

The Problem of Universals

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Boethius Against Real Universals

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10. But Porphyry remembered that he was writing an introduction, and he does not depart from the form of treatment which is the manner of instruction. He says in fact that *he abstains from the knots of the more lofty questions, but resolves the simple ones with ordinary interpretation*. Moreover he sets down what the more lofty questions are which he promises to put aside, thus:

At present, he says, I shall refuse to say concerning genera and species whether they subsist or whether they are placed in the naked understandings alone or whether subsisting they are corporeal or incorporeal, and whether they are separated from sensibles or placed in sensibles and in accord with them. Questions of this sort are most exalted business and require very great diligence of inquiry.

I pass over, he says, the more lofty questions, lest by pouring them intemperately into the mind of the reader I disturb his beginnings and first efforts. But lest he should make the reader wholly negligent, and lest the reader think that nothing more is hidden than what he had said, he adds the very thing whose question he promised he would put off pursuing, that he might spread no confusion before the reader by treating of these things obscurely and completely, and yet that the reader, strengthened by knowledge, might recognize what could be inquired into rightly. The questions, however, concerning which he promises to be silent are extremely useful and secret and have been tried by wise men but have not been solved by many. The first of them is of this sort. The mind, whatever it understands, either conceives by understanding and describes to itself by reason that which is established in the nature of things, or else depicts to itself in vacant imagination that which is not. It is inquired therefore of which sort the understanding of genus and of the rest is: whether we understand species and genera as we understand things which are and from which we derive a true understanding, or whether we deceive ourselves, since we form for ourselves, by the empty cogitation of the mind, things which are not. But even if it should be established that they are, and if we should say that the understanding of them is conceived from things which are,

then another greater, and more difficult question would occasion doubt, since the most grave difficulty is revealed in distinguishing and understanding the nature of genus itself. For since it is necessary that everything which is, be either corporeal or incorporeal, genus and species will have to be in one of these. Of what sort then will that which is called genus be, corporeal or incorporeal? Nor in fact can attention be turned seriously to what it is, unless it is known in which of these classes it must be placed. But even when this question has been solved, all ambiguity will not be avoided. For there remains something which, should genus and species be called incorporeal, besets the understanding and detains it, demanding that it be resolved, to wit, whether they subsist in bodies themselves, or whether they seem to be incorporeal subsistences beyond bodies. Of course, there are two forms of the incorporeal, so that some things can be outside bodies and perdure in their incorporeality separated from bodies, as God, mind, soul; but others, although they are incorporeal, nevertheless can not be apart from bodies, as line, or surface, or number, or particular qualities, which, although we pronounce them to be incorporeal because they are not at all extended in three dimensions, nevertheless are in bodies in such fashion that they can not be torn from them or separated, or if they have been separated from bodies, they in no manner continue to be. These questions although they are difficult, to the point that even Porphyry for the time refused to solve them, I shall nevertheless take up, that I may neither leave the mind of the reader uneasy, nor myself consume time and energy in these things which are outside the sequence of the task I have undertaken. First of all I shall state a few things concerning the ambiguity of the question, and then I shall attempt to remove and untie that knot of doubt.

Genera and species either are and subsist or are formed by the understanding and thought alone. But genera and species can not be. This moreover is understood from the following considerations. For anything that is common at one time to many can not be one; indeed, that which is common is of many, particularly when one and the same thing is completely in many things at one time. Howsoever many species indeed there are, there is one genus in them all, not that the individual species share, as it were, some part of it, but each of them has at one time the whole genus. It follows from this that the whole genus, placed at one time in many individuals, can not be one; nor in fact can it happen that, since it is wholly in many at one time, it be one in number in itself. But if this is so, no genus can possibly be one, from which it follows that it is absolutely nothing; for everything which is, is because it is one. And the same thing may properly be said of species. Yet if there are genus and species, but they are multiplex and not one in number, there will be no last genus, but it will have some other genus superposed on it, which would include that multiplicity in the word of its single name. For as the genera of many animals are sought for the following reason, that they have something similar, yet are not the same, so too, since the genus, which is in many and is therefore multiplex, has the likeness of itself, which is the genus, but is not one, because it is in many, another genus of this genus must likewise be looked for, and when that has been found, for the reason which has been mentioned above, still a third genus is to be sought out. And so reason must proceed *in infinitum*, since no end of the process occurs. But if any genus is one in number, it can not possibly be common to many. For a single thing, if it is common, is common by parts, and then it is not common as a whole, but the parts of it are proper to individual things, or else it passes at different times into the use of those having it, so that it is common as a servant or a horse is; or else it is made common to all at one time, not however that it constitute the substance of those to which it is common, but like some theatre or spectacle, which is common to all who look on. But genus can be common to the species according to none of these modes; for it must be common

in such fashion that it is in the individuals wholly and at one time, and that it is able to constitute and form the substance of those things to which it is common. For this reason, if it is neither one, because it is common, nor many, because still another genus must be sought for that multitude, it will be seen that genus absolutely is not, and the same conclusion must be applied to the others. But if genera and species and the others are grasped only by understandings, since every idea is made either from the subject thing as the thing is constituted itself or as the thing is not constituted – for an idea can not be made from no subject – if the idea of genus and species and the others comes from the subject thing as the thing itself is constituted which is understood, then they are not only placed in the understanding but are placed also in the truth of things. And again it must be sought out what their nature is which the previous question investigated. But if the idea of genus and the rest is taken from the thing not as the thing is constituted which is subject to the idea, the idea must necessarily be vain, which is taken from the thing but not as the thing is constituted; for that is false which is understood otherwise than the thing is. Thus, therefore, since genus and species neither are, nor, when they are understood, is the idea of them true, it is not uncertain that all this must be set forth relative to the care which is needed for investigating concerning the five predicables aforementioned, seeing that the inquiry is neither concerning the thing which is, nor concerning that of which something true can be understood or adduced.

11. This for the present is the question with regard to the aforementioned predicables, which we solve, in accord with Alexander, by the following reasoning. We say that it is not necessary that every idea which is formed from a subject but not as the subject itself is constituted, seem false and empty. For false opinion, but not understanding, is in only those ideas which are made by composition. For if any one composes and joins by the understanding that which nature does not suffer to be joined, no one is unaware that that is false, as would be the case should one join by the imagination horse and man and construct a centaur. But if it be done by division and by abstraction, the thing would not be constituted as the idea is, yet for all that, the idea is still not in the least false; for there are many things which have their being in others, from which either they can not at all be separated, or if they should be separated they subsist by no reason. And in order that this be shown to us in a well known example, the line is something in a body, and it owes to the body that which it is, namely, it retains its being through body. Which is shown thus: if it should be separated from body, it does not subsist; for who ever perceived with any sense a line separated from body? But when the mind receives from the senses things confused and intermingled with each other, it distinguishes them by its own power and thought. For sense transmits to us, besides bodies themselves, all incorporeal things of this sort which have their being in bodies, but the mind which has the power to compound that which is disjoined and to resolve that which is composite, so distinguishes the things which are transmitted by the senses, confused with and joined to bodies, that it may contemplate and see the incorporeal nature in itself and without the bodies in which it is concrete. For the characteristics of incorporeal things mixed with bodies are diverse even when they are separated from body. Genera therefore and species and the others are found either in incorporeal things or in those which are corporeal. And if the mind finds them in incorporeal things, it has in that instance an incorporeal understanding of a genus, but if it has perceived the genera and species of corporeal things, it bears off, as is its wont, the nature of incorporeals from bodies, and beholds it alone and pure as the form itself is in itself. So when the mind receives these incorporeals intermixed with bodies, separating them, it looks upon them and contemplates them. No one,

therefore, may say that we think about the line falsely because we seize it by the mind as if it were outside bodies, since it can not be outside bodies. For not every idea which is taken from subject things otherwise than the things are themselves constituted, must be considered to be false, but, as has been said above, that only is false which does this by composition, as when one thinks, joining man and horse, that there is a centaur; but that which accomplishes it by divisions, and abstractions, and assumptions from the things in which they are, not only is not false, but it alone can discover that which is true with respect to the characteristic of the thing. Things of this sort therefore are in corporeal and sensible things, but they are understood without sensible things, in order that their nature can be perceived and their characteristic comprehended. Since genera and species are thought, therefore their likeness is gathered from the individuals in which they are, as the likeness of humanity is gathered from individual men unlike each other, which likeness conceived by the mind and perceived truly is made the species; again when the likeness of these diverse species is considered, which can not be except in the species themselves or in the individuals of the species, it forms the genus. Consequently, genera and species are in individuals, but they are thought universals; and species must be considered to be nothing other than the thought collected from the substantial likeness of individuals unlike in number, and genus the thought collected from the likeness of species. But this likeness when it is in individual things is made sensible, when it is in universals it is made intelligible; and in the same way when it is sensible, it remains in individuals, when it is understood, it is made universal. Therefore, they subsist in sensibles, but they are understood without bodies. For there is nothing to prevent two things which are in the same subject from being different in reason, like a concave and a convex line, which things, although they are defined by diverse definitions and although the understanding of them is diverse, are nevertheless always found in the same subject; for it is the same line which is convex and concave. So too for genera and species, that is, for singularity and universality, there is only one subject, but it is universal in one manner when it is thought, and singular in another when it is perceived in those things in which it has its being.

Once these distinctions are made, therefore, the whole question, I believe, is solved. For genera and species subsist in one manner, but are understood in another; and they are incorporeal, but they subsist in sensible things joined to sensible things. They are understood, to be sure, as subsisting through themselves and not as having their being in others. Plato, however, thinks that genera, and species, and the rest not only are understood as universals, but also are and subsist without bodies; whereas Aristotle thinks that they are understood as incorporeal and universal, but subsist in sensibles; we have not considered it proper to determine between their opinions, for that is of more lofty philosophy. But we have followed out the opinion of Aristotle very diligently for this reason, not in the least because we approved of it, but because this book has been written for the *Categories*, of which Aristotle is the author.