



Abelard and the Twelfth Century Denis Hawkins

§1

The mediaeval thinkers were fortunate in having their attention called early to the problem of universals, for it is a problem whose ramifications extend over a great part of the philosophical field. A meditation on the nature of abstract thought leads insensibly to the consideration of the structure of fact in so far as it is intelligible or thinkable. Thus the problem of universals, as it presented itself to the mediaeval mind, served as an introduction to the whole range of philosophical logic and general metaphysics.

When I say of two roses that this is a rose and that is a rose, I am giving them the same name and using it in each case with the same meaning. It might seem that it could not have the same meaning unless in each case it meant the same thing. In that case, is there really one rose of which the particulars called by the name of rose are accidental modifications or manifestations? Or is that which is really the rose itself something apart from particular roses and belonging to a different order of being, so that through the perception of particular roses we glimpse a reality more absolute than the shifting objects of perceptual experience?

A more prosaic approach, however, enforces the realization that the two roses have no parts in common. The stalk and the petals and every other part of the flower are entirely distinct in the one and in the other. All that they have in common may appear to be the name, or perhaps the concept, considered as a sign of its object. Are we to content ourselves with this nominalist view and to assert simply that the name or concept designates a certain group of objects, or any member of the group, without inquiring further why these objects group themselves in our minds as roses and those as lilies?

The latter question is too obvious and urgent to be left aside. Although two roses have no part, nothing in common, they could yet hardly be said to have nothing in common. They resemble each other, and if we can understand what resemblance means, we shall be able to grasp the nature of the universal concept. Two things would in ordinary language be said to resemble each other when they are partly the same and partly different. This cannot mean, as we have already seen, that they have a part which is the same and a part which is different; there is no concrete reality belonging in common to both. But there is resemblance where there is identity in difference, where the identity and the difference are in reality inseparable although distinguishable by thought. A good deal more could evidently be said about the problem of universals, but this will serve to make intelligible the vacillations of the earlier mediaeval thinkers in dealing with the question.

§ 2

The celebrated passage of Porphyry which aroused the attention of the mediaevals is one in which that philosopher raises certain questions about universals without venturing to provide answers. He asks whether genera and species are real or merely figments of the mind, whether, if they are real, they are corporeal or incorporeal, and whether their reality resides in the sensible things which are members of the genus or species or is something distinct from these. The mediaeval thinkers might have found the Aristotelian solution of these difficulties in Boethius, for Boethius says clearly enough that genera and species are real but have their reality in their members; although their members may be perceptible through the senses, the apprehension of universals requires more than perception; it requires comparison and abstraction, for a universal is a resemblance cognized by thought (*similitudo cogitata*). It does not, however, appear to have been noticed that Boethius provided the essential answer, for Godfrey of St. Victor, in a well-known piece of twelfth-century academic light verse, represents him as embarrassed by the differences of learned opinion and unable to make up his mind which side to take in settling the question.

*Assidet Boethius stupens de hac lite,
Audiens quid hie et hic afferat perite,
El quid cui faveat non discernit rite,
Nee praesumit solvere litem definite.*

The earliest mediaeval speculation manifests a realism untempered by any more subtle consideration. To know is to know something; since thinking employs universal terms, universals must themselves be real. The principle seems almost to have been: one word, one thing. In the Carolingian age Fridugise of Tours, writing *De Nihilo et Tenebris*, delighted in the paradox of attributing a certain reality to nothingness and to darkness on the ground that they were significant terms of thought.

The first reaction, when it came, was equally extreme. Just as the original realism had been based too exclusively on the true principle of the objectivity of knowledge, so the new view was based too exclusively on the true principle that only the individual is real. The authorship of opposition to realism is usually assigned to Roscellinus towards the end of the eleventh century. Since the individual alone is real, universality belongs only to the words by which we designate indifferently one or other member of a class of individuals; a universal term is *flatus vocis*. It obviously did not occur to Roscellinus that the same problem can be raised about words as about things. Each instance of the use of a word is itself a different thing, a different sound or a different mark on paper; how then do we come to speak of instances of the same word? Apart from this, how did Roscellinus explain the manner in which we group things under the same name? Why do we call roses by the name of rose, and not lilies? Our information about him is too scanty to enable us to answer these questions of interpretation. Henceforward, at any rate, those who dealt with logic from the viewpoint of language, *secundum vocem*, were opposed to those who dealt with it from the viewpoint of reality, *secundum rem*. Everything invited to the formation of a synthesis which should do justice to both points of view, but this did not come at once.

Meanwhile, for example, we find Odo of Tournai defending the traditional

realistic logic against the pernicious novelties of the nominalist Raimbert of Lille, and maintaining that humanity is one reality manifested in ever-changing forms throughout the generations of men. With more elaborate argument the ancient realism is defended by William of Champeaux, who died as bishop of Chalon in 1120. William, however, was fated to have Abelard among his students and, under the pressure of the young logician's objections, had gradually to modify his views. Having given up the theory that a universal is essentially one thing of which the individuals which are members of the class are merely accidental modifications, he first subscribed to the vague formula that there is a certain unity of indifference in the members of a class, and finally contented himself with saying that there is no identity but only likeness.

A considerable number of theories aiming at compromise appear in the early part of the twelfth century, but most of them are regrettably vague. Adelard of Bath speaks of different aspects (*respectus*) under which a thing can be considered as this individual, as belonging to a species and as belonging to a genus. Walter of Mortagne, using the term *status*, seems to intend very much the same as Adelard. Jocelin of Soissons prefers to look at the question in extension and says that universality belongs to the whole collection or class, while individuality characterizes its members. These views are catalogued in the *Metalogicon* of John of Salisbury, and are evidently attempts to reconcile the objectivity of knowledge with the primary reality of the individual.

For a precise and accurate treatment, however, we have to go to the logical writings of Peter Abelard himself. Abelard sets out from the now established position that reality belongs primarily to the individual. Specific and generic names, however, are common to classes of individuals, but the universal is not merely a name, for it is significantly predicated of the class of individuals to which it applies. It signifies a real property of the individual subject, although it places this in an isolation which does not belong to it outside the mind. The formation of the universal concept must be referred to the abstractive activity of thought; in this way it can be true both that its whole content is real and that its form of universality is a mental product. "When I consider this man merely as a substance or body, and not also as an animal or man or grammarian, I am thinking of nothing which does not belong to him but I am not considering everything which belongs to him. . . . One factor is thought of separately from another but not as 'separate from it' (*Separatim namque haec res ab alia, non separata intelligitur*). This is the classical mediaeval solution of the problem of universals, and, when it had sunk into men's minds, there was no further controversy on the subject until after the age of Aquinas, when Duns Scotus raised new metaphysical questions about the structure which fact must possess in order that abstract thought may be possible, and when William of Ockham, proceeding in the opposite direction, founded a new type of nominalism.

§ 3

His solution of the problem of universals was Abelard's chief departmental contribution to philosophy, but his personality and spirit exercised a wide general influence on the development of thought in the twelfth century. His stormy career gave a new intellectual impetus to his own and the succeeding generation. The trouble with him, of course, was that riot only could he not suffer fools gladly but he could not even suffer wise men gladly if their wisdom was of a different stamp from

his own. Yet, in spite of his defects, he remains a fascinating personality, and we are fortunate in possessing his own account of the greater part of his life in the long letter which is usually known as the *Historia Calamitatum*.

Born at Le Pallet near Nantes in 1079, the eldest son of a knightly family, Abelard renounced his feudal rights in order to follow a career of learning. After being initiated into dialectic by Roscellinus, he made himself obnoxious to William of Champeaux by presenting him with unanswerable objections, and soon set up as a teacher on his own account. The established masters made things difficult for the pert young newcomer, who was ready to treat anyone as he had treated William, and he went off to become a student again, but this time of theology. The teacher he chose was Anselm of Laon, the most celebrated theologian of the period, but Abelard found him disappointing and, forgetful of how much trouble he had stirred up for himself by his tactless handling of William of Champeaux, he behaved in the same way to Anselm. He announced a rival lecture on the interpretation of Ezekiel and found himself greeted as a new master of theology. This, obviously, was not pleasing to Anselm, and Abelard had to leave Laon and return to Paris, a teacher now of theology in place of dialectic.

It was at this period that he fell in with Heloise, the niece of the canon Fulbert with whom he lodged. Their genuinely tragic connection deserves something better than the rather sugary sentimentality which has often been lavished upon it. Abelard candidly describes how, beginning by teaching her in his spare time, he ended by falling in love with her. When their son Astrolabius was born, he wanted to marry her, although this would of course have ended his career as a cleric, and her unselfish arguments in opposition have a curiously twentieth-century ring. "Could anyone intent on theological or philosophical meditations", she said, "put up with the cries of children, the foolishness of nurses hushing them and the tumult of a household full of men and women? Could he tolerate babies with their continual dirtiness? It is all right for the rich, who have plenty of room in their palaces or mansions and whose wealth makes them superior to expenses and daily worries. But philosophers are not in the same position as the rich, nor do those who are amassing wealth and engrossed by worldly cares give much time to theology or philosophy." In the end, however, Abelard prevailed, and the marriage took place secretly. But the relations of Heloise seem to have suspected that he was unwilling to acknowledge her publicly as his wife and took their cruel revenge upon him.

In an emotional reaction from this shock Abelard became a monk at Saint Denis, while Heloise took the veil at Argenteuil. Meanwhile some of his theological opinions became a subject of complaint, and he was condemned to burn his book *De Unitate et Trinitate Divina* by a synod held at Soissons in 1121. Finding his monastery intolerable, he adopted a solitary life in the place where he built the oratory of the Paraclete, but students soon flocked to him again. Fearing that theological teaching would get him into trouble once more, he handed over the Paraclete to Heloise and her nuns, and consented to become abbot of St. Gildas in his native land of Brittany. Here he was unlucky as usual; the abbey turned out to be in so relaxed a state of discipline that he could do nothing with it. He returned first to the Paraclete and then to the Mont Sainte Genevieve at Paris, where he resumed his teaching of theology. This merely procured him a new condemnation by a synod at Sens in 1140, whose decisions were confirmed by Pope Innocent II. He submitted and took refuge with his friend Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, under whose protection he died in 1142.

There can be no doubt that Abelard made mistakes. He was a pioneer in the analytic speculative theology which is so characteristic a product of the middle ages, and he never seems to have been quite clear about the respective parts of faith and of reason. His scornful and intolerant character made it impossible for him to come to an agreement with men like St. Bernard, whose sanctity and fundamental Tightness he overlooked and whose lack of formal intellectual training he despised.

Yet Abelard's own intentions were fundamentally sound; he was only trying to develop more completely and more systematically the faith seeking understanding which St. Anselm had cherished. The character which could deserve the affection and respect shown by Peter of Cluny for Abelard in the letter to Heloise which tells her of his death, and is surely one of the most moving of mediaeval documents, cannot be lightly condemned. Other men, his successors in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, not excluding Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, were to walk more discreetly and more securely in his footsteps, but we should not forget to pay tribute to the pioneering work of Abelard and to the impulse which it gave to later speculation in spite of its blemishes.

In the circumstances of his life it is not surprising that Abelard's works remain somewhat fragmentary. In pure philosophy, apart from his logical works, the glosses on Porphyry, on the *Categories* and on the *De Interpretatione* of Aristotle, he left an ethical treatise, the *Scito Te Ipsum*. Here he displays an appreciation of the subjective factor in conduct, of the importance of viewpoint and intention, which is almost unique in the middle ages. But he left still more, in spite of all his faults, an example of genuine devotion to the intellectual life, and for this his very faults and the misfortunes which they brought upon him only increase the duty of acknowledging his real merits.

§4

The twelfth century was not to produce a great systematic philosopher, but it was marked by a series of respectable scholars and thinkers. The abbey of St. Victor at Paris, in which William of Champeaux had passed some years before he became a bishop, was an important centre of study. The German Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) was its most distinguished figure. While he holds a considerable place in the history of theology, in philosophy he was something of an eclectic. His view of universals was derived from Abelard; he adopted an atomic account of the material world; his psychology was based on Augustine; for the way to God he relied chiefly upon an inference from the finite and temporal character of the self as given to consciousness. His work was carried on in the next generation by the Scotsman Richard of St. Victor. The other well-known name connected with St. Victor, that of Adam, the author of an immense number of not unpleasing doggerel Latin hymns, does not appear in the history of philosophy.

Chartres was an even greater intellectual centre for part of the twelfth century. It was specially noted for its humanistic and literary interests, and a good deal of work was done in the physical sciences, especially by William of Conches, who professed a more developed atomic theory than that of Hugh of St. Victor. The philosophers, Bernard and Thierry of Chartres, were Platonists, and their systems can be rapidly described as a commentary on the *Timaeus* with the addition of Neoplatonic and Augustinian elements. Gilbert de la Porree (1076-1154), however, who taught at Chartres before becoming bishop of Poitiers, was more of an Aristotelian; his *Liber*

Sex Principiorum, in which he endeavoured to supplement the Categories of Aristotle, became a classic of mediaeval logic and was studied for centuries in conjunction with the *Organon* itself.

The Englishman John of Salisbury died as bishop of Chartres in 1180. He had been a disciple of Abelard, of William of Conches and of Gilbert de la Porree, and gives a pleasant picture of his student days at Paris and Chartres, making the comment when he returned later on to the scenes of his youth that the same problems were still being heatedly discussed with the same arguments, and no one seemed to have got any farther. Later he was for twenty years on the archiepiscopal staff at Canterbury under Theobald and St. Thomas a Becket. An old chronicle provides one of those revelations of character which make history come to life, in the account which it gives of his remonstrance to Becket for being so conciliatory in his first interview with the knights who eventually murdered him. "We all have to die," the archbishop replied, "nor should be diverted from the right way by the fear of death; I am more ready to undergo death for the sake of God and of justice than they to inflict it." "We," rejoined John, "are sinners and not yet prepared to die; I see no one here who wishes to die for dying's sake but you."¹

John of Salisbury was more of a scholar and an eclectic than an original philosopher. The *Policraticus* is a discursive work concerned with political theory and incidentally enumerating the systems of philosophy known to John. The *Metalogicon* is a plea for the study of logic; it contains an account of the different contemporary views on universals and solves the question more or less in the spirit of Abelard. It is important, too, as containing an analysis of the *Organon* of Aristotle, which was just then coming once more to be known in its entirety.

Alan of Lille was another great scholar of the twelfth century, but his philosophy, too, was eclectic rather than original. The thinkers of the period are of mainly historical interest, but they prepared the way for the major developments of the thirteenth century. Meanwhile Aristotle was being rediscovered and universities were taking definite shape, so that we can see a great difference in the state of learning in 1100 and in 1200, and it is not inappropriate to speak of a twelfth-century renaissance.

§5

Universities are a mediaeval creation. In the early middle ages the schools, which were usually attached to cathedrals or monasteries, had little organization or continuity. When good teachers were available, they flourished, but in a few years they might be almost deserted. In the twelfth century itself we see how a brilliant group of scholars brought Chartres into a temporary celebrity which in a short time was completely eclipsed. From the writings of Abelard and John of Salisbury it appears that anyone might set up as a teacher at Paris if he could collect an audience.

With the new enthusiasm for learning and the great increase in the number of students, it was natural that measures of organization should gradually be introduced. The development was in fact gradual; it is impossible to assign a date of foundation to the first mediaeval universities. The charters which they eventually received were a recognition of an already existing state of affairs; the faculties had begun to be organized, and masters and scholars formed a self-governing unity. The earliest university is usually said to be Bologna, but it was always predominantly a law school. The greatest of mediaeval universities was indisputably Paris. At the time of

Abelard there were the three schools of Notre Dame, St. Victor and the Mont Sainte Genevieve; by the end of the twelfth century these had coalesced into the university which received a charter from Philip Augustus in 1200 and a papal privilege in 1231. Oxford was growing up at the same time; the origin of Cambridge can be more exactly dated by a migration from Oxford in 1209.

The teaching of philosophy was in the mediaeval university associated both with the arts and with theology. Dialectic or logic acquired a dominant position among the arts, while the treatment of metaphysical and ethical questions fell to the masters of theology. That is why we have, for example, to look for a great part of Aquinas's philosophy in his professedly theological works, such as the *Summa Theologica*. But, in spite of this mingling of philosophy and theology in practice, it is evident when we read the great men of the thirteenth century that they were very well aware of what was philosophy and what theology, what fell within the province of pure reason and what presupposed revelation. With the rediscovery of Aristotle, the reading of his works gained a greater place for pure philosophy and for questions which we should now consider to belong to the physical sciences.

With the paucity and dearness of books before the invention of printing, oral teaching was of primary importance. The tradition of lecturing has perhaps even now failed to take full account of the change of conditions brought about by printing; while lectures remain useful for general introduction, bibliographical direction and the emphasizing of salient points, it is riot always recognized that an intelligent student can acquire information by reading in half the time that it would take to assimilate it through the ear. In the middle ages, however, lectures were inevitably the chief means of instruction, and they were supplemented by disputations in which the students themselves took part.

The nature of mediaeval teaching dictated the form of mediaeval writing. The lecture, *lectio*, a reading, took the form of commentary on some accepted textbook, but it was a commentary which often diverged considerably, in accordance with the taste of the lecturer, from the opinions and even the subject-matter of the author commented upon. Although the authority of Aristotle was very great in the middle ages, the commentaries upon his works are by no means slavish. The mediaeval convention, of course, was to seek agreement, and even sometimes to assume it when it was fairly patently not there, and this tends to obscure the originality of mediaeval writers when examined by the modern reader, now that Professor A tends usually to stress his divergences from Professor B, and anything but the latest new theory is commonly considered rather dull. But, under the bland mediaeval assumption that Aristotle or some other great authority is being explained, he is in fact often being considerably modified. At the same time the mediaeval thinkers were not ashamed to profess agreement when they did agree, and it was thought sufficient originality to present the old truth with new force. This panegyric is fully applicable to the creative period of the middle ages; it should be acknowledged equally that in the decline of scholasticism opinions did become fatiguingly stereotyped.

The accepted author in theology was Peter Lombard, who taught in Paris and became its bishop in the middle of the twelfth century. A large proportion of mediaeval philosophy, as well as theology, is to be found in the innumerable commentaries on the four books of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Besides these there were the records of disputations and studies of special questions treated in the form of disputation, whether the continuous exposition of the ordinary *quaestiones*

disputatae or the more miscellaneous *quaestiones quodlibetales*. Short *opuscula* dealt with particular problems in more familiar literary form, and there were a certain number of larger original constructions, especially the *summae theologicae*, of which that of St. Thomas is so famous. In this way mediaeval writing clearly bears the stamp of the teaching methods of the universities.

The twelfth century was a period of preparation. The urge to study grew, the knowledge of the past was once again brought to bear, and universities were formed. It's most important contribution to the new life of philosophy in the thirteenth century, the recovery of Aristotle, has been alluded to but remains to be studied in some detail.

Denis Hawkins. *A Sketch of Medieval Philosophy*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1946. This text is in the public domain.