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**FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND  
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**Humanity's Knowledge of Natures in Peter Abelard's Solution to the Problem of Universals**

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**Humanity's Knowledge of Natures in Peter Abelard's Solution to the Problem of  
Universals**

**Warren Leroy**

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the MA degree in Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to identify and discuss a problem in Peter Abelard's solution to the problem of universals. In Chapter 1, I present a brief account of Abelard's account of universals geared towards familiarizing the reader with the basic concepts and terminology involved in his solution. In Chapter 2, I identify the problem I perceive with this account; namely that Abelard seems to be committed to two, incompatible, positions as regards whether or not it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of natures. In Chapter 3, I will examine the passages where Abelard addresses this tension. As we will see, he provides no satisfactory solution to this problem. At the end of Chapter 3, I will also examine the work of Peter King who, in his highly influential Ph.D thesis, suggests a reading of certain passages in Abelard that he thinks solves our problem. I will argue, however, that King's solution cannot be accepted as it relies on a mistaken translation of Abelard's Latin such that it misconstrues the passages King cites as evidence for his view.

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## Chapter 1

Abelard's solution to the problem of universals is one of the most historically and philosophically significant attempts to solve this famous problem in the Twelfth Century and indeed the entire Middle Ages. My intention in this chapter is to provide a general account of Abelard's solution that is geared towards familiarizing the reader with how Abelard goes about solving the problem of universals as well as the terminology and philosophical concepts involved in this solution. I will begin by defining some important terms Abelard frequently uses throughout his writings concerning the problem of universals. With these definitions out of the way, I will move on to describe Abelard's position as regards the ontological contents of reality and his view that there are no universal things (*res*) anywhere in the world. Here we will also examine his claim that universals are nothing more than words. Once we have seen what Abelard has to say about this, we will move on to his arguments that we do not need to admit universal *res* into our ontology to account for how universal words work. As we will see, Abelard thinks that universal words can "nominate" discrete things and "signify" meaningful "understandings" despite the absence of any universal *res* in the world.

### §1.1: Double Signification

Our first point of business is to discuss a bit of semantic terminology current in the Twelfth Century. Abelard, along with many Twelfth Century grammarians, held that words have a double function: "words have a double signification - namely of things and of understandings" (*LI Isag*, 112; King, 1982). In the Twelfth Century, then, the term

‘signification’ refers to the double function of words to a) nominate real things in the world and b) to direct the mind of the hearer or listener of a word to an understanding.<sup>1</sup>

I will deal first with the nominative aspect of signification. Words nominate things by picking them out of the world. Nomination is what contemporary philosophers might call the referential or extensional function of a term. The word ‘Socrates’ nominates the thing Socrates by naming him. “They [universal words] signify *things* by naming them” (*LI I*, 42; Spade, 1994). Abelard also writes that: “in truth, they [universal words] signify things really existing, through nomination – namely the same things which singular names do” (*LI I*, 128; King, 1982). What Abelard is saying here is that words, both universal and singular, can be used to name real things in the world. So, for instance, when I want to point the real thing Socrates out to someone or to direct their attention to him, I use the word ‘Socrates’ to refer to him and pick him out of the world. The same is true of universals. When I want to refer to men I use the word ‘men’ to refer to that particular group of existing things.

Words also signify in that they function to communicate understandings from one person to another. Now in order to understand the second function of words, we must pause to note the psychological dimension of language that characterizes Abelard’s theory of signification. According to Abelard, the sense of a word is the mental understanding that arises in the mind of someone who understands the language upon

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<sup>1</sup> According to Abelard, an understanding is “the mind’s very thought” and is the “perpetual effect of reason... whence wherever reason is not present thence understanding is necessarily absent – which as we said, always examines from reason either a nature or a property” (*Tractatus*, 66; King, 1982). Understandings are the effect of reason, which is the “very power of or ease of discretion of the mind which suffices to truly inspect or adjudge the natures of things” (*Tractatus*, 65; King, 1982). Reason, then, is the faculty of the mind that allows us to contemplate natures and properties. The results of the exercise of this faculty are thoughts the contents of which are always natures or properties such as red or the nature of man (rational mortal animal). These thoughts are what Abelard calls ‘understandings.’

hearing or reading the word. Accordingly, when I want to communicate an understanding to another person, I use the word associated with that understanding. Abelard describes this significative function of words in the following passage:

Nouns and verbs are also said to designate understandings, whether this be the understanding belonging to the person speaking the utterance or the person hearing it. For the utterance is said to signify the speaker's understanding in that he makes it evident to the person who hears it, as long as it produces a mutually similar understanding in the hearer (*LI De in*, 3.00.5; quoted in *Abelard on Mental*, King, 5).

Abelard's claim here is that when someone hears a word, that word forces the hearer to think about the understanding in the speaker's mind. Thus, the word 'Socrates' causes a mental understanding of Socrates to rise up in my mind when I hear his name. "*To signify is the same as to constitute an understanding*" (*Tractatus*, 84; King, 1982).

It is worth emphasizing that, according to Abelard, the understandings constituted by words between speaker and hearer are characterized by a high degree of objectivity. Indeed, Abelard is of the view that human beings who live in the same regions of the planet tend to have similar understandings. Hence he writes that

Furthermore, Aristotle asserts that understandings are the same for everyone because mental conceptions don't differ due to different languages. If a Greek and a Latin simultaneously see a horse, in no way will one hold that it's a man while the other that it's a horse! Rather, in accordance with the nature *horse*, each will have the same (*i.e.* mutually similar) understanding of the horse's substance. But when each wants to point out the thing and to express his understanding, he employs a different utterance than the other does (*LI De in*, 3.01.71; quoted in *Abelard on Mental*, King, 4).

The content, then, of the understandings invoked by words are the same for the hearer and the speaker presuming they have been exposed to the same things.<sup>2</sup> So when Abelard writes that words constitute understandings, his idea is not that I can communicate what I understand to you but rather that I can force you to think about an understanding we both share - provided, of course, that our experiences have been sufficiently similar.

Now a question that might arise in connection with all this is whether words have the power to constitute understandings between two people who do not speak the same language. So, for instance, if I say the word '*caelum*' to someone who does not speak Latin, it is false to say that this word causes him/her to think of the sky – or of anything. Indeed, to anyone who does not know what it refers to, the word might just be a sound that has no signification. Does this compromise Abelard's claim that words have a double function? I don't think it does. As we will see shortly, Abelard is of the view that there is a distinction to be drawn between words (*sermones*) and physical sounds (*voces*). Only *sermones* have the function of signifying because they alone are meaningful parts of language. Drawing on this distinction, the answer that Abelard would give to this question, I think, is that the word *caelum* does not cause an understanding to arise in the mind of the hearer because to them, it is simply a sound. In this connection, he writes that "although the utterance of *voces* is natural to all men, the function of signifying is not

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<sup>2</sup> While Abelard does not talk about this, it is interesting to consider the idea of context as regards the way we understand the things in the world. So, for instance, a farmer and a biologist might conceive of the same horse in different ways. The scientific/biological dimension of the horse might be lost on the farmer while the animal's worth as a farm animal might be lost on the biologist. Can we say, then, that both men have the same understanding? It is true that they both understand the same horse but they do so in different ways. I do not think that this really poses a problem for Abelard. His claim is not that our understandings of things are identical but rather that they are 'mutually similar.' He is careful to allow for the fact that we do have different conceptions of things in the world. What he wants to establish is that underlying our different interpretations of the things in the world is a core conception of the horse as a quadrupedal animal, for instance. The claim, then, is not that the farmer and the biologist have an identical understanding of the horse but that they share a basic understanding of the horse.

held by all but only by those who are not ignorant of their imposition” (*Theologica Christiana* III, 162; King, 1982). The claim here is that while making vocal sounds (*voces*) is a characteristic of all men, such sounds only signify for those who are aware of their linguistic connotations. To someone who does not know that the sound ‘*caelum*’ has linguistic connotations, it does not function to signify because to them it is not a word but just a sound. *Sermones* signify, *voces* do not. We will discuss this distinction in more detail below.

So according to Abelard, words have the double function of nominating real things and generating understandings. Now this account of how words function is unproblematic so long as we stick to words that refer to individuals. ‘Socrates’ clearly refers to the real *res* Socrates and generates an understanding of him. Unlike words that refer to singulars, however, universal words are much more problematic. Indeed, it is not at all clear what universal words nominate or if the content of the understandings they generate can be said to have purchase on the world. As we will see, these problems stem from Abelard’s claim that there are no universal things (*res*) in reality. Before looking at Abelard’s claim to this effect and the problems it causes as regards his views about the double signification of words, I want first to clarify what he means by the term ‘*res*.’

### **§1.2: The Contents of Reality: *Res***

The term is usually rendered as ‘thing’ by most translators of Abelard and refers to what exists objectively in reality. Now to understand what Abelard means by ‘*res*,’ a quick word about the contents of his ontology is in order. Like almost every philosopher in the Middle Ages, Abelard thinks that the real contents of reality are substances that

have properties.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, then, he admits both into his ontology – not only is Socrates’ substance actually there in the world but so too are his properties (his whiteness, rationality, etc.). Now Abelard uses the term ‘*res*’ indiscriminately. He often uses it to refer to the real entities composed of substance and properties that populate reality (Socrates, Plato, the Louvre, etc). However, he sometimes also calls properties and substances *res*. So he might call Socrates’ whiteness a *res* or refer to his matter (substance) as a *res*. In general though, the term refers to the real contents of reality – properties, substance, or a complex of both (Socrates).

Now as a nominalist, Abelard denies that universals are *res* in any way.<sup>4</sup> According to Abelard, there are *no* universal substances nor are there universal properties at all, anywhere in the world. Put simply, Abelard excludes universals from his ontology. Indeed, he asserts that the *res* we find in reality are radically distinct in every way.<sup>5</sup> Hence, he writes that “all things (*res*) subsist discretely in themselves and did not agree in

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<sup>3</sup> I simply cannot go into the details of Abelard’s ontology here. It has been very well documented however in the secondary literature. See Peter King’s *Metaphysics* in the *Cambridge Companion to Abelard* as well as John Marenbon’s outstanding work *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 99-202 for fuller discussions of this.

<sup>4</sup> It might grate on the modern ear to hear talk about the existence of universal substances. However, most forms of realism current in the Twelfth Century actually were that extreme in the sense that they defended the position that universal substance exists in things. When characterizing a version of such a theory, Abelard writes that “Some people take ‘universal thing’ in such a way that they set up *essentially the same* substance in things diverse from one another through forms. This substance is the ‘material essence’ of the singulars it is in... The matter is entirely the same essentially” (*LI I*, 29; Spade, 1994). The idea, then, is that there are objective universal *res* that are part of the metaphysical structure of individuals. The very same universal stuff is in Plato and Socrates at the same time and it is the possession of this stuff (they are made of the same substance) that makes them both men.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that Abelard’s ontology resembles, as D.H. Armstrong puts it (*Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, 116-117) a modern “substance-attribute” trope theory. As in Abelard, the trope theorist allows both substances and tropes into his ontology as the basic building blocks of reality. Such theories then claim that both substances and tropes are particular – as Abelard does.

any *thing*”<sup>6</sup> (*LI I*, 40; Spade, 1994) and that “there exists no thing not discrete (*nulla res est nisi discreta*)” (*LI*, 157; King, 1982). Now what Abelard means here is that Socrates and Plato are not only different in substance – they are made of different stuff - but also that their properties are different too. Even though both men have the real property rationality, their respective versions are completely discrete.

Very good. Universals are not *res* in any sense. Instead, they are words - nothing more than words. In this connection, Abelard cites Aristotle’s definition of the universal as “what is naturally apt to be predicated of several” (*LI I*, 28; Spade, 1994) and argues that the only way of reading of this definition that makes any sense is to interpret Aristotle as asserting that words alone are universals. We surely cannot say that predicability is a property of things. Indeed, things are not predicates. When I say that ‘Socrates is a man’ there is not some real *res* in the world that I copulate to Socrates. The proposition is made up of nothing more than words. According to Abelard, then, universality can be ascribed only to them. Hence, he writes that “to them [words] alone is the task of being the predicate terms of propositions” (*LI I*, 29; Spade, 1994) and that “*things* taken neither singly nor collectively can be called ‘universals’ insofar as they are predicated of several, it remains to ascribe this kind of universality only to words” (*LI I*, 37; Spade, 1994).

### §1.3: *Sermones* and *Voces*

Fine. According to Abelard, universals are nothing but words. Now, there is a rather large problem with all this. Indeed, this distinction between words and *res* is

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<sup>6</sup> Rebus autem nullis uidebantur imponi uniuersalia nomina, cum scilicet omnes *res* discrete in se subsisterent nec in re aliqua, ut ostensum est, conuenirent, secundum cuius rei conuenientiam uniuersalia nominapossint imponi.

problematic. Could we not object to what Abelard has said here on the grounds that words are *res*? Are they not sounds or signs written on a page – things with substance and properties? In that case, does this not mean that universals are *res* after all? Not so, according to Abelard. He thinks he has a way to show that universals are words without committing to the position that they are *res*.

In order to defend the position that universals are words but not *res*, Abelard draws his famous distinction between what he calls a *vox* (physical sound) and a *sermo* (meaningful linguistic entity). He describes this distinction as follows:

There is another more reasonable view about universals, which attributes commonness neither to things nor to *voces*, but holds that *sermones* are either singulars or universals – which Aristotle, Prince of the Peripatetics, expressly suggests by the definition of the universal which he sets forth, when he says: ‘a universal is that which is naturally predicated of many,’ that is, from its nativity; obviously, this comes about from its institution. Indeed, what else is the nativity of *sermones* or names than men’s institutions? That which is a *sermo* or a name comes about from men’s institutions. Yet what else is the nativity of a thing or a *vox* than a natural creation, since the proper being of a thing or a *vox* exists only by a natural operation? Therefore, the nativity of a *vox* and a *sermo* are different, though wholly identical in essence, which can be set forth more carefully by an example. Although this stone and this image are wholly identical, this stone is nevertheless the work of one and this image of another... We say that *sermones* are universals, since they are predicated of many things from their nativity, that is, the institution of men. But *voces* or things are in no way universals, though it happens that all *sermones* are *voces* (*LNPS*, 44; King, 1982).

The nub of the distinction, then, is that all *sermones* are *voces* but no *voces* are universals.

Now it is not possible to discuss the numerous passages where Abelard elaborates on this very subtle distinction here. However, I think we can get the jist of what he is saying if we pay close attention to the idea of the statue mentioned in the above

quotation. What Abelard is saying here turns on the idea that a universal *sermo* (a “meaningful unit of language”<sup>7</sup>) is a composite entity – like a statue, which is composed of both crude matter and the image that adorns it. Abelard admits that it is true that the matter and the image of the statue are exactly the same thing – the statue is nothing but a formed piece of stone - but points out that it is equally true that the statue and the image differ in that their respective properties are not interchangeable. Abelard elaborates on how this works as follows (here he is discussing not a statue but a waxen image - the principle remains the same):

The matter of the waxen image and the materiate,<sup>8</sup> as the wax and the waxen image, are the same wax; but nevertheless... it pertains to the property of matter to precede the materiate, which is out of it, but to the property of the materiate to follow and be posterior. Thus the property of the matter is the priority according to which something has to come about materially from it. But the property of the materiate, conversely, is posteriority. Those properties are therefore unmixed by predication, although those properties, as I have said, are predicated of the same thing confusedly. It is one to predicate the form, another to predicate the formatum (i.e the thing subject to the form). If I were to say ‘the waxen image is prior to the wax,’ i.e has priority with respect to the wax, then I copulate it and predicate the form, and what is said is false. But if I were to say ‘the waxen image is first wax’ i.e. some thing prior to the wax, then I copulate it and predicate the formatum, and the proposition is true (*Theological Christiana*, 140-141; King, 1982).

The claim here is that even though the image (materiate) and the wax (matter) from which it is made are the same thing, they do differ in property. Indeed, the wax has the

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<sup>7</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 305.

<sup>8</sup> We will discuss this below – the term ‘materiate’ refers to the image or the form imposed on matter. If we examine a bust of Nietzsche, the materiate is the image of his head while the matter is the bronze stuff that it is made of.

property of priority, which is to say that it is a substrate and can exist without an image or with a different image. The image, on the other hand, cannot exist without a substrate and must therefore inhere or be imposed on one already extant. It has the property of posteriority. Accordingly, a proposition that predicates priority of the form is false. The property of priority belongs to the matter – not the image - and so the proposition must be untrue. The significance of this, then, is that even though the matter and the form are the same thing, they do differ in property.

Now what Abelard wants to say is that the case of the *sermo* and *vox* is just like this. A universal *sermo* is made up of a sound invested with semantic properties such that it can be used meaningfully in a language. *Voces* (physical sounds) are, in the first place, meaningless noise. At a certain point, though, they are appropriated by human beings and become “meaningful units of language.” Now it is undeniable that the sound or the symbol and its semantic meaning are inseparable and are one thing – just like a statue and its image are one thing. However, each of the two parts of the composite have properties not transferable to the other part. That is, the content of a universal word has a meaning and semantic properties such that it can be predicated of a subject. The audible component, on the other hand, has no such properties. It is only a word because we have appropriated it and assigned it a semantic meaning. Coupled with such a semantic meaning, it becomes a word but stripped of the linguistic element and the audible component of the word is reduced to noise.

Now Abelard wants to conclude from this that his view that universals are words in no way commits him to the position that universals are *res*. We recall that universality is defined as ‘predicability of many.’ We also recall Abelard’s claim that “*things* taken

neither singly nor collectively can be called ‘universals’ insofar as they are predicated of several, it remains to ascribe this kind of universality only to words” (*LI I*, 37; Spade, 1994). The objection raised was that Abelard cannot legitimately say that predicability of many is not property of *res* but words when words are *res*. At this point, I think we can see that he *can* say this. Universality – that is, predicability of many – cannot be ascribed to *voces*, which are *res*. Just as it is false to predicate priority of a statue’s image, so too is it false to predicate universality of a *vox*. It is true that part of the composite that makes up *sermones* are *voces*. However, the material component of the composite is not characterized by linguistic properties such that it can be predicated of many. We can say, then, that ‘all *sermones* are *voces*’ because any word is the same thing as a *voces*. However, we can deny that ‘*voces* are universals.’ Indeed, we cannot predicate ‘universal’ of ‘*voces*’ because they lack the property: predicability of many. It is only the content of words that can be called universal.

In this way, Abelard argues that it is possible to say that universals are words without committing to the position that there are any universal *res* in the world. Universality – predicability of many – is a property of “meaningful units of language,” which are only partly made up of *res* (*voces*). The physical sound or the written sign are *res* but universality cannot be predicated of these. Universality, then, can only be ascribed to the semantic meanings created by men to talk about the world – they have no extra-linguistic existence.

### **The Problem**

Very good. The world is composed of radically discrete *res* and universality – that is, predicability of many – is a property of *sermones* but this does not mean that there are

any universal *res* in reality. Now at this point, Abelard must deal with several very difficult problems as regards the function of such universal *sermones*. As we will see, both the referential and significative function of universal words poses problems for the nominalist. Let us look first at the problem with universal nomination, which Abelard formulates as follows:

Universal names did not seem to be imposed on any *things*, since all things subsisted discretely in themselves and did not agree in any *thing* in such a way that universal understandings could be imposed in accordance with their agreement in this thing (*LI I*, 40; Spade, 1994).

How could someone impose a common word such as ‘man’ on a group of *res* that are completely different? That is, how could we use the same word to name or refer to Socrates and Plato when they are as different from each other as they are from trashcans and sunsets? Indeed, if we accept Abelard’s claim that the world is composed of radically discrete individuals, it would seem that universals have no purchase on the real world as the individuals that make it up share nothing in common – that is, there is no common (universal) substance or property that both Socrates and Plato share since they are radically discrete in every way. “Since universal names cannot name things as agreeing in *things* (for there *is* no thing they agree in), therefore universal names seem to bring about no signification of things” (*LI I*, 40; Spade, 40). It seems as though Abelard must admit that his claim that *res* are radically discrete commits him to the position that universal words do not nominate anything.

Moreover, Abelard’s view that universals are only words faces other problems when it comes to the signification of universal words. “In fact, it seems that “neither ‘man’ nor any other universal word appears to signify anything. For it does not establish

an understanding of any thing” (*LI I*, 41; Spade, 1994). As with nomination, this problem follows as a result of Abelard’s rejection of the existence of universal *res*. If there are no universal *res* in the real world, it is not clear how we come to have universal understandings or even what their content is. There is nothing in reality that is universal which makes it difficult to see what universal understandings are understandings of. If nothing in reality, could they perhaps be empty fictions created by the human mind that have no purchase on the real world?

So we can see that Abelard is in a tricky spot here. He wants to be able to explain how universals nominate discrete things as well as provide an account of how we come to have perfectly sound universal understandings without admitting that universal *res* exist. As we will see, he works very hard to defend his claim that we do not need to endorse realism to account for how universal words signify. I will deal first with Abelard’s account of how nomination is possible despite the absence of any universal *res* in reality.

#### **§1.4: Nomination and the *Status***

We have seen that Abelard’s position is that universals are just words and that he is faced with the challenge of accounting for how it is that they can apply to radically distinct *res*. Now any attempt to describe Abelard’s account of universal nomination must deal with his much-debated notion of the *status*. Indeed, it features prominently in the section of the *Ingredientibus* where Abelard tells us how universal nomination is possible. Unfortunately, however, what Abelard actually means by the term is a bit of a mystery. He tells us that it is not a *res* but beyond this rather cryptic claim, he gives us little help. As such, the correct interpretation of what Abelard means by the *status* is an ongoing topic of discussion in the secondary literature that has come to no definite

consensus on what he intends by the term.

That being said, I think that one account in particular is especially convincing – that offered by Peter King in the *Cambridge Companion to Abelard*.<sup>9</sup> I think King’s account is promising for several reasons. Firstly, it is consistent with the passages where Abelard says that *res* resemble one another in virtue of their natures - it is the only account that I have come across which addresses these important passages. By taking into account Abelard’s claims that *res* can be collectively nominated by universal terms because they resemble one another in virtue of their natures, King is able to provide a simple and elegant explanation of the passages where Abelard discusses the *status* that fits very well with the primary text. In addition to this, King’s account is consonant with Abelard’s rejection of realism. In other words, his interpretation of the *status* does not cast Abelard as a closet realist, which is a way of reading him (given his explicit<sup>10</sup> refusal to admit universal *res* into his ontology) that seems to me highly suspect. For these reasons, I have followed King’s interpretation of the *status* and its role in securing the nomination of universal terms.

Now before I go into how (according to King) Abelard solves this problem of universal nomination and the role of the *status* therein, one very important definition

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<sup>9</sup> King, *Metaphysics in The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 81-83.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, we will not have time to discuss Abelard’s criticism of the various realist solutions to the problem of universals common in his day. Abelard prefaces his own account of universals with an extended criticism of realism. Moreover, as we have seen, he seems unwilling to admit any kind of universal things into his ontology. This pervasive anti-realism makes it unlikely that he himself ultimately endorses a version of the view he seems hell-bent on disproving. So much so, that Martin Tweedale in his highly influential *Abailard on Universals* has interpreted Abelard’s entire philosophical project as informed by a pronounced anti-realist bent. None of this is, of course, conclusive evidence that he was not a realist but a theory that does not cast him as such seems more consistent with his texts on the whole. Paul Spade translates the texts where Abelard presents his arguments against various forms of realism in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals*, pp. 26-37.

bears mentioning: the nature.<sup>11</sup> A thing's nature is, as King puts it the "list of properties,"<sup>12</sup> which, taken together, define what that *res* is. A *res* has human nature if it has the real properties rationality, mortality, and animality.<sup>13</sup> These three properties - taken together - constitute human nature. This seems simple enough. However, Abelard's nominalist take on reality complicates our story. Indeed, if each *res* is radically distinct such that its nature is made up of real, completely individualized properties (tropes), we should expect that each *res* has a particularized nature. And sure enough, this is exactly what Abelard thinks: "there is no nature which subsists indifferently: any given thing (*res*) whenever it exists, is personally discrete and found to be numerically one" (*Tractatus*, 80; King, 1982). Plato and Socrates both have human nature but this is not to say that they have the same nature. With this conception of the nature in mind, I now turn to Abelard's solution to the problem of how it is that universals nominate groups of radically distinct individuals.

### Resemblance

We have already seen that the problem of universal nomination turns on how it is possible for universal words to name groups of individuals when those individuals have

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<sup>11</sup> As we will see, Abelard is going to say that individuals agree in that they bear a resemblance to one another in virtue of having similar kinds of natures. Plato and Socrates agree in that they both have human nature – even though these natures are unique to them alone. Now it is worthwhile emphasizing this idea that things are similar in virtue of their natures. This allows Abelard to avoid the fatal objection to his account that a theory of agreement which stems from individual properties is too weak of a foundation to support any kind of real resemblance. Indeed, if Plato resembles Socrates because he has rationality, it is equally true that he resembles Brownie the Donkey because he has animality. However, human nature, which is formed by a *collection* of real properties does not resemble Brownie's nature. This sort of objection to resemblance nominalism is laid out by D.M. Armstrong in his book *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (pp. 44-45).

<sup>12</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 396.

<sup>13</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 394-396.

nothing in common. Indeed, to account for how universal words work, it seems as though Abelard must admit that men, for instance, are alike in some respect. The real trick, however, is doing this without apostatizing to realism and admitting that individuals are not radically discrete after all. Let's see how he does this.

According to Abelard, things of the same species are alike in virtue of their natures.

Whence things of this sort are called *substantial differentiae*, that is, those which enter into substance and produce discrete substances and the unity of a common nature; nor indeed can we call anything a generic or specific nature except those which are united into a single nature by a Divine Operation (*Dialectica*, 421; King, 1982).

What Abelard is saying here is that the substantial differentiae – those properties that define an individual's nature (rational mortal animal in the case of man) – are the source of unity among discrete individuals. Now we must be careful here. Abelard's claim is not that Plato and Socrates have the same nature. He is not proposing that Socrates and Plato somehow wind up with the same human nature but in virtue of properties unique to them alone. A nature is a group of individualized properties and is therefore always particular. We must keep the following claim in mind: "there is no nature which subsists indifferently: any given thing (*res*) whenever it exists, is personally discrete and found to be numerically one" (*Tractatus*, 68; King, 1982). There are no universal natures in reality or indeed anything that can be shared between individuals. Each nature is characterized by an irreducible degree of radical discretion. So what kind of agreement according to natures are we talking about here?

Abelard's view is that Socrates' nature **resembles** Plato's.

Boethius says that nature is 'the likeness of things that

come into being,' as though to say explicitly that the same things are of one nature that are similar to one another by natural activity. Accordingly, we call the name 'man' a nature, which is naturally common to many things in virtue of its single imposition, due to the fact that they are naturally similar to one another in that each of them is a rational mortal animal (*Secundum mag. Petrum*, 17; King, quoted in *the Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 2004).

What I want to stress here is Abelard's claim that the word 'man' nominates individual men insofar as they are similar to one another. Socrates' nature is defined by his properties rationality, mortality and animality. Socrates is similar to Plato because they have natures that exhibit a high degree of resemblance. Likewise, Socrates is less similar to a trashcan than to Plato since the trashcan has a nature that exhibits a low degree of resemblance to Socrates.' It has a different collection of properties that terminate in a nature that resembles Socrates' only slightly. *Res* agree to the extent that their natures resemble one another. To use the language of a different era, Abelard (as I have interpreted him) is what we might call a "resemblance nominalist."<sup>14</sup> He rejects the idea that universal *res* exist in favor of the idea that certain *res* resemble other *res* in virtue of their natures.

Collective agreement, then, is a function of the fact that radically discrete *res* resemble one another in virtue of their natures. Because *res* agree in this way, there are groups of individuals whose natures are sufficiently similar to be collectively nominated by universal terms. Hence, Abelard writes that "*the species is a collection of many into one nature*, i.e. a specific term nominates subject-things according as they agree and are similar to one another" (*LI I*, 57; King, 1982). Because they resemble each other in this

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<sup>14</sup> I am heavily indebted to D.M. Armstrong's book *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* throughout this discussion.

way, the world can be divided into groups of like individuals that can be collectively nominated by universal terms. Because Socrates and Plato have similar natures, they belong to the species called 'man' and are so named by that word. Abelard, then, does have a way to show us how universal terms collectively nominate discrete individuals without compromising his claim that all *res* are radically individual.

Very good. Abelard appears to endorse a version of resemblance nominalism. But how does the *status* fit into this story? In the *Ingredientibus*, Abelard tells us that universal words nominate discrete individuals in virtue of the *status*. Witness: "the word 'man' names single men on the basis of a common cause: *that they are men*" (*LI I*, 41; Spade, 1994). Moreover, he also writes the following:

I do not say they agree in *man*, since no thing is a man unless it is discrete. Rather, they agree in *being a man*... We mean only that they *are men* and in this respect do not differ at all - I mean in the respect *that they are men*... now someone's *being a man*, we call the *status* of man (*LI I*, 42; Spade, 1994).

According to this passage, men are alike insofar as they have the same *status* - they agree *in that they are men*. It sounds like he might be saying that because *res* have the same *status*, they can be collectively nominated by universal terms. But we have already seen that *res* agree in virtue of possessing natures that resemble one another. Is Abelard telling a different story? Is this another kind of agreement in addition to the agreement in nature we have already discussed? To the contrary, I think what Abelard is saying here is entirely consistent with the account given above as regards agreement according to nature. In other words, when Abelard writes that Socrates and Plato agree *in that they are men*, I think he is talking about the same sort of agreement but in a slightly different way. Let me explain.

I want to endorse the view<sup>15</sup> that an individual's *status* is, as Peter King puts it, a "condition"<sup>16</sup> of membership in a certain species fulfilled in virtue of having certain properties that resemble other members of the group. Now of course, this condition of belonging is just a function of the fact that certain discrete individuals resemble one another. Indeed, this is why Abelard insists that the *status* "is not a thing" (*LI I*, 42; Spade, 1994). The condition of belonging is not something that an individual has in the same way as it has a real property. It is just the fact that this individual (Socrates say) belongs to the group of things called 'men' in virtue of the fact that it resembles the other members. Indeed, I think this is what Abelard means when he writes that "we can likewise call the *status* of man the things themselves established in the nature of man" (*LI I*, 42; Spade, 1994). Because Socrates has the properties rationality, mortality, and animality, he has a nature that resembles other men and is thereby a member of that species - and this just is having the *status* of man. That is, having the properties rational mortal animal is exactly equivalent to being a member of our species and having the *status being a man*.

If this is indeed what Abelard thought, we can say that an individual's *status* is not a different source of agreement in addition to the resemblances things have to one another in virtue of their natures. Indeed, if King's reading of Abelard is correct, to say that Socrates and Plato agree in that they have the same *status* is just to say that they belong to the same group of discrete individuals and do so because their natures resemble

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<sup>15</sup> I urge the reader to recall that there is no scholarly consensus on what Abelard means by the *status*. Abelard does not clearly define the term and his comments about it are too vague to support a definitive account of what he means by it. The interpretation voiced here is Peter King's and I have chosen to endorse it for the reasons mentioned above (pp. 8-9).

<sup>16</sup> King, *Metaphysics in The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 82.

each other as well as the other members. Because *res* agree in this way, they can be collectively nominated by universal terms even though they do not share anything in common. Abelard's solution to the problem of universal nomination, then, can be read as that of a resemblance nominalist. While he sometimes talks about agreement in terms of *status* or the condition of belonging to a group, it is ultimately natures that do all the heavy lifting in his account of how it is possible for us to collectively nominate groups of radically discrete individuals. Indeed, radically discrete *res* agree in that their natures resemble one another. In this way, Abelard is able to explain how groups of radically discrete things can be collectively nominated by universal terms.

### **§1.5: Universal Understandings**

So there we have it. Abelard can explain how nomination is possible even though he denies universal *res* into his ontology. Our task is not yet done however as Abelard has yet to explain the understandings generated by universal words. As we mentioned briefly above, the problem with the understandings generated by universal words is that it is not clear where they come from or what their content is given that there are no universal *res* anywhere in reality. Abelard addresses this problem by formulating a theory of abstraction such that he is able to explain how universal understandings arise from the radically discrete individuals that populate reality. As I hope to show, Abelard endows human beings with two powers of abstraction such that we can strip away any “individuating conditions”<sup>17</sup> from the individuals in the world. Through this process, it is possible for us to conceive of the “common form” of all men. As we will see, Abelard's account raises some questions about the veridicality of such universal understandings.

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<sup>17</sup> Guilfooy, *Cognition in The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 214.

Once we have explored Abelard's account of abstraction, we will turn to these concerns and what Abelard has to say about them.

### Abstraction

According to Abelard "understandings of universals... must always come about by abstraction" (*LI I*, 50; Spade, 1994). Moreover, all abstraction is based on real individuals in the world. Witness:

We call those 'understandings through abstraction' which either speculate upon the nature of some form free from any respect of subject matter, in itself, or which indifferently considers any given nature free from any discretion of its individuals. For example, whenever I attend a body's color or a mind's knowledge in its proper being, namely in that it is color or knowledge, or a quality, or whatsoever else of the proper being of its subject substances with respect to the proposed, then by the force of reason I indeed abstract forms in a certain way from its subject substances (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982).

The claim here is that when the human mind thinks about some property free from personal discretion (in universal terms) it always abstracts from individuals. Abelard reiterates this claim as follows: "Abstraction would thus be of superiors from inferiors, namely either of universals from individuals through the predication of a subject or of forms from matter through the foundation of a subject" (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982). Universal understandings, then, are understandings of real individuals and come about through abstraction. Let's take a closer look at the mechanics of abstraction and how exactly such understandings are attained.

For Abelard, abstraction has two powers.<sup>18</sup> He describes the first as follows: "the substance of this man is *body* and *animal* and *man*, and is covered with an infinity of

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<sup>18</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 475-480.

forms. When I attend to it in the material essence *substance*, setting aside all its additional forms, I have an understanding ‘by abstraction’” (*LI I*, 47; Spade, 1994). The first sort of abstraction, then, is an action of the mind whereby it isolates and focuses on one aspect or property of a thing. This action of the mind is able to set aside certain properties in order to attend others on their own. So for instance, through abstraction, I can focus in on Socrates’ rationality without attending to his whiteness, animality, or mortality.

The second power Abelard ascribes to abstraction is the ability to set aside the individuality that permeates all aspects of real individuals. We have already seen that Abelard thinks that individuals “differ both in their own essence and in their own forms” (*LI I*, 41; Spade, 1994). This means that the rationality of Socrates – even if it is mentally isolated from all the other properties of Socrates – is still different from Plato’s rationality. The second power of abstraction, then, is a bracketing of this individuality so that we might be able to contemplate *rationality* in itself. Witness:

We call those ‘understandings through abstraction’ which either speculate upon the nature of some form free from any respect of subject matter, in itself, or which indifferently considers any given nature free from any discretion of its individuals (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982).

Abelard tells much the same story in the *Logica Ingredientibus*. Here, he clearly distinguishes the two types of understandings we can have through abstraction.

The understandings of singulars too come about by abstraction... By the phrase ‘this man’ I attend only to the nature of *man*, but as regards a certain subject thing. But by the word ‘man’ I attend to the same nature simply in itself, not as regards any one man (*LI I*, 50; Spade, 50).

Abelard here draws a line between thinking about Socrates’ rationality in isolation from his other properties and *rationality* itself free from any “individuating conditions.”

Now such understandings, which are isolated from other properties and free from

personal discretion, are universal. Abelard frequently describes these understandings as 'bare, pure, and alone.'

Thus, the understandings of universals is deservedly called 'alone' and 'bare' and 'pure.' 'Alone,' apart from sensation, because it does not perceive the things as sensible. 'Bare,' with respect to the abstraction of forms, either all or some of them. 'Pure,' of everything, as far as being discrete is concerned, because no thing, whether matter or form, is picked out in it (*LI I*, 51; Spade, 1994).

These terms 'bare,' 'pure,' and 'alone' warrant some explanation. An understanding that is 'alone' is one that conceives of a property otherwise than it is sensed. Every property that we perceive with the senses is individualized. As such, no universal understanding conceives of things as they have been sensed simply because universals cannot be sensed as they do not exist in the world.<sup>19</sup> A 'bare' understanding is the kind generated by the first sort of abstraction in the sense that it conceives of a property as isolated from, for instance, Socrates' other properties. And finally, a 'pure' understanding is one that conceives a property *in itself*; that is, it conceives of rationality free from any "individuating conditions."

Now Abelard tells us that the content of such bare, pure, and alone understandings are the "common form[s]" (*LI I*, 44; Spade, 1994) of things. In this connection, Abelard writes that "the word 'man...' constitutes a certain understanding, a common one, not a proper one – that is, a common understanding that pertains to the single men whose common likeness it conceives" (*LI I*, 41; Spade, 1994). When I hear universal words, then, what comes to mind is an understanding of the "common form" or the "common likeness" of all men. That is, when I hear the word 'man,' a general

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<sup>19</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 479.

(universal) understanding of what defines and characterizes all men is what I think about.

Now at first blush, this stuff about ‘common forms’ might sound strange given Abelard’s claim that all men are radically discrete and share nothing in common. Indeed, how can we even talk about such things when all individual men are radically individual? Unfortunately, Abelard does not explicitly address this but I think we can make sense of what he is saying easily enough. What he wants to say turns on the idea that even though all men are unique, they are all characterized and defined by the possession of certain properties (rational mortal animal). That is, all men are characterized by a common form (rational mortal animal). However, this form is, so to speak, always “contracted”<sup>20</sup> by particularized “individuating conditions.” The idea, then, is that all men are *rational mortal animal* plus some individuating conditions and by mentally removing such conditions, we can attend their common form.

So there we have it. This theory of abstraction is supposed to show us where universal understandings come from as well as describe their content without reverting to realism. Abelard claims that universal understandings are based on the real, radically discrete individuals that populate reality. Through the process of abstraction, the human mind is able to attend to real properties as bare, pure, and alone such that we can contemplate the “common forms” of things. It is these general understandings that are signified by universal words.

### **The Problem**

Now having outlined his theory of abstraction and explained how universal understandings that conceive the common likeness of all men come about, Abelard

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<sup>20</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 410.

moves to defend his position against a classical argument formulated by Boethius in his

*Second Commentary on Porphyry* as follows:

If the understanding of genus and the rest is taken from the thing, but *not* in such a way as the thing subjected to the understanding is disposed, then that understanding must be empty. It is taken from a thing, granted, but not as the thing is disposed. For what is understood otherwise than the thing is is false (Boethius, *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, 23; Spade, 1994).

The concern that Boethius<sup>21</sup> is describing here is that the content of universal understandings does not conceive of things in the world as they actually exist. For instance, a universal understanding of *rationality* does not reflect any rationality that actually exists in the world since rationalities are only found as radically discrete. Such understandings of *rationality*, then, do not seem to understand the real rationalities in the world accurately since they are *all* characterized by individuating conditions. Could we not say, then, that because universal understandings do not accurately reflect reality that they are empty?<sup>22</sup> Is it not the case that universal understandings attend things wrongly insofar as they understand them otherwise than they actually exist?

Now Abelard is fully aware of all this. Indeed, he candidly admits that all universal understandings attend things otherwise than they actually exist. He admits that

whenever anybody conceives purely and simply that nature  
*body* only attending it in which is corporeal, or takes any

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<sup>21</sup> Abelard echoes Boethius' formulation of the problem as follows: "Such understandings 'by abstraction' perhaps seem to be 'false' or 'empty' because they perceive the thing otherwise than as it subsists. For since such understandings attend to the matter by itself or the form separately, but neither of these subsists separately, those understandings certainly seem to conceive the thing otherwise than as it is, and so to be 'empty'" (*LI*, 48; Spade, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Abelard uses the terms 'sound' and 'empty' as roughly equivalent to true or false. A sound understanding is one that contains truth about the world and reflects the way reality really is. An empty understanding, on the other hand, is one that is false and contains information that does not reflect the way reality really is.

given nature as universal, that is, attends it indifferently from any personal discretion, he surely understands it otherwise than it subsists (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982).

Unlike Boethius, though, Abelard does not think that this poses a serious problem for him. As we will see, Abelard thinks that there is nothing wrong with attending to things otherwise than they actually exist so long as such understandings do not attend to things in terms of properties or natures they do not have. As this does not happen with universal understandings, there is no reason to think they are empty. Abelard wants to sideline Boethius' objection, then, by arguing that there is nothing problematic about attending to things otherwise than they exist. Let's turn to what he has to say about this.

#### **§1.6: Universal Understandings are not Empty**

According to Abelard, there are all kinds of understandings that conceive of things otherwise than they actually exist that ought to be called sound. In this connection he writes the following:

Nobody, when he attends some thing, is capable of considering all its natures or properties, but only according to some. Thus whenever we attend to any given thing according to only some of its natures or properties we consider that thing not only according to what it itself has; surely we consider it otherwise than it is (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982).

Abelard's point here is that all human understandings attend things otherwise than they actually are. Indeed, it is impossible for me to consider every single property and accident that Socrates has when I think about him. "If so often as the mind understands any given thing otherwise than it subsists [that understanding] should be called a vain understanding, [then] by the reasons put forth, what human understanding should not be called vain?" (*Tractatus*, 80; King, 1982). If we accept that all understandings that conceive of things otherwise than they actually are must be empty, we are forced to admit

that *all* understandings (not just universal ones) are empty.

What Abelard wants to say, then, is that understandings can be sound even if they do not conceive of their object exactly as it is found in reality. So, for instance, I can focus on Socrates' whiteness without attending to his baldness and still attend him correctly. In this connection, Abelard writes that

If it were asked whether every understanding which has another manner of attending than the thing of subsisting is vain, this should not be conceded. Surely the ways of understanding any given thing are many and innumerable which are not ways of understanding its existence (*Tractatus*, 82; King, 1982).

The idea here is that there are many different ways of understanding the things in the world that do not exactly do justice to the real complexity of their existence. Indeed, if I think about Socrates as Greek, I surely leave a lot of information about him out but that does not mean that this understanding is empty – even though it attends him otherwise than he really is. Indeed, it seems silly to deny that I understand something true simply because I only attend to one aspect of him.

Now it is of course the case that not *all* understandings that attend to things otherwise than they actually are ought to be called sound. Indeed, Abelard tells us that those understandings that attend to something otherwise than they actually exist in the sense that they get something wrong are empty. Hence he writes the following: “If someone were to understand in this way otherwise than the thing is, namely that he were to attend it in a nature or property which the thing does not have, surely that understanding is empty” (*LI I*, 48; Spade, 1994). If I understand something otherwise in the sense that I attend to it incorrectly then most certainly I have an empty understanding. Perhaps I attend Socrates as Persian or blue. Such understandings do not attend Socrates

as he is actually found in the world because they contain false information about him.

What Abelard wants to say, then, is that there are two ways of understanding something otherwise than it actually exists: a benign and a not-benign sense. The benign sense is such that I understand something otherwise than it actually exists but still attends the thing “as the thing has itself” (*Tractatus*, 75; King, 1982). Perhaps I understand Socrates to be pale but do not attend him as a philosopher. My understanding attends him otherwise than he actually exists but still conceives of him rightly – it just leaves certain information out. The not-benign mode of understanding something otherwise than it actually exists attends a thing wrongly. Perhaps I understand Socrates as indigo or Persian. The problem here is that I misunderstand the real Socrates who possesses neither of these properties.

Very good. Having sorted out the criteria for the soundness of understandings, Abelard now moves to situate universal understandings on the benign side of the line. The reason for this is that they do not understand real things in terms of properties or natures that they do not actually have – even though they conceive of them otherwise than they actually exist. Hence, Abelard writes that

If someone were to understand in this way otherwise than the thing is, namely that he were to attend it in a nature or property which the thing does not have, surely that understanding is empty. But indeed, this does not happen in abstraction. For when I attend in this man only the nature of *substance* or of *body*, not also of *man* or *animal* or of *literate*, surely I understand nothing but what is in the nature. But I do not pay attention to *all* the features it has (*LII*, 48; Spade, 1994).

Universal understandings attend to real things (Socrates) focusing only on certain properties. The content of a universal understanding of *rationality*, then, is someone’s

real version of the property isolated from his other properties and stripped of any “individuating conditions.” To understand Socrates’ version of rationality purely is not to attend Socrates in terms of something he does not have (wrongly). Indeed, universal understandings attend to what is actually there – they just leave certain information out.

### **§1.7: Conclusion**

At this point, we have seen that Abelard’s view is that universals are just words – that there are no universal *res* in reality. Universals collectively name real *res* in the world because they agree in that they have natures that resemble one another. Moreover, we have also seen that the understandings signified by universals are sound. Although they attend things otherwise than they exist, they still have purchase on the world. When I abstract *man* from Socrates, the content of my understanding does not attend Socrates or anyone else as they are actually found in the world. However, this is not to say that such understandings are empty. They attend to properties actually found in the world but simply do not pay attention to any other properties or “individuating conditions” individuals have. Universal words can be used to refer to real things in the world and also signify sound understandings – and all without a shred of realism.

## Chapter 2

In this chapter, I intend to describe a difficulty I see with Abelard's solution to the problem of universals. We saw in Chapter One that natures play a key role in Abelard's account of universals. Indeed, universal nomination is possible because things resemble one another in virtue of their natures. Now the problem is that he appears to espouse incompatible views as regards our knowledge of natures. As I will show below, Abelard holds the position that the scope of the knowable for human beings is circumscribed by information about the world imparted through the senses. As the senses only perceive the external appearances of things and not their inner natures this epistemological view seems to rule out the possibility that human beings could acquire knowledge of the insensible natures of things. However, we will also see that elsewhere Abelard talks as though he thinks that it is possible for human beings to have a fairly good understanding of these things. His account of the imposition of universal terms, for instance, contains several passages, which indicate that his position is that human beings are able to understand natures. Is Abelard's position on our knowledge of insensible natures consistent? Are these views compatible? That is, does Abelard think that it is possible for human beings to have knowledge of natures even though he affirms that the senses perceive only accidents? Does this knowledge come from our perception of the real world – even though the senses only detect accidents?

### §2.1: How Much Knowledge of Natures?

I now turn to a discussion of the chief problem I want to address in this chapter. As we will see, Abelard appears to advocate two incompatible positions as regards our knowledge of natures. On one hand, Abelard appears to be committed to the view that it

is not possible for human beings to have knowledge of insensible things such as natures. On the other hand, he also appears committed to precisely the opposite view - that it is possible for us to acquire such knowledge. I will begin by discussing those passages that might lead us to think that Abelard wants to say that it is not possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of the natures of things. Once we have seen the passages that suggest such a reading, we will move on to examine those where Abelard precisely the opposite. Let's begin.

This problem of whether or not human beings can acquire knowledge of natures emerges in connection with two passages found in Abelard's *Logica Ingredientibus* – where he outlines his solution to the problem of universals. Indeed, it is in trying to make sense of what Abelard says here that it starts to look like he might be advocating incompatible views as regards our knowledge of the natures of things. The first passage runs as follows:

The external sensuousness of accidents prevents men from conceiving the natures of things purely. But God, to whom all the things he created are plain through themselves and who knew them before they existed, distinguishes the single *status* in themselves. Sensation is not an obstacle for him who alone has true intelligence (*LI I*, 45; Spade, 1994).

In the same vein he writes a few lines later that:

We have opinion rather than real intelligence of the internal forms that do not reach the senses, such as rationality, mortality, fatherhood, sitting (*LI I*, 46; Spade, 1994).

Now what we can see here is that Abelard clearly wants to seriously qualify our knowledge of natures. Indeed, he tells us in the first paragraph that we cannot understand the natures of things purely.<sup>23</sup> In the second, he informs us that we have opinion about the

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<sup>23</sup> Inde etiam bene diuinae menti, non humanae huiusmodi per abstractionem conceptiones adscribuntur,

properties that make up human nature.

Fine. Abelard clearly thinks that we cannot be said to possess a very clear knowledge of the natures of things. What is not so clear however is how much knowledge Abelard thinks human beings enjoy as regards them. Indeed, when he says that we have ‘opinion’ about natures, does he mean that our understandings of natures have little or no purchase on the world - that my understanding of human nature is empty? Or, is Abelard saying that we cannot understand natures perfectly - that our knowledge of natures are just not as clear as that possessed by God? On the basis of these passages, it does not sound like he wants to deny that human beings could have any knowledge of natures. Indeed, he claims that we cannot understand the natures of things ‘purely’ and that we have ‘opinion’ of them – not that such knowledge completely eludes us.

That being said, however, if we take a look at Abelard’s reasons for making these claims, it starts to look as though he might very well be making such a radical assertion here. Abelard tells us that the reason human beings cannot be said to have any clear knowledge of natures is that ‘the external sensuousness of accidents prevents men from conceiving the natures of things purely.’ Moreover, we have opinion of natures because they ‘do not reach the senses.’ At this point, I want to look at some of the things Abelard says about sensation and the role accidents play in our perception of the world. Once we understand Abelard’s views on these matters, we will see that he has good reason to want to qualify our knowledge of natures. So much so, in fact, that we might be tempted to

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*quia homines, qui per sensus tantum res cognoscunt, uix aut numquam ad huiusmodi simplicem intelligentiam conscendunt et ne pure rerum naturas concipiant, accidentium exterior sensualitas impedit. Deus uero cui omnia per se patent, quae condidit, quique ea antequam sint nouit, singulos status in se ipsis distinguit nec ei sensus impedimento est qui solus ueram habet intelligentiam. Unde homines in his quae sensu non attractauerunt, magis opinionem quam intelligentiam habere contingit, quod ipso experimento discimus.*

think that his position is that such knowledge does completely escape us after all.

### §2.2: Sensation

For Abelard, the senses are the foundation for any activity of the human intellect. Abelard thinks that the mental contents of the human mind are always derived from and limited by what the senses perceive. Witness: “any human notion arises from the senses” (*Tractatus*, 80; King, 1982). Abelard presents a more detailed account of his view in the following passage:

Understanding is, on the one hand, linked to sense by origin and, on the other hand, by name as well. The understanding is linked to sense by origin in that any of the five senses, by coming-into-contact with any given thing, soon forces awareness of it upon us. Indeed, what we sense by seeing something - or hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching - we quickly understand. And so the weak human mind is compelled to rise from the senses to understanding, with the result that we can hardly form something in the understanding unless it is formed in the likeness of corporeal things, which we learned through the experience of the senses (*Tractatus*, 64; King, 1982).

In Abelard’s view, then, any knowledge that the human mind might contain must be derived from the information given through the senses; human knowledge *always* stems from perception of the sensible world. “Men... know things only through the senses” (*LI I*, 45; Spade, 1994). At the root of all Abelard’s epistemological claims, then, is the idea that the human mind is completely dependent on the senses for its knowledge of reality. Indeed, Abelard claims that “the feeble human mind starts with sense and is hardly ever able to progress beyond sense” (*Tractatus 2*; Guilfooy, 2004). In short, the scope of what we can understand is determined by what the senses tell us about the external world.

So what do the senses perceive? Abelard tells us that sensation is:

The perception of a corporeal thing requiring a corporeal

instrument, that is, the sort of application of the mind which is directed to corporeal things and comes about necessarily, and is exercised through some bodily instrument without which it cannot be had at all - as through the ears or the eyes (*Tractatus*, 64-65; King, 1982).

He tells much the same story in *Logica Ingredientibus*.

Whence we call them [the senses] 'bodily' - obviously, not because the body can perceive any given thing through them, but because it only exercises them through them bodily instruments and only perceives corporeal things through them (*LI III*, 8-10; King, 1982).

According to Abelard, then, sensation is the perception via the sense organs of corporeal objects. We sensibly perceive physical things such as people, trees, and dogs. On Abelard's account, then, the senses are directed towards concrete things and it is our perception of these physical things that functions as the foundation for any higher activity of the mind.

Now a characteristic of corporeal individuals is that they have accidental properties. "For example, the substance of this man is *body* and *animal* and *man*, and is covered with an infinite of forms" (*LI I*, 47; Spade, 1994). Abelard tells us the same story in the *Tractatus*: "For example, this body is a body, a man, warm, shiny white, and subject to innumerable other natures or properties" (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982). Every individual we perceive possesses many accidental properties. This might seem like an obvious and entirely expected thing for Abelard to say but it is an important point worth emphasizing. As we will see, accidents play a crucial role in what Abelard has to say about our ability (or rather inability) to understand the natures of things. Let's take a closer look at his account of accidents.

### **§2.3: Accidents**

According to Abelard, no accidental feature is integral to the individuals that have

it. That is, accidents are properties that can be added or removed from an individual without said individual becoming something else – undergoing a substantial change.

Yet if Socrates were to cease to be white, he would not for this reason be corrupted in substance, since it is not necessary for this reason that any generic or specific *status* perish. Analyze the definition thus: Accident, that is, accidental form, *is that form which can be present or absent to the subject matter without its corruption*, that is, such that but its adventing or its receding it is not necessary that the subject material in the nature of its substance be corrupted, i.e. for the generic or specific *status* to change (*LII*, 92 & 127; King, 1982).

The color of Socrates hair has no effect on the sort of substance he is. Socrates remains a man so long as he possesses the properties rationality, mortality, and animality as these are the properties that define what it is to be a man. By contrast, certain other properties such as the color of his hair can change without Socrates becoming a different sort of thing – such are accidental properties.<sup>24</sup> In short, there are two sorts of properties – the ones that compose a thing's nature that cannot be removed without a substantial change taking place and the accidental ones that can change without any substantial change. Accidents are traits the having of which do not affect a thing's nature or alter the kind of thing that it is.

Now although the substantial being of individuals does not depend on their accidental features, they nevertheless have an important role to play in the way we perceive individual things. We already know that Abelard's position is that all human

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that properties are considered accidental not in relation to each other but in relation to the substance of the thing that possess them. John Marenbon (*The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 130) provides an excellent illustration of this point. A fire's being-hot is an essential property of fire. Fire cannot be fire unless it possesses the property of being-hot. This same property of being-hot though is an accidental property if possessed by Socrates. Indeed, if Socrates goes from being-hot to being-cold, his substance is not altered in any way whereas if a fire goes from being-hot to being-cold, it is no longer fire. For Abelard, then, the same property can be both a *differentiae* (essential property) and an accident (non-essential property) depending on the sort of substance of the thing that possesses it.

understandings are based on the information given through the senses. We also know that they are directed to corporeal things. Now the significance of accidents in this story is that insofar as they cover all the objects that we sense, it is – properly speaking – them that we see. That is, we do not see the substances of things nor do we see those insensible properties that make up their natures. Our eyes only see their outer shell, which is made up of accidental properties. Hence, Abelard writes that

Thus we say that those things only properly come to the senses about which sense immediately produces a judgment<sup>25</sup> which no other thought interceding, as color, sound, softness, smell; only these accidents are seen, which is confirmed by reason as much as by experience (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982).

The claim here is that the senses are always directed only to accidental properties. What we can say, then, is that the senses are our only window to reality and the only things they tell us about are accidents. I can see the corporeal thing Socrates only insofar as I can see his outer appearance. Indeed, I cannot see his nature as it is covered in accidents.

Now based on this discussion, we can certainly see why Abelard would want to claim that the “the external sensuousness of accidents prevents men from conceiving the natures of things purely” (*LI I*, 45; Spade, 1994). Because we only sense accidents it makes sense for him to say that these “internal forms do not reach the senses” (*LI I*, 46; Spade, 1994). While I can perceive with the senses that Socrates is white and has a snub nose or that he is tall or short, I cannot see or touch the properties that make up his nature - his rationality and mortality for instance as they are concealed by his accidental properties and it is these alone that I sense. As such, if the senses are the foundation for

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<sup>25</sup> Abelard’s use of the word ‘judgment’ may be a bit misleading. He does not intend judgment in the sense of reflective appraisal undertaken by reason. Rather, his meaning is that the senses, properly speaking, only perceive proper sensibles in an immediate and pre-reflective perception.

any activity of the mind and they only perceive accidents, how could we have understandings of things that we cannot sense? For this reason, it seems plausible to suggest that when Abelard writes that human beings do not have pure understandings of natures, he might mean that we have *no* knowledge of them. If Socrates' and Plato's nature are completely hidden from me, where would such knowledge come from? Indeed, it appears as though Abelard's epistemological views on sensation and the perception of accidents rule out the possibility that human beings could acquire knowledge of natures.

And yet, Abelard never commits to this position. As we saw above, he says that we have 'opinion' of these things and have no 'pure' understanding of them but does *not* claim that it is impossible for us to acquire such knowledge. Indeed, the texts we cited above show that Abelard wants to qualify our knowledge of such things – not deny it. So what is Abelard's position? Does he think we have knowledge of natures or not? At this point, I want to look at some of the other things Abelard says about our knowledge of natures and, as we will see, his position is that it is possible for human beings to acquire such knowledge. In fact, he frequently says that such knowledge is within our grasp and even seems to think that we can have a pretty good understanding of the insensible natures of things. As we will see, despite Abelard's epistemological claim that the senses only perceive accidents, there are other passages where he clearly commits to the view that it is possible for human beings to have knowledge of natures.

Now without question this raises some serious concerns in light of what we have just seen. Firstly, is Abelard's epistemological commitment to the fact that we do not perceive natures compatible with his claims that it is possible for us to have knowledge of them? I will try to show in what follows that Abelard does want to say it is possible for us

to have knowledge of natures. But is this view compatible with his claims about sensation and the perception of accidents? How does he think we acquire such knowledge? How can he say that human beings are able to have knowledge of insensible things when we only ever perceive accidents? Does he have a way around his claim that the senses never come into contact with natures? We will return to these questions once we have seen that Abelard wants to say that it is possible for human beings to have knowledge of the natures of things.

#### **§2.4: Our Knowledge of Natures**

In contrast to the passages where it appears as though Abelard is committed to the view that it is not possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of the insensible natures of things, there are others where he talks as though we can have a pretty good understanding of these things. We can see this very clearly in his accounts of the imposition of universal terms and the human power of abstraction. I have chosen to focus on Abelard's discussion of these two things as they clearly evidence his view that he thinks that it is possible for human beings to have knowledge of insensible natures. Let's begin with his account of the imposition of universal terms.

According to Abelard, words come to refer to things through an impositive act whereby a vocal sound is connected to a physical thing or a group of physical things.<sup>26</sup> In his *Hexameron*, which contains a gloss on *Genesis*,<sup>27</sup> Abelard refers to a myth of imposition that illustrates the way that he conceives of the impositive act.

God... led each animal to Adam in order to see what he

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<sup>26</sup> Although Abelard does discuss the imposition of proper names such as 'Socrates' or 'Plato' – names, which nominate only one thing – the passages under discussion here refer only to universal names and the impositive act involved therein.

<sup>27</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 335.

would call it: that is, after inspecting their natures, for the designation of which afterwards he applied the terms... Whatever Adam called a living animal, that is its name: read this as follows: *any name of a living animal he uttered*, that is, Adam imposed, *that is its name*, obviously uttered in the Hebrew tongue, which is called the mother and source of all other languages (*Hexameron*, 240; quoted in *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, King, 335).

This passage describes the genesis<sup>28</sup> of the relation between words and the things they refer to. What happens is that a vocal sound is imposed on some thing(s) and becomes a name that can be used to speak about the named things.

So, a word's reference is established through an impositive act. Moreover, the impositor, we are told, imposes words after 'inspecting the natures' of the things he is naming. Abelard's view is that words are imposed on things in the world in accordance with an understanding of their natures. Now this claim is by no means isolated. Elsewhere, Abelard writes that "their inventor [universals] meant to impose them in accordance with certain natures or characteristics of things" (*LI I*, 46; Spade, 1994). Similarly, Abelard also writes that "he who originally created the term first considered the nature of the thing for the indication of which the term was imposed" (*LI II*, 112-113; King, 1982). So what we can say here is that the impositor of a word first considers the natures of the thing(s) being named and then imposes the word in accordance with said nature.

Fine. But why does Abelard invoke the nature here? Why does the impositor need

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<sup>28</sup> Now this 'paradigm case' of the act of imposition ought not to make us think that Abelard is of the view that the imposition of universals only occurred in a mythical past or that the impositor of universal words was God. Indeed, the impositive act for Abelard occurs in the world as we know it by regular people. Indeed, we read in Chapter One that "*sermones* are universals, since they are predicated of many from their nativity, that is, the institution of men" (*LNPS*, 45; King, 1982). We saw that *sermones* are meaningful words that are created by men to speak about the world. Abelard never gives the impression that language is divine in origin and frequently insists that it arises from human institution.

to consider the natures of the things being named? I think we can see why Abelard says this if we recall his demonstration of how it is possible for universal words to nominate groups of individuals. In Chapter One, we saw that Abelard argues that universal words can be used to refer to groups of radically discrete things because they have natures that resemble one another very closely. “*The species is a collection of many into one nature, i.e. a specific term nominates subject-things according as they agree and are similar to one another*” (*LI I, 57*; King, 1982). In his account of imposition Abelard invokes the nature to the same purpose. Indeed, the nature plays a central role here because it is what licenses the imposition of a universal term on a group of radically discrete individuals. “We call the name ‘man’ a nature, which is naturally common to many things in virtue of its single imposition, due to the fact that they are naturally similar to one another in that each of them is a rational mortal animal” (*Secundum mag Petrem, 17*; King, 2004).

Now based on this, we can see why Abelard would want to say that the impositor of a universal term would need to have some knowledge of the natures of the things he is naming. Indeed, to collectively name a group of things, it makes sense to say that the inceptive user of a universal term must have some idea of what defines that specific group of things. If not, it would be unclear which things were being named. For instance, how could the impositor of ‘man’ know which things to stick the word on unless he had some idea of what the criterion of being a man is? If I had no idea of what defined manhood, it seems unlikely that I could identify which things were men. In this way, we can see how imposition depends on an understanding of the natures of things being named and why Abelard wants to say that the impositor of a universal term understands the natures of the things he names.

Now it is worth noting that Abelard is careful to say that the impositor's knowledge of the natures of the things he names need not be exhaustive. Indeed, if this were the case, his account of imposition would be highly implausible given the fact that we talk about things all the time without having a complete knowledge of their natures.

Recognizing this, Abelard writes that

perhaps there will be a question whether in the name of a species all its differences are understood, as has been said. If indeed we pay attention to the impositor's understanding, it does not seem to be true, since perhaps he did not understand all its differences... Although the impositors did not distinctly understand all of the differences of *man*, nevertheless he wanted the term to be accepted for them, whichever of them there may be (*Dialectica*, 595; King, 1982).

The idea, then, is that the impositor of a universal term such as 'man' did not need to understand everything about human natures. In a similar vein, Abelard also writes that

any names of existing things, insofar as is in their power, generate understanding rather than opinion, since their inventor meant to impose them in accordance with certain natures or characteristics of things even if he did not know how to think out the nature or characteristic of the things (*LII*, 46; Spade, 1994).

So, words are imposed in accordance with the natures of things. However, the impositor need not know everything about the thing he is naming. Now I think this is important for Abelard to say. Indeed, it is certainly the case that human beings in the past knew less about natures of things than we do now. However, they still imposed words on them despite this deficiency in knowledge. For instance, Abelard would not have known that the chemical structure of water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Despite this, however, he could still refer to water without knowing this. What Abelard wants to say, then, is that I must have some notion of what human nature is in order to identify which things are men and are so called but

this is not to say that I must understand everything about their natures to talk about them.

What we can take away from this story about imposition is that Abelard thinks that it is possible for human beings to have at least some knowledge of the natures of things. The inceptive impositors of the words we use understood something about the natures of things. They 'first consider the nature of the thing' they want to name and impose the term 'in accordance' with this nature. Now this account of imposition shows us that Abelard thinks that human beings are able to acquire knowledge of the natures of things. Indeed, impositors do so. Now this is not the only place where Abelard makes claims to the effect that it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of the natures of things. Indeed, he makes such a claim when discussing abstraction. Let us take a look at what he says here.

Now we have already discussed Abelard's account of abstraction in Chapter One but it is worth revisiting some of the things he says about it as they confirm our thesis that he does think it is possible for us to have knowledge of natures. Now if we recall, Abelard thinks there are two types of abstraction. The first sort is an action of the mind whereby it isolates and focuses on one aspect or property of a thing. Abelard describes this power as follows:

when I attend to this man only in terms of the nature *substance* or *body*, but not also in terms of the nature *animal* or *man* or *literate*, surely I understand nothing but what is in the nature. But I do not pay attention to *all* the features it has (*LI I*, 48; Spade, 1994).

This action of the mind is able to set aside certain properties in order to attend others on their own. So for instance, through abstraction, I can focus in on Socrates' rationality without attending to his whiteness, animality, or mortality.

The second power Abelard ascribes to abstraction is the ability to set aside the ‘individuating conditions’ that characterize all individuals. Abelard thinks that individuals “differ both in their own essence and in their own forms” (*LI I*, 41; Spade, 1994). This means that the rationality of Socrates – even if it is mentally isolated from all the other properties of Socrates – is still different from Plato’s rationality. The second power of abstraction, then, is a bracketing of this individuality so that we might be able to contemplate *rationality* in itself. Witness:

We call those ‘understandings through ‘abstraction’ which either speculate upon the nature of some form free from any respect of subject matter, in itself, or which indifferently considers any given nature free from any discretion of its individuals (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982).

Abelard goes on to say that

when I indifferently consider human nature which is present in single men so that I attend the personal discretion of no man, i.e. I only consider man in what man is, that is, a rational mortal animal (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982)

and that “by the force of reason I indeed abstract forms in a certain way from its subject substances, clearly speculating upon those things in their proper natures *per se*” (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982). Through the second power of abstraction, then, human beings can contemplate the natures of things *in themselves*.

On the basis of these passages, it is very difficult to deny that Abelard thinks that we are able to acquire knowledge of the natures of things. Indeed, he tells us that we are equipped with powers of abstraction that allow us to understand them. Through the first power of abstraction I can attend ‘nothing but what is in the nature’ because ‘I do not pay attention to *all* the features it has.’ That is, I can isolate and understand the natures of concrete individuals. Additionally, through the second power of abstraction, I am able to

‘clearly speculat[e] upon those things in their proper natures *per se*.’ Indeed, Abelard’s view is that human beings are equipped with powers of abstraction that make it possible for us to think about natures both in isolation from other properties a thing may have as well as *in itself*.

### **§2.5: The Problem**

So far we have seen that, on one hand, Abelard definitely wants to say that it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of the insensible natures of things. We have seen that Abelard wants to qualify our knowledge of these things but that he never commits to the position that such knowledge is unattainable for human beings. Moreover, his comments to the effect that “we have understandings of a great many incorporeal things” (*Tractatus*, 67; King, 1982) and that we can “clearly speculat[e] upon those things in their proper natures *per se*” (*Tractatus*, 79; King, 1982) leave little room for doubt that Abelard’s position is that it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of natures. On the other hand, however, we have seen several passages that suggest that his epistemological views about sensation and the perception of accidents appear to rule out the possibility of such knowledge. Indeed, we have seen that he thinks that “men... know things only through the senses” (*LI I*, 45; Spade, 1994) and that “the feeble human mind starts with sense and is hardly ever able to progress beyond sense” (*Tractatus 2*; Guilfooy, 2004). We have also seen his claim that “the internal forms... such as rationality, mortality, and fatherhood... do not reach the senses” (*LI I*, 46; Spade, 1994). Now the problem should stand out fairly clearly here. Indeed, Abelard seems to be advocating two, incompatible views about our knowledge of natures.

The question is how Abelard thinks that these views fit together. If he does think

that they are compatible and fit together, how does he think that this works? Indeed, it is not clear how or if we can reconcile Abelard's claims that we can have knowledge of natures with his epistemological views on sensation and the perception of accidents. Is there a way around his epistemological position that we only sense accidents and not the insensible natures of things? Can Abelard claim that his epistemological views on sensation and accidents do not rule out the possibility that human beings can have such knowledge? How can he say that it is possible for us to have knowledge of insensible things while claiming that we can only understand what we sense and we only sense accidents – not insensible natures? How does such knowledge reach our minds? Does it come from the sensible perception of these real individuals? If so, how so?

### Chapter 3

We saw in Chapter Two that Abelard's views on sensation and the perception of accidents make it difficult to see how human beings could know anything about the insensible natures of things. The question, then, to which we seek an answer in this chapter is whether Abelard has a way to explain how it is possible for human beings to have knowledge of insensible natures despite that fact that a) all knowledge we have about the world comes from the senses and b) the senses only convey information about proper sensibles (accidents). Does he think that these views are consistent? Can Abelard show us how these views are compatible? The short answer is that this problem appears to be only partially resolved in Abelard's text. As we will see below, he tells us that human beings are able to acquire knowledge of natures even though we only perceive accidents because the perception of accidents mediates our knowledge of insensibles. He neglects, however, to show us *how* this actually happens. Indeed, he never explicitly tells us how seeing that Socrates has white skin or black hair allows us some knowledge of his nature.

Now work has been done in the secondary literature to show that Abelard's text licenses us to say more about how exactly this happens. Indeed, Peter King, in his seminal Ph.d thesis, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, endeavors to provide an account of what Abelard thinks on this matter. King's thesis, despite the fact that it has never been published, is probably the most important work on Abelard's theory of universals extant and has had a huge influence on Abelard scholarship in the past twenty-five years. In the second half of this chapter, I will take a look at whether King's work shows that Abelard actually does tell us about the mechanics of how accidents mediate

knowledge of insensibles. As we will see, King's account is not very convincing but I leave this aside for now. Before addressing King's work, let us first examine what Abelard says explicitly about how it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of insensible natures despite the fact that we only perceive accidents.

### **§3.1: The Indirect Perception of Insensibles**

As we saw in Chapter Two, Abelard thinks that the senses are the starting point for any of humanity's knowledge of the world. His view is that "men... know things only through the senses" (*LI I*, 45; Spade, 1994) and that "the feeble human mind starts with sense and is hardly ever able to progress beyond sense" (*Tractatus 2*; Guilfooy, 2004). Moreover, we also saw that Abelard thinks that "color, sound, softness, smell; only these accidents are seen, which is confirmed by reason as much as by experience" (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982). The senses, which only perceive accidents, are the only point of access we have to reality. As we saw above, this story makes it very difficult to see how human beings could have knowledge of insensible natures. Indeed, where would such knowledge come from?

In ostensible contradiction to these claims, however, there are certain other passages where Abelard talks as though human beings are able to perceive more than accidents. For instance, in the following quotation Abelard writes that

Surely sense, in order that it may be exercised, requires bodily instruments; and they perceive only bodies or the proper accidents of bodies, as sight color or length, hearing sound (which occurs in the air), taste flavor, smell odor, touch heat or hardness or texture (*LI III*, 8-9; King, 1982).

The striking thing about this passage is that Abelard says that in addition to accidents, the senses can perceive *bodies*. Now because they are covered in accidental forms, it does not

seem possible that bodies themselves could be seen or touched. And yet, Abelard here tells us that the senses do perceive them. Moreover, in his Gloss on Porphyry in the *Logica Ingredientibus*, Abelard makes even stronger claims to the effect that the senses communicate knowledge of insensible objects.

Since we ourselves judge as much of the subjects as of the accident by the sense, it seems that the senses perceive both. Indeed, discerning a white horse we not only know whiteness in its foundation, but we also know the substance *horse*, for we not only attend its being white but also its being a horse (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982).

And again, “we do not deny that sight, penetrating the color, perceives the nature of the subject body” (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982). So without a doubt, Abelard does think that the senses are able to somehow perceive insensible things such as bodies and natures.

Now these passages are rather puzzling. Indeed, what is going on here? We are very familiar with Abelard’s claim that the senses only touch accidents. How can we *only* perceive accidents and yet perceive insensibles at the same time? Is Abelard changing his story? Is he contradicting his claim that we only perceive proper sensibles? Or, is it possible to perceive insensible natures and bodies even though we only perceive accidents? Could it be that this is what Abelard is saying when he writes that the senses perceive insensibles? In fact, I think that this is precisely what he means. What I want to argue is that Abelard thinks there are two degrees or levels of perception. That is, there is the direct perception of accidents by the use of my sensory organs but there is also a secondary level of perception whereby insensibles are perceived – as Kevin Guilfooy puts

it - “through”<sup>29</sup> the perception of accidents.

In the *Ingredientibus*, there are two passages that suggest that Abelard thought something like this. The first reads as follows:

What is so odd that one might **see bodies by**<sup>30</sup> **[through] color**, since one often penetrates within the substance of a given body, as one may judge things about a given body? For we know bodies (as it were) **through a window**. But if anyone were to say also that we see a body with color, I think color is especially perceived by sense, with which having been removed from sight the color is absent and sight tells us nothing (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982).

And the second: “sense seems to present us with many things, which, although in perceiving them, sense does not touch them” (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, Guilfooy, 2001).

Now it seems to me that we can read these passages as an explanation of how it is that human beings only perceive accidents and yet are also able to perceive insensibles. Let us look closely at what Abelard says here.

The first thing I want to emphasize is Abelard’s claim that accidents are ‘especially’ perceived by the senses. What does this mean? What Abelard is saying here is that despite his claim that the senses are able to penetrate to insensible bodies, his view is not that the senses can actually see or touch insensibles. Indeed, this is confirmed in a passage a few lines after the one we have quoted above, Abelard writes the following: “since... sense is similarly corporeal, their force is directed most to accidents which are

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<sup>29</sup> Guilfooy, *Mind and Cognition*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 212-213.

<sup>30</sup> King translates the word *per* as ‘by.’ However, I think we get a better sense of the passage if we translate *per* as ‘through.’ Here is the passage in Latin: “Quid enim mirum, si *per* colorem corpus uideat, cum etiam corporis intus positi substantiam saepe penetret, ut de aliquo quoque corpore supposito iudicet?” (Abelard, *LI Gloss on Porphyry*, Geyer edition, p. 96).

like its nature, i.e. corporeal, which we can also see by experience” (*LI Gloss of Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982). Because the senses are exercised through corporeal instruments, they can only detect corporeal things such as sounds or colors. In this connection, Abelard tells us that if color is removed the senses see nothing at all. “Color is especially perceived by sense, with which having been removed from sight the color is absent and sight tells us nothing” (*LI I*, 95; King, 1982). In the absence of accidents, the senses do not perceive anything as they only have the power to touch the corporeal things such as colors, textures, and sounds. What we can see here is that Abelard is careful not to give the impression that he is advocating the view that the senses are able to penetrate to insensible nature and bodies in the sense that we can actually see or touch bodies and natures.

But if we cannot see or touch them, in what way can we say that the senses penetrate to them? I think what Abelard wants to say is that there are two levels of perception.<sup>31</sup> Let me explain. On one hand, there is the direct perception of colors, textures, and sounds, which the sense organs touch directly. In addition to this direct level of perception, however, there is another level whereby insensibles are perceived in a “secondary manner.”<sup>32</sup> It is via this secondary level, that we can acquire knowledge of insensibles insofar as they are perceived indirectly *through* the direct perception of accidents. Hence Abelard writes that we know bodies ‘through a window’ and that we ‘see bodies through (*per colorem corpus uideat*) color.’ That is, we only directly perceive color but this perception somehow mediates our ‘perception’ of the insensible body. In

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<sup>31</sup> Guilfooy, *Mind and Cognition*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 212-213.

<sup>32</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 448.

this way, ‘sense seems to present us with many things, which, although in perceiving them, sense does not touch them.’

So what we can see here is that there is evidence to suggest that Abelard was of the view that his epistemological claims to the effect that we only perceive accidents are compatible with his position that it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of insensible things. If what we have said here is true, we can see how Abelard’s view that “only... accidents are seen” (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982) is compatible with his claim that “sight, penetrating the color, perceives the nature of the subject body” (*LI Gloss on Porphyry*, 95; King, 1982). Indeed, these views are not antithetical because insensible things such as bodies and natures can be indirectly perceived through the direct perception of accidents. That is, it is possible for our perception of accidents to mediate our knowledge of insensibles.

So there we have it. Abelard does have a way of explaining how the fact that human beings only perceive accidents is compatible with his position that it is possible for us to acquire knowledge of insensibles. However, is this answer entirely satisfactory? I think it allows us to say that Abelard himself thought that his views are consistent. On this front, I think we can count this as a partial answer to our inquiry. Without a doubt though, there are a number of questions left unanswered here. Indeed, it is not obvious *how* accidents mediate our knowledge of insensible things. What can the sensible perception of Socrates’ external appearance tell me about his insensible nature? I can see that he has white skin and brown hair but it is not clear how the perception of these accidental features communicates information about his inner and insensible nature. Is there some connection between insensible things and the external appearances of things?

If so, what sort of connection is it? Unfortunately, there are no explicit answers to these questions in Abelard's texts on universals nor in his epistemological work the *Tractatus*. It appears, then, that all Abelard gives us permission to say is that accidents mediate knowledge of insensibles – how this actually happens remains a mystery.

Now not everyone has accepted this conclusion. Indeed, Peter King,<sup>33</sup> in his influential Ph.D thesis *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals* has argued that Abelard *does* supply answers to the sort of questions we raised above. At this point I want to take a look at King's solution to see whether it will help us to provide a more complete account of Abelard's views on this matter of how accidents mediate our knowledge of insensibles. As we will see, King's argument turns on the idea that the world we perceive is characterized by certain detectable regularities. He argues that Abelard's position is that by observing these regularities, we can come to form some idea of their underlying causes – i.e. insensibles such as natures and bodies. Now while King's argument is interesting and at first blush appears to be a fairly plausible answer to this question in Abelard, I do not think that it is defensible. Indeed, as I will argue below, it relies on a mistaken reading of the primary text. Let's take a look at King's solution.

### **§3.2: Coherence?**

Peter King's solution is geared toward answering the questions we posed above; namely, how is it that the perception of accidents mediates our knowledge of insensibles such as natures or bodies? King formulates the question as follows: “‘For we know bodies (as it were) through a window...’ We can be said to sense intrinsic forms and the like in a secondary manner. But what licenses this conclusion?” (King, 448) King goes on

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<sup>33</sup> King's work is, to the best of my knowledge, the sole scholarly attempt that has been made to provide a solution to this problem in Abelard.

to explain what he thinks Abelard's answer is.

I think Abelard has an answer to this problem: coherence. The answer, when spelled out, will go something like this – through sense-experience we are presented with a morass of perceptions; nonetheless, there are certain detectable regularities and others are such that they help to explain and unify our experience. Thus we are led to form simple confused ideas of these things, which unify sense-experience. Such are the ideas of body, substance and the like (King, 448).

The linch-pin of King's idea is that the world we perceive through the senses is characterized by certain detectable regularities.

I think we can see what King has in mind here if we think about insensible bodies and the detectable regularities they affect in the sensible world. Although the skin color of all the people I see varies from person to person the color itself nevertheless adheres to a certain frame – one that has an opposable thumb and stands upright. Even though every person we see has different accidents, they nevertheless consistently appear in a regular and predicatable manner. Now it seems plausible to suggest that through observation, we could come to understand something about the structure of the human body by taking note of these detectable patterns that characterize our perception of human beings. Much the same story could be told when it comes to how it is possible for us to acquire knowledge of insensible natures. They, like bodies, provide a degree of 'detectable regularity' to the world. For instance, human beings have a rational nature. Because of this, we consistently exhibit a style of behavior that is indicative of this "power of discernment."<sup>34</sup> By observing this trend or consistency in the ways that human beings appear to us, we might be led to postulate that we have rational natures. Moreover, we

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<sup>34</sup> Abelard defines rationality as a 'power of discernment' (*Logica Ingredientibus III*, 96; King, 1982).

could do so without ever perceiving the nature itself.

So King's idea is that the coherence that the sensible world exhibits might allow us to form, as he puts it, 'simple ideas' of those insensible things such as bodies or natures that cause this consistency. Now King cites the following passage from the *Tractatus* as evidence that Abelard endorses this view.

Yet what Aristotle says – that our understandings are hardly had free from imaginations – should, I think, be taken in this manner: while we must examine some thing through some understanding of its nature or property, and we care only to attend to that very thing, sense, with respect to the very agreement from which any human notion arises, forces certain things on the mind through imagination, which we do not attend at all (*Tractatus*, 449; King, 1982).

He goes on to explain how Abelard's claims here relates to his own view as follows:

The agreement (*convenientia*) of the senses 'forces certain things on the mind through the imagination.' It is this agreement which is at the rock-bottom of all higher mental activity too: 'from which any human notion arises...' It is the coherence of our experience which is responsible for the rise of 'any human notion' (King, 449).

According to King, Abelard is claiming here that our sensible perception of the world is characterized by 'agreement.' That is, amongst the 'morass' of perceptions to which the senses bear witness they 'agree' about some of them - that is, they detect certain recurring regularities. Moreover, it is the senses' agreement about the world that forces certain things on our minds. Now these 'certain things' are, of course, 'the simple confused ideas of [those] things, which unify sense-experience. Such are the ideas of body, substance and the like.'

Such is King's answer as to how Abelard thinks that the sensible perception of the external appearance of things mediates our knowledge of insensible things such as natures and bodies. Now at first blush, this solution appears to be fairly plausible. Indeed,

I think it could work to explain how the external appearances of things mediates our knowledge of insensible natures. As we will see shortly, however, King's account here is deeply problematic for a number of reasons. What I want to do now is to look at the Latin text to see whether King's interpretation of the passage cited above as evidence that Abelard held such a view squares with what Abelard himself says. As we will see, it fails to do so in several important ways.

### The Primary Text

Let us look carefully at the passage King quotes as evidence for his view. In the Latin text edited by Lucia Urbani Ulivi (upon which King bases his translation), the text runs as follows:

Quod vero Aristoteles dicit intellectus nostros minime absque imaginationibus haberi, ita accipiendum est, arbitror, quod dum in aliaque re per intellectum aliquam eius naturam aut proprietatem deliberare nitimur, eamque solam attendere curamus, ipsa **sensus consuetudo** a quo omnis humana notitia surgit, quaedam per imaginationem ingerit animo, quae nullo modo attendimus (*Tractatus*, 107; Ulivi, 1976).

In the critical edition of the *Tractatus*, the text is largely unaltered.

Quod uero Aristoteles dicit, intellectus nostros minime absque imaginationibus haberi, ita accipiendum est, arbitror, quod, dum in aliqua re per intellectum aliquam eius naturam aut proprietatem deliberare nitimur eamque solam attendere curamus, ipsa **sensus consuetudo**, a quo omnis humana notitia surgit, quedam per imaginationem ingerit animo, quae nullo modo attendimus (*Des Intellections*, 38; P. Morin, 1994).

Now I want to highlight the line '*ipsa sensus consuetudo, a quo omnis humana notitia surgit, quedam per imaginationem ingerit animo, quae nullo modo attendimus.*' King translates this as follows: "sense, with respect to the very **agreement** from which any human notion arises, forces certain things on the mind through imagination, which we do

not attend at all.” I want first to point out King’s problematic use of the word ‘agreement.’ In the Latin text, the word Abelard uses is *consuetudo*, which is typically translated as ‘habit.’ Now this is not simply a matter of an unconventional translation. Indeed, in his explanation of this passage King talks about “the agreement (*convenientia*) of the senses.” It appears, then, that King has translated the wrong word. Where the text reads *consuetudo*, King has incorrectly translated *convenientia*.

Now there is a second problem that I want to discuss. In addition to mistranslating the word *consuetudo*, King’s rendering of the entire sentence is problematic. We can see this if we look at the relative clause beginning with the relative pronoun *quo*, which is declined in the masculine singular. Now *consuetudo* (as is *convenientia*) is a feminine noun. As such, it cannot be the antecedent of the relative phrase ‘*a quo omnis humana notitia surgit*.’ Instead the antecedent is *sensus*, which is masculine. This is problematic for King’s translation in that in his versions it appears as though Abelard is saying that it is the ‘agreement’ (not the senses) - from which all human notions arise. If we read the word *sensus* as the antecedent, a more literal translation of the passage<sup>35</sup> is as follows: ‘that very habituation of the sense - from which all human knowledge arises - forces, by way of the imagination, certain things on the soul to which we do not attend.’

So what we can see here is that King’s translation does not match up with Abelard’s primary text in several important ways. It is not the ‘agreement’ of the senses that is at the ‘rock-bottom of all higher mental activity’ (King, 449). Instead, Abelard is asserting that the senses are at the bottom of any mental activity. Moreover, it is not

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<sup>35</sup> In his translation from the critical édition of the *Tractatus*, Morin translates the passage as follows: “L’habitude même de la sensation – d’où provient toute connaissance humaine -, impose à l’esprit, par l’imagination, des choses que nous n’avons d’aucune façon visées” (*Tractatus*, 39; x, x).

‘agreement’ but some sort of ‘habit’ that forces ‘certain things on the mind.’ It is clear that this passage does not say what King wants it to say. Now at this point, I want to take a look at the context in which we find this passage in order to figure out precisely what Abelard is actually doing here. As we will see, King’s mistranslation of the text has led him far indeed from the actual meaning of the text. So much so that little, if anything, can be salvaged from King’s account. Let us look at what Abelard himself is saying here.

### **Imagination**

In order to appreciate the claim being made in King’s passage, we must pause for a moment to briefly discuss Abelard’s idea of the ‘imagination,’<sup>36</sup> which is a component of humanity’s mental apparatus. Its function is to act as “a surrogate for sense”<sup>37</sup> insofar as it stands in for the objects of sensation when they are absent. Abelard describes the job it does as follows:

Imagination, like sense, examines nothing from reason. Yet imagination, in the case of things which we sense, is nothing other than a certain recollection of sense, that is, with the thing which we sensed absent; in this way, through a certain recollection of sense, the mind itself retains up to this point the affection of how it was before, which it sensed (*Tractatus*, 66; King, 1982).

In the absence of direct sensory contact with an object, the mind invokes the imagination to reproduce the object sensed. The imagination, then, is like a mental photograph of information given through the senses and retained in the mind for use in the absence of

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<sup>36</sup> There is much more to say about Abelard’s views on the imagination and its role in cognition than I am able to get into here. For our purposes it is sufficient to know that images are mental copies of sensible objects. However, if the reader is so inclined, very thorough and lengthy discussions of Abelard’s doctrine of the imagination can be found in Peter King’s *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals* (pp. 427-442), Kevin Guifloy’s *Cognition in the Cambridge Companion to Abelard* (pp. 203-213), and John Marenbon’s *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (pp. 162-172),

<sup>37</sup> King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 427.

sensible objects, which we wish to contemplate. “When sense is absent imagination takes its place – indeed, not by sensing, but by discerning the absent thing free from any adjudgement (just as sense does by perceiving)” (*Tractatus*, 67; King, 1982).

Very good. Images are mental copies of the sensible world that the mind can invoke so as to contemplate things no longer present. Now in the course of his discussion about images and the role they play in human cognition, Abelard brings up a claim that Aristotle makes in connection with mental images. He writes that “Aristotle, as Boethius testifies in his *Commentary of the De Interpretatione*, asserts that our understandings are hardly had without imaginations” (*Tractatus*, 67; King, 1982). Now Abelard feels he needs to explain what Aristotle means here because it is not obvious how we can reconcile Aristotle’s claim with Abelard’s idea that the imagination is a surrogate for objects perceived through the senses. We can see the tension between the two views in the following passage: “we have understandings of a great many incorporeal things, imaginations are also of these... with which we never came into contact by any sense” (*Tractatus*, 67; King, 1982). Aristotle says *all* understandings are had with imaginations. This means that understandings of insensible things must also be accompanied by an image. But why would that be given that the imagination is nothing but a mental replica of information given through the senses? Does it make sense to say that understandings of insensibles are had with images of sensible things?

Now it is in the course of his explanation of this claim by Aristotle that we find the passage King quotes in support of his coherence argument. So what Abelard is doing in this section is explaining why our understandings of insensible things involve images of sensible things. As we will see shortly, Abelard’s explanation is that the human mind

is habitually accustomed to thinking about things in the world as they are perceived through the senses. That is, even when I am thinking about some insensible aspect of Socrates (i.e. his nature), my mind automatically recalls his sensible appearance purely out of habit. Moreover, we will also see that Abelard claims here that the image does not help us to understand incorporeal things as King argues. In fact, he is saying precisely the opposite - that images hinder our ability to think about natures of things as they distract us from the insensible itself. Let's look at how Abelard explains Aristotle's claim about images and why the mind employs them when we want to think about insensible things.

### Habit

Abelard's explanation of Aristotle's claim that "our understandings are hardly had without imaginations" (*Tractatus*, 67; King, 1982) turns on the idea of habit (*consuetudo*).

Yet what Aristotle says – that our understandings are hardly had free from imaginations – should, I think, be taken in this matter: while we must examine some thing through some understanding of its nature or property, and we care only to attend to that very thing [that very habituation of the sense -- from which all human knowledge arises -- forces, by way of the imagination, certain things on the soul to which we do not attend]. For instance, in *man* we only need to understand what pertain to human nature, as rational mortal animal; that is, with all other things which not pertain to human nature circumscribed; yet surely many things show themselves to the unwilling mind through the imagination, which we completely separate from intention - as some color, or length, or any given arrangement of limbs; and a great many accidental forms of bodies which we have frequently experienced by the senses (*Tractatus*, 68; King, 1982 - square brackets indicate my corrections to the text).

So what we can see here is that Abelard's explanation of Aristotle's claim involves the idea of some sort of habit that forces accidents on the mind through the imagination.

Abelard elaborates on what sort of habit he is talking about as well as how it is formed a few lines below those quoted above. What he is saying here comes down to the idea that because all our knowledge about the things in the world comes first from the senses, we are habitually inclined to think about it in those terms.<sup>38</sup> In this connection, Abelard writes that

The senses are first of all stimulated, and they are stimulated frequently; thereafter the human mind rises to imagination; eventually to understanding. Yet what we first learned we retain more firmly (*Tractatus*, 68; King, 1982).

He goes on to illustrate his point by quoting the following lines from Horace: “A fresh vessel will preserve the scent of what / First filled it for a long time” (*Tractatus*, 68; King, 1982). Now Abelard’s explanation here is uncharacteristically loose but I think we can discern his intention clearly enough. He wants to say that before we try to understand things in any rigorous way (i.e. contemplate their natures), we have already encountered them frequently through the senses. Through these early encounters, we become used to things as they are sensed and, for a long time afterwards, habitually form images of their external appearance when we think about them.

Abelard explains Aristotle’s claim, then, that all understandings – even those of insensible things – involve images of sensible things on the grounds that habit compels the mind to invoke them. In other words, when I try to think about a thing’s insensible nature it is not that my mind requires a sensible image but that it is forced to invoke one out of habit rather than necessity. Hence, Abelard writes that “sense is so bound to us by

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<sup>38</sup> Indeed, elsewhere in the *Tractatus*, Abelard writes that “the understanding is linked to sense by origin... the weak human mind is compelled to rise from the senses to the understanding” (*Tractatus*, 442; King, 1982).

[habit]<sup>39</sup> (*consuetudo*), as remarked above that we can hardly, or never, understand something which we do not imagine as corporeal or subject to corporeal properties” (*Tractatus*, 68; King, 1982). On account of this habit, even though I may want to contemplate some insensible nature, ‘many things show themselves to the unwilling mind through the imagination, which we completely separate from intention – as... a great many accidental forms of bodies which we have frequently experienced by the senses.’

Now it is also worth mentioning that Abelard goes on to say that this habit of conceiving of things in terms of sensible images hinders our ability to think about insensible things clearly. At the end of the section currently under discussion, Abelard writes the following:

Sense is so bound to us by [habit] that we can hardly, or never, understand something which we do not imagine as corporeal or subject to corporeal properties. ‘Hardly’ is added, however, perhaps because intelligence, according to Boethius – which he says is characteristic of few men and is more of God alone – so transcends any sense and imagination that it is had without either, that nothing occurs to the mind except only what it understands and attends. ‘Intelligence,’ therefore is the sort of understanding that goes with no confused perception of the mind, whether through sense or imagination. (*Tractatus*, 68; King, 1982).

Because human beings habitually employ images derived from the sensible world, we cannot be said to have ‘intelligence,’ which Abelard tells us is ‘the sort of understanding that goes with no confused perception of the mind.’ Abelard tells us that God alone is capable of this sort of understanding as He can attend things in such a wise ‘that nothing occurs to the mind except only what it understands and attends.’ Human beings on the

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<sup>39</sup> Adeo autem, ut suprameminimus, sensus consuetudo adnectitur nobis ut uix aut numquam aliquid intelligere ualeamus, quod non tamquam corporeum et corporeis proprietatibus subiectum imaginemur (*Tractatus*, 38; )

other hand, are denied such a distilled understanding. Indeed, every time we want to think about Socrates' nature, an image of his external appearance crowds into our minds and prevents us from contemplating his nature on its own. We cannot think about it clearly because of the extraneous data habit forces onto us.

Now at this point, I think we can clearly see just how far from the actual meaning of the passage King's account strays. Indeed, Abelard is not talking about how we come to acquire knowledge of insensible natures at all. The topic under discussion is why Aristotle claims that *when* we try to think about natures, we must also think about images. Moreover, Abelard is certainly not saying that the imagination forces an understanding of insensible natures on the mind through the coherence or 'agreement' that characterizes our perception of the world. To the contrary, in fact, he stresses that the images of sensible things that habit (*consuetudo* rather than *convenientia*) forces on our minds are a distraction rather than an aid to understanding insensible natures.

King's thesis, then, that images force an understanding of insensibles such as natures and bodies does not fit with what Abelard is saying on several levels. His translation misconstrues the meaning of the Latin text. Moreover, his reading of the whole passage does not accurately represent what Abelard himself is trying to say. As such, while King's solution to the problem of how the sensible perception of accidents mediates humanity's knowledge of insensible things makes sense and certainly seems plausible on its own terms, we cannot accept it as it is based on a mistaken reading of the primary text. Indeed, Abelard himself says nothing about the senses' agreement nor does he say anything about how the sensible perception of accidents mediates our knowledge of insensible natures.

### §3.3: Unresolved Questions

We have seen that Abelard tells us that he thinks that the sensible perception of accidents somehow mediates our knowledge of natures. What we can say about our problem, then, is that Abelard himself seems to have thought that epistemological views on sensation and the perception of accidents are compatible with his position that it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of natures. Beyond this, however, the primary text offers no further explanation of how this happens. Moreover, we have seen that only attempt in the secondary literature to show that Abelard's text does allow us to say more about how exactly accidents mediate our knowledge of insensibles is unsuccessful. As such, Abelard's text licenses us to say only *that* accidents mediate our knowledge of insensible but fails to deliver on *how* this actually happens. Indeed, Abelard's solution to the problem outlined in Chapter Two appears to have but a partial resolution.

### §3.4: Conclusions

Based on what we have seen here in Chapter Three, the issue of how it is that human beings acquire knowledge of insensible natures given that we only perceive accidents remains unresolved by Abelard. Now although this is a problem in Abelard's theory, it is one he would share with virtually all philosophers in the Middle Ages who framed the question of knowledge in terms of sensation and the perception of accidents.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In an influential passage that would subsequently spark much philosophical literature on the topic, Richard of Middleton (writing in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century) raises a problem very similar to the one currently under discussion. Richard - when faced with the problem of how it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of substances even though we only perceive accidents - bites the bullet and suggests that such knowledge is not possible for us. His view is that we cannot know substance in itself because we only perceive the external appearances of things. He writes "quod nos in statu corruptibili non cognoscimus per naturam de lege communi substantiam per propriam eius speciem, nisi accipiatur species, pro verbo, quod intellectus concipit de ea, per suas proprietates: non enim cognoscimus eam immediate, per suam speciem

Indeed, this issue of how it is possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of more than just accidents is one of the chief epistemological difficulties of the period. Given the formidable nature of the problem, then, that he does not solve it ought not to lower him in our esteem too much. Moreover, even if Abelard's account of universals is not entirely successful as regards this epistemological issue of how it happens that human beings acquire knowledge of insensible natures, there is still much to admire in his treatment of the problem. As we saw above in Chapter One, he is successful in developing a plausible non-realist theory of reference such that he can explain how it is possible for universal words to nominate real *res* and signify meaningful understandings while endorsing a metaphysics of radical discretion. He is the first philosopher in the Middle Ages and the only one in the Twelfth Century to accomplish such a feat. Although his treatment of some of the epistemological questions that arise in connection with this account fails to satisfy, Abelard's work on universals is nevertheless a major landmark in the history of philosophy as well as the infamous problem of universals.

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increatam” and that “ergo intellectus noster, per naturam non potest acquirere propriam speciem substantiae.” He goes on to assert that what little understanding of substance we have is inferred from the sensible perception of accidents. Because this is the only way we are able to know anything about substance, we cannot be said to have any kind of direct knowledge of it. Richard of Middleton is the first philosopher of the Middle Ages to seriously raise the possibility that we do not have knowledge of insensibles (substance) and his conclusion would be much discussed throughout the remainder of the period. I raise this point simply to illustrate that much more work was yet to be done on this difficult problem. Indeed, even a century after Abelard's death, philosophers would still be seriously wrestling with it.

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