

The Status of *Status*: Boethian Realism in Abelard

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Peter Abelard's claim that universals are only words is well known, yet its full metaphysical bearing for Abelard's philosophy is much disputed. Peter King provides a strong nominalist interpretation and argues that Abelard's nominalism is only an element of his larger irrealist metaphysic. In his chapter on Abelard's metaphysics in *The Cambridge Companion to Peter Abelard*, he writes,

Abelard's philosophy is the first example in the Western tradition of the cast of mind that is now called *nominalism*. Although his view that universals are mere words (*nomina*) is typically thought to justify the label, Abelard's nominalism—or better, his *irrealism*—is in fact the hallmark of his metaphysics. He is an irrealist not only about universals, but also about propositions, events, times other than the present, natural kinds, relations, wholes, absolute space, hylomorphic composites, and the like.¹

King clarifies this further in relation to the three Boethian criteria for a universal. In the same chapter he writes, "More exactly, Abelard holds that there cannot be any real object in the world that satisfies Boethius's criteria for the universal: being present as a whole in many at once so as to constitute their substance."² In this paper I want to argue that Abelard's view is not best understood as King portrays it, but rather as a development of the solution attempted by Boethius in his *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*. For, one might wonder why Abelard should be considered the first nominalist and an irrealist while Boethius is held by many to be a moderate realist, since both come to the same conclusion: there is no real object in the world that fits the criteria for a universal.

I wish to show that while both deny the independent existence of universals, they should not be called irrealists, since they agree that

universal words or concepts have a firm basis in real, individual things. Boethius's account on this issue is inadequate or at least unclear, because he implies that what is in common between individual things is an incorporeal thing, in itself neither universal nor particular. Abelard resolves problems with Boethius's solution by holding that what individuals agree in is their *status*, but that status is, in itself, no thing. Thus, Abelard should be understood in light of his predecessor, Boethius, and Abelard's position viewed as a development of Boethius's solution. I will begin by sketching Boethius's criteria for and argument against universals and his proposed solution to the argument. I will, then, briefly explain why Abelard says that universals are words only and why this is not inconsistent with his attempt to provide a real basis for universal terms in status. I will spend the remainder of this paper explaining Abelard's use of status and the way that it resolves problems in Boethius's account.

Boethius's Definition of a Universal, Argument against Universals and Solution

According to Boethius's definition of a universal in his *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, a universal must be common to its singulars in three ways: first, as a whole in all its singulars, second, in all its singulars at *one time*, and third, able to constitute and form the substance of what it is common to. These three criteria serve Boethius in an argument against the reality of universals. In his work on Boethius, John Marenbon summarizes Boethius's argument thus:

1. Either (A) genera and species really exist (*sunt atque subsistunt*) or (B) they are formed by the intellect, in thought alone.
2. Every thing that really exists is one in number.
3. Genera and species are common to many at the same time.
4. Genera and species do not really exist, i.e., (A) is false.
5. [Therefore] genera and species are formed by the intellect, in thought alone, i.e., (B).³

Boethius tries to offer an alternative to the entailment of this argument that if universals are formed by the intellect in thought alone, then they are necessarily false and empty. He does this by distinguishing between abstraction and composition. Abstraction draws from an individual thing

its nature without adding anything to the nature as such, but composition puts together natures that do not belong together in things. Abstracted universals are not false, because they only ignore other aspects of a thing and focus on one nature as common among many, although the nature only really subsists in individuals.

Yet, Boethius's theory of abstraction fails to overcome his argument against universals. For if an abstraction is merely an apprehended similarity in unlike things, it is difficult to see how a universal understanding that binds metaphysically-unlike things together is not false. Therefore, Boethius must still explain how individual things are really common to each other for his theory of abstraction to work. He attempts to do this by suggesting that a common incorporeal thing subsists in individuals. In his *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge* he writes:

The sense faculty delivers to us, together with the bodies themselves, all incorporeal things like this that have their being in bodies. But the mind, which has the power both to put together what is disjoined and to uncouple what is put together, distinguishes what are delivered to it by the senses, confused and conjoined to bodies, in such a way that it gazes on and sees the incorporeal nature by itself and apart from the bodies in which it is made concrete. For there are distinctive peculiarities of incorporeals mixed with bodies, even if they are separated from bodies.⁴

Unfortunately, this attempt to account for real commonality between things by incorporeal things falls prey to the premise of Boethius's earlier argument, namely, that "every thing that exists is one in number." Boethius is caught in a dilemma. He needs a real basis of commonality in things for abstracted universals not to be false, but his suggestion that there are common incorporeals in individual things violates his premise that everything that exists is one.

Abelard, like Boethius, thinks that there is a real basis for universal words. Yet, where Boethius suggests that incorporeals subsisting in corporeal things account for this basis, Abelard holds that what things agree in is their status or common cause, which is no thing over and above the individual things. I argue that Abelard does not hold that individual things agree by an approximate similarity, which I take to

be King's interpretation of Abelard. Rather, since Abelard uses status to point out real differentiations within individual things, it is reasonable to maintain that individuals may also really agree in status. Status fulfills Boethius's criteria for commonality, I argue, but without positing a thing over and above the individual things.

The Aristotelian Definition of a Universal

Questions about the real basis for universal terms or abstractions derive their criteria from the Boethian definition of a universal. But, Abelard's conclusion that universals are merely words, flows not from the Boethian, but the Aristotelian definition of a universal, which Abelard uses in his glosses on Porphyry in his *Logico ingredientibus*.⁵ A universal according to this definition is a thing predicable of many. What makes one a realist by this definition is if some non-linguistic thing besides the word is also predicated of individuals.⁶ This is why in the same passage, after refuting William of Champeaux's first and second realist positions, Abelard concludes: "[N]ow that we have shown the reasons why things taken neither singly nor collectively can be called "universals" insofar as they are predicated of several, it remains to ascribe this kind of universality only to words."⁷ Abelard is an Aristotelian or predicational nominalist, but this does not mean that he is also a nominalist by the Boethian definition. He even qualifies his Aristotelian nominalism with the phrase, "this kind of universality" as if to indicate that there is another kind of universality. While both he and Boethius do not want to posit independent things that fulfill the Boethian definition of a universal, I argue that a thing's status, while no thing, meets the Boethian criteria and provides a real basis of commonality in things for Abelard's universal terms.⁸

Nature and Status

Since Abelard holds that universal terms do not refer to universal things, he is forced to explain on what basis universal terms are meaningful and does so by maintaining that universal terms signify on the basis of a "common cause" or status of things. Universal terms also "constitute" in the understanding a "common conception" of the likeness of the individual things. Between the common cause and the common conception he concludes that the common cause serves as the stronger basis for universal terms. He writes in his *Glosses on Porphyry*, "There is no objection if it is by both. But the common cause, which is taken in

accordance with the nature of things, seems to have the greater force."⁹ The common cause, which individual men agree in, Abelard says, is the status of being a man. Yet, Abelard is careful to maintain that the status of a thing, is "no thing." He explains in his *Glosses on Porphyry*: "Now being a man is not a man or any other thing, if we consider the matter carefully, any more than *not being in a subject is any thing, or not admitting of contraries, or not admitting of greater and less.*"¹⁰ What discrete individuals agree in is not a common thing like Boethius's incorporeal, but rather refers to the way of being of a thing or its cause. This is why Abelard says the status of man is "being a man."

Since the status of a thing is not itself an independent thing, King maintains in his chapter on Abelard's metaphysics in the *Cambridge Companion to Abelard* that Abelard's division of things into natural kinds is a "shallow fact" about the world. Abelard, he writes in that same chapter, "sometimes refers to each thing's being as it is as its 'condition' (status), but this shorthand carries no metaphysical baggage." Although Abelard maintains that things agree in their status, King denies that this agreement is metaphysically significant since the status of a thing is not a real thing. Agreement is, then, a matter of approximate similarity between things.¹¹

Whether there is real commonality between things that agree in a status or if, as King claims, their agreement is a shallow fact and a matter of rough similarity remains to be seen, yet besides referring to status as that which diverse things agree in, Abelard also holds that the status of a thing can cause real differentiations within a single thing. He uses the differentiating power of status to explain the difference between a physical utterance and a meaningful expression, as well as the real differences between the persons of the Trinity. The way statuses differentiate within things, I maintain, provides a step to understanding how numerically diverse, individual things can really agree in their status.

Vox, Sermo and Essential Predication

Abelard encounters a metaphysical difficulty even for his nominalist version of universals when he says that universals are only words. For according to Abelard, what is predicated of many things is an expression, but an expression is the same thing as its physical utterance. Since they are the same thing, it would seem to follow, then, that an utterance is also predicated of many. But if an utterance is predicated of

many, this would lead Abelard into the same contradiction the realists had encountered; namely, one concrete thing being predicated of many concrete things.

Abelard resolves this problem by appealing to the difference in the statuses of the thing as an utterance and as an expression, maintaining that two objects can be the same essentially while distinct from each other in certain properties or definitions. The statement, "this utterance is an expression," is an essential predication, one in which the subject and predicate both denote the same thing. Adjacent predication refers to a predication of inherence where a form inheres in a thing. Usually, if two objects are predicated essentially, then it is assumed that properties inhering in one object also inhere in, or are predicated adjacently of, the other object. But, according to Ian Wilks in his article "Peter Abelard and the Metaphysics of Essential Predication," Abelard holds that some predications can be merely essential and not adjacent.¹² Abelard often uses the example of a statue and its material to illustrate the nature of such a relationship. The image and the stone are the same thing, but the statue has the property "of being made material," while a stone does not. Since the stone is the same thing as the image, it shares this property but only essentially and not by adjacency. The stone is not made material, yet since the stone and the statue are the same thing, he says the stone *is that which is made material*. Abelard uses this illustration to reveal the relation of an utterance and an expression in his *Logica Nostrorum Pettitioni Sociorum*:

Although this stone and this image are completely the same, still the stone is the work of one being and the image of another. For it is agreed that the type [status] of stone can only be conferred by the divine substance, but the type [status] of image can be formed by the shaping activity of men.

Thus we say that expressions are universals since in virtue of their formation, i.e. their establishment by men, they are predicated of many. But utterances or things are not in any way universal, even if it is agreed that all expressions are utterances. For if some things were predicated of many it would be found one and the same in many.¹³

The status that belongs only to the expression, namely, "being made to be expression," is distinguishable from the utterance, yet it is not another

thing above and beyond the utterance. The status of the expression differentiates it by definition from the utterance. Abelard uses this to show in the Trinity how the Son can be the same as the Father but because the Father and Son have distinct statuses of "being a begetter" and "being begotten," respectively, they differ in definition.

Compare this to Boethius's attempt to argue that the same thing can be in one sense singular and in the other universal by a diversity of definition. In his *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, he states, "For it is not ruled out that two things that are conceptually diverse should be in the same subject.... Since these things are bounded by diverse definitions, the understanding of them is diverse. Yet they are always found in the same subject."¹⁴ This passage, which uses the analogy of a line that is both convex and concave, is meant to argue that the same thing can have different properties or statuses. Abelard's appeal to the status of an expression as distinct from the utterance from which it is made, allows him to hold that an expression is predicabile of many while an utterance is not, even though they are the same thing. What distinguishes the expression from the utterance is that the expression is "made to be predicabile of many" while an utterance, not unlike the bronze of the statue is not made to be predicabile of many.

Status and the Boethian Criteria for a Universal

Since, Abelard holds that statuses can differentiate a thing in real ways without positing some other thing, one might ask why could not distinct things have in common that differentiating definition or status? For example if asked how numerically diverse utterances, such as, "human," "human" and "human" can all have something in common, it can be answered these utterances agree in the status of being expressions. In this way, status not only creates differentiation within single things but can be the cause of their agreement. Similarly, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle although distinct, agree in the status of being human. It is not that a new *thing* is what they agree in, but that they all agree in being made to be humans.

The creator, whether divine or human, is central to understanding how things can share in a common definition while remaining distinct. Abelard indicates the relation of *status* to its creator in his glosses on Porphyry in his *Logica 'ingredientibus'*. In this passage, he compares the human and the divine creation of status:

For those works—the general or special *status* in a nature—are God's work, not a builder's. For instance *man*, *soul*, *stone* are God's work, but a house or a sword are man's. So the latter—the house and the sword—are not the works of nature as the former are. The words for them do not fall under substance but rather accident, and so they are neither genre nor most specific species.¹⁵

King has maintained that status carries with it no metaphysical baggage because it is no thing. Yet, surely a thing's status in a certain nature created by God has metaphysical significance even if it is no thing. One might consider that an utterance will not have the particular physical qualities it does if it is not also that which is made to be an expression. To understand a thing's status, is to understand the thing as being made to be something by its creator.

Abelard goes beyond Boethius's reference to incorporeals that subsist in things to account for commonality and Boethius's use of the geometric analogy for explaining differentiation in a thing. What is common between things is not some thing besides each individual, but these things agree in a status or being made to be a certain way by a creator; which the intellect is able to grasp to some extent. The pure status of "man," as in the mind of the creator, is hidden; yet, Abelard thinks that there are intelligible aspects of a thing's status that whether the impositor of the word is aware of them or not provide the basis for a words imposition.¹⁶ I conclude that Abelard is a Boethian realist, because the status of individuals can be common to many at one time and in such a way, due to its source in a creator, that it constitutes their substance, and that this position is a development of the solution that Boethius puts forth in his *Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*.

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Notes

¹ Peter King, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to*

Peter Abelard, edited by Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfooy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.

² King, "Metaphysics," 66.

³ John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 27.

⁴ Boethius, *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge* (Referred to as *Commentary*), edited and translated by Paul Vincent Spade in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals, Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 24.

⁵ Peter Abelard, *From the "Glosses on Porphyry in His Logico 'ingredientibus' (referred to as LI) edited and translated by Paul Vincent Spade in Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham* (Indianapolis: Hackett 1994), 37.

⁶ See Paul Vincent Spade, "The Problem of Universals and Wyclif's Alleged 'Ultrarealism,'" *Vivarium: An International Journal for the Philosophy and Intellectual Life of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* 43(1): 117.

⁷ Abelard, *LI in Five Texts*, 37.

⁸ I owe the idea that Abelard might be a Boethian realist and an Aristotelian nominalist to Paul Vincent Spade, *Five Texts*, xi.

⁹ Abelard, *LI in Five Texts*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ King, "Metaphysics," 21.

¹² Ian Wilks, "Peter Abelard and the Metaphysics of Essential Predication," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36 (1998): 370.

¹³ Abelard, *Logica "Nostrorum Petitioni Sciorum"* (NPS), as cited in Martin Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976), 143.

¹⁴ Boethius, *Commentary in Five Texts*, 25.

¹⁵ Abelard, *LI in Five Texts*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.