Abelard on Universals

By Alexander Koudlai

In this essay I shall attempt to show that in the XII century there was a problem of relation of names to things and classes of things, or the problem of Universals. I shall also argue that Peter Abelard in his examination of the problem was neither a nominalist (contrary to J. R. Weinberg’s claim in his *Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, p.79), no a realist in the full meaning of the terms, but rather synthesized both positions showing the limitations of each of them, and presented his solution named conceptualism. I shall try to support my own impression that (contrary to the opinion expressed by D.E.L. in the Britanica I, p. 26) he was not exactly a peripatetic but also was influenced by Plato and in that was also inclined to a synthesis with qualifications. And finally I shall go in some more details of the paradox of why some scholars like Weinberg called Abelard’s solution nominalistic.

I

It is not just Weinberg who call’s Abelard’s solution a *nominalistic*. Professor A. Broadie also thinks that “in the dispute about the nature of the universals Abelard was in the nominalistic camp” (The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, p. 1). For this reason, arguing against this, I would emphasize that: 1. Abelard was well known as a *knight* in his debates. He was born a son of a knight in Brittany (a relative of the Duke), and this heredity showed in the manner of his philosophic and theological studies and confrontations with his professors, 2. He studied philosophy mostly under two very different specialists: Roscelin of Compiegne (a nominalist) and Guillaume de Champeaux (a realist), and disagreed with each of them rather aggressively. Peter was always a very independent and original thinker and interlocutor. He always looked for a more inclusive and logically superior solution than those immediately available. I understand that this biographical information does not present a demonstrative proof, but rather a background with which Weinberg’s and Broadie’s pictures just do not blend well, and upon which I would try to draw a picture more plausible, i.e., that there was a third position between realistic and nominalistic, namely, ***conceptualism***, which could be defined as a synthesis of realism (thesis) and nominalism (antithesis), and which was precisely what Peter Abelard attempted to establish.

II

It was the claim of extreme nominalists that the names were just sounds, that we could call one and the same thing quite opposite names, and it would not change anything in its essence. It very well can be so, but in the naming things we also do something to ourselves, to our understanding of the physical nature of the things. Is there really *man* or *woman*, *masterpiece, junk, good guy, bad guy, traitor, falsifier, guilty, innocent*? Or all those words are just “utterances”? Is there some reality behind the word *mother*, or John can be your mother if the court rules so? Abelard understood that there **is** some medium between things and names which is not the name and not the thing it signifies, and still to keep the language meaningful we **must** use certain words which point to that medium in order to form meaningful concepts in our minds. Without this physics would not be possible as well as any science and language itself. That is because of that medium it is possible to translate from one language to another. Without this there would be no dictionaries, and to understand Greek or Latin would be impossible. If you call a nominalist *a genius,* he will be pleased, and if you call him *a fool* he will likely to get offended. But why, if it is true what he is teaching? Words do signify something about physical world! The words we use to describe physical objects are symbols of meaningful concepts which we form about those things in our minds. They are mental in nature, but they **necessarily** belong to those particulars. For Abelard this was easy to see and demonstrate. But what about the names which do not point to particulars? There were three questions, which Peter Abelard and Porphyry before him asked: (1) whether genera and species subsist or are placed only in understanding; (2) if they subsist, whether they are corporeal or incorporeal; (3) whether they are separated from sensibles or are placed in sensibles. Also there was the forth question added by Abelard, whether genera and species must refer to something or whether, if their normal referents are destroyed, these universals could consist of mere meaning of the concept.

III

The next quotation from Abelard will shed more light on the nature of the problem of how to understand universals, because there were different opinions about that, and also expose Abelard’s perception of Plato-Aristotle controversy and whether it was really a controversy:

Boethius likewise [Porphyry], when he says that the thought collected from the likeness of many things is genus or species\*, seems to have understood the same common conception. Some insist that Plato was of this opinion too, namely that he called those common ideas which he places in *nous*, genera and species. Boethius records that he dissented from Aristotle when he says that Plato wanted genera and species and the others not only to be understood universals, but also to be and to subsist without bodies, as if to say that he understood as universals those common conceptions which he set up separated from bodies in *nous*, not perhaps taking the universal as the **common predication**, as Aristotle does, but rather as **common likeness** of many things. For that latter conception seems in no wise to be predicated of many as a noun is which is adapted singly to many.

That he says Plato thinks universals subsist without sensibles, can be resolved in another manner so that there is no disagreement in the opinions of the philosophers. For what Aristotle says to the effect that universals always subsist in sensibles, he said only in regard to actuality, because obviously the nature which is animal which is designated by universal name and which according to this is called universal by a certain transference, is never found in actuality except in a sensible thing, but Plato thinks that it so subsists in itself naturally that it would retain its being when not subjected to sense, and according to this the natural being is called by the universal name. That, consequently, which Aristotle denies with respect to actuality, Plato, the investigator of physics, assigns to natural aptitude, and thus there is no disagreement between them (H&W,183).

It likely follows from this that Abelard (in his search of the proper definition for universals and examining the opinions of Porphyry, Boethius, and more importantly Aristotle and Plato) is trying to see the possibility of truth in each position, if it is presented in accordance to the meaning of each philosopher - *truth does not contradict truth*. But even so, he investigates the problem further reviewing a more recent (nominalistic) position, which he modifies, because by itself it does not look reasonable enough to him:

Moreover, now that *authorities* have been advanced who seem to build up by universal words common concepts which are to be called forms, *reason* too seems to assent. For what else is it to conceive forms by nouns than to signify by nouns? But certainly since we make forms diverse from understanding, there arises now besides thing and understanding a third thing which is the signification of nouns. Although authority does not hold this, it is nevertheless not contrary to reason.

Let us then set forth what we promised above to define, namely, whatever the community of universal words is considered to be because of a common cause of imposition or because of a common conception or because of both . There is nothing to prevent that it be because of both, but the common cause which is taken in accordance of nature of things seems to have greater force (183).

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\*It feels that I have to apologize to the reader for my underlining of certain words and phrases. It may be useless and disturbing for him providing that his knowledge of Abelard is flawless, but it is important for the clarity of my own understanding of the text, and also can help the reader to understand what particularly is important to me. (A. K. )

*The nature of things*, and not the words only, is something that has to be of greater

importance for Abelard in definition of universals. If we concentrate on this we could call him rather a realist. But let us wait a bit with that. Looking at how we form the conceptions of universals, Abelard likes the notion of abstraction, and this abstraction for him is not a nominalistic one:

Likewise we must define . . . that *the conceptions of universals are formed by abstraction, and we must indicate how we may speak of them alone, naked and pure but not empty* (183).

Here I would like to remind the reader the Aristotelian doctrine of intellect-matter. According to it, there are two types of intellect: potential and active; we have knowledge of something when we abstract the portion of that potentiality by active intellect: the matter is the principle of potentiality (unknown). Let us see now how Abelard deals with *abstraction*:

In relation to abstraction it must be known that matter and form always subsist mixed together, but the reason of the mind has this power, that it may now consider matter by itself; it may now turn its attention to form alone; it may now conceive both intermingled. The two first processes, of course, are by abstraction; they abstract something from things conjoined that they may consider its very nature. But the third process is by conjunction. For example, the substance of this man is at once body and animal and man and invested in infinite forms; when I turn my attention to this in the material essence of the substance, after having circumscribed all forms, I have a concept by a process of abstraction. Again when I consider only corporeity in it, which I join to substance, that concept likewise (although it is by conjunction with respect to the first, which considered only the nature of substance) is formed also by abstraction with respect to other forms than corporeity, none of which I consider, such as animation, sensuality, rationality, whiteness.

Conceptions of this sort through abstraction seemed perhaps false and vain for this reason, that they perceive the thing otherwise than it subsists. For since they are concerned with matter by itself or form separately, and since none the less neither of these subsists separately, they seem obviously to conceive the thing otherwise than it is, and therefore to be empty. But this is not so (184).

Abstraction in any case is not empty for Abelard because it considers “the qualities the nature has” even though it does “not consider **all** that it has“. When he considers “only this one among the qualities the nature has the ***only* refers to the attention alone, not to the mode of subsisting”**. This process on one hand could be understood to be arbitrary (because **we** could choose where to point our attention), but on the other hand it is restricted by the nature of things necessarily, and in the second sense is realistic. “Otherwise it would not be reason, but opinion, that is if the understanding should deviate from the state of the thing”( 184). So, the concept formed in the mind by abstraction is a realistic one. But it is always limited always considering only part of the nature of the thing.

There is room to think that the abstraction is not the only way how we get the realistic concepts of the world of physics. Abelard is a monk and a theologian, and not just a natural philosopher. He definitely believes in God, Supreme Intellect and Providence, miracles and prophets. How is it possible to have knowledge of things before they actually exist? It is not by way of abstraction. The ideas of things and their relations should be able to exist before the very things exist, otherwise prophecies would not be possible. In his writings on universals Abelard does not go too far to investigate this, but there are passages, suggesting that the problem entered his mind in a peculiar form:

But the following question arises concerning the *providence* of the artist, whether it is empty when he holds in mind the form of a work still future, seeing that the thing is not yet constituted so. But if we grant that, we are forced to say that likewise the providence of God is empty, which he had before the creation of his work . . . Consequently, modifying the words we should say that the providence is not empty…(185)

Abelard promises: “There will be a fuller investigation of this in relation to the *on Interpretation*”, but he also says: “any question concerning the understanding with respect to God is superfluous”, and in the regular case of our knowledge he returns “to the *conception of universals* which must always be formed by abstraction” (185). But what is the nature of this abstraction compare to the abstraction of the concept of things?

When I hear *man* or *whiteness* or *white* I do not recall from the meaning of the noun allthe natures or properties which are in the subject things, but from *man* I have only the conception although confused, not discrete, of animal and rational mortal, but not of the later accidents as well. For the conceptions of individuals, too, are formed by abstraction, when namely it is said: this substance, this body, this animal, this man, this whiteness, this white. For by *this man* I consider only the nature of man but related to a certain subject, whereas by *man* I consider that same nature simply in itself not related to anyone. Wherefore the understanding of universals is rightly spoken of as alone and naked and pure, that is, alone in regard to the senses, because it does not perceive the thing as sensual, and naked in regard to the abstraction of all and any forms, and pure with respect to discreteness because no thing whether it be matter or form, is designated in it; in this latter respect we called a conception of this sort confused above (186).

So, according to Abelard, we should understand universals as neither things no merely words, also he does not grant them the status of forms (which makes his position neither realistic no nominalistic!). They constitute a special class of confused but real concepts, which are also useful in our thinking of the natural world and our intellect as well.

IV

After having shown the nature of the universals Abelard proceeds to the resolution of the questions concerning genera and species:

The first question, then, was to this effect, whether genera and species subsist, that is signify something truly existent, or are placed in understanding alone, etc., that is, are located in empty opinion without the thing, like the following words, chimera and goat-stag which do not give rise to a rational understanding.

To this it must be replied that in truth they signify by nomination things **truly existent**, to wit, the same things as singular nouns, and in no wise are they located in empty opinion; nevertheless, they consist **in a certain sense** in the understanding alone and naked and pure, as has been determined.

(2) …whether subsisting they are corporeal or incorporeal, that is when they are considered to signify subsistences whether they signify subsistences which are corporeal or incorporeal. . . . I see that the existing things some are called corporeal and others incorporeal, which of these shall we say are the things signified by universals? To which the reply is made: in a certain sense corporeal things, that is things discrete in their essence and incorporeal with respect to the designation of the universal noun because obviously universals do not name discretely and determinately, but confusedly, as we have set forth sufficiently above. Whence the universal names themselves are called both corporeal with respect to the nature of things and incorporeal with respect to the manner of signification, because although they name things which are discrete, nevertheless they do not name them discretely and determinately.

(3) …whether they are placed in sensibles, etc., follows from granting that they are incorporeal, because obviously the incorporeal taken in a certain manner is divided by being and by not being in the sensible . . . . And universals are said to subsist in sensibles, that is to signify the intrinsic substance existing in a thing which is sensible by its exterior forms, and although they signify this substance which subsists actually in the sensible thing, yet they demonstrate the same substance naturally separated from the sensible thing, as we determined above in relation to Plato. Wherefore Boethius says that genera and species are understood, but are not, outside sensible things, in that obviously the things of genera and species are considered with respect to their nature rationally in themselves even when the exterior forms by which they come to the senses have been removed. . . . obviously they do not designate the sensible things which they name in the same manner as they are perceived, that is as discrete, and sense does not discover them by demonstration of them, it remained a question whether universals named sensible things only or whether they also signified something else; to which it is replied that they signify both sensible things and at the same time **that common conception which Priscian ascribes particularly to the divine mind.**

*And in accord with them.* With respect to that which we understand here as the fourth question , as we noted above, the following is the solution, that we in no wise hold that universal nouns are, when, their things having been destroyed, they are not predicable of many things inasmuch as they are not common to any things, as for example the name of the rose when there are no longer roses, but it would still, nevertheless, be significative by the understanding, although it would lack nomination; otherwise there would not be the proposition: there is no rose (187).

Here we can note that Abelard’s answers are extremely sharp, flexible and inclusive. He concentrates on the different meanings in which the universals are applied and understood. He always keeps in mind the physical reality they refer to. He also states that they could be significative even without nomination. And this is, in my opinion, a very strong claim (among others mentioned above) against those who would like to call his solution a nominalistic one. Names, and universal names particularly, are not just mere “utterances”, because they signify being and not being of something in the physical world.

It must be noted, however, that although the definition of the universal or of the genus or the species includes only words, nevertheless these nouns are often transferred to their things, as when it is said that species is made up of genus and difference, that is, the thing of the species from the thing of the genus. For when the nature of words is examined with respect of signification, **it is a question sometimes of words and sometimes of things**, and frequently the names of the latter and the former are transferred reciprocally (188).

It can be seen now that it is neither nominalism no realism, because the words sometimes signify words and sometimes things. In his rather realistic inclination Abelard, who does not like to talk nonsense as well as to hear one, warns us:

For this reason most of all, the ambiguous treatment of logic as well as grammar leads many, who do not distinguish clearly and properly of the imposition of nouns or the abuse of transference, into error by the transference of nouns (188).

He wants us always to make sense or signify either things or words and understand what is that we are doing at the moment.

Now, I think, it is clear that there was a problem of universals at the time, otherwise there would be no alternative questions and attempted solutions about them. It seems that Abelard’s solution was neither nominalistic, no realistic. He tried to give life of a meaningful concept to the universals, saying that they signify by nomination things truly existent, and some say he succeeded for another 300 years in his conceptualism. There is a reason why Abelard was not a peripatetic (meaning the follower of Aristotle). He could not, being a Christian theologian and the observer of Plato, considering his position with qualification (together with Boethius), but like almost every medieval thinker he was indebted to The Philosopher, which did not prevent him from being a very original thinker with rather synthetic tendencies.

V

What consequences of Abelard’s writings on universals could be thought of? The doctrine that names for physical things and for their groups of certain kind, like genera and species, and universals in general, at least some times are real, i.e., constitute a valid knowledge about the physical world as well as at other times the knowledge about the operations of our mind, influenced the further development of natural philosophy and logic in Western tradition. The subtle and multiple-level solution of the problem encouraged a more elaborated and keen approach to the other problems of philosophy as well. The philosophers, like for instance Tomas Aquinas, were greatly impressed by Peter Abelard’s work and they used his solution in their writings. I believe that later even Immanuel Kant was indebted to Abelard building his arguments about necessity intrinsic to science, which was, in my opinion, the strongest part in proving his *Transcendental Aesthetic*, namely *how are synthetic a priori propositions possible*. We can trace Abelard’s logical ideas in Kant’s writings on logic.

Who knows how much F. Bacon was in his debt, when he so passionately believed in the new method for acquiring knowledge of the physical world? It is easy to underestimate Abelard’s importance for the whole development of Western science, if we fail to consider that his doctrine was not a nominalistic one, which I hope I was able to demonstrate in this essay.

VI

There still remains a question: Why some scholars like Weinberg and Broadie called Abelard’s solution nominalistic? In order to answer this, let us first look at their definitions of the term *nominalism* and then on some of their explanation of what Abelard wrote on the universals.

Nominalism traditionally understood is a doctrine, which denies the real existence of universals, conceived as supposed referents of general terms like “red” or “table”. . . . In more recent usage, ‘nominalism’ is often employed as a label for any repudiation of abstract entities, whether universals or particulars…(O.C.P., p.624)

In contrast to that, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* gives us the following on the term *realism*:

‘Real’ is often used with some opposite term in mind, such as ‘ideal’ or ‘fake’. To assert that something is somehow mind-independent is to move in the realist direction… (647)

Abelard thinks that nouns can be real **and** fake, or empty. When we speak of genera and species “they signify by nomination things **truly existent**, to wit, the same things as singular nouns, and **in no wise are they located in empty opinion**”, when we speak of mere words and images “like the following words, chimera and goat-stag which do not give rise to a rational understanding” those are located in empty opinion without the thing.

So, if somebody would focus exclusively on the second kind of words in Abelard’s solution, it would seem to him that Peter is a nominalist. Which I believe is the case with Weinberg and Broadie. It is possible then to form the concept of universal fakes like unicorns, centaurs… and call them empty species. It would be fine if Abelard did not also emphasize the first kind of words, which *in no wise are located in empty opinion*. If we focus exclusively on this kind of words we could (with the same right!) call Abelard a realist, and his solution of the problem of the universal a realistic one. But the truth is that there are two and not only one type of words Abelard shows, that is why his solution must be called rather synthetic, and the word is *conceptualism*. Abelard learned from both of his teachers and not just from one of them, and he was a very attentive student!

J. Weinberg and A. Broadie: some account of the arguments they give for their claim.

Broadie says: “In the dispute about the nature of the universals he [Abelard] was in the nominalist camp, holding that universals are utterances (*voces*) or mental terms, not things in the real world”.

This is far from precision, as I already showed giving a much more inclusive Abelard’s quotations about universals. Once more, Abelard’s universals are mental terms (like all terms), but they are sometimes about real things in the real world.

Broadie: “The universality of the universal derives from the fact that it is predicable of many things. Nevertheless, unless a number of things are in the same state, the one universal term cannot be predicated of them”.

Let’s read it as: *unless* ***many*** *things are in the same state…we cannot call them by the name signifying that state.* It is applicable, for instance, to the state of existing, and Abelard is saying: “we in no wise hold that universal nouns are, when, their things having been destroyed, they are not predicable of many things inasmuch as they are not common to any things, as for example the name of the rose when there are no longer roses, but it would still, nevertheless, be significative by the understanding, although it would lack nomination; otherwise there would not be the proposition: there is no rose”. Here the physical roses do not exist but the meaningful concept of roses, the universal, does, but in the mind only. This is only one of the cases of universals, and even in this case the name *roses* is not empty. It is not exactly the same to say *there is no rose in the vase* as *there is no unicorn in the room*. Because we observe real roses in other times and places in the physical world, but nobody really observes unicorns in reality. Abelard shows the possibility to talk about real things, and then universals describing them have certain reality, he also shows the possibility to predicate unreal things only existing in the mind, in that case they will certainly not have real existence. Still, in both cases they will have the existence as mental concepts. So some concepts could signify real things of physics and **others** could exist without physical referents. It is just when we talk about the second type of Abelard’s names we could consider him “in the nominalist camp”. **But how in the world could we do that considering his other types?**

J. Weinberg says: “His [Abelard’s] nominalistic solution of the problem of universals requires him to deny that universals are things and to affirm that they are significant words or concepts merely, and he finds a problem in the existence of a significant term which has no normal extradiscursive referent” (79). I can answer that the terms *merely* and *significant* present a contradiction. If a word is merely a word it is empty. If the word signifies something it has certain physical reality, and not merely a word. Therefore the above attempt to identify Abelard’s solution, in my opinion, lacks discretion and presents a logical problem. About the *normal* referent I can say that Abelard shows different cases (which I already exposed above) in which there sometimes **are** physical referents and at other times there **are no** physical referents**.** Hence, it is better to say that Abelard’s solution is neither nominalistic no realistic but rather synthetic with qualifications, which I already did in this essay.

But what if the following questions still come to our mind?

1. How is it that Broadie (and others) et al still adopt that reading? 2. Are they just being silly, or

3. are they stressing other texts, or are they not convinced that my reading of Abelard’s texts is correct?

Personally, I respect scholarship in general, and first would consult specialists on any topic of their expertise and only then would try my own reasoning wanting it to be informed and inclusive. However, the problem with so-called specialists often arises: not all philosophers concentrate on certain problematic phenomena, and, having had focusing on particular areas of the history of thought and doing a really good job there, sometimes they treat other areas without proper discretion. If it were not so, we would not have to think for ourselves at all but just to memorize what some specialist have said. We would not even have to read the originals. It is after reading the Abelard’s original writings with particular interest and sympathy I was surprised to read those statements of Broadie and Weinberg, which seemed to me contradicting my understanding of Abelard. I have to say that it is not that everything they wrote on Abelard was not helpful, on the contrary, I liked reading them, especially Weinberg.

Now, about the questions themselves. It seems to me that **there is** a temptation (1) to call Abelard a nominalist, because nominalism is **one of the** foundations of his solution. As I already said, probably those writers thought it was good enough to use the term for this reason. We also often call the snow white when it is white only partially, like today. I do not know if we should be called *silly* for this (2), but I do think that the snow right after the snow-storm would be called white more properly then today. And compare to that the latter should be more properly called dirty-white or something like that. About other texts Weinberg stresses, I just went through those again (in S.H.M.P.) with this particular question in mind, noticed the exposition of Abelard’s critical attitude to both, realistic Guillaume de Champeaux and nominalistic Roscelin of Compiegne, (and also others), nevertheless I could not find any relative argument which could present a contradiction to my reading of Abelard on this matter. There could be appearances of justification of that claim but I just can’t see anything really strong. That is why I will show only a couple of examples:

“The universal is that which in naturally apt to be predicated of many” (p.82). This rather supports the realistic element of the Abelard’s doctrine. If, what ever it is, a universal is **naturally** apt to be predicated of particulars, it has certain physical reality and cannot be empty. But then the critique of a certain doctrine follows, and Abelard, finds a flaw in that particular doctrine of *collection* of particulars. This critique still is **not** directed against the realism of universal itself but against the notion of universal as a collection-term for the particulars, which does not support the Weinberg’s claim we are investigating.

What than about the following?

“While the motivation of this theory (Adelard of Bath’s) is clearly the attempt to locate universality in individual things, it fails in the attempt to predicate a thing of a thing” (p. 83).

This also criticizes not a reality of a universal in general, but rather a particular doctrine designed for such purpose. And so in all other cases shown by Weinberg, as far as I can judge. So, after another examination of the texts, I cannot see anything to compromise my position. I do not think that they are stressing other texts (3), relative to the essence of my claim. About *whether they are convinced that my reading of Abelard’s texts is correct*, I cannot actually say unless I ask Weinberg and Broadie and they choose to respond to my critique.

Still, if the reader can see something I keep missing, I would be obliged if he brought it to my attention, and until then I remain satisfied with my conclusion which consists of the following:

The Abelards solution of the problem of universals is neither a realistic no a nominalistic one, or, in other words, it is in the same degree nominalistic as it is realistic; it includes elements of both as well as a critique of both taken separately in their application to the totality of the question. Neither one by itself can deal with all cases Abelard has exposed, because it is the meaning of the words in their relationship with the classes of particulars which determines their real or only nominal usage appropriate in each case, and that is determined sometimes by the mind only and sometimes by the nature of those particulars as well. The proper usage of logic here requires great attention and care in the construction of a meaningful concept. That is why it is better to call Abelard’s solution conceptualism, and the word here signifies a combination or synthesis of realism and nominalism.

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