since things as well as words seem to be called universals, it should be investigated how the definition of the universal can be appropriate to things.

Abelard starts not from Porphyry or Boethius, but from Aristotle's 'definition' of the universal in *De int.* 7 17^a40–41 as "what is naturally apt to be predicated of many" (*quod in pluribus natum est praedicari*). Predication is, at least in part, a linguistic affair; words are indeed predicated of words. The issue is whether predication is more than a linguistic affair, whether things are somehow 'naturally apt to be predicated of many' as well. The philosophical issue is completely general, as Abelard points out:¹¹

⁹ *log. ingr.* 1 8.11–16: Possunt et aliae fieri de eisdem quae similiter difficiles sunt, sicut est illa de communi causa impositionis uniuersalium nominum quae ipsa sit, secundum quod scilicet res diuersae conueniunt, uel illa etiam de intellectu uniuersalium nominum, quo nulla res concipi uidetur nec de aliqua re agi per uniuersalem uocem, et aliae multae difficiles.

¹⁰ *log. ingr.* 1 10.8–9: Cum autem tam res quam uoces uniuersales dici uideantur, quaerendum est qualiter rebus definitio uniuersalis possit aptari.

¹¹ *log. ingr.* 1 9.12–17: Nunc autem ad suprapositas quaestiones, ut promisimus, redeamus easque diligenter et perquiramus et soluamus. Et quoniam genera et species uniuersalia esse constat in quibus omnium generaliter uniuersalium naturam tangit,

Let us now return to the questions posed above, as we promised, and let us carefully investigate and resolve them. And since it is the case that genera and species are universals, in which one touches on the nature of all universals generally, let us here distinguish universals in common by the distinctive properties belonging to each and investigate whether they are suitable to words only or to things as well.

What is naturally apt to be predicated of many—words only, or things as well? The issue is raised by Porphyry’s questions, but does not depend solely on them. Abelard flatly states his intention to investigate “the nature of all universals” by uncovering their common distinctive properties. This is a deeper point than one might at first imagine. A complete analysis is best represented by an aristotelian definition; in the strictest sense, a definition is given by citing the proximate genus and the specific differentia of the definiendum.¹² However, not everything has a definition in the strictest sense: some things have no genus—for example, ‘universal’. Boethius says as much when he points out that Porphyry, giving several senses of ‘genus,’ is careful to call them “descriptions”:¹³

Porphyry carefully says he is ‘describing’ rather than ‘defining’ [the genus], for definition comes about from a genus, but ‘genus’ isn’t able to have another genus. . . Hence if one had wanted to include ‘genus’ in a definition, in no way would one have been able to, for ‘genus’ would not have something that could be placed before it [in the definition]. Consequently, Porphyry says that he is fashioning a description rather than a definition.

Where no definition is possible, an alternative that is nearly as good may be available: a description picking out the common distinctive properties of something, so that the description applies to it alone.¹⁴ The most obvious

nos hic communiter uniuersalium per singularium proprietates distinguamus et utrum hae solis uocibus seu etiam rebus conueniant perquiramus.

¹² As Abelard was well aware: *log. ingr.* 1 6.16–21, *dial.* 584.16–23.

¹³ Boethius, *in isag. maior* 2.4 180.20–181.7: Diligenter uero ait describentes, non definientes; definitio enim fit ex genere, genus autem aliud genus habere non poterit. Idque obscurius est quam ut primo aditu dictum pateat. Fieri autem potest ut res quae alii genus sit, alii generi supponatur, non quasi genus sed tamquam species sub alio collocata. Unde non in eo quod genus est, supponi alicui potest sed cum supponitur, ilico species fit. Quae cum ita sint, ostenditur genus ipsum in eo quod genus est, genus habere non posse. Si igitur uoluisset genus definitione concludere, nullo modo potuisset; genus enim aliud quod ei posset praeponere, non haberet, atque idcirco descriptionem ait esse factam, non definitionem.

¹⁴ Porphyry and Boethius take ‘description’ (*descriptio* = ὑπογραφή) as the nontechnical explanation of a term (its common meaning), whereas the definition is the technical

example of a description in this sense is the characterization associated with a highest genus. Substance, for instance, has no genus above it in terms of which it could be defined. In *cat.* 5, Aristotle lists several identifying marks of substance: it has no contrary (3^b24); it is not susceptible to more and less (3^b33–34). But Aristotle identifies as the ‘common distinctive property’ of substance that it can remain numerically one and the same while admitting contraries (4^a10–11). This descriptive phrase is extensionally equivalent to the term ‘substance’. It is not a definition, since it does not pick out a (higher) genus and give a differentia.

So too with the universal. There is no definition of the universal, but Aristotle’s description of it as what is “naturally apt to be predicated of many” spells out its common distinctive property. The problem of universals, on Abelard’s reading, is thus to determine whether this description applies “to words only or to things as well.” Notoriously, Abelard argues that it applies to words only.

According to Abelard, then, Porphyry’s questions introduce a philosophical issue, the solution of which involves rejecting metaphysical commonness and turning instead to the philosophy of language—all generality, for Abelard, is linguistic generality. Porphyry’s questions therefore do bring us to semantics. But only in due time, and they pose neither foundational questions in the philosophy of language nor the only interesting problems to confront. Abelard, in short, debunks the traditional importance accorded the *Isagoge*.

2. “And Things Going Along With Them”

Porphyry ends his list of questions with the throwaway phrase “and things going along with them” (*et circa ea constantia* = καὶ περὶ ταῦτα ὑφειστώτα),¹⁵ likely meant to describe the way in which genera and species would be “postulated in sensibles,” left deliberately vague. On this construal, the final phrase is grammatically part of the second alternative introduced by *utrum* = πότερον, along with *in sensibilibus* = ὑφειστηρότα

analysis of the meaning of a term given by the philosopher.

¹⁵ Boethius’s rendering of ὑφειστώτα by *constantia* is peculiar, since it is a form of ὑφίστασθαι, a technical term Boethius translates explicitly as *substare* in his *euty.* 3 216.206–213: Nam quod Graeci οὐσίωσιν uel οὐσιοῦσθαι dicunt, id nos subsistentiam uel subsistere appellamus; quod uero illi ὑπόστασιν uel ὑφίστασθαι, id nos substantiam uel substare interpretamur. Subsistit enim quod ipsum accidentibus, ut possit esse, non indiget. Substat autem id quod aliis accidentibus subiectum quoddam, ut esse ualeant, subministrat; sub illis enim stat, dum subiectum est accidentibus.

σώματα; genera and species are postulated in sensibles and are things ‘going along’ with sensibles, inherent in them.

Abelard, however, seems never to have read the phrase in this way. (Boethius does not comment on the phrase.) He instead takes it to be coördinate with the main verb ‘I shall refuse to say’ (*dicere recusabo* = παραπήσομαι λέγειν), so that the sense of the passage is that Porphyry refuses to answer any of the initial three questions as well as say “things going along with them.”¹⁶ Abelard proposes two ways to construe the passage, depending on what the final ‘them’ (*ea* = ταῦτα) refers to: either (a) the three questions, or (b) genera and species.

Abelard’s proposal was novel enough to be remarked upon in two later anonymous twelfth-century logic texts, the *Summa sophisticorum elenchorum* and the *Tractatus de dissimilitudine argumentorum*, who call (a) the ‘positive’ construal of Porphyry’s throwaway phrase and (b) the ‘interrogative’ construal (presumably since it leads to a ‘fourth question’).¹⁷ I’ll adopt their terminology in discussing Abelard’s account.

2.1 The Positive Construal

First, suppose ‘them’ refers to Porphyry’s three questions. If so, the final

¹⁶ A third way of reading καὶ περὶ ταῦτα ὑφ’εστῶτα was common in late Antiquity, namely to take it as introducing a third alternative in Porphyry’s third question: Whether genera and species are (a) separated from sensible things, (b) are postulated in sensible things, or (c) ‘go along’ with sensible things. When properly understood, each alternative holds—the nature *ante rem* for (a), which exists prior to sensible individuals in the Mind of the Demiurge; the nature *in re* for (b), as the immanent form that makes an individual to be what it is; and the nature *post rem* for (c), where what ‘goes along’ with sensible things is the nature as conceived in the mind. Versions of this account can be found in Simplicius, Philoponus, Ammonius, David, and Elias: see Barnes [2003] 44 n. 82.

¹⁷ *Tractatus de dissimilitudine argumentorum* 475.26–32: Fit sophisma accentus in Porphyrio hoc modo, ut quidam interrogatiue legunt quae positiue deberent legi, ut ibi: RECUSABO DICERE CONSTANTIA CIRCA EA. Quidam enim interrogatiue legunt dicentes: ET RECUSABO DICERE UTRUM GENERA ET SPECIES SINT CONSTANTIA CIRCA EA, et sunt quattuor quaestiones. Alii positiue legunt sic: ET RECUSABO DICERE CONSTANTIA CIRCA EA, de quibus erat Abaelardus. —Omitting De Rijk’s editorial additions, which obscure the point at issue, namely what *constantia circa ea* should be construed with. The parallel passage in the *Summa sophisticorum elenchorum* 325.10–16 is less clear, since takes the interrogative construal to result in three choices, rather than two, for Porphyry’s third question: Fit sophisma accentus uel prosodiae in Porphyrio. Quod faciebat Magister Petrus legens interrogatiue quae positiue legenda erant. Ut ibi: RECUSABO DICERE UTRUM GENERA ET SPECIES SINT POSITA IN SENSIBILIBUS AN EXTRA AN SINT CONSTANTIA CIRCA EA. Et sic faciebat trimembrem istam ultimam quaestionem. Nos uero facientes illam quaestionem bimembrem legimus positiue, hoc scilicet: RECUSABO DICERE CONSTANTIA CIRCA EA.

phrase would then introduce a positive general remark on the same level which is not itself a question. In his *Introductiones paruulorum* Abelard adopts this construal and takes ‘things going along with them’ to mean, roughly, ‘other [questions] comparable to them’:¹⁸

And I SHALL REFUSE to give THINGS GOING ALONG WITH THEM, namely questions that are like them in difficulty.

Elsewhere Abelard is more vague:¹⁹

We can take it as though saying: I SHALL REFUSE TO ANSWER these three questions posed above regarding [genera and species], as well as some other THINGS GOING ALONG WITH THEM, that is, along with these three questions.

In *log. nostr.* 1 528.10–12 Abelard offers a recognizable variant of the same construal:²⁰

AS REGARDS GENERA AND SPECIES, I SHALL ALSO REFUSE TO SAY THINGS THAT GO ALONG WITH THEM, *i. e.* with respect to those three questions—namely, criticisms and rebuttals.

Abelard replaces *constantia* with *ea quae consistunt*, making the sense of the phrase explicit: Porphyry refuses to answer the questions and likewise to provide those things that go along with answering them, namely arguments and objections and replies, here pithily described as “criticisms and rebuttals.”

2.2 The Interrogative Construal

Second, suppose ‘them’ refers to genera and species. If so, the final phrase would then introduce another question on the same level as the preceding three (with an implicit *utrum sint*): “I shall [also] refuse to say [whether there are] things going along with genera and species.” This is Abelard’s notorious fourth question, paralleling Porphyry’s initial three, and his preferred ‘interrogative’ construal of Porphyry’s final phrase. Its

¹⁸ *intr. paru.* 1 5.11–12: ET CONSTANTIA CIRCA EA RECUSABO dare*, scilicet quaestiones affines istis in difficultate. [*Perhaps better DICERE.] There is an echo of this view in a commentary on the *Isagoge* attributed to Roscelin in Iwakuma [1992]: Non solum istas RECUSABO, sed etiam CIRCA EA CONSTANTIA*, id est quaestiones affines his. [**consistentia* MS] —De Libera [1999] 299 reads these passages as allowing for Abelard’s infamous ‘fourth question’. Perhaps, though that is better linked to the interrogative construal discussed in the next section.

¹⁹ *log. ingr.* 1 8.9–11: Sic enim possimus accipere ac si dicat: haec tria supra posita de eis RECUSABO DICERE ET alia quaedam CONSTANTIA CIRCA EA, quippe istas tres quaestiones.

²⁰ Haec supra DE GENERIBUS ET SPECIEBUS RECUSABO DICERE ET EA QUAE CONSISTUNT CIRCA EA, id est circa illas tres quaestiones, scilicet impugnationes et defensiones.

sense is not perspicuous. What does it mean for something to ‘go along’ with genera and species?

The answer comes from a surprising quarter. In mediæval logic, a term is said to have ‘things going along’ (*constantia*) with it when its extension is non-empty, when there actually is something to which it applies: the referent ‘goes along’ with the term, so that it must denote. This usage, common in later mediæval logicians, was customary in the twelfth century. Abelard himself uses it in this sense to guarantee the reliability of propositional conversions, which otherwise would fail were a term empty.²¹ Hence on the interrogative construal, Porphyry is asking whether genera and species must be non-empty. So Abelard:²²

We may add a fourth question like this: WHETHER THINGS GO ALONG WITH GENERA AND SPECIES, *i. e.* whether [genera and species] must contain some things as subjects by appellation, or whether they can still remain universals were the things destroyed.

Abelard is more explicit in his *Logica ‘ingredientibus’*:²³

We can explain AND THINGS GOING ALONG WITH THEM such that we may add a fourth question, namely whether genera and species, so long as they are genera and species, must have some thing as subject by reference—or, if the things referred to were destroyed, the universal can then also consist in its signification (which is the understanding), *e. g.* the noun ‘rose’ when there are no roses to which it is common.

Abelard couches his fourth question in semantic terms: whether a noun succeeds in referring to a thing, whether there is a subject to which the noun applies, whether its extension is non-empty (or ‘contains’ something). Even granting the legitimacy of his fourth question, however, we need not

²¹ Abelard, *dial.* 400.30–406.25 above all, but see also 210.1, 325.8, 347.33, 371.34ff. The term *constantia* has exactly the same sense in the anonymous twelfth-century logic treatise *Ars Emmerana* 157.28. Walter of Mortagne glosses it as *subiectio rerum* when describing Abelard’s views in his *Tractatus ‘quoniam de generali’* (discussed in Section 4.4).

²² *log. nostr.* 1 528.13–16: Quartam adnectamus quaestionem hoc modo: UTRUM CONSTANTIA SINT CIRCA illa duo, id est GENERA ET SPECIES, necesse sit ea aliquas res subiectas per appellationem continere, an destructis rebus uniuersalia permanere possint.

²³ Abelard, *log. ingr.* 1 8.16–22: Possumus sic exponere ET CIRCA EA CONSTANTIA ut quartam quaestionem adnectamus, scilicet utrum et genera et species, quamdiu genera et species sunt, necesse sit subiectam per nominationem rem aliquam habere an ipsis quoque nominatis rebus destructis ex significatione intellectus tunc quoque possit uniuersale consistere, ut hoc nomen ‘rosa’ quando nulla est rosarum quibus commune sit.

follow Abelard in taking it to be semantic. A realist version of a fourth question might be whether there are instanceless universals, that is, whether universals persist in the absence of anything exemplifying them, or instead they somehow existentially depend on their instances. Abelard, of course, has no truck with any kind of realism, but his exegetical strategy here—finding a fourth question in Porphyry's throwaway remark—can be prised apart from his own philosophical position.

The interrogative construal is Abelard's preferred way to read Porphyry's final phrase, perhaps because the 'logical' sense of *constantia* was uppermost in his mind—hardly surprising in the greatest logician since antiquity!—as well as offering a creative new gloss on an otherwise all-too-familiar passage. Whatever its attractions, however, it is not a possible way to construe Porphyry's Greek, since ὑπεστῶτα does not bear the sense 'nonemptiness' carried by *constantia*. If anything, the interrogative construal reverses the natural interpretation of the Greek noted at the start of Section 2, since it asks whether things are associated with genera and species, rather than describing how genera and species (somehow) accompany sensible things. Abelard's interrogative construal is an artifact of Boethius's translation and the evolution of logical terminology.

3. "Nothing Is Against It"

Abelard treats Porphyry's text as a springboard to his own independent investigation of the issues they touch upon, most notably the problem of universals. He argues at length that there cannot be any real metaphysical commonness; no object could satisfy Boethius's criteria for the universal, *i. e.* being present as a whole in many at once so as to constitute their substance, making the individual in which it is present what it is.²⁴ In his discussion Abelard adopts Boethius's own dialectical strategy by first attacking the view that the universal is a real constituent of each individual thing, and thereafter the view that the universal is the collection of things; to this Abelard adds further arguments against a family of views that identify the universal with the individual thing in some fashion.²⁵ Putting aside the details, the main thrust of Abelard's arguments is that metaphysical

²⁴ Boethius, *in isag. maior* 1.10 161.16–22 and 162.16–163.3, an account parallel to *in cat.* 164C–D (taken from Porphyry's *in cat.* 62.19–33); see further King [2004].

²⁵ See *log. ingr.* 1 10.15–16, 31.23–31, and *log. nostr.* 1 528.28–529.21 for Abelard's understanding of Boethius's strategy in the latter's *in isag. maior* 1.10 161.15–163.5. The last-mentioned views are 'realist' in virtue of identifying the universal with some real thing or things said to satisfy Boethius's criteria.

commonness is not merely false or mistaken or wrongheaded. Worse by far, it is *incoherent*.

To the extent that Porphyry's questions presume a coherent account of metaphysical commonness, they are to Abelard hopelessly confused. And presume they do: for all Abelard's irrealism, he recognizes the force of the 'traditional' reading of Porphyry.²⁶ This presents Abelard with a difficulty: Porphyry's questions apparently call for an impossible reply, a positive and coherent account of metaphysical commonness. What to do?

Abelard responds with a strategy to reinterpret Porphyry's text, a way of finding what sense he can in the conceptual confusion embedded in Porphyry's questions. His strategy is fairly common among philosophers—interpreting a question in a different fashion so as to make it make sense. He formulates his strategy as follows (*log. ingr.* 1 28.7–15):²⁷

Nothing is against it if the person putting the question forward were to take some words in one way in asking it, while the person who responds to it takes them differently in giving his response. . . . The words can be taken in exactly the same way everywhere, by the respondent as well as the questioner (in which case a single question will not be posed), through opposites belonging to the preceding alternatives of two dialectical questions, namely these: (a) whether genera and species exist, or not; (b) whether they are postulated in understandings that are alone and bare and pure, or not.

The same approach is sketched elsewhere as well (*log. nostr.* 1 525.23–28):²⁸

Anyone who addresses the views and transferences employed by authorities knows not only what the questioner precisely intends to talk

²⁶ So Abelard's initial account of Porphyry's text in *log. ingr.* 1 7.34–8.4: *Prima autem est huiusmodi: UTRUM GENERA ET SPECIES SUBSISTANT AN SINT POSITA IN SOLIS etc., ac si diceret: utrum uerum esse habeant an tantum in opinione consistant. Secunda uero est, si concedantur ueraciter esse, utrum essentiae corporales sint an incorporales, tertia uero, utrum separata sint a sensibilibus an in eis posita. Duae sunt namque incorporeorum species, quia alia praeter sensibilia ipsa in sua incorporeitate permanere possunt, ut Deus et anima, alia uero praeter sensibilia ipsa in quibus sunt, nullatenus esse ualent, ut linea absque subiecto corpore.*

²⁷ *Nihil autem obest si proponens quaestionem aliter quasdam uoces accipiat in quaerendo, aliter qui soluit in soluendo. . . . Possunt et eodem penitus modo uoces ubique accipi tam ab solute quam a quaerente, et tunc fiet una quaestio per opposita de prioribus membris duarum dialecticarum quaestionum, harum scilicet: utrum sint uel non sint, et item utrum sint posita in solis et nudis et puris uel non.*

²⁸ *Qui uero ad doctrinam loquitur et ad translationem quibus usi sunt auctores, cognoscit non tantum illud quod quaerens diligenter intendit discutere, uerum et membra diuisionis quam quaerens per opposita fieri intendebat; quodammodo non esse opposita asserit, uerbis tamen aliter acceptis in discussione quam ille in inquisitione.*

about, but also the alternatives the questioner meant to pose through opposites. The [respondent] holds that in a certain way the alternative aren't opposites, taking the words in his analysis otherwise than the questioner does in putting the question forward.

Abelard reconceptualizes his reading of and commenting on Porphyry as a dialectical exchange. Porphyry's questions are posed by one of the participants in the exchange, the 'questioner' (*quaerens*). The other participant tries to answer the questions, the 'respondent' (*soluens*).²⁹ The full array of dialectical moves are open to these two figures. In particular, the respondent has a great deal of freedom *vis-à-vis* the questions posed by the questioner: "nothing is against it" if he deliberately reads the question otherwise than the questioner intended. Hence the first part of Abelard's reinterpretation strategy is to recast Porphyry's questions so that they make good sense—knowing full well that Porphyry did not mean them to be taken as Abelard does.

There must be constraint on such reinterpretation; not even Abelard would accept a rereading of Porphyry's questions as being about plumbing or romance. His practice is to abide by a principle of charity, so that a reinterpretation is legitimate if it makes much of what an author says both true and sensible.³⁰ One of Abelard's favoured devices for reinterpretation is to identify instances of 'transference': cases where a word is taken from its proper domain of applicability and given an analogous, though improper, usage in another domain. The realist language used in discussing metaphysical commonness is best understood, Abelard maintains, as transferred from its proper semantic domain. For example, the claim that human nature is present in Socrates and Plato is best understood as the disguised or transferred semantic claim that common noun 'man' refers equally to Socrates and to Plato.

The second part of Abelard's strategy is for the respondent to split each of Porphyry's questions into two, each of which is a proper 'dialectical' question in the sense sketched by Aristotle, namely one to which the respondent may select either of a pair of exclusive and exhaustive contradictory op-

²⁹ In *log. nostr.* 1 526.4–5 Abelard calls the respondent *magister*. It is unclear whether Abelard is thinking of the conventions for actual debate or offering a self-depiction (or for that matter whether it is the scribe's own description of Abelard). The dialectical situation Abelard describes here has obvious affinities with the topical tradition on the one hand, and treatises on *obligationes* on the other hand.

³⁰ More than most was Abelard aware of the need for self-conscious hermeneutics; he offers some guidelines in the Preface to his *Sic et non* along these lines.

posites.³¹ “Is the ball red or green?” is not a proper dialectical question, since the ball might be blue and hence neither red nor green. Abelard’s strategy is to replace this improper question with two proper dialectical questions, each taking up one of the original alternatives: “Is the ball red or not?” and “Is the ball green or not?” (The ball *qua* physical object must have some colour.) So too with Porphyry’s three questions, each of which is improper and resolvable into two proper dialectical questions.³² Since Abelard’s fourth question is already in proper dialectical form, this makes a total of seven questions posed in Porphyry’s text (on the interrogative construal). Astonishingly, Abelard thinks he can find readings for which *each* of these seven questions is given an affirmative answer!

4. Questions and Answers

Abelard’s positive account of universals as words is subtle and sophisticated. Most of the subtlety and sophistication, however, isn’t needed to understand his replies to Porphyry’s questions. In fact, little more is needed than a distinction that has been a staple of contemporary philosophy. For Abelard rejects the traditional Augustinian view of language as a system of signs, which takes the meaning of a sign roughly to be the thing it signifies,³³ and replaces it with his breakthrough distinction between sense (*significatio*) and reference (*nominatio*). The former is a quasi-psychological property, in some respects like Fregean *Sinn*;³⁴ it is a matter of the causal force a term has in giving rise to an understanding—in first approximation, the sense of

³¹ Aristotle, *De int.* 11 20^b15–30. This passage, in tandem with Boethius’s commentary on it (*in isag. maior* 11 357–358) and his account of dialectical questions in *top. diff.* 10.5–11.9, is clearly Abelard’s inspiration for his dialectical re-reading of Porphyry. His own commentary on Aristotle’s text is instructive: *log. ingr.* 3.11 §§19–21 (Geyer 474.20–475.6). Aristotle’s further remarks about dialectical questions in the *Topics* and *De soph. el.* were not available to Abelard.

³² Why doesn’t Abelard further resolve at least the ‘second’ half of Porphyry’s first question? It seems as though it should be resolved into three proper dialectical questions: (a) “Are genera and species postulated in understandings that are alone, or not?”; (b) “Are genera and species postulated in understandings that are bare, or not?”; and (c) “Are genera and species postulated in understandings that are pure, or not?”

³³ Augustine, *De magistro*. Anselm is an Augustinian in his philosophy of language, for instance. The problems with trying to make a single semantic relation (signification) do all the work are well-known, caricatured by Gilbert Ryle as “the ‘Fido’–Fido theory of meaning.” Others before Abelard had read texts *in uoce* and *in re*, but Abelard was the first to elevate the distinction into a fundamental and systematic principle of semantics.

³⁴ Abelardian *significatio* differs from Fregean *Sinn* in two important respects. First,

a term is what its expression would cause most competent speakers of the language to think of.³⁵ This guarantees a certain measure of objectivity to sense, since different people have the ‘same’ understanding.³⁶ The identity of understandings, and the proper sense of a term, may be spelled out by the term’s definition: the sense of ‘human being’ is *rational mortal animal*, for instance, even though humans can be conceived in an endless variety of ways. Hence an understanding that attends to rationality and mortality and animality in a unified whole is an understanding of human beings, and is the sense associated with ‘human being’.

Reference is the semantic prerogative of nouns and noun phrases above all, linking words to the world. Its paradigmatic form is naming; hence Abelard’s general term for reference, *nominatio*, is the verbal form derived from ‘name’/‘noun’, *nomen*. What it is for a noun to have reference? Abelard, in keeping with twelfth-century practice, assimilates this question to the question of how a noun acquires its reference. This takes place through imposition (*impositio*), a performative act akin to baptism, which by fiat associates a linguistic item with things in the world. The reference of a proper noun is fixed arbitrarily, as ‘Socrates’ is associated with Socrates. The reference of a common noun is fixed by the nature of the thing to which it is applied: ‘human’ is associated with whatever is a rational mortal animal, for instance, since that is human nature, though it would refer to humans even if we were ignorant of what human nature consists in. (Thus ‘water’ refers to whatever is H₂O, rather than XYZ, regardless of our knowledge of water’s nature or our ability to correctly identify samples.) Despite the apparent appeal to ‘nature’, Abelard thinks that no abstract entities are appealed to; ‘human’ refers to Socrates and Plato in virtue of

whereas sense determines reference for Frege, Abelard takes the sense and the reference of a term to be independent. Second, unlike Frege, Abelard is willing to talk about psychological features of sense: its connection to mental images, for instance.

³⁵ This account of meaning (*significatio*) is derived from Aristotle, *De int.* 116^a1–14 and *De int.* 316^b20–22, as translated and commented upon by Boethius. Particular inscriptions or utterances are variously said to ‘generate’ or ‘constitute’ or ‘express’ an understanding—for instance, *log. ingr.* 2.1 136.31–32 and *dial.* 112.30, two passages of many. See further King [2007].

³⁶ In *dial.* 54.5–17 Abelard solves the puzzle of different people hearing one and the same term and being caused to have different understandings, by appealing to the way people ‘usually’ take it (*secundum humanum consuetam acceptionem*). See also *log. ingr.* 3.00 §5 (Geyer 307.30–308.1): [Nomina et uerba] intellectus quoque designare dicuntur, siue is sit intellectus proferentis uocem siue audientis eam. Nam intellectum proferentis in eo significare uox dicitur, quod ipsum auditori manifestat, dum consimilem in auditore generat.

Socrates's being human and Plato's being human—which, in each case, is just a matter of what each one is.

Whether Abelard's account succeeds in the end is an excellent question. Fortunately, this is not our concern, and so need not detain us here. His distinction between sense and reference, rough and ready as it may be, is sufficient to understand his several replies to Porphyry's several questions, keeping in mind his reinterpretation strategy outlined in Section 3.

4.1 The First Question(s)

Abelard splits Porphyry's first question into two proper dialectical questions, one concerned with reference (existence) and the other with sense (understanding):

(1*a*) Do genera and species subsist, or not?

(1*b*) Are genera and species postulated in understandings that are alone and bare and pure, or not?

In each case the answer is affirmative.³⁷

Take (1*a*). Abelard glosses it in *log. ingr.* 1 27.40 as whether they signify any genuine existents (*utrum significant aliqua uere existentia*). His answer to the question put this way is simple and direct.³⁸

To this question we should reply that in fact they signify genuine existents by reference, namely the same things as singular nouns do.

General nouns like 'animal' refer to the same things the corresponding proper nouns do: Socrates, Trigger, Rin-Tin-Tin, Elsa, Lassie, Elsie, Morris, and so on. Proper nouns are semantically similar to demonstratives, indexicals, and singular descriptions. Common nouns are semantically similar in several respects to general expressions having what Abelard calls 'plural signification'.³⁹ First, common nouns are like plural nouns. The grammatically singular common noun 'man' is in many ways like the grammatically plural 'men': each refers to every man. A grammatically plural term, though, signifies individuals as part of a collection, whereas the common noun distributively refers to each individual. Second, there are terms

³⁷ De Libera [1999] 474 describes Abelard's strategy here as "bizarre." Yet it is clearly motivated by Abelard's desire to find some reasonable problem(s) raised by the text on which he is commenting, and is part of his systematic treatment of Porphyry's questions.

³⁸ *log. ingr.* 1 28.3–5: Ad quod respondendum est quia re uera significant per nominationem res uere existentes, easdem scilicet quas singularia nomina.

³⁹ See *log. ingr.* 2 170 and *dial.* 64–65. Plural signification is not the same as multiple applicability: on a single occasion of use, a noun that is multiply applicable may apply to only one thing, but a noun with plural signification must apply to more than one thing.

that apply to more than one individual, as do common nouns, but to a determinate number: ‘pair’, ‘trio’, and the like. Unlike these terms, common nouns have a definite number only on an occasion of use, relative to time and possibility; the extension of a common noun may vary.

Thus a common noun refers to concrete individuals, but not to individuals *qua* individuals, since the indexical component belonging to proper nouns is left out. Instead, a common noun distributively refers to the distinct concrete individuals it does because it has a substantial definition (whether we know it or not). These semantic features come from the imposition of the common noun, which differs from the imposition of a proper noun.

For all that, Abelard does not explain in *log. ingr.* why an apparently straightforward metaphysical query (“Does *X* exist?”) should be recast as a semantic question (“Is ‘*X*’ a denoting term?”). In *log. nostr.* 1 525.33–36 he offers an explanation by describing how the problem arose initially:⁴⁰

Surely the same things are contained under the universal and the particular noun. In this question the verb ‘subsist’ is transferred from things to language when it’s adjoined to the nouns ‘genus’ and ‘species’, which are applied to words.

Abelard takes himself to have established that genera and species are words only, not things as well. More exactly, some words (roughly common nouns that are also natural-kind terms) are predicable of many; any such word, say *weasel*, is a species or a genus. Hence ‘genus’ refers to words, or classes of words, not to things in the world. A sentence like “Genera subsist” must therefore be about words, since that is what its subject picks out; it says that there are general terms, that some bits of language are predicable of many. This in turn is the case only if there are terms that actually refer to several things. Hence the reinterpretation of a metaphysical query as a semantic question about whether any common nouns are denoting terms.

Take (1*b*). Genera and species are postulated in understandings that are alone and bare and pure, since the sense associated with common nouns consists in a certain kind of understanding. Abelard summarizes his view as follows:⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Eaedem namque res ab uniuersali nomine et particulari continentur et hoc loco hoc uerbum ‘subsistit’ de rebus ad sermonem transfertur per adiunctionem horum nominum ‘genus’ et ‘species’, quae sermonibus data sunt.*

⁴¹ *log. ingr.* 1 27.29–34: *Unde merito intellectus uniuersalium SOLUS et NUDUS et PURUS dicitur. SOLUS quidem a sensu, quia rem ut sensualem non percipit. NUDUS uero quantum ad abstractionem formarum uel omnium uel aliquarum. PURUS ex toto quantum ad discretionem, quia nulla res, siue materia sit siue forma, in eo certificatur,*

Accordingly, the understanding of universals is correctly described as ALONE and BARE and PURE: ALONE from sense, for it does not perceive a thing as sensuous; BARE as regards the abstraction of either all or some forms; PURE with respect to the whole as regards distinctness, since no thing, whether matter or form, is specified in it, and due to this we called this kind of conception ‘fused together’ earlier.

Very roughly, the understandings generated by common nouns are abstractions: ‘human being’ generates an understanding of *rational mortal animal*, which does not involve any particular sensible form—any human being will have many sensible forms, but most of these forms do not belong to its definition, which refers only to a kind of life, namely a form of intelligent life that will come to an end; it is thus ‘alone’. Since many forms an actual human being has are not included in its definition, it will be ‘bare’ as well.⁴² Finally, the understanding of ‘human being’ does not distinguish any one individual human from any other, such as Socrates from Plato; they are all considered equally as human beings, commingled in a ‘pure’ understanding with no admixture of the individual.

All this seems quite right. The sense of a common noun ought to be semantically general, which is a matter of there not being any individual features in its understanding. They are literally ‘abstract ideas’, though without the conflation of mental content with mental image that so plagued the British empiricists.

4.2 The Second Question(s)

Porphyry’s second question can easily be split into two proper dialectical questions:

(2a) Are genera and species corporeal, or not?

(2b) Are genera and species incorporeal, or not?

Abelard spends most of his time searching for an appropriate semantic interpretation of ‘corporeal’ and ‘incorporeal’ that will allow him to answer each question affirmatively. Oddly enough, in *log. ingr.* 1 28.18–19 he mentions the obvious suggestion, namely whether their referents are corporeal or incorporeal, only to set it aside in favour of other less plausible readings. He later found a more perspicuous way to address the questions:⁴³

secundum quod superius huiusmodi conceptionem confusam diximus.

⁴² In *log. nostr.* 1 526.19–21 Abelard says that the forms of which the understanding is ‘bare’ are accidental forms, which are clearly not part of human nature, say.

⁴³ *log. nostr.* 1 526.35–40: SIVE SINT CORPORALIA SIVE INCORPORALIA. Quaerens sic intelligit: cum genera et species sint res subsistentes et subsistentia alia corporalia, alia incorporalia, utrum genera et species sint corporales res an incorporales. Soluens ita:

OR WHETHER THEY ARE CORPOREAL OR INCORPOREAL. The questioner understands it as follows: since genera and species are subsisting things, and some subsistents are corporeal and others incorporeal, whether genera and species are corporeal or incorporeal things. The respondent understands it as follows: genera and species are corporeal, *i. e.* they refer to distinct things, and they are incorporeal, *i. e.* they refer to distinct things indistinctly.

The key move is to take ‘corporeal’ as ‘distinct’, which Abelard justifies as follows:⁴⁴

‘Corporeal’ is put in place of ‘distinct’ because distinctness is especially based on the corporeal, since circumscription-in-place is found in them. But incorporeals lack circumscription-in-place, for their boundaries cannot be defined by place. And for this reason ‘incorporeal’ is put in place of ‘indistinct.’

Ingenious, but Abelard’s explanation won’t carry the weight of his positive answers to (2a) and (2b), since his explanation of (2a) turns on features of things in the world whereas his answer to (2b) characterizes not the referent of a term but the kind of reference a term has.

Abelard’s answers turn on the referential function of general terms, without appeal to their sense. This is unusual; his other answers, including his answer to the additional fourth question, each make use of the sense/reference distinction. He reasons as follows. As established in Section 4.1, common nouns refer to the same things proper nouns refer to, in much the same way: concrete individuals, distinct from one another. (There are no non-distinct things in the world to be referred to, after all.) Hence their reference is ‘corporeal’. Yet they do not pick out any determinate individual from their extension; ‘human being’ refers to Plato just as much as Socrates. That is a feature of the ‘plural reference’ of general terms, a feature not shared by proper names. Hence general terms refer to distinct individuals, but not *qua* distinct—they refer ‘indistinctly’ to each element of their extension. Undeniably true, though a tortuous reinterpretation of Porphyry’s text.

genera et species sunt corporalia id est res discretas nominant, et sunt incorporalia, id est res discretas indiscrete nominant.

⁴⁴ *log. nostr.* 1 527.1–5: ‘Corporale’ enim pro discreto ponitur, qui maxime in corporalia consistit discretio, cum etiam in illis reperiatur loci circumscriptio. Incorporalia uero circumscriptione carent, cum eorum terminus loco definiri non ualeat. Et ideo ‘incorporale’ pro indiscreto ponitur.

4.3 The Third Question(s)

Porphyry's third question is also split into two proper dialectical questions, the first concerned with sense and the second with reference:

(3a) Are genera and species separated from sensibles, or not?

(3b) Are genera and species postulated in sensibles, or not?

Abelard holds that common nouns refer to sensible things, yielding a positive reply to (3b), but their associated sense conceives of the nature of the sensible thing in itself, which doesn't include any form capable of being sensed, yielding a positive reply to (3a). His formulation is brief and to the point.⁴⁵

The respondent understands [the third question] as follows: GENERA AND SPECIES, [*i.e.*] certain nouns, ARE POSTULATED IN SENSIBLES, *i.e.* they refer to sensibles; they are also postulated beyond sensibles, *i.e.* they have the feature of signifying things, but they do not signify them with a form that is subject to sense-perception, since if things were to give up all forms that are subject to sense-perception they could nonetheless be referred to by the genus and species. Hence genera and species are postulated in sensibles by appellation, yet are beyond them by signification.

Generic and specific terms refer to sensible things, and they generate an understanding of the nature of those sensible things—a nature that is not itself sensible, however. This difference in function between the sense and the reference of universal words also explains the apparent conflict between Plato and Aristotle, as reported by Boethius:⁴⁶

I think that Aristotle understood matters like so. Genera and species subsist in sensibles by appellation (*i.e.* they appellate in themselves), but they are understood beyond them, since their understandings are

⁴⁵ *log. nostr.* 1 527.23–29: Soluens ita: GENERA ET SPECIES, quaedam nomina, IN SENSIBILIBUS SUNT POSITA, hoc est sensibilia habent appellare uel nominare, et ponuntur EXTRA SENSIBILIA, id est res habent significare et non cum aliqua forma quae sensui subiaceat, quia si res omnes formas quae sensui subiacent, amitterent, non ideo minus a genere et specie nominari possent. Sunt igitur genera et species in sensibilibus posita per appellationem, extra uero per significationem.

⁴⁶ *log. nostr.* 1 527.34–528.8: Aristoteles uero sic intellexisse arbitror quod genera et species in sensibilibus subsistant per appellationem, id est in se appellant, extra uero intelliguntur, quia intellectus eorum absque omni sensibilitate habentur, quia non faciunt concipere res ut informatas formis, secundum quas res sensui subiacent. Plato uero dicit genera et species non solum extra intelligi, uerum etiam extra subsistere, quia si res substantiae omnibus illis formis carerent, secundum quas res sensui subiacent, non minus tam secundum intellectus generum et specierum ueraciter deliberari possent. Apparet igitur in sensu non esse diuersitas, quamuis in uerbis uideatur.

considered free from all sensibility because they don't make us conceive things as informed by the forms according to which things are subject to sense-perception. Plato, on the other hand, says that they are not only understood beyond sensibles but also subsist beyond them, because if things were to lack all those substantial forms according to which they are subject to sense-perception, they could still nonetheless be truly examined according to the understandings of genera and species. It is clear, then, that there is no divergence in their view, although there seems to be in their words.

The correct answer to (3a) is that common nouns have a sense that is an abstract conception, as described earlier, of the nature of a sensible object; *qua* abstraction, the nature is not sensible, though we can “truly examine” sensible things (or their natures) through these conceptions. As for (3b), such terms refer to sensibles, as noted.⁴⁷

The sense/reference distinction, a *leitmotiv* in Abelard's replies to Porphyry, allows him to find sensible questions in conceptually confused formulations. They are not exegetically plausible—not even Abelard thinks Porphyry meant his questions to be taken as Abelard takes them—but they are the best philosophical problems in the vicinity of the text, and Abelard will settle for that.

4.4 The Fourth Question

If universals are nothing but words, and so have both sense and reference, must there actually be something to which they refer? Does their reference have to be successful? Which is more important in rendering words universal, the sense or the reference? Such are the issues in the fourth question (on the interrogative construal), whether a term is universal even when there is nothing to which it refers. Abelard's answer is that words can be meaningful without having a reference, since they retain their sense even

⁴⁷ Abelard's discussion of Porphyry's third question in *log. ingr.* 1 covers the same ground but in a less perspicuous way (29.11–23): Et dicuntur uniuersalia subsistere in sensibilibus, id est significare intrinsecam substantiam existentem in re sensibili ex exterioribus formis et cum eam substantiam significant, quae actualiter subsistit in re sensibili, eandem tamen naturaliter separatam a re sensibili demonstrant, sicut superius iuxta Platonem determinauimus. Unde Boethius genera et species intelligi praeter sensibilia dicit, non esse, eo scilicet quod res generum et specierum quantum ad naturam suam rationabiliter in se attenduntur praeter omnem sensualitatem, quia in se ipsis remotis quoque exterioribus formis per quas ad sensus ueniunt uere subsistere possent. Nam omnia genera uel species concedimus sensualibus inesse rebus. Sed quia intellectus eorum a sensu solus semper dicebatur, nullo modo in sensibilibus rebus esse uidebantur.

when they fail to refer:⁴⁸

Corresponding to what we understand here as the fourth question, as noted above, this is the answer. We hold that nouns are not in any way universal when the things belonging to them have been destroyed, since at that point they are not predicable of many, seeing that they are not common to any things—for instance, the noun ‘rose’ when roses no longer exist, even though it is still significant at that point in virtue of its understanding, despite lacking reference.

Note that Abelard takes universality to be a matter of a word’s actual extension. Words are universal when they are predicable of many, by definition, but Abelard’s reply to the fourth question indicates that the modality implicit in ‘predicable’ does not apply to merely possible referents, as for instance ‘rose’ would apply to possible roses even in the absence of any actual roses. Instead, Abelard takes the modality in ‘predicable’ to be a matter of the actual things of which the speaker has the opportunity to predicate the common noun, so that it is predicable only if there are several actual things of which it might be predicated.⁴⁹ Loosely speaking, of course, a word is universal in the former sense, even if it is currently empty. A common noun does not become semantically proper by destroying all but one thing to which it applies.

The relative independence of sense and reference allows Abelard to give a straightforward account of the meaningfulness of nondenoting terms. He takes this as a fundamental semantic principle:⁵⁰

The signification of things is transitory, whereas the signification of understandings is permanent. If someone were to utter the noun ‘rose’ (or ‘lily’) when all the things subject to it have been destroyed, even though they would not at that point retain the signification of the

⁴⁸ *log. ingr.* 1 29.39–30.5: Secundum hoc quod hic quartam intelligimus quaestionem, ut supra meminimus, haec est solutio quod uniuersalia nomina nullo modo uolumus esse cum rebus eorum peremptis iam de pluribus praedicabilia non sint, quippe nec ullis rebus communia, ut rosae nomen non iam permanentibus rosis, quod tamen tunc quoque ex intellectu significatiuum est licet nominatione careat. —No resolution of the fourth question is offered in *log. nostr.* 1.

⁴⁹ Aristotle’s definition of the universal as that which is *apt* to be predicated of many can be interpreted along Abelardian lines. Walter of Mortagne reports this ‘actualist’ view of Abelard’s in his *Tractatus ‘quoniam de generali’*.

⁵⁰ *log. ingr.* 3.00 §9 (Geyer 309.4–9): Rerum quippe significatio transitoria est, intellectuum uero permanens. Destructis enim rebus subiectis, si quis hoc nomen proferat rosa uel lilium, licet rerum, quas nominabant, significationem iam non teneant, significatio intellectuum non euacuatur, quia siue res sint, siue non sint, intellectus semper constituunt.

things to which they used to refer, the signification of understandings is not rendered vacuous, since whether the things exist or not they always constitute understandings.

No matter where all the flowers have gone, ‘rose’ and ‘lily’ retain their senses, each word presumably causing people to think of their respective natures independently of whether anything actually has them. There need be no “things standing along with them.” Names are names even when there is nothing they name.

Conclusion

Abelard treats Porphyry’s questions at the start of the *Isagoge* as a way—not a particularly good way—into issues in the philosophy of language, a conclusion that fits his irrealist project well. His attempt to shoe-horn semantics into the place of metaphysics is not likely to persuade anyone not already committed to irrealism, however. Yet as far as I know it remains the most thoroughgoing attempt to dislodge metaphysics from its exalted place in mediæval philosophy, at least until the advent of fourteenth-century nominalism. Abelard takes Porphyry seriously; he thinks that the importance of his questions has been seriously overrated.

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