

Boethius against Universals: The Arguments in the *Second Commentary on Porphyry*

Paul Vincent Spade
Indiana University

I

Apart from his *Consolation of Philosophy*, perhaps the most well known text of Boethius is his discussion of universals in the *Second Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*.¹ In that passage, he first reviews the arguments for and against the existence of universal entities, and then offers a theory he attributes to Alexander of Aphrodisias, a kind of theory called in recent times “moderate realism,” according to which there are no universal entities in the ontology of the world, but nevertheless there is an objective, non-arbitrary basis for the formation of our universal or general concepts about that world. At the very end of the passage, Boethius adds the intriguing comment that he has presented this view not necessarily because it is his own, but because it is the one that fits Aristotle’s

¹ For a few treatments of this passage in the secondary literature, see Meyrick H. Carré, *Realists and Nominalists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 32–40; Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 98–100; Peter King, *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals*, 2 vols., Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1982 (DUI 8220415), at vol. 1, pp. 31–55; John Marenbon, *Early Medieval Philosophy (480–1150): An Introduction*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 31; Ralph M. McInerny, *Philosophy from St. Augustine to Ockham*, (“A History of Western Philosophy,” vol. 2; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), pp. 64–70; Paul Vincent Spade, *A Survey of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Version 2.0 (August 29, 1985) (available for downloading at <http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/boethius.pdf>, vol. 1, Ch. 23; Martin M. Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals*, (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976), Ch. 2 (pp. 53–88); Julius R. Weinberg, *A Short History of Medieval Philosophy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 60 (brief mention only). Translations of the passage may be found in Richard McKeon, ed. & trans., *Selections from Medieval Philosophers*, 2 vols., (New York: Scribner’s, 1929), at vol. 1: *Augustine to Albert the Great*, pp. 81–99; King, vol. 2, pp. 117*–121*; Spade, *Survey*, vol. 2, Text 5; and Paul Vincent Spade, ed. & trans., *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 20–25.

doctrine the best, and Porphyry's *Isagoge*, the work Boethius is commenting on, is intended after all as an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*.²

There are many interesting things about this passage, not the least of which is that it is an early example of a form that would later be codified in the scholastic *quaestio*: a yes/no question is stated (or in general some question expressed in terms of an exclusive dichotomy), then arguments are presented on both sides, *pro* and *con*, the author gives his own answer to the question, and finally (although this part of what would become the classic form is missing from Boethius' discussion) the arguments for the losing side of the question are answered.

I do not intend to discuss the whole of Boethius' passage in this paper, and in fact will not even be saying very much about Boethius' own theory of universals in the passage — if indeed it contains his own theory. What I want to focus on instead is just one part of the discussion's *quaestio* structure: the preliminary statement of the case against universals. I have included the Latin text in [Appendix 1](#), below.

For purposes of reference, I have divided the Latin into five sections: First (section A) there is the general statement of the question in § (10).³ Then (section B), as part of the case against universals, there is the argument in §§ (11)–(12). Third (section C), there is another and quite odd argument in § (13). Just how this latter argument is related to the rest of the passage is a delicate matter, and is one of the things I want to discuss in this paper. Then, fourth (section D), there is the very interesting discussion in §§ (14)–(18), where Boethius describes the way in which a universal is supposed to be — and, if the argument in the passage as a whole is correct, *cannot* be — “common to many.” And then, fifth and finally (section E), there is what appears to be a kind of summary and conclusion in § (19).

There are several things I want to discuss about these paragraphs: First, I want to make some observations about the source for Boethius' description in section D, §§ (14)–(18). Second (although I will save most of what I want to say on this topic until the end of the paper), I want to say some things about the structure of the overall passage, how the various sections I have distinguished are related to one another. Third, I want to look at a peculiar “infinite regress” argument in the middle of the passage, section C, § (13). This infinite regress argument is one of the main things I want to focus on in this paper.

The discussion in § (13), it seems to me, is an extremely puzzling one, both from the point of view of what it is doing in the passage as a whole, and

² See *ibid.*, p. 25, § (37).

³ The paragraph numbers are taken from *ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

from the point of view of what the actual argument in the paragraph is. Curiously, although Boethius' treatment of universals in his *Commentary* is discussed often in surveys and secondary literature, this infinite regress argument is almost always passed over cursorily if not ignored entirely. In fact, I know of only one published account of it that is anything more than perfunctory, in Martin Tweedale's *Abailard on Universals*.⁴ There are, however, at least two other treatments in "unofficial" circulation, by which I mean that they have not been published by a commercial or university press. One is an interpretation I presented in my *A Survey of Mediaeval Philosophy*,⁵ a collection of lecture notes and course materials I have circulated privately. The other is in Peter King's Ph.D. dissertation, where he discusses Boethius as a preliminary to Abailard.⁶ King's understanding of the passage is quite close to Tweedale's, although it is developed in more detail, particularly on the question how the argument in § (13) fits into the structure of the passage as a whole. I am not entirely happy with any of these three accounts, including my own, and therefore want to look at the whole passage again.

II

To begin with, however, let me deal with the first item on the agenda I just listed: section D of the text, §§ (14)–(18). There Boethius states what it would take to be a "universal" in the sense he is discussing. A universal, he says, would have to be, first, "common" *as a whole* to the various things it is said to be common to, not shared part by part like, say, a pie. Second, it has to be "common" as a whole *at the same time* to those things; a universal is not a kind of metaphysical "hand-me-down" that passes as a whole, to be sure, into the possession of several individuals, but only one after another. And third, it has to be "common" to those things as a whole and at the same time in some appropriate *metaphysically constitutive* way, not in the purely "external" way we might all be said to witness some event in common, as a whole and at the same time. (Boethius in fact says a universal must be "able to constitute and form the *substance* of what it is common to" — § (18). But presumably his account is meant to be generalizable to universals in other Aristotelian categories besides substance.) This third requirement, of course, metaphysical "constitutiveness," demands a lot more explanation than is given anywhere in Boethius' discussion.

These paragraphs are an admirable attempt to define the notion of a universal. All too often, philosophers argue about universals without ever stopping

⁴ Tweedale, pp. 75–77.

⁵ See the references in n. 1 above.

⁶ King, pp. 45–47.

to specify exactly what it is they are talking about, as though it were something plain and obvious and agreed upon by everyone. In fact of course, it is nothing of the kind. Boethius' description is clear (although the last clause does require more work) and, while it was not the only notion of a universal in circulation in the Middle Ages,⁷ it was certainly an extremely influential account.

Nevertheless, as it turns out, Boethius' description is not altogether original with him. It seems to have gone previously unremarked in the secondary literature that he got the various parts of his description from Porphyry. Not from Porphyry's *Isagoge*, but from his *Exposition of Aristotle's Categories by Question and Answer*. I have given you the Greek text and a translation in [Appendix 2](#) below.⁸

To be fair to Boethius, he is still as far as I know the first person to apply considerations of the kind we see in section D to the problem of universals. Nevertheless, the actual content of his three-part description seems definitely to have been derived from Porphyry.

In the very first lines of the *Categories*, Aristotle says that "equivocals" or "homonyms" are things that have a name in common, but the definition of that name they do not have in common.⁹ In the passage from Porphyry's *Exposition*, the "questioner" asks what the word 'common' means there in Aristotle's statement. But first, he says, "tell me in how many ways 'common' is said." What we get in Porphyry then is a kind of catalogue of the various senses of the word 'common'. Then the text goes on to ask which of those senses is the one Aristotle is using in those opening lines of the *Categories*.

Of course this is quite a different kind of context from the problem of universals. Porphyry and Aristotle are here talking about having a *name* in common, not about having some sort of universal *entity* in common. It remains, true, as I just said, that Boethius seems to have been the first to apply Porphyry's distinctions explicitly to the problem of universals.

Porphyry in fact gives four senses in which things can be "common." First, he says, "that is called 'common' which is divided into parts, like a loaf [of bread], and wine if it is one of [the things that] are divided."¹⁰ Note that this is exactly what Boethius is talking about in § (15), being "common" part by part, as a pie is "shared" by all those who take a slice. Universals, if there are any, are not common in that way.

⁷ There was also Aristotle's definition in *De interpretatione* 7 17^a39–40, that a universal is "what is apt to be *predicated of many*."

⁸ For an alternative translation, see Porphyry, *On Aristotle's Categories*, Steven K. Strange, trans., (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 41–42.

⁹ *Categories* 1 1^a1–2.

¹⁰ On this last clause, see [n. 35](#) below.

Second, Porphyry says, “That is called ‘common’ which is not divided into parts but is received by many for [their] use, like a horse or a slave [that is] common to many brothers.” The examples, a horse and a slave, are exactly the same as those Boethius uses for his own second way of being “common,” in § (16).

At first, perhaps, it does not appear that Porphyry’s second sense has anything to do with possessing something at different times, as Boethius’ second sense does. It would seem that all Porphyry is talking about is something like the legal notion of “joint ownership.” But the word I have translated here as ‘received’ is the Greek παραλαμβάνομενον, a word often used in the context of inheritance, so that whatever Porphyry himself may have meant, the notion of temporal succession could easily have been suggested to Boethius.

Oddly, Boethius omits Porphyry’s third sense of being “common.” In this third sense, Porphyry says, “that is called ‘common’ which is in someone’s possession beforehand and, after being used, is returned to common [ownership].” This is perhaps not altogether clear. In Porphyry’s second sense, as we have seen, what is “common” is passed from one individual to another, like for instance an inheritance, whereas in his third sense the predominant notion seems to be one of “joint or common ownership,” to be distinguished from actual possession and use. He gives the examples of the public baths and the theater or assembly. The idea seems to be this: even if no one is actually using the public baths at a given time, they are still “common” — they are still public. And the public theater belongs to everyone, even if no one is actually there at the moment. On the other hand, if no one person actually has possession of a slave at a given time (one of the examples both Porphyry and Boethius give of the second sense), then he or she is simply not a slave then, and certainly not a slave “in common.”

The case is perhaps a little hard to make out convincingly. It is easy, for example, to suppose a slave owned by a whole family, rather than by any one individual in the family. In any event, the distinction Porphyry seems to have in mind between his second and third senses of being “common” is that in the second sense what is received is received from another individual rather than from the “common store,” whereas the third sense allows the latter possibility as well.

The distinction is nuanced and not altogether certain, which is perhaps why Boethius ignores it and reduces Porphyry’s four senses to three.

Porphyry’s fourth and last sense once again uses the example of the theater or assembly. This is confusing, to be sure, since he had just used the very same example for his third sense.¹¹ But in any case, in his fourth sense, “that is

¹¹ Perhaps the distinction is between the theater or assembly as a *building* and the theater or assembly as an *event*, what takes place in the building.

called ‘common’ which, as a whole, comes undividedly into the use of many simultaneously.” And, with the same example of the theater — or as Boethius puts it, a “stage-play, or some spectacle” — this is exactly Boethius’ third way of being “common” without being a universal (§ (17)).

The upshot, then, is that this well known passage from Boethius is not altogether original with him, although he does seem to have been the first to apply these distinctions to the problem of universals, and to make the point that a universal is not supposed to be common in any of these ways.

III

Let us now look briefly at the argument in §§ (11)–(12) — section B — of the passage from Boethius, in order to fix the context for the infinite regress argument in § (13), which is the main thing I want to focus on.

Paragraph (11) begins by stating the conclusion of the argument, that “genera and species cannot exist.” Why not? Because, Boethius says, “everything that is common to several things at one time cannot be one.” He goes on to say this is especially so ‘when one and the same thing is *as a whole* in many things *at one time*.’ Note that this explicitly captures the first two of the three clauses of § (18), where Boethius lists the requirements for being a universal.

So in effect § (11) argues that the plurality of things to which a universal is supposed to be common is somehow “contagious” and “infects” the universal itself, making it plural too, and so not “one.” Paragraph (12) then draws the consequence from this: A universal “is nothing at all. For everything that exists exists for the reason that it is one.”

The two operative assumptions in this section, then, are (i) the “convertibility” of being and unity, and (ii) the view (not further explained anywhere in the entire passage) that plurality is “contagious” in the sense just described.

IV

We now turn to § (13), where we get the infinite regress argument. “But even if genus and species do exist,” the paragraph begins, “but are multiple and *not* one in number, there will be no last genus. It will have another genus placed above it.” Then he goes on to give an example in terms of the genus *animal*, and argues somehow that there would be an infinite regress of ever higher genera. Presumably this is supposed to be an unacceptable result, so that the argument amounts to a *reductio*.

“Boethius against Universals: The Arguments in the *Second Commentary on Porphyry*” by Paul Vincent Spade is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Notice something already. What is the unacceptable conclusion this argument is trying to derive? That “there will be no last genus.” Now even though no one I know of has ever interpreted the passage this way, the phrase ‘last genus’ certainly suggests the interpretation “highest genus,” a “most general genus” or category, so that the argument would then be that the existence of universals that “are multiple and not one in number” would violate the Aristotelian theory of the categories. Surely the argument in the rest of the paragraph doesn’t suggest this is what is going on at all, but the claim ‘there will be no last genus’, taken by itself, certainly sounds like it.

Tweedale, King and I, all of whom have written about this argument, have in effect all taken it for granted that this is not what is going on. In fact, both King and I, when we paraphrase the argument, cast it not in terms of the genus ‘animal’, as Boethius himself had done, but in terms of the species ‘man’ or ‘humanity’.¹² It is as if we are tacitly assuming that the fact that Boethius puts his example in terms of the genus ‘animal’ is purely accidental, and that the argument is meant to apply to any universal, whether a genus, a species or whatever. And indeed, evidence that the discussion throughout this entire passage is meant to be generalizable in this way might be found in the fact that all the other arguments in the passage are put in terms of genus too, and nevertheless at the end of § (12), Boethius says “The same can be said about species.” Again, at the end of the whole passage (§ (19)), he says “And the same is to be understood for the other predicables.”¹³

But if this is so, if there is nothing unusual about genus in this argument, then what are we to make of the very first sentence of § (13): “But even if genus *and species* do exist, but are multiple and not one in number, *there will be no last genus*”? Notice what the sentence does *not* say. It does not say that if genus exists and is multiple, there will be no last genus, and if species exists and is multiple, there will be no last species. Rather, on the most natural reading, in either case, there will be no last *genus*. That is, we will get the same result —no last genus — whether we start the argument by talking about genus or by talking about species. And if it is species we are talking about instead of genus, that result — that “there will be no last genus” — would mean that somewhere in the argument we move from species to genus, and so to something broader than we began with. If that step is repeated as the regress goes on, then the regress is not just a regress of further and further stages, but a regress that involves increasing generality. And

¹² King, p. 45; Spade, *Survey*, Ch. 23.

¹³ Tweedale does not explain the argument in terms of the species ‘man’, but — like Boethius — in terms of the genus ‘animal’ (Tweedale, pp. 75–77). Nevertheless, in Tweedale’s analysis too, there is nothing to suggest that the choice of a genus for the example is anything more than coincidental.

if that's what's going on, then — however the argument works in detail — we do have a regress that would do away with the Aristotelian theory of the categories as “most general genera.”

Nevertheless, it remains true, as we shall see, that the actual argument in the rest of § (13) does not seem to involve any kind of regress to ever-increasing levels of generality, and no one has ever interpreted the argument as if it did.

We are left then with an initial puzzle about § (13): Its first sentence would lead one to expect something quite different from the actual argument given in the paragraph.

V

Let us look again at the argument in § (13). At the beginning of the paragraph, it is hypothesized (for *reductio*) that genus and species exist “but are multiple and not one in number.” King and Tweedale interpret this as the hypothesis that universals are not *numerically* one, in the sense that the previous argument in §§ (11)–(12) has already refuted, but instead “one” only by a kind of looser unity, that universals are in effect “collections.”¹⁴

King points to the *Contra Eutychem* for a clue to what is going on here. There Boethius says “Indeed, what is not one cannot exist at all; *being* and *one* are convertible terms, and whatsoever is one exists.”¹⁵ Here we have a reaffirmation of the convertibility of being and unity that was one of the bases for the earlier argument, in §§ (11)–(12). But then Boethius goes on: “Even those things which are combined from many, as a heap or a chorus, are nevertheless one.”¹⁶ Thus, according to the *Contra Eutychem*, being and unity are convertible, but there are *two* kinds of unity.

The connection the *Commentary on Porphyry* and the *Contra Eutychem* is an intriguing connection to draw, not least because it suggests that the kind of realism Boethius is arguing against in § (13) may be some form of “collective realism,” such as one finds later on at the time of Peter Abelard.¹⁷

On the authority of the *Contra Eutychem*, therefore, anything that exists must have one or the other kind of unity, either numerical unity or at least the looser kind of unity “a heap or a chorus” has. This suggests then that the first argument (the one in §§ (11)–(12)) is directed against a realism that would make

¹⁴ Tweedale, p. 75, puts this in terms of being “‘multiplex’ in the way pairs and triplets are multiplex,” but then goes on to explicate the latter in terms of “collections.”

¹⁵ King’s translation, p. 40. He is quoting Boethius, *Contra Eutychem* IV.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ On “collective realism,” see King, Ch. 8 (= pp.187–214).

universals numerically one, while the infinite regress argument in § (13) is directed against various kinds of “collective realism.”

I think this reading is a very attractive way of looking at the text. Nevertheless, some *caveats* should be noted. First of all, while the connection with “collective realism” is an appealing interpretive conjecture, it *is* a conjecture. Paragraph (13) makes no mention of “collections,” or of heaps or choruses, and conversely the *Contra Eutychen* does not in the relevant passage use the characteristic term ‘multiplex’ or ‘multiple’ that runs all through the argument in § (13). So the link is at best surmised, not explicit in the text.

Second, there is a very good reason to be hesitant about looking too much to the *Contra Eutychen* for help in interpreting the *Second Commentary on Porphyry*. For in a well-known passage in the *Contra Eutychen*, Boethius tells us how to translate certain Greek philosophical terms. He says¹⁸:

For what the Greeks call οὐσίωσις or οὐσιῶσθαι, that we call “subsistence” or “to subsist.” But what they call ὑπόστασις or ὑφίστασθαι, that we translate as “substance” or “to substand.”

Yet in his translation of Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, when Boethius gets to the first of Porphyry’s three famous questions about universals, which he translates as “whether [genera and species] *subsist* or are posited in bare understandings only”¹⁹ — the very passage being commented on in the text we are considering in this argument — the word he translates as ‘subsist’ is a form of ὑφίστασθαι, not of οὐσιῶσθαι, just the reverse of the translation-policy announced in the *Contra Eutychen*. Whether this represent some conscious theoretical change-of-mind on Boethius’ part, or whether it is merely an indication of sloppiness or whatever, I do not know. But it does suggest that one should not to rely too heavily on the *Contra Eutychen* in interpreting the *Second Commentary on Porphyry*.²⁰

VI

Still, if the hypothesis that genus and species exist “but are multiple and not one in number” doesn’t mean they are “collections,” what might it mean in-

¹⁸ *Contra Eutychen* III.

¹⁹ Spade, *Five Texts*, p. 20, § (1).

²⁰ Note that the *Contra Eutychen* is later than the *Second Commentary*. The latter was written before 510 (see L. M. De Rijk, “On the Chronology of Boethius’ Works on Logic,” *Vivarium* 2 (1964), pp. 1–49, 125–162, at p. 125), while the former was written not before 512 (see John Mair, “The Text of the *Opuscula Sacra*,” in Margaret Gibson, ed., *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), Ch. 8 (= pp. 206–213), at pp. 208–209.

stead? Well, at least one other possibility ought to be considered, if only to see that it is not very plausible.²¹ It is possible to take Boethius here to be referring more or less to the view he himself explains and defends, on the authority of Alexander of Aphrodisias, a little later in his *Commentary*.

There Boethius says “these things [genus and species] exist in singulars, but are thought of as universals.”²² Socrates and Plato, then, each has his own humanity and his own animality, so that there are *two* humanities and *two* animalities there. They are, in an obvious sense, “multiple and not one in number.” Nevertheless, through a process of abstraction, or what Boethius sometimes called “division,” the mind views these numerically distinct humanities as one universal thing, and so too for animalities at the level of genus.

There are notorious — and, I think, frankly insuperable — difficulties with such an “abstraction” theory, what is sometimes called “moderate realism.” But the success or failure of Boethius’ theory is not the issue here. The point instead is that the theory can be expressed without appealing to collections, without thinking that genus and species are like a “heap” or a “chorus.” Humanity, on this view, is “multiple and not one in number,” and so is animality, but that does not mean they are collections.

So there is a perfectly straightforward way of interpreting the phrase ‘multiple and not one in number’ without turning genera and species into collections. On this interpretation, the phrase in effect means nothing more than that the generic and specific terms it describes are common names. Being a common name is, after all, not the same as being a proper name of a collection.

But if this interpretation of the phrase is reasonable in general, it is not a very plausible one in the present context. First of all, if the view Boethius is hypothesizing at the beginning of § (13) is the one he himself defends a little later in the *Commentary*, according to which genera and species are not numerically one, and not one in the way a collection is one either, then why does this argument appear in the text as part of the case *against* realism? It would seem that the theory the argument is attacking is not a realist theory at all in any metaphysical sense.

Second, if § (13) is addressing the theory Boethius defends later in the *Commentary*, then what is the *answer* to the argument against that theory here? Later on in the text, Boethius presents his theory of abstraction and argues in effect that a basically nominalist metaphysics is not incompatible with a basically realist epistemology, so that to deny the reality of universals in the external

²¹ Plausible or not, I confess that I held it in Spade, *Survey*. For the reasons I am about to give, I no longer hold it and in fact now wonder why I ever did.

²² Spade, *Five Texts*, p. 25, § (31).

world does not threaten the legitimacy of our general knowledge.²³ All that is fine if it works, but it is answering a different question: the epistemological questions posed by a nominalist metaphysics. Nowhere in the text is the argument in § (13) answered.

Does this mean then that Boethius regarded the argument in § (13) as sound, and the theory hypothesized there as refuted? That would be something of an embarrassment if we take that theory to be the one Boethius means to defend!

These difficulties make it unlikely that Boethius has that theory in mind in § (13). And this fact in turn might be taken as negative evidence in favor of reading the argument in terms of collections, as Tweedale and King do. Nevertheless, as we shall see in the last part of this paper, there are considerations that perhaps count against the latter reading.

VII

Let us now look at the actual argument in § (13). In the end, there is not much difference between Tweedale, King and me over how the argument goes, although there are some differences in presentation.

Consider several animals — say, Socrates, Plato and Brunellus the Ass. They are “not the same” (see [Appendix 1 below, line 20](#)), since there are three of them, and yet they have “a certain similar something” ([Appendix 1, lines 19–20](#)) — Socrates’ animality, Plato’s animality and Brunellus’ animality, let us say. “*For that reason*” ([line 20](#)) we look for their genus. That is to say, likeness is a matter of falling under the same universal, in this case a genus.²⁴

But the genus itself, by the hypothesis of § (13), is just as “multiple” as our three animals were to begin with. That is, Socrates’ animality, Plato’s animality and Brunellus’ animality are three animalities that are “not the same,” just as Socrates, Plato and Brunellus themselves were three animals that were not the same. But these three animalities are alike in being animalities, and therefore they too “have a certain similar something,” so that we must look for their genus in turn. And off we go on our regress.

King and Tweedale put the regress in terms of “collections”: Individuals are alike; likeness implies sharing somehow the same universal; and universals are thought of as “collections” of their individual instances. And while we have seen that this may be the right way to look at it, notice once again that there is really nothing in the text itself that implies collections.

²³ Ibid., pp. 23–25, §§ (23)–(32).

²⁴ Notice how this account takes the fact that it is a *genus* as merely a consequence of the example, not as essential to the argument.

If we do think of the argument in terms of collections, then it is important to note that the regress requires abstract names to get it going, not concrete ones. For example, if we say

Individual animals are alike and so fall under the common genus *animal* (concrete noun), which genus is in turn the collection of all individual animals (concrete noun again)

we are right back where we started, with individual animals, and there is no regress. In order to get a regress, we need to say something like:

Individual animals are alike and so fall under the common genus *animality* (abstract noun), which genus is in turn the collection of all individual animalities (abstract noun again).

Here we have gone up one level of abstraction, from *animal* to *animality*. And since all those animalities are alike too, our infinite regress is under way.

Tweedale was the first to make this point, although he expresses it in somewhat different terms.²⁵

King, Tweedale and I are therefore in substantial agreement about the actual form of the argument in § (13), although the role of collections is perhaps negotiable. In any case, notice that as I remarked earlier,²⁶ on this reading the argument does not proceed in terms of a regress of increasing generality. If there are three animals, then there are three animalities and three of that “similar something” those animalities have — call it “animalityhood” or whatever. And so it goes: three all the way up, never anything more general than that.

If this is indeed the form of the argument (and I do not see any other way to read it), then it is worth noting that the argument relies crucially on the notion of what we might call “higher-order properties.”²⁷ We have not only animals, but

²⁵ Tweedale, p. 75: “In following the reasoning one must be careful to distinguish single items that *make up* the genus in question from the single items that *fall under* it. Individual animals fall under the genus *animal*, but they make it up only if we consider the genus *animal* to be simply the collection of all animals. Since Boethius is thinking of a genus as a collection of single items each of which is ‘in’ an individual animal, it does not appear that he thought of these single items as identical with individual animals.”

²⁶ See pp. 7–8, above.

²⁷ I do not here mean “property” in the technical sense from Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, a real metaphysical characteristic that is not an essential ingredient of the members of a species but nevertheless belongs to all and only the members of that species, as risibility was said to be a “property” of man. I am instead using the term in its modern-day, looser sense in which *any* metaphysical feature of a thing is a “property” of it. There is no good mediaeval word for this.

animalities, and then animalityhoods (as we called them a moment ago), and “animalityhoodships” (or whatever we want to call them²⁸), and so on.

The picture here is one of higher-order properties, not just of higher-order predicates. It is a matter of metaphysics, not just of language. Animals each have some real metaphysical feature, an animality, in virtue of which they are animals. These animalities in turn each have another metaphysical feature, an “animalityhood” we called it, in virtue of which they are animalities, and so on. Animalityhood is a real feature of an animality; indeed, it is what makes it an animality. But it is not a feature of an animal, since an animal is *not* an animality.

Such a picture, involving iterated “properties of properties,” reflects certain recent metaphysical views quite well. But it is not usually part of mediaeval discussions. For example, with respect to the Aristotelian distinction between things “present in” a subject and things “said of” a subject,²⁹ one never finds talk of some things’ being “present in” others that are in turn “present in” yet further things, and so on. And while it is true that *animal* is “said of” *man*, which is in turn “said of” Socrates, it is also true that *animal* is “said of” Socrates,³⁰ whereas on the picture Boethius presents, while higher-order properties can belong to the properties immediately below them, they do *not* belong to the things the latter properties belong to: animalityhood is a feature of animality, but not of any animal.

I find it noteworthy, therefore, that Boethius appeals to such higher-order properties in his infinite regress argument in § (13). Of course that argument, and the higher order properties appealed to in it, are part of a *reductio*, so that Boethius is not committing himself to such a theory. Still, the fact that he even raises it is striking.

VIII

Finally, I said I wanted to say something about the overall structure of the passage from Boethius’ *Second Commentary on Porphyry*, how its various sections hang together. In particular, I want to comment on the odd placement of section D, §§ (14)–(18).

²⁸ Ordinary vocabulary is of course lacking, and the artificial vocabulary becomes increasingly strained as one progresses up the infinite regress to ever higher levels of abstractness.

²⁹ *Categories* 2 1^a20–^b9.

³⁰ Compare *Categories* 3 1^b10–15: “When one thing is predicated of another as of a subject, all that is said of what is predicated is also said of the subject. For example, *man* is predicated of *this man*, but *animal* [is predicated] of *man*. Accordingly, *animal* will also be predicated of *this man*.”

Commentators who have discussed this passage previously, and who have addressed this point, all seem to have agreed in taking section D as a kind of elaboration and filling in of the argument in section B.³¹ In other words, it is as if the overall structure of the passage goes like this: First, we get the statement of the question in section A. Then we get one two-part argument against the reality of universals, in sections B and C. Then, in D, we get an elaboration of the argument back in B. And finally, we sum it all up in section E.

But if D is an elaboration of the argument in B, why is it delayed until after the infinite-regress argument in C, to which it seems to be totally irrelevant?

This odd placement of section D is not all that surprising, of course. Experienced mediaevalists are after all quite used to seeing much stranger arrangements than this in mediaeval arguments. Still, it is worth noting, and makes one wonder whether perhaps there is another way of organizing the passage.

The usual way of organizing it, the one I have just described, is the natural interpretation if we take sections B and C as two parts of a single, two-case argument. This reading is reinforced by King's attractive suggestion linking these passages with the distinction in the *Contra Eutychem* between two kinds of unity, numerical unity and collective unity.

On this reading, the argument in the entire passage — and so Boethius' whole case against universals — depends crucially on the convertibility of being and unity, the first operative assumption listed in section III above. But there are two kinds of unity. Numerical unity is discussed in section B, and collective unity in section C. Then we get a kind of afterthought in section D, and a conclusion in E.

But if one looks at § (11) it is clear that, although numerical unity is indeed explicitly mentioned at the very end of the paragraph, the actual argument in the paragraph is applicable to collective unity as much as to numerical unity. Just as numerically one thing cannot be wholly in two things at once, according to this argument, so too one chorus, let's say, cannot be both wholly in Carnegie Hall and wholly in Yankee Stadium at the same time.

But if the first part of the two-case argument covers both kinds of unity like this, then the argument in section C is unnecessary and the structure of the whole passage becomes all the more mysterious; the argument in section B covers both cases.

I want to suggest an alternative structuring of the passage. Look at the end of § (12), and likewise at the end of § (19). They both look like concluding summaries. Both conclude that genus does not exist, and then go on to say that

³¹ See the references in n. 1 above.

the same thing holds for species (§ (12)), or for “the other predicables” (§ (19)). Both passages, that is, offer a summary and then a generalization.

Now look at the beginning of § (13) and the beginning of § (14): “But if genus and species do exist, but are multiple *and not one in number*” (§ (13)), and “Now if a genus *is one in number*” § (14)). While it is perhaps not fully explicit, this looks very much like a conditional excluded middle — the condition being that genus (or species) does exist.

What I want to suggest then is that in this passage as a whole what we really have is not one two-case argument plus an afterthought, but rather two separate arguments against the reality of universals, the second of which is a two-case argument. The first argument is in section B, and depends on the convertibility of being and unity; it ends in § (12). The second argument, the two-case argument, takes up sections C and D, and does *not* depend on the convertibility of being and unity at all, but only on an excluded middle.

If genus and species are not numerically one, that case is handled by the infinite-regress argument in section C. And note that on this reading there is no longer any special reason to take that argument in terms of collective unity or indeed in terms of *any* kind of unity. In fact, if sections B and C are not two parts of a single, two-case argument, but instead belong to two entirely unrelated arguments, then the passage from *Contra Eutychem* about the two kinds of unity is irrelevant to interpreting the text.

On the other hand, if genus and species *are* numerically one, that case is handled in section D, by an argument that looks very much like the first argument, back in section B, except that it is somewhat more developed and conspicuously makes no mention of the convertibility of being and unity.

There is another reason too why this restructuring of the passage is an appealing one, this time a philosophical reason. For one might well have thought that without the convertibility of being and unity, there simply is no problem of universals. If Socrates’ humanity and Plato’s humanity, which are wholly, at the same time and in the appropriate metaphysically constitutive sense present in Socrates and Plato respectively, can be counted as satisfying Boethius’ three-clause definition of a universal in § (18) even though they are two humanities and not one, then what possible objection can there be to admitting the reality of universals?

But if we read the structure of Boethius’ passage in the way I have indicated, then there is a suggestion in the passage that it is possible to argue against the reality of universals even *without* assuming that every being is one being. For while the first argument, in section B, does assume that, the second argument, the two-case argument in section C–E, conspicuously does not assume it. This second part of the argument, section D, handles the case where a universal is one,

but the first part, in section C, allow the case where it is not. Neither alternative is assumed, and both are covered.

The philosophical assessment of this intriguing suggestion is a topic for another paper.³²

³² Many of the ideas in this paper, particularly those in the last section, about structural matters, were prompted by discussion with Christopher Vaughan. An earlier version of this paper was read at the workshop on Boethius held at The Ohio State University, May 28–29, 1994. I am grateful to the participants in that workshop for their insightful and penetrating comments.

Appendix 1: Boethius' Text³³

Section A	(p. 161.14) (10) Genera et species aut sunt atque subsistunt aut / ¹⁵ intellectu et sola cogitatione formantur,
Section B	(11) sed genera et species esse non possunt. hoc autem ex his intellegitur. omne enim quod commune est uno tempore pluribus, id unum esse non poterit; multorum enim est quod commune est. praesertim cum una eademque res in multis uno tempore tota sit. / ²⁰ quantaecumque enim sunt species, in omnibus genus unum est, non quod de eo singulae species quasi partes aliquas carpant, sed singulae uno tempore totum genus habent. quo fit ut totum genus in pluribus singulis uno tempore positum unum esse non possit; neque enim fieri potest ut, cum in / ²⁵ pluribus totum uno sit tempore, in semet ipso sit unum (p. 162) numero.
5	
10	
15	(12) quod si ita est, unum quiddam genus esse non poterit, quo fit ut omnino nihil sit; omne enim quod est, idcirco est, quia unum est. et de specie idem conuenit dici.
Section C	(13) quodsi est quidem genus ac species, sed multiplex neque unum / ⁵ numero, non erit ultimum genus, sed habebit aliud superpositum genus, quod illam multipliciter unius sui nominis uocabulo includat. ut enim plura animalia, quoniam habent quiddam simile, eadem tamen non sunt, idcirco eorum genera perquiruntur, ita quoque quoniam genus, quod in pluribus est / ¹⁰ atque ideo multiplex, habet sui similitudinem, quod genus est. non est uero unum, quoniam in pluribus est. eius generis quoque genus aliud quaerendum est, cumque fuerit inuentum, eadem ratione quae superius dicta est, rursus genus tertium uestigatur. itaque in infinitum ratio procedat necesse est, cum / ¹⁵ nullus disciplinae terminus occurrat.
20	
25	
Section D	(14) quodsi unum quiddam numero genus est, commune mul-

³³ From *Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii In Isagogen Porphyrii commenta*, Samuel Brandt, ed., ("Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum," Vol. 48; Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1906), pp. 161.14–163.6. I have divided the text into sections in conformity with the discussion above. Paragraph divisions are my own, and are numbered in accordance with the translation in Spade, *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals*, pp. 21–22.

<p>οὕτως γὰρ / διὰ τῆς τοῦ κήρυκος φωνῆς κοινή ἢ χρῆσις τοῖς ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ μὴ διαιρουμένης τῆς εἰς ἐλάχιστα φωνῆς καθ' ἕκαστον τῶν παρόντων. /</p>	<p>25</p>	<p>such a thing. Again in another sense, (4) that is called “common” which, as a whole, comes undividedly into the use of many simultaneously. For in this way, through the voice of the crier, the use [of the theater] is common to those in it, although the voice is not divided up in the least among each of those present.³⁸</p>
<p>Ἐ. Κατὰ ποῖον οὖν σημαινόμενον τὸ κοινὸν εἴληπται; /³⁰</p>	<p>35</p>	<p>[<u>Question:</u>] So in which sense is ‘common’ taken [in Aristotle’s definition]?</p>
<p>Ἄ. Κατὰ τὸ τελευταῖον λέγω, καθ' ὃ κοινή χρῆσις γίνεται ἅμα πολλοῖς / ταύτου ὅλου ἀδιαίρετου μένοντος· ἢ γὰρ Αἴας φωνὴ κοινήν ἔχει χρῆσιν / καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ Ὀϊλέως παιδὸς καὶ τοῦ Τελαμῶνος ὅλη λαμβανομένη καὶ / ἀδιαίρετος μένουσα ἐπ' ἀμφοτέρων. /³⁴</p>	<p>40</p> <p>45</p>	<p>[<u>Answer:</u>] I say [it is] according to the last [sense], according to which there comes to be a use common to many simultaneously, although the same whole remains undivided. For the word ‘Ajax’ is used both for the son of Oileus and for [the son] of Telamon,³⁹ taken as a whole and remaining undivided between the two [of them].</p>

³⁸ The word ‘theater’ means not only a place where drama was performed, but also an “assembly”, where a “crier” made proclamations and kept order.

³⁹ These are called, respectively, Ajax the Less and Ajax the Greater. They are characters from the *Iliad*.