

Peter Abelard and Philosophy of Language in the Twelfth Century

1. Background

Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142)

Dialectica c. 1110

Logica Ingredientibus c. 1119

Logica Nostrorum Petitioni Sociorum (Glossulae) + *De intellectibus* (both c. 1124).

Twelfth-century linguistic thought

Priscian *Glossulae*

William of Conches

Peter Helias

Gilbert of Poitiers

2. The traditional and the new theory of meaning

Knowing the meaning of a term 'is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state (in the sense of 'psychological state', in which states of memory and psychological dispositions are 'psychological states'; no one thought that knowing the meaning of a word was a continuous state of consciousness, of course). [Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' repr. in *Mind, Language and Reality*, 219]

Directly psychologistic:

I understand 'x' -> I form some type of concept in my mind which is the correct concept corresponding to 'x' and allows me to distinguish xs from non-xs.

Indirectly psychologistic:

I understand 'x' -> (a) 'x' stands for a certain concept (seen as an abstract entity, graspable by individuals but not the property of any one individual); (b) I know what concept it stands for (reference to a psychological state in manner indicated by Putnam).

3. What's wrong with the traditional theory?

Thales = 'the Eleatic philosopher who believed that all is water' whereas actually he was from Miletus.

I discover that the structure of a certain element or particle x is really s , whereas it had been thought to be r .

I want to say that the concept to be associated with x , and which determines its reference, is s .

'Only s -things are xs ' – but we've established that what xs are are r -things!

4. The New Theory: Direct Reference

Fallibility of Categorization.

5. Abelard on reference: the dispute between Peter King and Chris Martin

(a) Names, both proper and common, refer to things individually or severally. A name is linked with that of which it is the name as though there were someone who devised the name to label a given thing or kind of thing, a process known as 'imposition' (modelled on Adam's naming the animals in *Genesis* 2:19), rather like baptism. This rational reconstruction of reference does not require the person imposing the name, the 'impositor', to have anything more than an indefinite intention to pick out the thing or kind of thing, whatever its nature may be:

The inventor [of names] intended to impose them according to some natures or distinctive properties of things, even if he himself did not know how to think correctly upon the nature or distinctive property of a thing..

A name "has a definition in the nature of its imposition, even if we do not know what it is." Put in modern terms, Abelard holds a theory of *direct reference*, in which the extension of a term is not a function of its sense. We are often "completely ignorant" of the proper conceptual content that should be associated with a term that has been successfully imposed. Peter King, article on Abelard in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

(b) And often in the same image the intellect attends in a variety of ways – as if it I were to use it just for thinking about the nature of quality or also about the nature of whiteness. For seeing a piece of wood, I attend through reason to different things about it, because now I think about it in that it is wood, now in that it is just a body, now in that it's fig or oak. Similarly, I consider one the same image that is set up before the eyes of my mind and I consider it as the nature of quality and the nature of whiteness, and although it is the same image, there are many ways of conceiving about it, at one moment in that it is quality, at another in that it is a white thing too. Abelard *Logica Ingredientibus*, 329

Et saepe in eadem imagine diuersae attentiones uariant intellectus, ueluti si eam simpliciter ad naturam qualitatis excogitandam instituam uel ad naturam etiam albedinis. Videns enim lignum diuersa de eo per

rationem attendo, quia modo ipsum in eo quod lignum est excogito, modo in eo simpliciter quod corpus, modo in eo quod quercus est uel ficus. Similiter eadem imagine ante mentis oculos constituta ipsam et qualitatis et albedinis naturam considero et licet sit eadem imago, plures sunt de ea concipiendi modi, [quod] modo in eo quod qualitas est, modo in eo quoque quod est album.

6. Abelard on Meaning

(a) ...Understandings are divided in this way: that which is of a universal name conceives a common and confused image of many things, but that which a singular word generates holds a form peculiar to one thing and as it were singular. And so when I hear 'human' a certain likeness rises up in my mind, that is related to particular humans in such a way that it is common to them all and proper to none. But when I hear 'Socrates', a certain form rises up in my mind that expresses the likeness of a given person. **Abelard** *Logica Ingredientibus*, 21

Qui [sc. intellectus] quidem in eo diuiduntur, quod ille qui uniuersalis nominis est, communem et confusam imaginem multorum concipit, ille uero quem uox singularis generat, propriam unius et quasi singularem formam tenet, hoc est ad unam tantum personam se habentem. Unde cum audio 'homo', quoddam instar in animo surgit, quod ad singulos homines sic se habet ut omnium sit commune et nullius proprium. Cum autem audio 'Socrates' forma quaedam in animo surgit quae certae personae similitudine exprimit.

(b) For they also in a certain way signify diverse things by nomination, although they do *not* constitute an understanding which arises from them and pertains to the singular things. As this utterance 'human' both nominates singular humans from the common cause, that is, that they are humans, for which reason it is called 'a universal', and it sets up a certain understanding which is common, not proper, that is, pertaining to the singulars of which it conceives the common likeness. . **Abelard** *Logica Ingredientibus*, 19

Nam et res diuersas per nominationem quodammodo significant, non constituendo tamen intellectum de eis surgentem sed ad singulas pertinentem. Ut haec uox 'homo' et singulos nominat ex communi causa, quod scilicet homines sunt, propter quam uniuersale dicitur, et intellectum quendam constituit communem non proprium, ad singulos scilicet pertinentem quorum communem concipit similitudinem.

These abstracted conceptions are rightly attributed to the divine mind, not the human one, because humans, who cognize things only through the senses, scarcely or never rise to simple understanding (*intelligentia*) of this sort, and the sensibly-perceptible exterior of accidents prevents them from conceiving the pure natures of things. But God, for whom all things lie open as they are (*per se*), differentiates each status in them and. He alone has understanding, and the senses offer him no obstacle. For this reason, it happens that humans have opinion rather than understanding – as we learn from this experiment: - If we think about a town we haven't seen, when we arrive there we find that it is other than we had thought it to be. I also believe it is the same too with regard to intrinsic forms that do not come to the senses, such as rationality and mortality, paternity, being-seated: we

have opinion, rather <than understanding>. But all the names of every sort of existing thing, considered in themselves, generate understanding (*intellectum*) rather than opinion, because the inventor intended to impose them according to some of the natures or properties of the things, although he himself did not have the knowledge to correctly conceive the nature or property of the thing. **Abelard** *Logica Ingredientibus*, 23

... bene diuinae menti, non humanae huiusmodi per abstractionem conceptiones adscribuntur, 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. Cogitantes enim de aliqua ciuitate non uisa, cum aduenerimus, eam nos aliter quam sit excogitasse inuenimus. Ita etiam credo de intrinsecis formis quae ad sensus non ueniunt, qualis est rationalitas et mortalitas, paternitas<s>, sessio, magis nos opinionem habere. Quaelibet tamen quorumlibet existentium nomina quantum in ipsis est intellectum magis quam opinionem genera<n>t, quia secundum aliquas rerum naturas uel proprietates inuentor ea imponere intendit, etsi nec ipse bene excogitare sciret rei naturam aut proprietatem.

7. Settling the Martin – King dispute ?

Reading: -

Texts Abelard's *Logica Ingredientibus* and *Logica Nostrorum Petitioni Sociorum* are edited in (ed. B. Geyer, *Peter Abaelards philosophische Schriften*, Münster, 1919-31. The *De intellectibus* is edited in *Abélard: Des intellections*. Paris, 1994. A translation of the passage discussing universals from the *Logica Ingredientibus* which contains much of the important semantic discussion is given in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals*, trans. P.V. Spade, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1994.

Secondary works Peter King's article on Abelard for the Stanford Encyclopedia is at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abelard> (note also the excellent bibliography to be found there). Chris Martin's piece will be published in the Proceedings of the SIEPM Kyoto conference, ed. C. Burnett, Turnhout, expected 2008. The following are especially relevant to Abelard's philosophy of language: K. Jacobi, 'Abelard and Frege: the Semantics of Words and Propositions' in *Atti del Convegno internazionale di storia della logica*, Bologna, 1983; 'Abelard on Philosophy of Language' in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, ed. J. Brower and K. Guilfooy, Cambridge, 2004, 126–157.

A leading researcher into twelfth-century doctrines of language is Irène Rosier-Catach. You can best find your way through her many writings by consulting the list at <http://htl.linguist.jussieu.fr/irosier.htm>

May I also mention my pbwiki website - <http://marenbon.pbwiki.com/> - where you will find a large general bibliography on medieval philosophy and some other information.