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BOETHIUS' ANTI-REALIST ARGUMENTS

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1. Introduction

BOETHIUS opens his discussion of the problem of universals, in his second commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, with a destructive dilemma: genera and species either exist or are concepts; but they can neither exist nor be soundly conceived; therefore the enquiry into them should be abandoned (*In Isag. maior* 1. 10). Boethius' strategy to get around this dilemma is well known. He follows the lead of Alexander of Aphrodisias, distinguishing several ways in which genera and species can be conceived, and he argues that at least one way involves no falsity. Hence it is possible to conceive genera and species soundly, and Porphyry's enquiry into them is therefore not futile after all (1. 11).

Boethius thus resolves the second horn of his opening dilemma. Yet he allows the first horn of the dilemma, the claim that genera and species cannot exist, to stand. The implication is that he takes his arguments for this claim to be sound. If so, this would be a philosophically exciting and significant result, well worth exploring in its own right.

Yet there is no consensus, either medieval or modern, on precisely what Boethius' arguments are, or even how many arguments he offers, much less on their soundness.¹ One reason for the lack

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I was first led to this corner of the history of metaphysics by Michael Frede, whose keen interest in Porphyry and Boethius stimulated my own. Thanks to Anna Greco for comments and advice. Special thanks to the Philosophy Department of the University of Auckland, where much of the research for this paper was done. All translations are mine except as noted.

¹ The secondary literature is sparse. Boethius' arguments do not rate even a single mention in J. Marenbon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius* [*Companion*] (Cambridge, 2009). There is an analysis of Boethius' entire discussion in

of consensus is that Boethius' arguments need to be understood in the light of their ancient philosophical sources—particularly his difficult regress argument, which can be reconstructed only in this light—and this is rarely done.² In what follows I shall try to establish Boethius' dependence on his sources, and to show that Boethius offers three arguments as part of a unified dialectical strategy to establish that genera and species cannot be things (in some suitably robust sense of 'things').

2. Preliminaries

Begin with the last point. What conclusion is Boethius trying to establish with his arguments, whatever and however many they may be?

Boethius translates the first half of Porphyry's first question as whether genera and species 'subsist' (*subsistunt*), and he introduces the second question with the assumption that they are 'subsistents' (*subsistentia*). These render Porphyry's *ὑφίστασθαι* and *ὑπόστασις*, terms that could be used in a technical sense among Neoplatonists (and perhaps Stoics) but which also had an ordinary non-technical sense in which they are roughly synonymous with 'exist' and 'existent'.³ Boethius seems to have had this non-technical

M. Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals [Abailard]* (Amsterdam, 1976), and of these arguments in P. Spade, 'Boethius against Universals' ['Boethius'] (<http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/boethius.pdf>), which takes into account unpublished work by Spade and King. The brief treatment in A. de Libera, *La Querelle des universaux de Platon à la fin du Moyen Âge [Querelle]* (Paris, 1996), 128–30, is expanded in id., *L'Art des généralités: théories de l'abstraction [L'Art]* (Paris, 1999), 175–214. Some relevant material can be found in J. Barnes, *Porphyry: Introduction [Introduction]* (Oxford, 2003), 37–9. For Boethius' works in general see J. Magee and J. Marenbon, 'Boethius' Works', in Marenbon (ed.), *Companion*, 303–10, and the references given there.

² There is still controversy over Boethius' relation to his ancient sources: see J. Shiel, 'Boethius' Commentaries on Aristotle', in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commentators and their Influence*. (London, 1990), 349–72, and S. Ebbesen, 'Boethius as an Aristotelian Commentator', *ibid.* 373–91. For the most recent overview of the debate see S. Ebbesen, 'The Aristotelian Commentator', in Marenbon (ed.), *Companion*, 34–55.

³ For the ancient philosophical usage of the terms see R. E. Witt, 'ὑπόστασις', in H. G. Wood (ed.), *Amicitiae corolla: A Volume of Essays Presented to James Rendell Harris, D.Litt., on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (London, 1933), 319–43; H. Dörrie, 'ὑπόστασις: Wort- und Bedeutungsgeschichte', *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, philologisch-historische Klasse*, 3 (1955),

sense in mind. He paraphrases Porphyry's first question as follows:

Omne quod intellegit animus aut id quod est in rerum natura constitutum, intellectu concipit et sibimet ratione describit aut id quod non est, uacua sibi imaginatione depingit . . . Quaeritur utrumne ita intellegamus species et genera ut ea quae sunt . . . Quod si esse quidem constiterit . . . (*In Isag. maior* 1. 10, 160. 3–5, 6–7, 10 Brandt)

Everything that the mind understands is either what there really is in the world (which the mind conceives through an understanding and describes for itself through a definition) or what does not exist (which it pictures to itself through a vacuous imagination) . . . The question arises whether we understand genera and species as things that exist . . . But if it were established that they do exist . . .

The question whether genera and species 'subsist' is given the equivalent formulation 'whether they are really to be found in the world' (*in rerum natura*), that is, whether they exist. Nothing in his gloss of the question suggests a technical sense for *subsistere/subsistentia*. Likewise, in his statement of the dilemma Boethius treats 'exist' and 'subsist' interchangeably:

Genera et species aut sunt atque subsistunt aut intellectu et sola cogitatione formantur. Sed genera et species esse non possunt. (1. 10, 161. 14–16 Brandt)

Genera and species either exist and subsist, or they are devised by understanding and thought alone; but genera and species cannot exist.

Against the pleonasm 'exist and subsist' (*sunt atque subsistunt*) Boethius counterposes the simple claim that genera and species

35–92; A. Smith, 'Υπόστασις and ὑπαρξις in Porphyry', in F. Romano and D. P. Taormina (eds.), *Hyparxis e hypostasis nel neoplatonismo* (Florence, 1994), 33–41; R. Chiaradonna, 'L'interpretazione della sostanza aristotelica in Porfirio', *Elenchos*, 17 (1996), 55–94. Boethius would also have been aware of the theological use of these terms, particularly with regard to formulae expressing the doctrine of the Trinity; see H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*, 3rd rev. edn. (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), ch. 15, and the overview of the relations between late ancient philosophy and religion in G. R. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford, 2001), pt. II. If nothing else, Boethius was surely familiar with Augustine's remark at *Trin.* 5. 8. 10 that he did not know what difference the Greeks wanted to draw between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις (cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 15. 4). Barnes points out that 'the words are common in Galen and in Sextus and in Alexander' in the non-technical sense, and that 'Galen notes expressly that the verb is synonymous with εἶναι and ὑπάρχειν' (*Introduction*, 40).

cannot exist, which clearly implies that existence *simpliciter* is the sole point at issue. The conclusion he draws from the arguments that follow is that ‘it seems that the genus does not exist at all’ (*uidebitur genus omnino non esse*, 163. 5 Brandt), again with no mention of subsistence. Whatever Porphyry may have had in mind, it is clear that Boethius takes Porphyry’s questions, as well as his own arguments, to be concerned with the existence of genera and species—without any technical sense being given to the question in advance.

More can be said about the non-technical sense of ‘existence’ at stake in Boethius’ dilemma, however. If nothing else, it gains meaning through contrast with its alternative, namely that genera and species do not exist but ‘are devised by understanding and thought alone’, so that the mind ‘pictures [genera and species] to itself through a vacuous imagination’, or, as he also says, ‘through an empty thought’ (*cassa cogitatione*, 160. 9 Brandt). Strictly speaking, there are two contrasts at work here, one between what is mind-dependent and what is not, the other between what is imaginary and what is not.⁴ Boethius takes one pole of his dilemma to stand against both. Hence ‘exists’ must have the sense ‘is a real mind-independent object’. Furthermore, as his remarks make evident, Boethius thinks of Porphyry’s three questions as presenting a unified logical division: genera and species are real mind-independent objects, or not; if they are indeed real mind-independent objects, they might be corporeal or incorporeal, and if the latter either ‘mixed in’ with the objects they characterize or separated from them (1. 10).⁵ Thus being real is compatible with being incorporeal, and even with being either separated from or combined with other real things. These issues of ontological status are not decided merely because genera and species are real.

Further information can be gleaned from how Boethius uses *sub-*

⁴ See Barnes, *Introduction*, 40–3, and de Libera, *L’Art*, 192, 204. Boethius’ dilemma depends on conflating the two contrasts, which he resolves in the end by holding that genera and species are mind-dependent but not imaginary or fictitious (*In Isag. maior* 1. 11). The imaginary or fictitious is arguably mind-dependent, but the converse does not hold; my thought of a shoe is mind-dependent but not of anything (merely) imaginary or fictitious.

⁵ Porphyry is naturally, but not necessarily, read this way: see Barnes, *Introduction*, 39–40. Because Boethius understands Porphyry’s questions to propose a logical division, he holds that the first question is the most fundamental, as sketched here, and therefore couches his dilemma in its terms exclusively.

sistere/subsistentia in his translation of the *Isagoge*.⁶ Apart from his rendering and discussion of Porphyry's first question, described above, he uses the term only five times. Two passages are about how accidents are related to their bearers: accidents always subsist in their subjects (13. 5 Busse=12. 15 Minio-Paluella), and they principally subsist in individuals (17. 9 Busse=25. 20 Minio-Paluella). In this case 'subsist' is used to pick out the special kind of existence that a dependent entity may have as a component or constituent of a thing. Next, it is said that species subsist in advance of *propria* (20. 19 Busse=30. 4 Minio-Paluella), a remark about their ontological standing even independent of features they necessarily possess. Finally, discussing inseparable accidents, twice it is said that without blackness an Ethiopian does not subsist (22. 1–2 Busse=31. 10–11 Minio-Paluella), where 'subsist' seems to mean no more than 'exist'. What these passages, taken together, tell us is that when Boethius raises the question whether genera and species exist, and in particular whether they subsist, he is asking whether they could be the sort of real mind-independent objects that are either constituents of things, or ordinary things themselves, or perhaps special metaphysical entities that have ontological standing independent of their subjects (and perhaps even of their concomitant features). In brief, Boethius wants to know whether genera and species are *real*. The conclusion for which he argues is that they are not. His arguments are therefore anti-realist inasmuch as they are designed to show that genera and species cannot be any kind of mind-independent things, taking 'thing' in its widest sense.

Boethius puts forward three arguments to show that genera and species cannot exist. Each argument is complete in its own right but also functions as part of a larger dialectical strategy that Boethius adopts—a point to which we shall return after a closer look at each of his anti-realist arguments.

⁶ Boethius' translation does not always track Porphyry's usage, which includes two further uses: for *ὑπέστησαν* at 18. 18 Busse Boethius offers *constituerunt* (27. 19 Minio-Paluella), and for *ὑπόστασις* at 19. 1 Busse he offers *substantia* (28. 5 Minio-Paluella); each passage describes how the differentia combines with the genus to give being to the species. Nor is Boethius consistent across his writings; in *Contra Eut.* 3, 216. 205–10 Moreschini, he declares that *ὑφίστασθαι/ὑπόστασις* are more exactly rendered by *substare/substantia*, taking *οὐσιοῦσθαι/οὐσίωσις* to be equivalent to *subsistere/subsistentia*. For further discussion see Spade, 'Boethius', §5; de Libera, *L'Art*, 175–87.

3. The first argument

Boethius' first argument turns on the (supposed) incompatibility between the genus's commonness to its species and its own existence as something one, that is, as something that is a single thing:

[A1] Omne enim quod commune est uno tempore pluribus, id unum esse non poterit. Multorum enim est quod commune est, praesertim cum una eademque res in multis uno tempore tota sit. Quantaecumque enim sunt species in omnibus genus unum est, non quod de eo singulae species quasi partes aliquas carpant sed singulae uno tempore totum genus habent. Quo fit ut totum genus in pluribus singulis uno tempore positum unum esse non possit; neque enim fieri potest ut cum in pluribus totum uno sit tempore in semetipso sit unum numero. Quod si ita est, unum quiddam genus esse non poterit. Quo fit ut omnino nihil sit; omne enim quod est, idcirco est quia unum est. Et de specie idem conuenit dici. (*In Isag. maior* 1. 10, 161. 16–162. 3 Brandt)

Anything that is common to many at one time won't be able to be one. For what is common is of many, especially since one and the same thing is as a whole in many at one time. No matter how many species there are, the genus is one in them all—not that each species carries off some parts of it, as it were, but that each of them has the genus as a whole at one time. Consequently, the genus as a whole cannot be postulated as one in each of the many [species] at one time, for it cannot happen that although it is in many at one time as a whole it is numerically one in itself. But if this is the case, the genus won't be able to be something one. Consequently, the genus is nothing at all, for anything that exists does so for this reason: because it is one. And the same should be said with respect to the species.

The argument begins with the assumption that the genus is common to its subordinate species, however many there may be, and ends with the conclusion that if so, then the genus does not exist (it is 'nothing at all')—the conclusion we should expect from Section 2 above. Furthermore, Boethius' argument is perfectly general, applying to all genera and their subordinate species, and, as noted in the last line, applies equally well to species and (presumably) the individuals that fall under them.

The argument Boethius sketches in [A1] can be reconstructed as follows:⁷

- [A1.1] To be common is to be one in many as a whole at once. [definition]
 [A1.2] The genus is common to its many species. [assumption]
 [A1.3] *Thus*, the genus is one in its many species as a whole at once. [from A1.1 and A1.2]
 [A1.4] *Thus*, the genus is not numerically one in itself. [from A1.4]
 [A1.5] *Thus*, the genus is not something one. [from A1.5]
 [A1.6] Everything that exists is one. [assumption]
 [A1.7] *Therefore*, the genus does not exist. [from A1.5 and A1.6]

The first three premisses spell out the sense of 'commonness' at stake, namely being wholly present as one in many at once. The genus is a metaphysical constituent of each of its species, along with the relevant differentia, and is simultaneously one and the same in each species (which is what makes them species of the selfsame genus after all). Boethius is careful to reject the possibility that each species has its own distinct part of the genus; if this were so, then there would not be literally one and the same item as a constituent of distinct species, and hence it would not be universally common to them.⁸ There may be further constraints to impose on generic commonness, but [A1.1–3] surely articulate necessary, if not sufficient, conditions.

The problematic move from [A1.3] to [A1.4] is the nerve of the first argument. The simultaneous presence of the genus as a whole in numerically different species somehow prevents the genus from being numerically one 'in itself' (*in semetipso*), as though the numerical plurality of the species were to infect the genus. Yet why should the fact that the genus is multiplied in its species tell against the unity of the genus?

We can make some headway on this question by considering the passage that is undoubtedly Boethius' source, either directly

⁷ For other analyses of this argument see Tweedale, *Abailard*, 71–4 (combined with Boethius' third argument); Spade, 'Boethius', §3; de Libera, *L'Art*, 205–6.

⁸ A mereological reading would hold that the genus is common to distinct species in virtue of each species having some part of the genus—that is all there is to commonness, perhaps, the way a wall is 'common' to the people leaning on it, each touching a distinct part.

or indirectly, for his first argument, namely Arist. *Metaph. Z* 14, 1039^a34^b2:⁹

εἰ μὲν οὖν τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ ἐν τῷ ἵππῳ καὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, ὥσπερ σὺ σεαυτῷ, πῶς τὸ ἐν τοῖς οὖσι χωρὶς ἐν ἔσται; καὶ διὰ τί οὐ καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἔσται τὸ ζῶον τοῦτο;

If animal is one and the same in both man and horse, the way you are [one and the same] with yourself, then how will that one thing, in things that exist apart, be *one*? Why isn't animal then apart from itself?

Aristotle's reasoning, allusive as it is, seems to run as follows. If the genus is one and the same whole in a given species, as *animal* is one in *horse* (since *horse* as a species is wholly *animal*), what are we then to say of the genus in respect of a different species, as *animal* in *man*? On the one hand, since the genus *animal* is one whole in *horse*, it seems as though it must somehow be a different whole in *man*, which yields the unfortunate conclusion that the genus is not one and the same in each of its species, and so not common after all. On the other hand, if we insist that the genus *animal* is one and the same in *horse* and in *man*, then the difference between the species means that the genus is one in one and other in the other, 'apart from itself' as Aristotle puts it.

So too in Boethius' first argument. Since his assumption that the genus is common in [A1.2] has already landed him with the conclusion that the genus is wholly present in each species at once, he is left with the conclusion that the genus is 'apart from itself'—and hence not numerically one in itself. The clause 'in itself' can properly be added since it is the nature of the genus to be common to its many species as described, and hence it is part of its nature to be divided from itself (namely in its many species). The plurality that the genus has in its species does invade its nature and destroy its internal unity. Thus [A1.4] holds under the assumption that the genus is common.

Since the genus is not numerically one in itself but rather multiplied in its species, it is therefore not one, as [A1.5] states. There is no straightforward sense in which the genus is one. In particular, we cannot simply identify the genus as a collection of the many

⁹ This passage was brought to my attention some years ago by D. Walsh. See M. Frede and G. Patzig (ed., trans., and comm.), *Aristoteles: Metaphysik Z*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1988), ii. 269–70, for an account of the text used here; they suggest Plato, *Parm.* 131 B 1–2 as the inspiration for its line of argument. If Boethius knew it indirectly, his most likely sources are Alexander of Aphrodisias or Porphyry himself.

distinct genus-in-the-species (one for each species), since the collection, although a kind of unity, is not common in the way demanded by [A1.3]. Boethius explicitly countenances such collections as having some sort of unity when he lays down a stronger version of the axiom put forward in [A1.6] in *Contra Eut.* 4, 220. 298–301 Moreschini:

Quod enim non est unum, nec esse omnino potest; esse enim atque unum convertitur et quodcumque unum est, est. Etiam ea quae ex pluribus coniunguntur, ut aceruus, chorus, unum tamen sunt.

What is not one cannot exist at all; 'being' and 'one' are convertible terms, and anything that is one exists. Even things that are joined together out of many, for instance a heap or a chorus, are nevertheless one.

Pluralities of items can be one, but the genus cannot be a plurality of this sort and also common as one whole in each of the species (required by [A1.3]); the whole chorus is not wholly present in each member, nor is the collection of items in a heap in any one item in the heap.¹⁰

This point against pluralities made, the rest of Boethius' first argument follows directly. Since there is no entity without identity—one way to read the 'unity' condition articulated in [A1.6] and strengthened in *Contra Eut.* 4—the genus cannot exist, which is the conclusion of the first argument.

4. The second argument

Boethius formulates his second argument in the light of the considerations that arose in the course of his first. The second argument tries to show that there is an infinite regress on the supposition that genera and species are multiple (*multiplex*) rather than numerically one, a possibility that emerged in the course of the first argument. The conclusion Boethius draws from the infinite regress is that genera and species cannot be multiple, or, equivalently, that under the supposition that they are multiple genera and species cannot exist. The details of Boethius' second argument, though, are hard to pin down.

¹⁰ However, the kind of commonness exemplified by collections might be thought sufficient for the genus, rather than the 'universal' commonness spelt out in [A1.3]. This intuition is the starting-point of Boethius' second argument, discussed in sect. 4 below.

Some of the difficulties are due to what seems to be editorial misjudgement. In his edition Brandt (162. 6–7) follows MS P in reading *illam multiplicitatem unius sui nominis uocabulo includat*, near the beginning of the second argument.¹¹ But this reading makes dubious sense. I follow instead the consensus of manuscripts collated by Brandt, CEFGNS, in the text given here, for reasons that will be apparent shortly.

The rest of the difficulties in the second argument seem to be due to Boethius' compressed presentation. Yet his argumentation becomes much clearer once its genre and ancient sources have been identified. First, though, the (corrected) text of the second argument:

[A2] Quod si est quidem genus ac species sed multiplex neque unum numero, non erit ultimum genus sed habebit aliud superpositum genus quod illam multiplicitatem unius ui nominis includat. Ut enim plura animalia quoniam habent quiddam simile, eadem tamen non sunt, idcirco eorum genera perquiruntur, ita quoque quoniam genus quod in pluribus est atque ideo multiplex habet sui similitudinem quod genus est; non est uero unum quoniam in pluribus est—eius generis quoque genus aliud quaerendum est, cumque fuerit inuentum eadem ratione quae superius dicta est, rursus genus tertium uestigatur. Itaque in infinitum ratio procedat necesse est cum nullus disciplinae terminus occurrat. (1. 10, 162. 2–15 Brandt)

Now if genus and species do exist but are multiple and not numerically one, there will be no final genus: it will rather have some other genus postulated above it, one including that multiplicity in the meaning of a single name. For just as many animals have something that is similar yet are not the same (and for this reason their genera are sought out), so too a genus, which is in many and thereby multiple, has a likeness of itself because it is the genus [in each]; however, it is not one since it is in many—[hence] another genus of this [initial] genus should also be looked for, and once it has been found, then, by the same reasoning given above, a third genus is again tracked down. Hence the reasoning must proceed to infinity, since no stopping-point to the task occurs.

The regress here proceeds to infinity in the hierarchy of genera: 'there will be no final genus'; any candidate for the role 'will have

¹¹ P. Spade, *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham* (Chicago, 1994), renders Brandt's reading as 'including the multiplicity in the word expressing [?] its one name' (§13), but even this inventive effort is obscure.

some other genus postulated above it.' The engine that powers the regress has to do with likenesses and their relation to genera. Roughly, it works as follows. Just as the likeness among different individual animals bespeaks a common genus that incorporates and reflects this likeness as well as the animality present in each individual animal, so too the generic likeness among the various distinct genus-in-the-species bespeaks a common genus that incorporates and reflects this likeness as well as the genus present in each distinct genus-in-the-species. But this common genus is not the same as any genus present in each distinct genus-in-the-species, since it includes their likeness as well as including each distinct genus-in-the-species. Therefore, the postulated common genus must be a higher genus of the initial genus. The same reasoning applies to this postulated common genus, and so on, to infinity.

Even in this inchoate form, the genre of Boethius' second argument should be apparent. It is a version of a Third Man Argument couched in abstract form,¹² unusual in that it does not begin from individuals but from species. The argument in [A2] can be approximately reconstructed as follows:

- [A2.1] The genus is multiple, that is, different in each of its many species. [assumption]
- [A2.2] The various distinct genus-in-the-species are like one another. [from A2.1]
- [A2.3] There is a likeness of the various distinct genus-in-the-species. [?]
- [A2.4] There is a 'new' genus that includes the various distinct genus-in-the-species and, in addition, their likeness. [?]
- [A2.5] The 'new' genus (postulated above) differs from the initial genus. [from A2.4]
- [A2.6] The 'new' genus includes the initial genus. [from A2.4 and A2.5]
- [A2.7] *Qua* genus, the 'new' genus is multiple. [from A2.1]
- [A2.8] The reasoning in [A2.1]–[A2.7] can be replicated for the 'new' genus, and so to infinity.

Boethius begins with [A2.1], the claim that the genus is multiple

¹² This second argument is the main concern of Spade, 'Boethius', but his account of the regress is quite different (§§4–7); so too Tweedale, *Abailard*, 75–6. De Libera, *L'Art*, 206, says of Boethius' second argument: 'C'est l'argument du Troisième homme ou, plutôt, du Troisième genre'—but then says no more about it, adopting Spade's account.

and therefore exists as many—it is the several genus-in-the-species, *animal* in *horse* as distinct from *animal* in *man*. Yet there must be some ground of unity between each of the genus-in-the-species, as maintained in [A2.2]; *animal* in *horse* is not entirely unrelated to *animal* in *man*, for otherwise their commonness would be in name only.¹³

The difficulties begin with [A2.3]. Boethius seems to treat it as an immediate and evident consequence of [A2.2]. It is not. Boethius offers an analogy with individual animals falling under the common genus *animal* to support [A2.3], but he does not spell out the details. We can fill in the missing premisses from what is almost certainly his source for the second argument, namely Alexander of Aphrodisias, whom Boethius explicitly names as the source of the solution to his dilemma (*In Isag. maior* 1. 11, 164. 4 Brandt). In the first book of his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Alexander summarizes many arguments against Platonic Forms taken from a variety of sources—notably, many are from Aristotle's otherwise lost treatise *Peri ideōn*—and at the end of his summary he mentions two Third Man arguments, one from Eudemus and the other from Aristotle, which he declares to be the same. The version Alexander attributes to Eudemus is as follows:¹⁴

λέγουσι τὰ κοινῶς κατηγορούμενα τῶν οὐσιῶν κυρίως τε εἶναι τοιαῦτα, καὶ ταῦτα εἶναι ἰδέας. ἔτι τε τὰ ὅμοια ἀλλήλοις τοῦ αὐτοῦ τινος μετουσίᾳ ὅμοια ἀλλήλοις εἶναι, ὃ κυρίως ἐστὶ τοῦτο· καὶ τοῦτο εἶναι τὴν ἰδέαν. ἀλλ' εἰ τοῦτο, καὶ τὸ κατηγορούμενον τινῶν κοινῶς, ἂν μὴ ταῦτόν ἢ ἐκείνων τινὲς ὄν κατηγορεῖται, ἄλλο τί ἐστι παρ' ἐκεῖνο (διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ γένος ὁ αὐτοάνθρωπος, ὅτι κατηγορούμενος τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα οὐδενὶ αὐτῶν ἦν ὁ αὐτός), τρίτος ἄνθρωπος ἔσται τις παρὰ τὸν καθ' ἕκαστα, οἷον Σωκράτη καὶ Πλάτωνα, καὶ παρὰ τὴν ἰδέαν, ἣτις καὶ αὐτὴ μία κατ' ἀριθμὸν ἐστίν. (*In Metaph.* 83. 35–84. 7 Hayduck)

They say that the things that are predicated in common of [F] substances

¹³ This is precisely how Proclus introduces his analysis (*In Parm.* 88o. 3–6 Diehl): ληπτέον δὲ ἐκ τούτων ὅτι τὸ ἐν εἶδος οὔτε κατὰ τὸ ὄνομα δεῖ μόνον κοινῶν τοῖς πολλοῖς, ἵνα μὴ πάλιν διὰ τὸ κοινὸν ὄνομα ζητῶμεν ἄλλο τι κοινὸν τῶν τε ἐνὶ καὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς, ὡσπερ τῶν πολλῶν τὸ ἐν κοινόν ('From this we should infer that the commonness between the one Form and its many instances should *not* be merely in name, lest because of the common name we should then have to seek for some single element which is common to the one and the many, seeing that unity is the common element in plurality'). The revision of Brandt's text captures Proclus' point here exactly: Boethius is insisting that a genus-term should have a single unified meaning, through which it can be applied to whatever is included in the genus.

¹⁴ The text and translation of Alexander used here are taken from G. Fine, *On Ideas* (Oxford, 1993), 9–10 and 18–19.

are fully [*F*] and are ideas. Further, things that are similar to one another are similar to one another by sharing in some same thing, which is fully this [i.e. fully *F*]; and this is the idea. But if this is so, and if what is predicated in common of things, if it is not the same as any of those things of which it is predicated, is something else besides it (for this is why man-itself is a genus, because it is predicated of the particulars but is not the same as any of them), then there will be a third man besides the particular (such as Socrates or Plato) and besides the idea, which is also one in number.

The version Alexander attributes to Aristotle is as follows:

εἰ τὸ κατηγορούμενόν τινων πλειόνων ἀληθῶς καὶ ἔστιν ἄλλο παρὰ τὰ ὧν κατηγορεῖται, κειωρισμένον αὐτῶν (τοῦτο γὰρ ἡγοῦνται δεικνύειν οἱ τὰς ἰδέας τιθέμενοι διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶ τι αὐτοάνθρωπος κατ' αὐτούς, ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος κατὰ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα ἀνθρώπων πλειόνων ὄντων ἀληθῶς κατηγορεῖται καὶ ἄλλος τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν)—ἀλλ' εἰ τοῦτο, ἔσται τις τρίτος ἄνθρωπος. εἰ γὰρ ἄλλος ὁ κατηγορούμενος ὧν κατηγορεῖται, καὶ κατ' ἰδίαν ὑφεστώς, κατηγορεῖται δὲ κατὰ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα καὶ κατὰ τῆς ἰδέας ὁ ἄνθρωπος, ἔσται τις τρίτος ἄνθρωπος παρὰ τε τὸν καθ' ἕκαστα καὶ τὴν ἰδέαν. οὕτως δὲ καὶ τέταρτος ὁ κατὰ τε τούτου καὶ τῆς ἰδέας καὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα κατηγορούμενος, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ πέμπτος, καὶ τοῦτο ἐπ' ἄπειρον. (84. 21–85. 3 Hayduck)

If what is predicated truly of some plurality of things is also [some] other thing besides the things of which it is predicated, being separated from them (for this is what those who posit the ideas think they prove; for this is why, according to them, there is such a thing as man-itself, because the man is predicated truly of the particular men, these being a plurality, and it is other than the particular men)—but if this is so, there will be a third man. For if the [man] being predicated is other than the things of which it is predicated and subsists on its own, and [if] the man is predicated both of the particulars and of the idea, then there will be a third man besides the particular and the idea. In the same way, there will also be a fourth [man] predicated of this [third man], of the idea, and of the particulars, and similarly also a fifth, and so on to infinity.

After presenting both arguments, Alexander then remarks that they are the same, 'because they took similar things to be similar by sharing in some same thing' (85. 4–5 Hayduck). Whether the two arguments are in fact the same is irrelevant to our purposes.¹⁵ What matters is that Boethius, following Alexander, took them to present essentially the same argument, and hence he treats Eudemus

¹⁵ It is worth noting, however, that the most thorough recent study of the arguments concludes that they are indeed 'logically the same argument' (Fine, *On Ideas*, 223).

and Aristotle on a par, drawing parts of his second argument from their differing formulations.

From Eudemus, Boethius adopts the One-Over-Many Principle cited by Alexander: ‘Things that are similar to one another are similar to one another by sharing in some same thing.’ This principle licenses [A2.3], the existence of a likeness above and beyond the things that are alike. In Boethius’ second argument, the things that are alike are the various distinct genus-in-the-species. The only ground for calling each of them the *genus-in-the-species* is the likeness exemplified by each, the fact that they are like one another despite being constituents of different species. Furthermore, this likeness is not the selfsame genus, since the likeness is a ‘one’ whereas the genus is a ‘many’ by [A2.1]—a point Boethius explicitly notes when he remarks that the (initial) genus ‘is not one since it is in many’. Yet the likeness in question also exemplifies the nature of the genus. As Eudemus remarks immediately after stating the One-Over-Many Principle, the ‘same thing’ that Boethius calls the likeness ‘is fully this [i.e. fully *F*]’. This Self-Exemplification Principle is the third leg of the Third Man Argument, the basis for self-predication (explicit in Eudemus and Aristotle) and necessary to start the regress in [A2.4].

Boethius seems to reason as follows. As noted, the only ground for calling the genus as it is present in the various distinct genus-in-the-species a genus is that it exemplifies some likeness, common to all, which is not itself the genus. The likeness is what causes the genus in each to be an exemplification of the genus, and therefore it must have the feature itself in order to be able impart it, hence [A2.3]. From Aristotle, Boethius adopts the second application of the One-Over-Many Principle and the ensuing regress. He does this allusively, declaring that ‘another genus of this [initial] genus should be looked for’ [A2.4]. For by self-exemplification, the likeness is similar to the genus as it is present in each distinct genus-in-the-species, and just as in the case of individual animals a set of natural similarities calls for something to be postulated above them, so too here. The new multiplicity includes all the genus-in-the-species as well as the likeness, and by the One-Over-Many Principle there must be, as Boethius says, ‘some other genus postulated above it, one including that multiplicity in the meaning of a single name’. This ‘new’ genus differs from the initial genus, since it covers a distinct item, namely the likeness, as noted in [A2.5]. Furthermore, the new

genus includes the initial genus, since it includes everything that the initial genus included (namely the distinct genus-in-the-species), and nothing but the feature in virtue of which they are like one another (namely the likeness which exemplifies the feature), as noted in [A2.6]. The initial genus is thus subordinate to the new genus, which is 'postulated above it'. Yet the new genus includes all and only the feature *F* that defines the nature of the genus. This means that it should have the same name as the initial genus: in our example *animal** but traditionally *man** (in addition to the species or idea *man* and individual men). Now since the new genus is a genus, by [A2.1] it is itself multiple, as Boethius notes in [A2.7]. And once the new genus 'has been found, then, by the same reasoning given above, a third genus is again tracked down', and so to infinity as Aristotle describes at the end of his version of the Third Man Argument.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Boethius' second argument is that he applies it not to Platonic Forms (or not explicitly to them), but to any theory that takes genera and species to be real things that are somehow 'in' things in the world. His conclusion, left as implicit as many of his premisses, is that if genera and species are multiple then they cannot exist—on pain of infinite regress.

5. The third argument

Boethius states the conclusion of his third argument at the outset. If the genus is numerically one, then it cannot be common to many in the way the genus should be common. The structure of his third argument is as clear as that of the second argument is murky: Boethius lists three senses in which something can be common, and points out that the genus cannot be common to its several species in any of these ways.

[A3] Quod si unum quiddam numero genus est commune multorum esse non poterit. Una enim res si communis est aut [A3.1] partibus communis est et non iam tota communis sed partes eius propriae singulorum; aut [A3.2] in usus habentium etiam per tempora transit ut sit commune ut seruus communis uel equus; aut [A3.3] uno tempore omnibus commune fit, non tamen ut eorum quibus commune est substantiam constituat, ut est theatrum uel spectaculum aliquod, quod spectantibus omnibus commune est. Genus uero secundum nullum

horum modum commune esse speciebus potest, nam ita commune esse debet ut et totum sit in singulis et uno tempore et eorum quorum commune est constituere ualeat et formare substantiam. (1. 10, 162. 15–163. 3 Brandt)

But if the genus is something numerically one it won't be able to be common to many. For a thing that is one, if it is common, is either [A3.1] common by parts, and then it isn't common as a whole but the parts of it are proper to each; or [A3.2] over time it passes into the uses of those possessing it, so that it is common as a slave or a horse is common; or [A3.3] it becomes common to all at one time, but not so that it constitutes the substance of those to which it is common, as for instance a play or some spectacle that is common to all watching it. Now the genus can't be common to its species in any of these ways, for it is supposed to be common in such a way that it is in each as a whole, at one time, and can constitute and form the substance of those to which it is common.

The three senses of commonness Boethius lists here are taken, and slightly simplified, from Porphy. *In Cat.* 1. 13, 62. 19–33 Busse:¹⁶

λέγω ὅτι πολλαχῶς: [C1] κοινὸν γὰρ λέγεται καὶ τὸ εἰς μέρη διαιρετὸν ὡς ἄρτος καὶ οἶνος, εἰ εἰς εἴη τῶν διαιρούντων, καὶ τὰ χρήματα κοινὰ τῷ εἰς μέρη εἶναι διαιρετὰ τῶν ὄντων. [C2] λέγεται δὲ κοινὸν καὶ τὸ εἰς μέρη μὲν οὐ διαιρετὸν, εἰς δὲ τὴν χρῆσιν ὑπὸ πολλῶν παραλαμβάνομενον ὡς ἵππος καὶ οἰκέτης κοινὸς πλείοσιν ἀδελφοῖς. [C3] λέγεται κοινὸν καὶ τὸ ἐν προκαταλήψει τινὸς γινόμενον καὶ μετὰ τὴν χρῆσιν ἀναπεμπόμενον εἰς τὸ κοινόν, οἷον δὴ τί ἐστι τὸ βαλανεῖον καὶ τὸ θέατρον. [C4] λέγεται πάλιν ἄλλως κοινὸν τὸ ὅλον ἅμα εἰς χρῆσιν ἐρχόμενον πολλῶν ἀδιαιρέτως· οὕτως γὰρ διὰ τῆς τοῦ κήρυκος φωνῆς κοινὴ ἢ χρῆσις τοῖς ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ μὴ διαιρουμένης τῆς εἰς ἐλάχιστα φωνῆς καθ' ἕκαστον τῶν παρόντων.

I hold that ['common' is said] in many ways. [C1] What is divided into parts is called 'common' if, like a loaf of bread or wine, its parts belong individually to each of those who divide it up; property is also common in virtue of being able to be divided up. [C2] That is likewise called 'common' which is not divisible into parts but is received from someone for the use of many people [in turn], as a horse or a slave that several brothers possess in common. [C3] What is handed out to someone and, after being used, is returned to common [ownership] is also called 'common', like the bathhouse or the theatre. [C4] Yet another sense of 'common' applies to what as a whole, undividedly, enters into the use of many at once; it is in this

¹⁶ See Spade, 'Boethius', §2 and app. 2; de Libera, *L'Art*, 211–14. The same senses of 'common' are repeated in Simplicius. *In Cat.* ad 1, 26. 11–20 Kalbfleisch, and in Dexiphanes. *In Cat.* 1. 12, 18. 34–19. 16 Busse.

way that everyone who is present in the theatre has access to the herald's voice, although his voice is not divided up into smaller parts for the use of each of those present.

Boethius clearly knew this passage—in his own commentary on the *Categories* he offers a paraphrase so close that it is nearly a translation¹⁷—and adapts it to his purposes by combining [C2] and [C3] into [A3.2], while slightly changing the example in [C4] for his [A3.3].

The genus is not common to its species the way an integral whole is common to its parts, according to [A3.1]. A similar claim was part of the first argument, where Boethius declares that the species do not 'carry off' parts of the genus, so to speak; each species is fully characterized by the genus as a whole. For *horse* is completely *animal*, and likewise *man* is completely *animal*. While numerical unity is compatible with mereological plurality, that is not the relevant kind of commonness for Aristotelian genera and species.

Nor is the genus common by way of being numerically one thing possessed serially, or able to be possessed serially, by many different things, as suggested in [A3.2]. The genus characterizes each of the many species at the same time, not as a pass-around party favour. Serial ownership is also compatible with numerical unity, but this too is not the relevant kind of commonness.

The last suggestion, in [A3.3], is that the genus, while remaining numerically one, be common to many like 'a play or some spectacle that is common to all watching it'. Porphyry is more explicit:

¹⁷ Boeth. *In Cat.* 164c–d Migne: '*Commune* quoque multis dicitur modis. [C1] Dicitur commune quod in partes diuiditur, et non iam totum commune est sed partes eius propriae singularum, ut domus. [C2] Dicitur commune quod in partes non diuiditur sed uicissim in usus habentium transit, ut seruus communis uel equus. [C3] Dicitur etiam commune quod utendo cuiusque fit proprium, post usum uero in commune remittitur, ut est theatrum, nam cum eo utor, meum est, cum inde discedo, in commune remisi. [C4] Dicitur quoque commune quod ipsum quidem nullis diuisum partibus, totum uno tempore in singulos uenit, ut uox uel sermo ad multorum aures uno eodemque tempore totus atque integer peruenit' ('Now "common" is said in many ways. [C1] What is divided into parts is called "common", and yet it is not common as a whole; its parts are instead proper to each, as for instance a house. [C2] What is not divided into parts but passes over into the use of those possessing it in turn is called "common", such as a slave or a horse that is common. [C3] What becomes the property of each who use it but, after being used, is returned to common [ownership] is also called "common", like the theatre, for it is mine when I make use of it and thereafter, when I leave [sc. the building], it is returned to common [ownership]. [C4] That is also called "common" which indeed is not divided into any parts but comes at one time to each, as an utterance or word reaches the ears of many people at one and the same time as a single whole').

the herald's utterance is present as a whole and undividedly to each person in the theatre. The point is the same, however. The play, like the herald's utterance, is present as an undivided whole to each person in the theatre. Boethius and Porphyry clearly mean to suggest something like Platonic participation here, since each example is reminiscent of how a Platonic Form is common to those things that share in it.

Boethius rejects [A3.3], however, on the grounds that something common in this way cannot 'constitute' or 'make up the substance of' the things to which it is common: *substantiam constituere/formare*. This is one of the jobs of the genus in the species—that is, to make the species be the kind of thing it is; the genus is a constitutive part of the essence of the species, part of what-it-is to be the species. A theatre play does not constitute the substance of those who watch it, for the spectators do not owe their being to it. (It does constitute their being spectators, but being a spectator is not part of the spectator's substance.) Something numerically one that is common according to [A3.3] is not multiplied by the multiplication of that to which it is common. But then it cannot be part of the essence of numerically distinct things, since it cannot be numerically multiplied in itself.

The last part of this argument is a commonplace in Aristotle's criticism of Plato (see e.g. *Metaph. Z* 14, 1039^b14–16) and, like Aristotle, Boethius seems to beg the question here. For the issue is whether something separate and numerically one *can* cause what it is separated from to be what it is, or at least to be the kind of thing it is; the number of such things is irrelevant. Yet the reason Aristotle keeps returning to this point is its intuitive appeal. If something causes an object to be what it is, it should be, it seems, a constituent part of the object, even at the cost of redefining the notion of 'object' to include constituents that are separated from one another. Once driven to this extreme, though, we are left with a numerically one and the same thing (the genus) present in and common to numerically distinct objects, which the first argument ruled out. It seems that we can allow Platonic participation only for non-essential characteristics. But that rules out the possibility that the genus is common according to [A3.3].

The upshot is that if the genus is numerically one, it cannot be common to the species in the way it is supposed to be, and hence not a genus at all. Therefore, genera and species do not exist, since

numerical unity is incompatible with the kind of universal commonness that is what causes genera and species to be what they are.

6. Conclusion

I have presented Boethius' discussion as consisting of three separate and distinct arguments, each of which concludes that genera and species cannot exist, given the assumptions with which each argument begins.¹⁸ To review: the first argument began with the hypothesis that genera are common to their species (in the way peculiar to genera), and from this hypothesis deduced that the genus cannot be numerically one, and hence cannot exist at all. The second argument began with the hypothesis that genera and species are multiple, and from this hypothesis deduced an infinite regress—grounds for rejecting the hypothesis if ever there were. The third argument began with the hypothesis that genera and species are numerically one, and from this hypothesis deduced that they cannot be common (in the way peculiar to genera and species).

Boethius' discussion, it seems to me, is therefore an instance of an exercise we know to have been common in later Platonism: a dialectical investigation based on hypotheses, in the style of the second half of the *Parmenides*.¹⁹ In each argument a hypothesis

¹⁸ The most common reading of the structure of Boethius' discussion, given in Tweedale, *Abailard*, 71–4, and followed by many, takes the first and the third arguments to be part of a single argument, oddly if not inexplicably interrupted by the regress argument. On this reading, the senses of commonness put forward in the third argument are used, at least tacitly, in the first argument; Boethius presents only two arguments in his dilemma. Spade, 'Boethius', §8, has recently argued for a different reading. According to him, what I have called the second and the third arguments are part of a single unified argument, turning on a conditional excluded middle: the first phase of this combined argument begins (in what I call the second argument) with the claim that genus and species do exist but are multiple and not numerically one, whereas the second phase begins (in what I call the third argument) with the assumption that genus and species are numerically one. The key, on Spade's reading, is to see that the combined argument drops the premiss [A1.6] of the convertibility of being and unity. This ingenious idea has the drawback that it makes the regress argument not complete in itself, but logically dependent on what I have called the third argument to reach its conclusion—something that is certainly not signalled in Boethius' text.

¹⁹ See A. C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford, 1990), 11–17, for a description of this dialectical procedure. He takes his example from Proclus, but there is every reason to think it was the common practice earlier in antiquity. The original procedure in the *Parmenides* is described in detail by C. Meinwald, *Plato's Parmenides* (Oxford, 1991), ch. 2.

is adopted that captures some fundamental property of the issue under investigation, and subsequent investigation shows that it leads to unfortunate results—usually contradicting some other fundamental property. Boethius' first and third arguments clearly have this structure, and his second argument is a classic instance of posing an insuperable problem, namely an infinite regress, every bit as good as a contradiction. If we see Boethius' arguments in this light, then each will have a certain degree of independence from the others, but also play a role in his overall dialectical strategy, a strategy that (unfortunately?) was not fully appreciated by later thinkers. Boethius' second argument was for the most part ignored by his medieval successors, and his first and third arguments are transformed into a single style of argumentation against genera and species, namely the anti-realist (nominalist) view that the sort of commonness demanded by real universals is incoherent and absurd. That this was not the immediate result of Boethius' commentary, waiting for Peter Abelard in the twelfth century and William of Ockham in the fourteenth, has more to do with the historical circumstances in which the relevant ancient background to Boethius' arguments was lost to the Latin West than it does with the intrinsic merits of his arguments.

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