

SUMMARY

BOETHIUS AND THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

The problem of universals may be safely called one of the perennial problems of Western philosophy. As it is widely known, it was also a major theme in medieval scholasticism. Because of the vehemence of the medieval debate it became to be referred to as "the quarrel over universals". The scholastic period may be considered in many ways as a classical one for the development of the problem; let us point only to the fact, that the very name of the problem, as well as the names for main positions within the debate - realism, nominalism and to a lesser extent conceptualism - are derived directly from scholastic discourse.

Among historians of philosophy there is a general agreement that Boethius' works were of fundamental importance for the medieval debate on universals. The Latin translations of the so called logical works of Aristotle (the *Organon*) provided the material on which the debate has been founded. Even more important were Boethius' commentaries on Aristotle and Porphyry, in which he has explicitly taken up the problem and outlined a solution to it (especially in the second commentary on the Porphyry's "Isagoge"). The medieval thinkers, while developing theories of their own, tried to build on this solution which has often been treated by them as expressing Aristotle's views.

Despite the fact that Boethius' influence was so widely recognized, his own theory of universals became a matter of examination in the modern scholarship only to a very small extent. For many years his thought concerning subject was almost completely neglected. During the 1970s and 1980s this situation has changed slightly, since Boethius' thought began to arouse interest as the most important source of certain aspects of philosophical discourse in 12th century.

However, even if Boethius' doctrine of universals is examined today (which still does not happen very often), most scholars focus their attention on a very scarce selection of passages - most commonly, the famous passage from the second commentary on the "Isagoge" (1.10-11), which is one of the few texts explicitly taking up the problem. Occasionally scholars supply it with a corresponding passage from the first commentary (also 1.10-11) or with selected passages from "De Trinitate" (Chs. 2-3) and "De Consolatione" (opening chapters of book V). Numerous other passages, where we can find Boethius addressing the problem either in a direct or an indirect manner, are still being left out.

In the past it was often the case that Boethius was being looked down at because of his alleged unoriginality. One is inclined to think that today this attitude is gradually changing (probably the best example of a shift in this respect is John Marenbon's monograph from 2003). Nevertheless the conviction that Boethius is only transferring what he has found in the Greek sources has strongly contributed to the fact that many aspects of his doctrine have not been properly examined so far.

The main aim of this book has emerged quite naturally from the situation described above - it attempts to give a thorough and exhaustive account of Boethius' doctrine of universals. Consequently, it takes into account all relevant texts from Boethius' writings and also pays attention to various levels and various aspects in which the problem of universals can be seen. It is common knowledge that in Boethius' works we find several positions on universals and that they are not easily reconciled - a tension persists especially between the logical commentaries and the neoplatonic tracts. But instead of trying to mould Boethius' remarks into one more or less consistent position, I have chosen to show the diversity and the richness (sometimes close to overabundance) of Boethius' thoughts and to include every position that can be found in his writings.

Originally, I was planning that after the fulfillment of this first aim I would distinguish Boethius' most important position, and then take up and settle down to the question of its originality. I realized however that a systematic and philosophically adequate description of Boethius' views will be impossible without first answering the question of how the name "problem of universals" as well as the traditional labels used to describe the positions within the debate should be understood - since many scholars agree that none of these labels is used in a consistent manner and with a properly defined meaning.

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In my opinion the problem of universals can be stated as a question whether our general concepts, especially these concepts which describe natural species like "man" or "animal", refer to some entities that are real, though they exist in a different manner than individual things, or are they just useful mental tools, that allow us to talk about many individuals at the same time. Intertwined with this question is the fundamental problem of giving a justification to our general knowledge, which for ancient and medieval thinkers was knowledge *par excellence*. If general concepts do not have a direct referent in reality, how can we claim that they bring knowledge that is worthwhile? Therefore, in opposition to a traditional and still quite popular description of the problem - as a question whether universal entities exist or not - we can define the problem of universals as a question of how the nature of reality should be conceived if our general concepts are to be justified and properly rooted in reality. As part of my description - and also as a consequence of Boethius' usage of the term *universale* - I propose to use the name "universals" to describe those entities that allow us to form general concepts and that let general knowledge be rooted in reality.

Such an account allows us to introduce a new division of the main positions. This division is based partly on the ideas of great Belgian historian of medieval philosophy Maurice de Wulf. An important role is played here by an epistemological principle, which I have named "the principle of correspondence". It states that no knowledge can be seen as justified unless its nature is correspondent to the nature of reality it describes. If we apply this rule to the problem of general knowledge, we arrive at a conclusion that general knowledge may be justified only when in reality we find entities that are also general (or universal) in their nature.

This is precisely the position which I call exaggerated realism - it postulates the existence of universal entities as a consequence of the application of the principle of correspondence. This definition shows that it is not the specific nature of universal entities (such as their transcendence, as opposed to immanence) that is crucial for judging a given form of realism as exaggerated but the sole existence of universal objects, whether transcendent or immanent. Exaggerated realism is, therefore, defined as a position saying that universals exist and that they are universal entities.

The move towards moderate realism is carried out by rejecting the principle of correspondence. A moderate realist maintains that no universal entity is needed in order to justify our general knowledge. Still, however, the realist maintains that we need to allow for the existence of some special kind of entities besides the regular individuals. The sole but, nevertheless fundamental difference is that these entities are not conceived as universal but as singular. A modern counterpart of this kind of realism in current ontology is trope theory. It is important to point out that the main theoretical innovation of moderate realism is not only ontological, but also epistemological. We can therefore say, that moderate realism states, that universals exist and that they play an important role in the process of rooting our general knowledge, but they should be seen as singular, not universal. We can also observe that one of the main achievements of the moderate realism is that while it tries to find justification for general knowledge, it allows us to build a wholly individualist ontology.

Nominalism differs from moderate realism in that it rejects the existence of universals altogether - it allows only for the existence of regular, common sense individuals, and rejects all kinds of universals - both singular and universal. One important task for nominalism is to show how general knowledge can be rooted in reality - unless, of course, nominalism wants to abandon the quest for justifying general knowledge. The label "conceptualism" does not appear in this division as a separate position. In my opinion (and this conclusion is argued for in Ch. 1) "conceptualism" is only a misleading label which was used by historians of philosophy to describe some of the nominalist philosophers.

To sum up this division, we can say that exaggerated and moderate realisms assert that universal concepts have referents in reality - they maintain that there are special objects to which general concepts refer. The difference between them lies in the way in which they conceive the nature of such beings. On the other hand, nominalism maintains that there are no such objects and that only regular individual things exist.

The analyses summarized above, along with an outline of the history of the problem and with the definition of main positions taken up by different thinkers during the debate, fill out the first chapter of the book and provide a conceptual framework for the rest of the study.

In the next chapters I try to carry out the main aim of the book, which is to provide a complete presentation of Boethius' thought on universals. In four chapters I analyze selected aspects of the problem in Boethius' writings: the notion of universal (Ch. 2), the ontological nature of Boethius' reflections on universals (Ch. 3), relations between the notion of the universal and the notion of individual (Ch. 4) and Boethius' various accounts of our general

knowledge and concept formation (Ch. 8). In these chapters I present several features of Boethius' works, that hitherto have gone pretty much unnoticed by modern scholars. I discuss the way in which Boethius is using the term *universalia*, pointing to the fact, that it is specifically used to describe the five predicables of the "Isagoge" (and not, as it is frequently assumed, the universal entities), and that in this usage we find an important mixture of ontological, semantic and logical elements. I also show how this notion of *universalia* could have influenced later medieval debates. Furthermore, I point to the fact, that Boethius uses more than just one term for universals - among which one needs especially to distinguish between the usage of *universale* and the usage of *commune*.

In the analysis of the ontological aspect of Boethius' doctrine I pay close attention to the language he is using - the notions of a real order of universals, hierarchy, "natural" relations of generation between them. It is interesting to note that the strongly realistic twist of his thought is less visible in his explicit philosophical statements than in his terminology and the quasi-metaphorical language. It is likely that this kind of language could have had a far more important influence on the realistic currents of medieval philosophy, and also one that was more difficult to abandon than Boethius' actual philosophical statements.

While discussing the notion of individuality, I try to explain how Boethius' realistic conception of universals, and also certain aspects of his notion of being, lead him to a virtual negation of the ontological distinctness of the individual. In this way I try to expand and supplement analyses of the notion of individuality in Boethius given by J. Gracia in his monograph on the problem of individuation in Early Middle Ages (1978).

Boethius' approach to the problem of universals itself is analyzed in three further chapters (Ch. 5-7). It is quite easily seen that in many texts devoted to the problem of universals Boethius gives answers that are diverse and hardly consistent, at least at their face value. Being aware, that he should not be conceived as a systematic and consistent thinker, I have chosen not to discuss only one position, eventually picked out as definitive or most important, but to present all of the positions present in Boethius' work. They can be divided into three currents - the exaggerated immanent realism (Ch. 5), the moderate realism (Ch. 6), and the Platonic realism (Ch. 7).

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This brings us to the second aim of the book which consists in distinguishing Boethius' most important position and determining its historical importance. It is carried out mainly in the final chapter (Ch. 9), although much of the preparatory interpretation is made in chapter 6, which is devoted to moderate realism.

Moderate realism is precisely the position that in my opinion should be conceived as the most important - in terms of historical importance - and also the most sophisticated of Boethius' answers to the problem. Boethius took up the question of universals in many passages and his answers are not very consistent. However of all those various positions, it is moderate realism that stands out as the most likely candidate for Boethius' original and important contribution to the development of the debate on universals.

One can suppose that it has been also his favorite one, since he has appealed to it in two of his most important analyses of the problem - namely the two passages discussing Porphyry's questions in the commentaries on the "Isagoge". However, given the unsystematic character of Boethius' thought, these remarks must remain nothing but speculations. To make my case stronger, I try to show that main elements of his moderate realism can be traced in other passages of the commentaries, as well as in other texts - as diverse as "De consolatione" and "De Trinitate" (see Chs. 6 and 7). We find in Boethius two crucial elements of moderate realism (as defined above) - the thesis about the existence of singular universal (tropes), and the rejection of the "principle of correspondence".

The most important conclusion of my thesis is that Boethius should be conceived not only as an important representative of the moderate realism, but also as the true founder of the position. The usual view that moderate realism begins either with Aristotle or with another ancient philosopher, Alexander of Aphrodisias, is based on misunderstandings about the nature of moderate realism, as well as on dubious interpretations of the texts by these authors. In Aristotle we do not find any rejection of the "principle of correspondence" (except maybe for some cryptic remarks in *Met.* M.10). Alexander, with his distinction between definability and ontological universality, was close to rejecting the principle but it seems that that he did not take that step and that he was not fully aware of the importance of it. Apart from this, those two authors do not seem to be opposed to the ontological universality of universals as strongly as Boethius has done in his second commentary on the "Isagoge".

In final chapters of my thesis I defend the conclusion that Boethius was the first thinker ever to propound moderate realism. I also try to show that the evidence usually used to present to Aristotle and Alexander as moderate realists is misleading or indecisive.