

Conceptualism in Abelard and Rand

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Introduction: Linear Conclusions

What is the nature and epistemological status of conceptual knowledge? Traditionally, this issue has been known as the problem of universals. In the foreword to her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Ayn Rand (1990, 2) lists four essential solutions to this problem:

1. The “extreme realists” or Platonists, who hold that abstractions exist as real entities or archetypes in another dimension of reality and that the concretes we perceive are merely their imperfect reflections, but the concretes evoke the abstractions in our mind.
2. The “moderate realists,” whose ancestor (unfortunately) is Aristotle, who hold that abstractions exist in reality, but they exist only *in* concretes, in the form of metaphysical *essences*, and that our concepts refer to these essences.
3. The “nominalists,” who hold that all our ideas are only images of concretes, and that abstractions are merely “names” which we give to arbitrary groupings of concretes on the basis of vague resemblances.
4. The “conceptualists,” who share the nominalists’ view that abstractions have no actual basis in reality, but who hold that concepts exist in our minds as some sort of ideas, not as images.

In the first part of this paper, I contend that Rand’s characterization of the conceptualists does not do justice to their views about the basis of abstractions in reality, using as my example one of the foremost

conceptualists in the history of philosophy: the medieval logician and philosopher Peter Abelard.¹ In the second part of this paper, I contend that Rand's views on the problem of universals are properly classified as a form of conceptualism, not as a *sui generis* "Objectivism" that rises above the positions historically offered.

Conceptualism in Abelard

Abelard and Rand have their stylistic similarities. For instance, Johan Huizinga (1984, 185–86) writes about Abelard as follows: "He was one of those people who throughout their lives arouse either a deep and passionate admiration or a violent hatred, one of those toward whom no one can be indifferent. . . . The combination of a penetrating, superior intellect and a violent passion made him very difficult to endure." The description could just as well have fit Ayn Rand over 800 years later! Yet the similarities between these two thinkers run deeper than style, and penetrate to what Rand considered "philosophy's central issue" (Rand 1990, 1): the problem of universals.² For Abelard, as for the ancients, the inquiry into knowledge began, not with the possibility of knowledge, but with the fact of knowledge. We discourse about Socrates, about men, about animals; and these discourses have meaning because, normally, we know what we are talking about.

Now knowledge of Socrates is not a problem in the theory of knowledge (at least not in Abelard's time)—it is so easily explained that it is hardly ever discussed: we have a simple knowledge of an individual entity or "substance."³ But what is it that we know when we truly discuss universals like "man" or "animal"? When we say that "Socrates is a man," what is it that we mean by "man"? "Socrates" is predicated of one thing (i.e., it is a proper noun), but "man" is predicated of many things simultaneously (i.e., it is a universal noun). What is the explanation for this state of affairs? What is the nature and status of universal nouns? This is the problem of universals.

Abelard raises two questions about universal nouns, questions that he thinks are more important and more fruitful than those posed earlier by Porphyry (*Logica Ingredientibus* as quoted in Tweedale 1976,

92)⁴:

There is the question as to what is the common cause of the application [*impositio*] of universal nouns, in virtue of which cause different things agree. Or there is the question about the ideas associated with universal nouns, since no thing seems to be conceived by those ideas nor do the universal utterances seem to deal with any thing.

This passage indicates Abelard's twofold purpose in the theory of knowledge. On the one hand, because he wanted to avoid the kind of nominalism which implies that universals are merely mental figments, he sought to discover the causes, in reality, for the application of universal nouns to existing things. On the other hand, because he wanted to avoid the kind of realism which implies that universals or essences are material substances, he sought to understand the nature of human abstractions, which he held are not things. (As we shall see, the motivation for this twofold purpose was at least partly theological: Abelard believed that both nominalism and realism led to heresy.)

Against the nominalists, Abelard answers the first of his questions as follows (*Logica Ingredientibus* as quoted in Tweedale 1976, 205):

Individual men who are separate from each other, while they differ both in their own essences and in their own forms . . . nevertheless agree in this: that they are men. I do not say that they agree in man, since a man is not any thing unless it is a distinct man. Rather I say in being a man. Being a man is not a man nor any thing if we consider the matter carefully. . . . We mean merely that they are men and do not differ at all in this regard, that is, not in as much as they are men, although we call on no essence.

Abelard's point may seem obvious: that we call men "men" simply because they are indeed men. But Abelard is not attempting here to define what it is to be a man. He is merely noting why universal

nouns are commonly applied—and showing a certain courage in not losing sight of three crucial facts: (1) that we do possess universal knowledge; (2) that the only things are particulars (and therefore that “essences” do not exist); and (3) that universals are truly tied to particulars.

Against the realists, Abelard contends that “being a man” is not a universal thing, even though it is universally applied—i.e., we cannot infer the existence of physical or metaphysical universals from the existence of linguistic ones. Abelard’s phrase “being a man” is an example for him of a *dictum* (roughly, a statement of how things stand in the world), which is closely allied with his notion of a *status* (roughly, the condition of being a certain sort of thing).⁵ In the same passage as that quoted above, Abelard declares that men “agree in the *status* of a man, i.e. in this: that they are men.” Now Abelard admits that it may sound strange that a *dictum* or *status*, neither of which is a thing, could be the cause of the common application of universal nouns; but he thinks that the demand that a cause be a physical thing is spurious. And he is emphatic that a *dictum* or *status* is not a thing: “we cannot call the *status* of a man the things themselves established in the nature of man” (206).

Abelard’s denial that natures are things is not a mere logical quibble for him, but an issue of great theological moment. For the main context of his denial is a discussion of the status and meaning of the Trinity within Christian theology. There existed two opinions concerning the Trinity: one was that the Trinity exists “only in words, not in reality” (nominalism), the other was that the Trinity exists “only in reality, not in words” (realism). The first view leads obviously to heresy, since it claims that God is not really three. And, Abelard argues, so also the second view leads to heresy: for if the divine Persons are different in reality, then their different natures or properties require three separate essences, thus undermining the oneness of God.

Yet, according to Abelard, the three Persons do have different properties or natures. It is only that “when we hear properties spoken of, we are not to understand that we believe that there are some forms in God. Rather we speak of properties as distinguishers.

... Or if someone understands some forms by this, it is certain that they are not in any way different from the substances they are in” (*Theologica Christiana* as quoted in Tweedale 1976, 191). “For if the paternity is in God, is it not true that God the Father consists of two items, i.e. of God and paternity, and that He relates as a whole to these two which he is made up?” Abelard answers: “Certainly not!” (193).

To overcome these theological difficulties, Abelard attempts to develop a new mode of differentiation in which we use “properties as distinguishers.” For it was obvious to him that both God and God’s paternity exist, and he realized that “exist” is being used in two different senses here. “For when we say that a man exists it is as though we posited a man in his manner of substance, i.e. said that something is itself or that something is a man. But if we say that paternity exists it is as though we posited something to be a father, not paternity itself to be its own essence” (195).

Thus, all existence statements say that something is true of an actually existing, concrete item. The first kind of statement says that a concrete subject simply exists; the second states that a particular thing possesses a certain property or *status* or nature.

If, then, everything that is true is true of particulars, whence universals? The fact that all particular men agree in the *dictum* of “being a man” may be the common cause of applying the term “man” to them, but that fact does not yield us knowledge of what human beings actually are—and it is this sort of knowledge that we associate with true, universal knowledge of the things themselves. Types or natures would seem to fit the bill, i.e., they seem to be things that are truly predicated of many individuals at the same time—but nowhere does Abelard take the easy way out by saying this.

Rather, what Abelard says is that expressions (*sermones*) are universals. This may strike the reader as not very advanced from Roscelin’s view that universals are the *flatus vocis* (the blowing of the voice). To buttress his claims, Abelard invokes the weight of Aristotle: “he says that ‘a universal is what is formed so as to be predicated of many,’ that is, he draws on its formation, i.e. its establishment. For what is the formation of expressions other than

their establishment by men? It gets its being a noun or an expression from its establishment. . . . Thus we say that expressions are universals since in virtue of their formation . . . they are predicated of many" (*Logica Nostrorum Petitioni Sociorum* as quoted in Tweedale 1976, 143).

It seems that earlier in his career, Abelard had held the nominalist view that utterances (*voces*) are universals, but that later on he revised his position. According to his later view, utterances are the bare, concrete, physical sounds of words, while *sermones* are these sounds as vested by human beings with meaning—*sermones* are, as it were, abstract yet determinate entities. As we saw in the discussion of abstract properties or types such as paternity, to say that a particular thing "is" an abstract item (e.g., "Socrates is a biped") amounts to noting a certain fact about a concrete item (Socrates has two feet). Abelard applies this notion also to expressions: when he says that expressions are universals, what he means is that utterances have been established by human beings through language as being universal, that is, as being predicable of many simultaneously. Utterances (*voces*) established as meaningful are expressions (*sermones*).

Now this talk of establishing utterances as meaningful may lead one to believe that human beings impose on the world the commonality of universals, or that meaning is merely a linguistic convention. But Abelard is opposed to this view:

Now let us answer the question that we promised above to discuss, namely whether the commonness of universal nouns is judged to be due to a common cause of application [*impositio*] or on account of a common conception or both. Nothing prevents its being due to both, but that common cause which is understood to pertain to the nature of things seems to have the greater force. (*Logica Ingredientibus* as quoted in Tweedale 1976, 208)

It is all very well for Abelard to say this, but what does he claim is the cause of this objectivity of universal expressions? What is the nature of the "common conceptions" that they provide us with notions both

universal and objective? Or, we moderns might ask, what is it about the world and about the mind that makes conceptual knowledge possible?

At first blush, it may seem impossible to answer this Kantian question in Abelardian terms, since there are in Abelard's extant writings no treatments of the nature of the mind or of the world. However, we do have his views on how the mind interacts with the world to establish utterances as expressions—that is, we are in possession of his theory of abstraction. And his theory of abstraction is the explanatory key to Abelard's views on universals.

Abelard's main presentation of the topic of abstraction is contained in his *Glosses on Porphyry* (McKeon 1929, 245–46):

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

Abelard's examples are not so important here as the method or procedure of "attending to" or "considering" only certain aspects of a thing—for we could just as well attend to a man's bipedality or

paternity or whatnot in isolation from all his other forms or attributes or properties.⁶

Thus, according to Abelard, we observe concrete things that are similar in a certain respect or property (e.g., that men walk on two feet)—and, comparing the concrete instances and attending only to the property of bipedality in isolation from the other characteristics of human beings, we come to know that man is a biped—that is, we establish the physical utterance “biped” as a universal expression referring to a fact about human beings that we have attended to. By attending, then, to each characteristic we observe, we can understand the nature of things, thereby building up a body of abstract, general knowledge about concrete things.

We can now better understand the “mode of differentiation” that Abelard developed to analyze the notoriously thorny theological issue of the Trinity (*Theologica Christiana* as quoted in Tweedale 1976, 190):

The Persons, i.e. the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are different from each other in the way that things which are different by definition or property are different; that is, although the very same essence which is God the Son is God the Father or God the Holy Spirit, nevertheless the property of God the Father in as much as He is the Father is other than that of the Son and that of the Holy Spirit.

According to Abelard, God has certain properties or characteristics, but these are not in reality separate from His nature or essence—they are “aspects” or “properties” of His nature. The result is that when we attend to God’s power, we say “Father”; when we attend to His wisdom, we say “Son”; when we attend to His love, we say “Holy Spirit.” Nor are our words in any way arbitrary: according to Abelard, God is indeed powerful, wise, and loving, and we simply recognize those facts when we use the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Further, despite Abelard’s claim that “words change their ordinary sense when their application is transferred from creatures to God” (Marenbon 1997, 155), he decidedly does not think these

principles of analysis apply only to God and the Trinity. For even though Abelard cleaved to the common medieval view that God is not a substance (124), he held that the relation of the essence or nature of God to the aspect or property Father is the same as, generally, that of any substance to any of its attributes or properties.⁷ It is, of course, mainly the latter, i.e., the properties or features of concrete things, that we deal with in abstraction—and Abelard claims that, as in the case of the Trinity, we deal with them truly.⁸ Thus, no matter how much truth may be a relation between the mind’s abstractive power and the particular concretes, Abelard’s focus is always fundamentally on the particular concretes, whence we truly derive our conceptual knowledge of the world. In contrast to Rand’s characterization, then, Abelard’s conceptualism does not exclude a kind of objectivism.

Conceptualism in Rand

Similarly, I would argue that Rand’s objectivism does not exclude a kind of conceptualism. Clearly, Rand wanted her epistemology to be seen as *sui generis*, as an “Objectivism” historically independent of other schools of thought. However, as we have seen, her characterization of conceptualism as a form of nominalism does not do justice to at least one conceptualist thinker, whose views seem quite congruent with her own. So it would behoove us to investigate the extent to which Rand’s views on the problem of universals can be reconciled with the historical record of reflection on this foundational issue.

Rand (1990, 53) writes of conceptualism as follows:

The nominalist and conceptualist schools regard concepts as *subjective*, i.e., as products of man’s consciousness, unrelated to the facts of reality, as mere “names” or notions arbitrarily assigned to arbitrary groupings of concretes on the ground of vague, inexplicable resemblances.

It seems as if it is Rand’s lumping of conceptualism with nominalism

here that groups theories together based on vague resemblances.⁹ For while nominalism and conceptualism both criticize realist theories, they are quite different in their fundamentals. Specifically, conceptualism, far from asserting that concepts are arbitrary (the mere *flatus vocis* of Roscelin), focuses its attention on the process of abstracting universals from their factual basis in reality.

This key feature can be found both in Abelard and in Rand. Abelard made abstraction the core of his account of conceptual knowledge, and Rand did the same, albeit in more modern and psychologically advanced language.¹⁰ Indeed, I would argue that we can see Rand's epistemology as an updating of the project that Abelard pursued over 800 years ago. Let us delve into the Randian texts on the matter to see how this is so.

First, there are two key principles or observations that clear the ground for a conceptualist approach to the problem of universals. These are (1) contra the realists, that the only entities are particular entities (i.e., there exist no abstract entities); and (2) contra the nominalists, that in general human concepts are valid, not arbitrary.

Rand clearly recognizes the first of these insights, which I have earlier labeled "particularism":

But anything pertaining to the content of a mind always has to be treated metaphysically not as a separate existent, but only with this precondition, in effect: that it is a mental state, a mental concrete, a mental something. Actually, "mental something" is the nearest to an exact identification. Because "entity" does imply a physical thing. . . . it isn't an entity in the primary, Aristotelian sense in which a primary substance exists. (157)

And she also recognizes the second:

There are such things as invalid concepts, i.e., words that represent attempts to integrate errors, contradictions or false propositions. . . . Invalid concepts appear occasionally in men's languages, but are usually—though not necessarily—

short-lived, since they lead to cognitive dead-ends.¹¹ (49)

As we've seen (and reflecting his stronger interest in logic), Abelard's main argumentative focus was on the epistemological validity of propositions such as "Socrates is a biped" and "Socrates is a man." He did not focus as exclusively as Rand did on the psychological processes involved in the formation of concepts themselves (perhaps because the discipline of psychology did not develop until the 1800s). This difference is manifest in the fact that the main actors in Rand's usual examples of concept-formation are children. Such a developmental focus would have struck Abelard the twelfth-century logician as exceedingly odd, but they came naturally, it seems, to Rand the twentieth-century epistemologist. So, for example, here is Rand's first explication of the process of concept-formation:

When a child observes that two objects (which he will later learn to designate as "tables") resemble each other, but are different from four other objects ("chairs"), his mind is focusing on a particular attribute of the objects (their shape), then isolating them according to their differences, and integrating them as units into separate groups according to their similarities.

This is the key, the entrance to the conceptual level of man's consciousness. *The ability to regard entities as units is man's distinctive method of cognition*, which other living species are unable to follow. (6)

Note also Rand's emphasis on what Jacob Bronowski called "the difference of man": the fact that the ability to form concepts sets human beings apart from the rest of the animals. Here again we find a concern that would have been foreign to Abelard (although this is not surprising, given that a deep interest in biology, and especially in what sets humans biologically apart from other animals, did not develop until after Darwin). Despite these differences, Rand and

Abelard share the same interest in the validity of human abstractions from the particulars:

A unit is an existent regarded as a separate member of a group of two or more similar members. . . . Note that the concept "unit" involves an act of consciousness (a selective focus, a certain way of regarding things), but that it is *not* an arbitrary creation of consciousness: it is a method of identification or classification according to the attributes which a consciousness observes in reality. (6-7)

Although Rand's terminology is more modern, her argument is not substantially different from what Abelard argued in his *Glosses on Porphyry*: that human abstractions are indeed valid because they include nothing except what is in the nature of the particular objects being considered.

Given that Rand devoted many pages to her treatment of abstraction, she developed her theory of abstraction in greater depth than Abelard did (though many of Abelard's texts were lost in the centuries following his death, so we may simply be missing important textual evidence). In contrast to Abelard's focus on propositions, Rand is much more concerned with defining and defending the status of individual concepts based on a determination of the distinguishing characteristics of each group of existents that humans classify. This leads her to explain what Abelard called the "common cause of application of universal nouns" in a rather more Aristotelian fashion than Abelard did:

To what precisely do we refer when we designate three persons as "men"? We refer to the fact that they are living beings who possess the *same* characteristic distinguishing them from all other living species: a rational faculty . . . (17)

This more Aristotelian bent in Rand's epistemology is not surprising. Indeed, what *is* surprising is how nearly Aristotelian many of Abelard's insights were, given that the only texts of Aristotle then

available in more than a handful of widely scattered scriptoria, were the *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*, both of which were viewed through the heavy lenses of medieval scholarship and Christian theology in the form of translations and commentaries by Boethius, as well as subsequent commentaries on Boethius. Yet there is a crucial difference between Abelard and Rand on the one hand and Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition on the other: whereas Aristotle's moderate realism assumes a rather passive approach to cognition (since universals exist in the world and can therefore imprint themselves on the mind), both Abelard (Marenbon 1997, 163) and Rand held that human conceptual consciousness plays a more active role by drawing concepts out of the particulars through a process of abstraction.

No doubt there are differences between Abelard and Rand on the problem of universals. But these differences are in most cases attributable to Abelard's stronger interest in logic and his unavoidable ignorance of psychology, biology, science, and the main heritage of Aristotle's contributions to epistemology. Further, I would argue that the differences are differences of measurement: Rand's theory of concepts is quantitatively deeper and broader than, but not qualitatively different from, Abelard's. To paraphrase Rand (1990, 66), the *concept* "conceptualism" has not changed: it refers to the same kind of theory; what has changed and grown in the 800 years since Abelard is the knowledge of that theory.

Conceptualism in Context

As noted at the beginning of this essay, Ayn Rand distinguished between four main positions on the problem of universals: extreme realism, moderate realism, nominalism, and conceptualism. Given the historical evidence, I would instead distinguish between five positions:

1. Extreme realism. The extreme realists hold that universals literally exist in another realm or dimension. On this view, universals exist independently or intrinsically, and the process of grasping them is one of intuition or something akin to perception; thus human

beings add nothing to the process of understanding (except perhaps receptivity to universal reality) and knowledge is not relational in any way. Plato is the first and leading figure here, but extreme realists have appeared even up to our own day (e.g., Kurt Gödel). In the history of philosophy, this position is sometimes referred to as objectivism, but I follow Hao Wang (1996) in holding that it is possible to develop an “objectivism without Platonism” and that the essence of objectivism lies in a commitment to objectivity, not to the independent existence of universals.

2. Extreme nominalism. The extreme nominalists hold that human names for things (we cannot really call them concepts) are purely arbitrary and that “knowledge” has nothing to do with inherent universals and everything to do with human conventions. On this view, knowledge is not relational, because humans create names only for their own subjective ends, without basing them on any kind of objective “reality.” Some ancient Sophists and modern linguistic philosophers (and, in Abelard’s day, Roscelin and his school) have been seen as extreme nominalists.

3. Moderate realism. The moderate realists hold that universals exist, not as separate forms, but as universal natures that inhere in particulars. On this view, universals exist in reality, but a process of thought is required to understand them and that process can make human ideas less than fully diaphanous; thus universals are mostly inherent or intrinsic, but the understanding of those universals can involve a relation between human cognition and inherent reality. Aristotle is often held to be the stereotypical moderate realist, although I would argue that his actual ideas (as opposed to those of later Aristotelians in the scholastic tradition) come close to bordering on conceptualism.

4. Moderate nominalism. The moderate nominalists hold that human beings give names to things for their own ends, but that these names can have some tie to reality because human naming is often based on “resemblances” among entities in the world. The exact nature of these resemblances is not normally spelled out, but the moderate nominalists do hold that there is some connection between names and things (albeit one as vague as Hume’s “associations” or

Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances”). However, the resemblances are not any kind of universals—the only universals are names for things, which are subjective.

5. Conceptualism. The conceptualists hold that the only universals are human abstractions or *concepts*. While concepts are human creations, the process of concept-formation is one of abstraction from the actual features of particular entities, and therefore concepts (in general) contain nothing that does not exist in reality. On this view, there are no universal entities: universals exist neither in a separate realm nor in particular entities. However, human concepts are based on abstraction from particular entities, so that the names we give to things are neither arbitrary nor subjective, but directly grounded in the features of entities. Thus, both existence and consciousness contribute to the process of concept-formation: reality contributes the particular entities and their features, while human cognition contributes the abstractions that unite those entities and features into universal concepts.

Based on this fivefold system of classification, it is clear that both Abelard and Rand are conceptualists.

Notes

1. For information about Abelard, his times, and his ideas, see Clanchy 1997, Haskins 1927, and Marenbon 1997, respectively. While it is common among scholars to define nominalism as the view that “there is no such thing which is not particular” (Marenbon 1997, 108), I find it clearer to label that view “particularism” and to reserve “nominalism” for the view that universals are mere names not based on any aspects of reality; I therefore consider Abelard’s views on universals to be a kind of conceptualism. (For a detailed discussion of Abelard’s account of universals, see Marenbon 1997, 174–209.)

2. In a sense, it is curious that Rand considered the problem of universals to be the central issue of philosophy, because although it was *the* burning topic among philosophers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it has not been considered so since that time. So Rand’s resurrection of the issue, and her concern over the old battles between realists and nominalists, might make this champion of industrial capitalism seem positively medieval to modern philosophers. In this connection, note that Rand’s interest in the problem of universals seems to have been sparked by a conversation she had with a Jesuit in the 1940s (Rand 1990, 307).

3. Abelard preferred to speak of “body” as opposed to “substance,” in part because as a confirmed dualist he considered both body and soul to be independent substances (Marenbon 1997, 124).

4. Unfortunately there exists no standard Latin edition or English translation of Abelard’s works. As a result, the quotes within this paper are drawn from the most relevant sources available (McKeon 1929 and Tweedale 1976),

although even these are far from complete in the texts that they include.

5. While *dictum* and *status* are not quite identical, for Abelard they are closely allied. Tweedale (1976, 282–83) discusses the close similarities between the two terms and how they are used in Abelard's writings, whereas Marenbon (1997, 208) notes that there is at least one important difference between these two terms: a *status* of an entity can exist only if that entity exists, whereas a *dictum* can be used even if the things about which that *dictum* speaks do not exist—e.g., a sentence can express something about unicorns, even though it is nonsensical to think that anything could experience the condition of being a unicorn, since unicorns do not exist. In general, within medieval philosophy, a *status* is a type or nature, while a *dictum* is “that which can be said about a thing” (the term is a Latinization of the Stoic *lekton* or “sayable,” although Abelard and most other medieval philosophers did not think that *dicta* are incorporeal entities, as the Stoics did about their *lekta*). For Abelard, a *status* is “the condition of being a certain sort of thing” while he uses the term *dictum* in two senses: it can be a state of affairs, but it also can be that which a sentence expresses (the subtleties of these two senses, and their consistency or lack thereof, are discussed in Marenbon 1997, 204–8). When Abelard uses *dictum* in the sense of “a state of affairs,” his usage is nearly identical to his usage of *status* as “the condition of being a certain sort of thing.”

6. It might be asked: what is so special about the attention or consideration of the mind? How does attention veil the thing itself any less than some image or idea or other mental figment might? Abelard has a reply to this worry (in McKeon 1929, 246):

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 nonetheless 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. For if one understands otherwise than the thing is constituted, in such manner that one considers it manifestly in such a nature and property as it does not have, certainly that understanding is empty. But that is not what is done in abstraction. For when I consider this man only in the nature of substance or of body, and not also of animal or of man or of grammarian, obviously I understand nothing except what is in that nature, but I do not consider all that it has. And when I say that I consider only this one among the qualities the nature has, the “only” refers to the attention alone, not to the mode of subsisting, otherwise the understanding would be empty.

7. “Abelard might, then, have confined the use of his new distinctions to theological discourse, where ordinary rules of explanation do not apply; or at least he might have insisted that in its earthly analogues difference by property could be fully explained in terms of things, although this did not remain true when it was transferred to talking about God. But, in fact, Abelard thought the analogy was far closer. Although he developed his notions of property and difference by property or definition in order to discuss the Trinity, he believed that they applied also to the ontology of created things. . . .” (Marenbon 1997, 155).

8. Abelard's theory of attention and abstraction explains also his view in logical theory that the correct analysis of predication involves not the standard three parts, but only two (for a detailed discussion of this view, see Tweedale 1976, 284–304). According to Abelard, the correct analysis of predication is not subject + copula + predicate, but subject + verb-phrase. What Abelard is overthrowing here

is the notion that the predicate noun denotes a thing (since, for Abelard, all things are particular). The subject noun is denotative because it refers to a concrete substance (or to a group of concrete things), and these substances must be attended to in order to ascertain the truth of the predication. But, for Abelard, the verb-phrase (in standard parlance, copula + predicate) is not denotative, since it does not refer to a separate thing or class of things. This means, since the copula is certainly not denotative, that the predicate noun is not denotative either. The verb phrase does not name any thing (any concrete substance), but rather picks out some property or aspect of the subject. And what it is that the verb-phrase grasps can be rather easily explicated in terms of Abelard's theory of attention and abstraction. The subject noun is the expression referring to the individual thing(s) that we observe, and the verb phrase is the expression for the fact that the thing we are observing has the property that we are attending to. When we say “Socrates is a biped” we are not linking (the idea of) Socrates with (the idea of) a biped—we are not linking two separate things at all. Instead, what we are doing is attending to the fact that Socrates has two feet.

9. Despite their lack of scholarly footing, such notions about conceptualism, and specifically about Abelard, may have been prevalent while Rand was forming her views on the problem of universals. Consider the following quote from M.H. Carré (1946, 61–62):

Abelard's position has often been described as Conceptualism. This term indicates a qualified form of Nominalism. Those philosophers in medieval and modern times who have adopted Conceptualism are at one with the Nominalists in denying that there are any universal realities. But they admit that general notions or concepts provide the content of thinking. Concepts, however, are constructions of our minds. They are arbitrarily framed according to our purposes by a process of abstraction from particular impressions, such impressions being our sole genuine contact with the external world. Partial aspects of separate perceived items are selected and grouped into unities, man, green, goodness: the other features in the complex perceived individual being ignored. The abstract entities are fixed by language and exist for our minds as independent objects of thought. We argue about them as though they corresponded to real facts. On this view universals are derived entirely from the mind.

10. For details regarding the influence on Rand of twentieth-century psychology, see Campbell 1999.

11. Ironically, Rand (1990, 148) argued that one of the central concepts that motivated Abelard's thinking on universals, namely the concept of God, is precisely such an invalid concept—indeed, she argued that it is “not a concept” at all.

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