

ABELARD'S THEORY OF UNIVERSALS

Abelard is guided by Aristotle's definition of "universal" as "that which is of such a nature as to be predicated of many"

He undertook a critique of extreme realism (in particular that of William of Champeaux, his contemporary), arguing that extreme realism treats universals as things or substances, which they could not be, since, as Aristotle also says, substance cannot be predicated of anything.

Hence, Abelard says, the only alternative is that it is a certain class of words which are universals. Words are obviously predicable of things in some sense. ("predicate" is from *prae-dicere*, "to say of")

But Abelard's position is not extreme nominalism (like that of Roscelin, who said that universals are mere vocal sounds). Does the extreme nominalist maintain that Socrates is a vocal utterance "human", in saying that Socrates is human? A mere sound in the air as such cannot be predicated of anything.

Abelard's position is that what is predicable is a universal word's significance or meaning, we may call this a universal idea or conception.

Such universal mental conceptions are obtained, according to Abelard, by abstracting from particular things a "general and indiscriminate image" of some characteristics in which all the particulars in a group are alike. It is general or indiscriminate in that it contains nothing that discriminates or distinguishes between the things having the characteristic.

A universal mental conception is unitary and distinct from particulars but it is made by us and is not an independent thing. There is not a numerically identical essence in things corresponding to this universal conception. Each man, e.g., has fused with the matter of his body, his own particular form of rational animality. The humanity of Plato is not the humanity of Socrates. Yet Plato and Socrates are alike in virtue of their distinct humanities. It is their likeness to one another that is abstracted to form the universal conception.

Abelard, pg.2

But are not such universal conceptions false and empty? Abelard considers this objection. There is nothing in Socrates which is general and indiscriminate. Yet Abelard's theory asserts that Socrates is represented by the universal mental conception which is general and indiscriminate.

And the universal is something separate and apart from individuals. Yet there is nothing in those individuals which can exist separate or apart from them. What then is it that the universal represents? Indeed, does it not mis- represent them?

Abelard answers that there is an important difference between considering something separately and considering it as separated.

Our universal conceptions must correspond to objective realities if they are not false and empty. But these objective realities need not be distinct from individuals. It is only the likenesses of individuals insofar as they have various characteristics that must correspond to our universal conceptions.

But is there not some reason why individuals exhibit objective similarities? In virtue of what are Socrates and Plato similar? Abelard's answer to this question is similar to that of Augustine. God created the world according to patterns of species and genera which are ideas in his mind. Unlike us, God does not rely upon experience to have ideas. God's way of knowing is not bound by any bodily condition or limitation. Hence, God's ideas contain far more than what can be abstracted from sense-perception of individuals. They are ideas of a kind superior to the abstracted images in human minds. Yet, since it is God's ideas which serve as the prototypes of the things he creates, there is a true and universal reason for the objective similarities of the characteristics in his creatures.

For Abelard, then, the solution to the problem of universals is that universals do not have just one status or nature but three.

- 1) "before things" (*ante rem*) - as patterns in God's Mind
- 2) "in things" (*in re*) - as characteristics in which things are alike
- 3) "after things" (*post rem*) - as universal conceptions in our minds.

Abelard was most likely familiar with a similar solution to the problem given by Avicenna.

One of the earliest attempts at a solution to the problem of universals was Extreme Realism. William of Champeaux (1120) held this view. Abelard was his student at one time.

Briefly, extreme realists argued along the following lines. One knows such facts as the following two:

- 1) Socrates is human
- 2) Plato is human.
- 3) In (1) and (2) "human" has the same meaning.
- 4) Since (3) is true, "human" stands for one and the same thing in both (1) and (2).
- 5) Since (4) is true, what "human" stands for is not a mental figment but something that actually exists, a substance.
- 6) What "human" stands for is not any individual thing but a species (essence or nature) : *rational animal*.
- 7) If a species is a single substance then particular members are its accidents or modifications. Thus particular men differ only in their variable surface accidents. The species is a unitary substance of which they participate.

Similarly for genera. *Animal* is the substance of which *Man* participates

Plato was an extreme realist. But platonic realism was different from typical early medieval realism in that Plato took universals to exist separately from the particulars that exemplify them. The early medievals said that universals exist only in particulars as their essences or natures.

One problem with extreme realism for orthodox christians is that it leads to Pantheism. It implies that everything is a manifestation of one all-inclusive Genus: Being. If one identifies Being with God, since it is the source of all things, then the world is a manifestation of God. One must then reject the Biblical idea that God radically transcends His creatures..

However, many christian theologians and Philosophers have also argued that extreme realism is compatible with and even required by Christian doctrine. The doctrine of original sin, for example, seems to require that Adam's sin was inherited by his descendants. Extreme realism provides an answer: Adam's very nature was corrupted and the same nature exists in all of his descendants. Another doctrine apparently requiring extreme realism was the doctrine of the Trinity. God is one being in three persons. God's unity is due to each of the three persons having divine Personhood in common. The Nicene creed says "The Son is of one substance with the Father" .

Near the end of the eleventh century, there was a reaction against extreme realism. The instigator of this reaction was probably Roscelin (1050 - 1120) . He was probably one of Abelard's teachers. Roscelin rejected the view that species and genera are substances, perhaps because he emphasized Aristotle's rule that substances cannot be predicated of anything and species and genera are predicable of many things. Substances can only be subjects of which something may be predicated. What one attributes to Socrates is not a substance but a complex characteristic - humanity. Roscelin was convinced that only concrete individuals exist independently. Unlike Aristotle, he may also have denied that characteristics are common to different individuals. He is reported to have said that universals are merely "flatus vocis". Nothing is really common to different individuals called by a general name except that the same name is uttered in reference to all of them. If this was Roscelin's view, it may be called Extreme Nominalism.. Actual existence belongs only to concrete individuals. There are no non-individual common entities.

A problem with extreme nominalism is that it seems to make it impossible to give any reason for calling different individuals the same name, i.e. for calling a group of individuals "human". Why should any group of individuals be viewed as belonging together prior to their being called by the same name? If the Father son and Holy ghost have nothing in common are they not three separate individuals? Must it not follow then that Christians worship three Gods?

Abelard objected to Williams version of Realism on the grounds that nothing can have contrary characteristics at the same time..