Do Thoughts Have Parts?
Peter Abelard: *Yes!* Alberic of Paris: *No!*

Boaz Faraday Schuman
    Email: boazfs@gmail.com
    ORCID: 0000-0001-5763-8628
    YouTube: youtube.com/@LogicwithBo
    Twitter: twitter.com/MedievalLatin

The Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen

Abstract: Spoken sentences have parts. Therefore they take time to speak. For instance, when you say, "Socrates is running", you begin by uttering the subject term *Socrates*, before carrying on to the predicate. But are the corresponding thoughts also composite? And are such thoughts extended across time, like their spoken counterparts? Peter Abelard gave an affirmative response to both questions. Alberic of Paris denied the first and, as a corollary, denied the second. Here, I first set out Abelard's account. I then present a series of arguments against Abelard, reconstructed from (sometimes fragmentary) manuscripts associated with Alberic's school. I conclude with an observation about present philosophy of language: this twelfth-century debate points to some undefended (and largely unstated) assumptions common to more recent thinking about propositions.

Keywords: Peter Abelard, Alberic of Paris, Gottlob Frege, propositions, mereology.

_____

(All translations are, unless otherwise stated, mine).

Spoken sentences are composite items with multiple proper parts. But what about the thoughts they correspond to: are they also composite? Consider for instance the following:

1) Socrates is running

2) All humans are mortal

An utterance of (1) or (2) has parts. For example, to say (1), you have to utter the subject term *Socrates*, the copula *is*, and the predicate *running*. What's more, any utterance of (1) takes time: one must speak the words of the sentence in a sequence, one after another.

But when you think the thought that corresponds to (1), does that thought have parts too? And, in thinking it, do you similarly go through a successive process of assembling the parts of the thought, one after another? The first question, and the second as its corollary, were a flashpoint in twelfth-century logic. Peter Abelard (1079–1142), answered *Yes* to both questions; Alberic of Paris (fl. ca. 1130–1140) answered *No* to the first, and accordingly denied the second.[1]

Here, I first set out Abelard's position, before turning to criticisms from Alberic and his school (the *Albricani*). I conclude the paper with a discussion of current philosophy of language: this largely forgotten medieval debate highlights some common—and commonly unstated—assumptions in our current thinking about propositions.[2] Nowadays, we often diagram propositions as though they are put together from their constituent meaningful parts, and we tend to speak of this composition as a diachronic string of mental acts. These assumptions and tendencies are much easier to see in light of the medieval debate. And

---

[1] Here, I refer to a view as Alberic's just when it is explicitly attributed to him in one of the texts that survive; otherwise, those views which are consistent with his, and which are expressed in a text sympathetic to him, I refer to as views of the Albricani. None of what Alberic may have written is currently known to have survived, so what we have to go on are testimonia.

[2] To clarify here at the outset: I translate the Latin *propositio* as "sentence", and retain "proposition" for its modern use.

articulating them raises important questions about how our current thinking about propositions can and should be clarified and elaborated.

Here at the outset, some distinctions must be made between compositionality, complexity, and successive composition. By **compositionality**, the meaning and truth value of a thought is a function of the meanings of its constituents—and *only* of its constituents. By **complexity**, thoughts are mereologically complex entities—things, that is, with multiple proper parts. By **successive composition**, thoughts are made up of parts that need to be assembled, and this assembly takes place across time.

These three notions are, *prima facie*, deeply connected. But do they stand and fall together? It is widely held that compositionality entails complexity (Szabó, "Compositionality"). And it may well be that complexity requires successive composition, in the sense that if thoughts are made up of parts, some time-extended assembly is required.

Conversely, successive composition certainly presupposes complexity: if thoughts are successively assembled from their parts, then they just must have parts—that is, they must be mereologically complex wholes. And if it is in their nature to be mereologically complex wholes containing meaningful constituents, then it seems that those constituents must contribute to the overall meaning in some way. Thus complexity provides good (if not conclusive) grounds for compositionality.

Then again, it may be that successive composition does not require full adherence to compositionality, since successive composition, as formulated, does not stop something independent of the composition from also contributing to the meaning of the whole (which would violate compositionality's *only*-clause). Maybe we can also endorse complexity without endorsing successive composition: from the fact that something has parts, it does not follow that it has to be assembled successively. And recently, Keller ("Does Compositionality

Entail Complexity?") has argued—quite persuasively, I think—that compositionality neither proves complexity, nor even provides solid evidence for it. So the *prima facie* relationships between the three may well come apart. For good measure, I will keep them all distinct, in order to make clear which aspect of Abelard's thought is under attack from Alberic and his followers.

Our technical terms here are few. For the most part, they come from a key passage of Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* 1 (16ᵃ3–6), in Boethius' Latin translation:

> Those things, therefore, that exist in speech (*vox*) are signs of affections (*passiones*) that are in the mind, and the things that are written are signs of those that exist in speech. And just as writing is not the same for all people, so too neither is speech. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the mind—are the same for all people.[3]

In what follows, we are chiefly concerned with spoken sounds, and with the affections of the mind, of which they are signs. In particular, we will be looking at a subclass of these affections, which twelfth-century thinkers call thoughts (*intellectus*). Since so much of what the Albricani have to say is in response to Abelard, let's begin with him.

Abelard's Thoughts

First of all, a word on my methods and goals: in what follows, I interpret Abelard in a way that: (a) is consistent with what he has written, (b) is consistent with what his modern

---

[3] "Sunt ergo ea quae sunt in voce earum quae sunt in anima passionum notae, et ea quae scribuntur eorum quae sunt in voce. Et quemadmodum nec litterae omnibus eaedem, sic nec eaedem voces; quorum autem hae primorum notae, eaedem omnibus passiones animae sunt."

I am here relying on the Aristoteles Latinus, and not the Greek, because the former and not the latter was what the thinkers under discussion here were, themselves, reading.

commentators have to say about what he has written, and (c) makes the most sense of what critics in his day have to say about his views.

Granted, there is some tension between (b) and (c): for instance in some twelfth-century debates, there is evidence that Abelard's critics have straw-manned him, or at least left out key aspects of his thought. On the other hand, Abelard is undoubtedly a genius and a magnetic character, who rightly has some keen defenders among the living. Here, I try to take the middle way between the groups in (b) and (c): my primary aim is to understand the twelfth-century debate, not to defend Abelard from criticism.[4]

To that end, my purpose in this section is to establish two things about three claims. The two things are (i) that Abelard holds the claims in question to be true, and (ii) that Abelard's modern commentators also hold that Abelard holds these claims. It will then follow that the Albrican criticisms of these claims are not attacks on a straw man, and that their arguments—to the extent that they have bite—are interesting and good. The Abelardian claims are:

I. **Complexity**: thoughts that correspond to spoken words (*dictiones*) are simple, whereas thoughts that correspond to spoken phrases (*orationes*) are composite;

II. **Successive Composition**: the assembly of these simple thoughts into a composite thought takes place over time; and,

III. **Symmetry**: Claims I and II apply both to thoughts in the speaker and to thoughts in the listener.

---

[4] Of course, criticism can be fair or unfair, and fairness comes in degrees. Perhaps there is a way of interpreting Abelard that is both consistent with what survives in the texts and also heads off all the criticisms of the Albricani that we're about to see. But unless the Albrican reconstruction of Abelard's view contradicts—directly or indirectly—something explicitly written by Abelard, I take what the Albricani say about it to be a plausible interpretation of his thought. Accordingly, I do not seek to defend Abelard here on the grounds that he did not explicitly make this or that claim attributed to him by his contemporaries, when the claim itself is otherwise consistent with our record of what he *did* say. And anyway, it's good to keep in mind that Abelard must have said many more things in classrooms and in debates with his contemporaries than he actually wrote down.

As we've seen, Claim II implies Claim I, but not vice-versa. What's the need for Claim III? In order to make sense of the criticisms lodged against Abelard by the Albricani, it will also have to be shown that Claims I–II apply to thoughts in general—that is, to the thoughts in both the speaker and the listener.[5]

Abelard is happy to treat spoken language as a guide to the structure of thought. Thus in his discussion of the composition of thoughts in the *Tractatus de Intellectibus* (henceforth *TI*), he tells us that:

> The nature of thoughts is like that of the utterances (*sermones*) which prompt them. Now some utterances are simple—namely, words (*dictiones*) considered in isolation. Others are composite—namely, phrases (*orationes*), which have to be constructed out of multiple words. These words nevertheless retain their proper signification within phrases. And likewise, also, thoughts that are obtained from utterances, or which should be obtained in accordance with their construction, are sometimes simple—namely, those thoughts that are obtained from simple utterances—and sometimes complex—as are those which are obtained from complex utterances.[6]

We find complexity in spoken phrases (*sermones* or *orationes*) like "Socrates is running". These are built up out of simple words (*dictiones*) like *Socrates* and *running*. In like manner, there is complexity in the corresponding thoughts, which are built up from the simple thoughts which correspond to words. That's Claim I, straight from the horse's mouth.

---

[5] Different authorities tend to emphasise either the side of the speaker (Priscian) or that of the listener (Boethius). Lenz (in "Are Thoughts and Sentences Compositional?") has examined these, in connection with Abelard (who is more Boethian) and H15, whose author hews more closely to Priscian. Here, I am content merely to show that, even if Abelard emphasises the side of the speaker, it still must be that the thoughts between the speaker and listener are the same.

[6] "Sicut enim sermonum qui intellectus excitant, ita est et intellectuum natura, ut videlicet sicut sermonum alii simplices sunt, singulae scilicet dictiones, alii compositi, velut orationes quas ex diversis necesse est confici dictionibus propriam in ipsis significationem tenentibus; ita et intellectus ex sermonibus habiti vel iuxta ipsorum constructionem habendi, modo simplices sunt qui videlicet ex simplicibus habendi sunt sermonibus, modo compositi qui ex compositis" (*TI*, §31).

Claim I is commonplace in the recent secondary literature on Abelard. Thus P. King tells us that:

> According to Abelard, Mental Language generally obeys a principle of compositionality, so that the meaning of a whole is a function of the meaning of the parts ("Abelard on Mental Language", 170).[7]

Rosier-Catach agrees: in a discussion of Abelard on predication, she notes that "The understanding [*intellectus*] of a proposition [*propositio*] is materially composed of the understandings of its parts" ("Understanding", 268).[8] Accordingly, as Jacobi observes, "a compound act of understanding [is one] in which several single acts of understanding are [...] conjoined with one another" ("Language", 144). All these are statements of, and elaborations on, Claim I.

What does putting thoughts together look like in practice? In a *TI* discussion of speaking and listening, Abelard is clear that it is a process extended across time:

> Just as someone who speaks and says 'A human is walking' has to proceed through several significative words (*dictiones*), so too one who listens proceeds by gathering the proper thoughts from each of the words. The listener first does this by thinking of a human, upon hearing the spoken word *human*, which is imposed to signify humankind; then by thinking of walking, upon hearing *walking*; and afterwards by combining (*copulando*) walking with a human.[9]

---

[7] Note however that the question whether Abelard indeed endorses a view of mental language is not uncontroversial. Panaccio disagrees: mental language, he argues, begins with Ockham (see "Mental Word", "Mental Language"). Also note that P. King appears to side with the overwhelming majority in taking compositionality to entail complexity, which is why I take this text as support for Claim I.

[8] This sentence is a gloss on Abelard's *LI De int.* ch. I §§107–8 (57–58, lines 758–770).

[9] "Sicut enim qui loquitur et dicit 'homo ambulat' per plures progreditur significativas dictiones, ita qui audit ex singulis dictionibus proprios colligendo intellectus procedit. Primum quidem hominem intelligendo, cum videlicet audit 'homo' quod ad significandum hominem institutum est; postea ambulationem, cum audit 'ambulat', eam insuper homini copulando" (*De Intellectibus*, §32). Abelard uses similar temporal language to make the same distinction in *LI De int*. I, §§94–5 (52–53, lines 621-661).

Hence while the speaker is speaking, the listener is busily building up a complex thought from the mental items which the spoken words bring to mind. For basic affirmations like "*S* is *P*", this process comes in three stages: (i) thinking of the subject, (ii) thinking of the predicate, and (iii) combining the two. The product of this successive process is a composite thought. That's Claim II.

Once again, the secondary literature broadly agrees with this reading of Abelard, and even sometimes takes it for granted. For instance, Rosier-Catach, discussing the sentence "A human is capable of braying" (*homo est rudibilis*) tells us that:

> In addition to these two understandings [namely, that of *human* and that of *capable of braying*], the composition of the two corresponds to a third act of *attentio*, which produces an additional understanding. In this complex expression there are therefore not two, but three acts or *attentiones*, one to attend to man, the second to attend to his braying, the third to attend to the combination of the first two ("Understanding", 268).

In what Rosier-Catach says here, the description of acts, in a sequence, suggests that they are carried out one after the other: we direct our *attentio* to humankind, then to the capacity to bray, and so on in a sequence.

This sequential ordering is something Rosier-Catach notes in an earlier paper on the same aspect of Abelard's thought. There, she takes Alberic's claim that "the thoughts of both parties [speaker and listener] are presented, and then disappear successively" (*les intellections de chacune des parties se présentent puis disparaissent successivement*) to be a statement of Abelard's view ("Les discussions", 9).[10] I take the above discussion to be an elaboration on

---

Note that there is considerable twelfth-century precedent to support the translation of *homo* as *human* rather than *man*: the sources include many long discussions of generic terms like *homo*, which are grammatically masculine but semantically genderless. For a discussion, see Hansen, "This Woman is a Father?".

[10] And as Rosier-Catach points out, Abelard himself mentions the objection in *Dialectica* 68, lines 25–34.

her earlier claim, and consistent with it. And indeed, it points to Claim III, since it applies to both the speaker and the listener.

P. King, for his part, is even more explicit about Claim II. To see how, we need first to consider an important distinction Abelard makes. Doing so will also set us up well to find strong evidence that Abelard holds Claim III.

At key points in his *Glossae super "Peri Hermeneias"* (henceforth *LI De int.*) and in his *TI*, Abelard is at pains to show that what we might call semantic complexity is not enough to render a thought complex or composite. If it were, then the thought that corresponds to a word like *human* would be composite and not simple, because *human* refers to many things: mortality, rationality, and so on. But Abelard wants to have it that spoken words (*dictiones*) are signs of simple thoughts, not composite ones; composite thoughts are reserved for composite speech. Thus he tells us in the *TI*:

> Note carefully what we said: a simple thought is not one which entirely lacks parts, but one which has none of its parts successively (*per successionem*). For we often understand many things at once through one word, as when we hear *two* or *three*, *people* or *flock*, *heap* or *house*—and any other noun that includes many things, be it of parts coming together as a quantity, or of matter and form at once. For the noun *human* picks out both the very matter of the animal, and also its rationality and mortality, all at once. But in the word *human*, all these things are thought of at once (*simul*), and not successively.[11]

Abelard reasons as follows: words (*dictiones*) as well as complex phrases (*orationes*) conjoin multiple things, but in different ways. In the case of a word like *human*, we think of multiple

---

[11] "Attende autem quod diximus, intellectum simplicem non qui omnino partibus caret, sed qui per successionem nullas habet. Sepe enim per dictionem unam plura intelligimus simul, veluti cum audimus *duo* vel *tria*, vel *populum* vel *gregem*, vel *acervum* vel *domum* et quodlibet nomen multarum conprehensivum rerum, sive partium in quantitate convenientium sive materie simul et forme. Nam 'hominis' nomen et materiam ipsam animalis et rationalitatem et mortalitatem simul determinat, sed simul omnia non per successionem in ipso nomine intelliguntur". (*TI*, §33).

things—animality, rationality, mortality—but all at once. In the case of a phrase like "A human is a rational, mortal animal", we also think of multiple things, but one after another. Hence the key difference between simple and complex thoughts is not that one has multiple constituent meanings and the other does not. Rather, it's that one has its constituents *all at once*, and the other has them *by succession*.[12]

Abelard describes this difference in terms of instantaneous *thoughts of conjuncts* (*intellectus coniunctorum*)—which correspond to words—and successive *conjoining thoughts* (*intellectus coniungentes*)—which correspond to phrases, of which sentences are a subspecies. Whereas a thought like *human* joins the conjuncts *animal*, *rational*, and so forth all at once, a conjoining thought like "A human is an animal" links its parts together across time. Similarly, thoughts of disjuncts correspond to negated words, like *non-human* (thought all at once), and privative words like *blind*; disjoining thoughts to negative sentences like "A human is not a donkey", thought out successively.[13]

Abelard elsewhere makes use of this distinction between conjuncts/disjuncts on one hand, and conjoining/disjoining on the other. In his *LI De int*., he uses it to distinguish a word like *human* from its phrasal definition, *rational mortal animal*:

> The thought that corresponds to a word can be of conjuncts or of disjuncts, but it can never be a conjoining or dividing thought. For someone who hears *human* or *non-human* grasps them as conjuncts or as disjuncts. But someone who hears *rational mortal animal* or *non-rational animal* conjoins or disjoins in a phrase something which is a human or something which is not a human. For a thought cannot conjoin or disjoin except when it is composite—when, that is, we join something to something already thought. For example, when

[12] There is an important if tangential problem here for Abelard: in attending to a human—say, Socrates—I do not obtain through sense the abstract notion *animal* (or *animality*), which is nowhere to be seen. And yet Abelard is an empiricist: what's in the mind comes through sense. How then do we square the two? I can't get into it here. But fortunately, the problem has already been addressed (see Cameron, "Perception").

[13] For a discussion, see P. King ("Abelard on Mental Language", 180*ff*).

we hear the phrase *rational mortal animal* or *non-rational animal*, we can

conjoin or disjoin in a phrase something which is a human or something which

is not a human, because here through many words we think of many things. In

the case of a word, however, which has no significative parts, but whose

signification we grasp all at once (*simul*), we cannot successively conjoin

something to something else, or disjoin something from something else.

Rather, we can only grasp things as conjuncts or disjuncts, all at once. For

instance, when I hear *human*, I grasp the matter and forms all at once, as

conjuncts—but I do not conjoin them, the way I do when I hear *rational

mortal animal*. Therefore, the thought that corresponds to a word can be one

of conjuncts or disjuncts, while a phrase can be either conjoining or

disjoining.[14]

Hence it is not just that words *do not* conjoin multiple things sequentially; it is that they

cannot. Only phrases, which have the necessary ordered complexity, can correspond to the

complexity in thought that Abelard here identifies with conjoining and disjoining. Once

again, Abelard is treating the structure of spoken language as a guide to the structure of

thought.

---

[14] "Et intellectus quidem dictionis coniunctorum vel divisorum esse potest, numquam autem coniungens vel dividens. Qui enim audit *homo* vel *non homo* ut coniuncta vel disiuncta capit. Qui vero audit *animal rationale mortale* vel ⟨*animal non rationale*⟩, aliquid quod est homo vel aliquid quod non est homo coniungit in oratione vel disiungit. Coniungere enim vel disiungere intellectus non potest nisi compositus, quando videlicet aliquo prius intellecto aliquid ei coniungimus. Veluti cum audimus hanc orationem *animal rationale mortale* vel *animal non rationale*, ⟨aliquid quod est homo⟩ vel aliquid quod non est homo, quia per diversas dictiones diversa intelligimus, coniungere vel disiungere in oratione possumus. At vero in dictione, quae partes significativas non habet, sed totam eius significationem simul accipimus, per successionem intellectus aliquid alicui coniungere vel disiungere non possumus, sed ut coniuncta iam vel disiuncta simul accipere. Ut cum audio *homo*, materiam et formas tamquam iam coniuncta simul accipio, non etiam coniungo, sicut dum audio *animal rationale mortale*. Dictionis itaque intellectus coniunctorum vel disiunctorum esse potest, orationis vero coniungens vel disiungens." (ch. I, §95; 53, lines 643–61)

At the outset of this passage, Abelard slips between speaking of an opposition between *coniungere–dividere* and *coniungere–disiungere*, prompting Jacobi (Abelard, *Kommentar*, 222) to point out that (i) the two oppositions seem to be the same, and (ii) the latter is somewhat better suited to logical investigations, since all that varies between the two are the prefixes; the root verb remains the same.

In his *TI*, Abelard gives an analogy to illuminate this distinction. In considering a collection of stones, we can look at them all at once, or we can attend to each of them, one at a time:

> The same things can be grasped both all at once by a simple thought, and successively by a composite one. For now I see the three stones placed before me all at once, with one glance, and now I see them one after another successively, with multiple acts of looking.[15]

Abelard takes this to show that, just because an act of seeing has multiple objects, the act itself need not therefore be complex and carried out successively. So, too, with thoughts.[16] Seeing the stones all at once is analogous to a thought of conjuncts: for example, of *human*, which has the conjuncts *rationality, mortality*, and so forth, all at once. In contrast, attending to the stones one at a time is like a conjoining thought. One begins by thinking of a human, and then of mortality, and so on, to form the thought that corresponds to the sentence "A human is mortal". Only the latter is—and indeed *can* be—successive. The former, by definition, takes place all at once.

Critically, then, how thoughts conjoin things in relation to time underpins the distinction between words on one hand, and complex phrases on the other. Commenting on this framework in Abelard, P. King tells us that:

> As Abelard puts it: 'An understanding [*intellectus*] is conjoining if, by proceeding successively, it combines some things understood at first with other things understood later' (TI §40). The key point is that a conjoining understanding [*intellectus*] combines some things with others by *processing*

---

[15] "possunt itaque eedem res et per simplicem simul intellectum concipi, et per compositum succendentem. Nam et tres lapides ante me positos uno intuitu modo simul video, modo per successionem pluribus obtutibus unum post alium video" (*TI* §34). See also *LI De int.* I, §94 (52, lines 637–641), where Abelard uses the analogy of seeing multiple stones in one glance to establish the same distinction.

[16] The notion of "vision of the mind rather than of the eyes" is an Augustinian thread that runs through Abelard's thought (Cameron, "Mental Perception", 26).

the constituent understandings one at a time. The understanding [*intellectus*] of compound phrases, for example, requires the successive understanding [*intellectus*] of each part, which is then appropriately combined with the understandings [*intellectus*] of the parts already understood. ("Abelard on Mental Language", 179; emphasis mine).

Thus the above distinction between instantaneity and successivity is the basis of Abelard's distinction between the thoughts that correspond to words, and those that correspond to spoken phrases, including sentences. The whole distinction thus turns on Claim II.[17]

How broadly does Claim II apply? Are the speaker's thoughts built up successively as well? We might think that, whereas the listener has to wait and work through what is said by the speaker, the speaker already has fully-formulated thoughts which are not successively composed. But this cannot be Abelard's view, since Abelard is committed to an exact likeness (*consimilitas*) of the thoughts in the speaker and listener. Accordingly, thoughts in the listener must share their basic structure with thoughts in the speaker. So Abelard tells us at the outset of his *LI De int.*:

> Thoughts [in addition to things] are also said to be designated by spoken words and phrases, whether the thoughts are those of the speaker, or those of the listener. For an utterance is said to signify a speaker's thought, in that he makes that thought evident to the listener, so long as it produces in the listener a thought that is exactly alike (*consimilis*).[18]

---

[17] It is noteworthy that, even once some feature of a thing is attended to in this way, for Abelard it is still not yet *judged* to be so: as Cameron puts it, it "is then held in attention awaiting an act of judgment" ("Mental Perception", 29). The texts examined here apparently criticize Abelard on this point as well. Arguments against him appear in H15 ch.I, §§46–53, as well as in another *De Interpretatione* commentary associated with the school of Alberic: H10 (Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal 910, fols. 163ra–186vb), ch.I, *fol.* 165vb. This debate is worth studying in its own right.

[18] "Intellectus quoque designare dicuntur, siue is sit intellectus proferentis uocem siue audientis eam. Nam intellectum proferentis in eo significare uox dicitur, quod ipsum auditori manifestat, dum consimilem in auditore generat." *LI De int.*, Proem, §5 (18, lines 31-5).

Two thoughts—one in the speaker, one in the listener—are completely alike. It follows that Claims I and II apply not only to the thought in the listener, but in the speaker as well.[19] And that's just Claim III.

Rosier-Catach also reads Abelard in this way: as giving a general account of thought, applicable both to speaker and to listener. The speaker, if successful, gets the listener to think the same thought that the speaker has in mind. Hence Rosier-Catach, citing the foregoing passage, tells us that:

> Aristotle says that to signify is to 'generate an understanding': Abelard explains that this understanding is either that of the speaker or the listener, since *the speaker builds an understanding* in attending to things and expresses that understanding in order to constitute *the same understanding* in the mind of the listener. ("Understanding", 251; emphases mine).[20]

The thought in the mind of the speaker is structurally the same as the thought in the mind of the listener: it is a mereological complex of parts, and the assembly of those parts takes time. Accordingly, Claims I–II apply to both speaker and listener alike.

Now perhaps we can blunt the criticisms of the Albricani by rejecting Claim III. We could then say that thoughts *do* have parts that take time to assemble, but only for the listener, and not for the speaker. The account presented by Abelard, and examined here, would therefore not be a general account of thoughts. And thus the bite of the criticisms of the Albricani would be limited to Abelard's account of the activity of the listener, and not to thoughts in general.

---

[19] An anonymous reviewer has pointed out that Abelard states that "Socrates runs" and "Running Socrates" generate the same thought, though they differ by way of stating (*modus enuntiandi*): only the first one is a statement (*LI De int.* Ch. V, §16). This is an interesting and important topic. The Albricani certainly have a good deal to say about it, and I have a separate paper on it which I hope to publish soon. For now, all I need to establish here is that there is enough structural similarity between the thoughts in the speaker and the listener that (i) they both have parts, and (ii) those parts are ordered sequentially. But in ways that go beyond present purposes, the notion of sameness is a complex and difficult one. Caveat lector: we are sailing over deep water.

[20] Although Rosier-Catach's *the same* may seem stronger than my *exactly alike* (for *consimilis*), it need not be. After all, *sameness* does not have to mean any more than it does when we say that you and I follow the same recipe, sing the same song, or have the same outfit.

But I can find no textual evidence to support a rejection of Claim III. And there is ample reason to uphold it. After all, rejecting Claim III would commit us to the claim that thoughts in listeners are structurally different from thoughts in speakers. We would then have two classes of thoughts: speaker thoughts, and listener thoughts. Then we would need an account of how such thoughts could be the same or exactly alike, as Abelard thinks they are, when they differ structurally.

Worse, we would have to take Abelard's Boethian focus on the listener not to be an emphasis of his view, but a shortcoming and a defect. What we want from Abelard is a general account of what thoughts are, not merely the listener's half of the picture. We would—and should—expect more from Abelard. Rejecting Claim III to head off the Albricani thus robs Abelard's account of its generality and interest.

Worst of all, we would lose Abelard's general distinction between simple and composite thoughts, sketched above. That is, we would have to abandon his way of distinguishing the thoughts that correspond to spoken words (*dictiones*) on one hand, from those that correspond to phrases (*orationes*) on the other. After all, this distinction turns on the distinction between how these items relate to time: thoughts like *human* conjoin multiple things all at once, whereas "A human is mortal" is a successive thought—as we saw from Abelard's stones analogy. For speakers, there would be no structural difference between the thoughts corresponding to words, and those corresponding to phrases. Such a difference would exist in the minds of listeners, but in the minds of speakers, this key distinction of Abelard's would collapse.

Thus rejecting Claim III to avoid criticism puts us out of the frying pan and into the fire. It is not a promising avenue for defending Abelard against his Albrican critics.

Let's step back and ask: how reasonable is the Abelardian picture? Against Abelard, we might think that thoughts are not drawn out in time the way spoken sentences are, but

rather that they happen in a flash, so to speak. That is, to think "Socrates is a human", we do not pass through a series of discrete stages: thinking of Socrates at time t, then of his humanity at t', before finally conjoining them at t''. Instead, it seems we do it all at once, in a point in time, as it were—in which case Abelard's picture is wrong. It is along these lines that the Albricani mount their attack.

Alberic's Thoughts

The most detailed Albrican discussion and criticism of Abelard's view comes from the anonymous *Glossae* "*Doctrinae Sermonum*" (cataloged as H15).[21] The anonymous author of H15 begins by summarising the view to be criticised as follows:

> Some say that certain thoughts are simple, and that others are composite. They call those *simple* which are signified by incomplex utterances (*voces*), for they have no parts. For although someone understands many things once the word *human* has been heard—namely, substance and quality—nevertheless his action (which is called a thought), through which all these things are contemplated all at once, is one and simple. Conversely, they call *composite* those thoughts which have other thoughts as their parts, and which are signified by spoken phrases (*orationes*). And they say that, just as in a spoken phrase, where we find a composition made up of words (*dictiones*), so too in the corresponding thought we find a composition made up of the thoughts which correspond to the words (*dictiones*). So for instance, if one were to say

---

[21] For the relevant catalogs, see Marenbon, ("Glosses and Commentaries", 98–122; reprinted and extended in *Aristotelian Logic*, 98–138) and Ebbesen ("Glosses and Commentaries", 129–83).

‘Socrates is a human’, we first think of Socrates, then of humankind, then we

put together (*copulamus*) a thought, thinking that he is a human.[22]

Here we have a clear—and I would say fair—restatement of Claims I–II. What follows is a

barrage of criticisms against them, at least some of which also presuppose Claim III. In a

moment, I will look at each of them in turn. But first, a word about attribution.

As we just saw, H15 does not name Abelard in connection with Claims I–II, though

these indeed appear to be his. Moreover, it makes no mention of Alberic in connection with

the debate, either. But there is another anonymous text associated with Alberic’s

school—cataloged H17—that presents similar arguments to the same effect, albeit in a briefer

and less detailed way.[23] Unlike H15, H17 explicitly attributes to Alberic the distinctive claim

that thoughts do not have parts.[24] On that basis, I attribute this claim to Alberic, too. This is

not, of course, to say that all the arguments advanced in support of this claim are Alberic’s:

some of them may well be the handiwork of anonymous Albricani.

The first criticism in H15 focuses on true sentences containing false sentential

constituents. In H15’s exposition, these are sentences whose truth relies on the operation of a

term like *except*. I call this the **detour argument**:

---

[22] “Dicunt enim quidam intellectuum alios esse simplices, alios compositos. ‘Simplices’ vocant qui ab incomplexis vocibus significantur; nullas enim habent partes. Licet enim aliquis ex hoc nomine ‘homo’ audito plura intelligat, substantiam scilicet et qualitatem, eius una tamen et simplex est actio, quae intellectus dicitur, per quam omnia simul contemplantur. ‘Compositos’ vero vocant intellectus qui alios intellectus ⟨ut⟩ partes sui habent et ab orationibus significantur. Dicunt quod sicut in oratione quaedeam ex dictionibus consideratur compositio, sic in intellectu illius ex intellectibus dictionum attenditur constitutio, ut si dicatur haec oratio ‘Socrates est homo’ prius Socratem, postea hominem intelligimus, deinde intellectus copulamus intelligentes ipsum ut homo est” (H15, ch.I, §106).

[23] H17 is Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, lat. fol. 624, fols. 87vb–96vb. The parallels to our present considerations begin at the bottom of fol. 89vb and run to the end of the chapter, on fol. 90ra. I have transcribed and translated these in the Appendix, below.

[24] Which school—if any—H15 belongs to is not immediately clear: Jacobi, Strub, and King point out that Alberic is named in it only twice, whereas Abelard is named around fourteen times, and conclude that “In short, our author has an ‘Abelard-soaked’ approach to philosophy” (“*intellectus*”, 21, and 21, note 9). Marenbon hedges a bit, saying it is *apparently* one of Abelard’s followers (*Four Dimensions*, 38), though elsewhere (*idem*, 40) he seems more certain. In contrast, Lenz notes the author’s “strong inclination” toward the teachings of Alberic, and remarks that “we might refer to him as one of the *Albricani*” (“Are Thoughts and Sentences Compositional?”, 173). For my part, I cannot determine overall allegiance of the author of H15 here.

It often happens that, when a true sentence is uttered, the listener has a false thought through parts of the phrase, if the thought is composed of true and false ones. For if someone says 'All the disciples have been saved, except for Judas', the listener will have a false thought through a certain part of this phrase. For once the 'All the disciples have been saved' part has been uttered, since the thought answering to this part is false, it must be that the listener has a false thought, since he grasps such a thought.[25]

If we adopt Abelard's Claim II, we have to say that, when we hear a sentence like the one just mentioned, we have to go through two overall steps: a first, in which we are presented with a false sentence, and so think a false thought; and a second, in which we get hit with the *except*-clause. This clause prompts us to go back and contradict our original thought, winding up with a true thought opposed to the first.

This argument doesn't only apply to such *except*-clause sentences. The author of H17 gives a version of it that extends to certain conditionals as well (See Appendix, §2). For example, to think "If Socrates is a donkey, then Socrates is a quadruped", I have to think "Socrates is a donkey", etc., and so I take a detour through falsehood.

Now both texts take such detours through falsehoods to be embarrassing for Abelard's account of the successive composition of thoughts. But neither text explains why. Granted, it is a bit weird that there are true thoughts that can only be arrived at by a passage through false ones. And more recently, Frege has also been somewhat reluctant to admit the role known falsehoods must play in, *inter alia*, conditionals:

---

[25] "Amplius: multotiens contingit ⟨quod⟩, cum vera profertur propositio, falsum habet intellectum auditor per partes orationis, ⟨si⟩ ex veris et falsis compositus sit intellectibus. Siquis enim dicat *Omnes apostoli salvi fuerant, praeter Judam*, veram profert propositionem, auditor tamen habet falsum habebit intellectum per quandam partem orationis huius. Prolata enim hac parte *Omnes apostoli salvi fuerunt*, cum intellectus huius partis sit falsus, oportet illum qui audit falsum habere intellectum, cum talem concipit intellectum" (H15 ch.I, §109).

A false thought must sometimes be accepted—not as true, but at least as indispensable: first, as the sense (*Sinn*) of an interrogative sentence; second, as part of a hypothetical complex of thoughts; third, in negation.[26]

So the role false thoughts play in conditionals and the like has more recently been the source of some minor philosophical embarrassment. But I am inclined to think this argument is relatively weak, as presented in H15 and H17.

Let's turn to the second argument. If the Abelardian account is true, then thoughts corresponding to spoken phrases cannot exist, since they would be made up at least partly of non-existent parts.[27] A key suppressed premise here is, apparently, that the mental terms corresponding to multiple spoken terms cannot exist all at once—at least in one mind. That is, it is impossible to think multiple (simple) thoughts all at once. I call this the **nonexistent thoughts argument**. Like the first argument, its target is Abelard's account of successive composition. As the author of H15 tells us:

It cannot be that there is composition in any thought like what is seen in a spoken phrase (*oratio*). For if, in the utterance of a phrase, the first part of the phrase produced a thought, and then another; and if in this way each part of the phrase thus produced its own thought; and if, once the whole phrase was uttered, all these thoughts joined together constituted an overarching thought; then there would follow an unacceptable result, namely that some thoughts were made up of thoughts which did not exist—that is, they would be made up of certain thoughts which were no more. For as some spoken sound (*vox*),

---

[26] "Ein falscher Gedanke muß, wenn auch nicht als wahr, so doch zuweilen als unentbehrlich anerkannt werden: erstens als Sinn eines Fragesatzes, zweitens als Bestandteil einer hypothetischen Gedankenverbindung und drittens in der Verneinung" ("Die Verneinung", 68 [147]). In translating this passage, I have consulted Max Black et al. (*Collected Papers*, 377).
[27] This objection is touched on in passing by Rosier-Catach ("Les discussions", 9).

once uttered, can no longer be called back, so too a thought signified by spoken sounds cannot exist after the utterance of the spoken sound is over. For this reason, once any part of a phrase is uttered, the listener can no longer have a thought of it. Hence it comes about that if, after the utterance of the whole phrase, the listener is said to join the thought of the last term with the thought of the terms coming before it, we will have to admit that the thought which he does have is bound together (*copulare*) with ones which he does not have.[28]

A similar argument appears in H17 (see Appendix §1, below). But the above passage is ambiguous, in a way that should be flagged from the get-go. The ambiguity turns on how we choose to read "like" (*ut*) in the first sentence: is it that there is no composition in thought *whatsoever*, in contrast to the composition found in spoken sentences? Or is it that whatever composition there may be in thought is just not like the composition we find in speech? The latter reading is weaker, and does not rule out composition of any sort in thought. Unlike H15, H17 is unambiguous on this question, and also attributes the view to Alberic explicitly: his claim is that *no* thought is composite (*nullum intellectum esse compositum*).

Now there is an easy reading of this argument that makes it clearly wrong. That is to read it as saying that once a spoken utterance is over, the corresponding thought can no longer exist. This is demonstrably untrue: of course it is possible for you to keep thinking about Socrates even after I am done speaking his name. I therefore find it implausible that this is the claim our author is trying to make.[29]

---

[28] "Sed hoc stare non potest, quod in aliquo intellectu sit compositio, ut in oratione consideratur. Si⟨cut⟩ enim in prolatione alicuius orationis prima pars orationis aliquem faceret intellectum, deinde alium, et sic quaelibet pars suum faceret intellectum qui tota oratione prolata simul iuncti unum component intellectum totalem, tale sequeretur inconveniens quod ex intellectibus non-existentibus quidam componeretur intellectus, ⟨id est⟩ quibusdam non manentibus copularetur. Sicut enim vox aliqua prolata non potest amplius sumi, ita intellectus a voce significatus post vocis prolationem esse non potest. Quare prolata qualibet orationis parte auditor illius amplius intellectum habere non poterit. Unde fit quod, si post prolationem totius orationis auditor intellectum extremae dictionis intellectibus praecedentium coniungere dicatur, oportebit concedere eum intellectum quem habet illis quos non habet copulare" (H15 ch.I, §108).

[29] Indeed it is a claim Abelard would deny, since he points out that someone who says "A human", falls silent for a while, and then utters "runs" has failed to assemble a phrase. Instead, such a speaker has put forth multiple

Here is a more charitable reading: the thought that corresponds to a spoken sound, like *Socrates* in "Socrates is running", cannot continue to exist in the mind once the subsequent thought—that of running—comes to be present.[30] The simple claim is, roughly, this: the mind, as informed by its object, cannot think multiple things all at once.[31] Once the thought of running comes, the initial thought of Socrates is knocked out of place. Or, to put it in the Abelardian language of attending: we first attend to Socrates, then to his running; but the second act of attending replaces the first. We cannot attend to multiple things at the same time.

Analogously, imagine a pair of stones large enough that each one can only be lifted using both hands (my example).[32] An act of predication would be something like lifting the two stones up and holding them together. But this cannot be done: I can pick up the first stone (let's label it *Socrates*), and I can set it down to pick up the second one (labeled *running*), but I cannot hold both up together at the same time. So too with thoughts answering to spoken terms: they can't both be held in the mind all at once, in the way that Abelardian composite thoughts require. Claim II is, therefore, false.

Importantly, this argument draws on Abelard's views on wholes with non-existent parts. As a strict presentist, Abelard excludes from his ontology any composite item whose parts do not all presently exist. Thus, as he tells us in his gloss on Aristotle's Categories (*LI Cat.*):

> We do not agree that we should say that some composite should exist at any

---

words, with their own corresponding thoughts. But in the ordinary case (where "A human runs" is spoken successively), the thought has not yet passed out of memory. (*Dialectica*, 68, lines 3–10).

[30] A version of this claim is commonplace in later Aristotelian commentaries, especially following the availability of Aristotle's *De Anima* in Latin. This text was not broadly available in the Latin speaking west in Alberic's day, but the claim itself is present in Boethius and Augustine.

[31] Note however that Abelard rejects the Aristotelian in-formational or con-formational account of intentionality. For a discussion, see P. King and Arlig ("Peter Abelard", §5).

[32] Perhaps this metaphor seems a bit extravagant; but it has its origin in Frege in a discussion about 'grasping' thoughts—a metaphor of the sort Frege grudgingly acknowledges is indispensable ("Der Gedanke", 57 [74]). More recently, Davidson (in "What Metaphors Mean"), has been much more optimistic about the use and value of such metaphors in philosophy.

time with one of its parts not remaining [...] Hence in truth, one can never truly and properly say that a day exists.[33]

Days, strictly speaking, do not exist, because not every moment they contain exists at once. Neither do such composite items as spoken phrases, or the thoughts they prompt. Accordingly, Abelard is hard put to explain how thoughts exist any more than days or spoken phrases do.

I take this second argument to apply both to the successive account of composition (Claim II), and to composition in general (Claim I). It applies to the successive account because it shows how such an account posits successive wholes—something Abelard elsewhere, and for other reasons, rejects. And it applies to composition more generally because it highlights how it implicitly posits the simultaneous existence of multiple thoughts in one mind—a possibility mainstream Aristotelians would deny.[34]

The third argument is presented very briefly, and seems to lead up the fourth. It deals with the contribution terms make to the overall meaning of composites: either (i) the subject term determines the final formulation of the phrase, or (ii) it does not. Now after the utterance of the subject term, and before the utterance of the predicate, the whole locution can be transferred (*transferri*) into something else. Therefore, it must be (ii). I call this the **part-whole argument** (in contrast with the whole-part argument, which we will see in a moment), because it deals with the way the constituent parts, in the Abelardian picture, get built up into a composite whole:

Since, once the first part of a phrase (*oratio*) has been uttered, the whole locution can be transferred to another (*locutio tota ad aliam transferri possit*),

---

[33] "Nos in hoc non consentimus ut velimus aliquid compositum existere umquam una eius parte non permanente [...] Unde in rei veritate numquam vere et proprie dici potest dies esse" (*LI Cat*. 187, lines 8–41).

[34] How the Albricani themselves think of mind is an interesting question, and one worthy of independent study. The study will have to draw on several streams: not only the commentaries on Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias*, but their commentaries on his *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge* as well. Whenever that study is conducted, it will be well served by the critical editions of some of these texts that are now in progress.

it is clear that the thought of the first part does not determine the composition that is produced later. For they say that in uttering the phrase 'Socrates is a human', *Socrates* is first understood: and it follows that Socrates does not determine the composition that follows. For, once Socrates is understood, and prior to the utterance of *human*, the locution can be transferred to another.[35]

What is this transference (*translatio*)? Luisa Valente summarizes it as follows:

In the widest and least technical sense, the terms *translatio*, *translatus* (an adjective) and *transferre* were generally used—both in the texts pertaining to arts and those pertaining to theology—to indicate any displacement of meaning, whether of a single term or an entire discourse (*discours*), from proper to improper usage (*Logique et théologie*, 70).[36]

In logic, such transference receives a good deal of attention in commentaries on fallacies. It comes up, for example, in SE5, a contemporary gloss on the *Sophistici Elenchi* connected to Alberic's school.[37] The anonymous author of SE5 tells us that "By the noun *human* we can deal with both the thing and—by way of transference—with the noun [itself]".[38] This description points, roughly, to what we now call the use–mention distinction. Consider the difference between the two instances of *Socrates* in the following sentences:

Socrates is a human

Socrates has three syllables

---

[35] "Amplius: cum prolata prima parte alicuius orationis locutio tota ad aliam transferri possit, patet intellectus primae partis nil prodesse ad aliquam compositionem quae postea fit. Quod enim dicunt in prolatione huius orationis *Socrates est homo* prius intelligi *Socrates*, nihil prodest ad sequentem compositionem. Prius enim intellecto illo pro homo ad aliam potest transferri locutionem" (H15 ch.I, §110).

[36] "Dans l'acceptation la plus large et la moins technique, les termes *translatio*, *translatus* (adjectif) et *transferre*, tant dans les textes des arts que ceux de la théologie, furent utilisés pour indiquer de manière générale tout déplacement de signification, que ce soit d'un seul terme ou d'un discourse entier, d'un usage propre à un usage impropre".

[37] SE5 is the *Glose in Aristotilis Sophisticos elenchos* edited by De Rijk in *Logica Modernorum*, vol. I.

[38] "per hoc nomen 'homo' possumus agere de re et de nomine translative" (*Glose in Aristotilis Sophisticos elenchos,* 237, lines 23–4).

Whereas the distinction between Socrates the human and *Socrates* the name is now made plain in writing by using italics or quotation marks, the distinction is not always and so readily made in speech. Hence when I begin to speak, saying "Socrates is…", I can take it in different directions: "...a human", "...trisyllabic". As a transference of the former, the latter is a radically different way of speaking of Socrates. Therefore, the word *Socrates* itself, and the thought that corresponds to it, do not determine the whole in which they appear.

Why is the possibility of transference a problem? By compositionality, the subject term *Socrates* should contribute in part to the overall meaning of the whole sentence, whatever that whole may be. Yet at the time of its utterance, "*Socrates…*" can be taken off in wildly different directions: we could go on to say "...is a human" or to say "...is a name", "...is trisyllabic", etc. This variability suggests that, at least at the outset, the term *Socrates* was not sufficient to determine which of these radically different alternatives the utterance—and accordingly the thought—was to be. It is therefore difficult to say what it, on its own at the outset, contributed in terms of meaning. This argument is, thus, an objection against successive composition.

The fourth and final argument is preserved in multiple texts, and appears to be the most elaborate of the lot. It attacks the Abelardian view along compositional lines. I call it the **whole-part argument**, because it deals with how, in the Abelardian picture, the whole composite predication informs us about its constituent parts:

> Furthermore, since they say that Socrates is first thought of (*intelligi*), and then humankind is bound together (*copulari*) with Socrates, and that he is thus understood to be a human, they have to admit either [i] that without any conjunction, no thought is had of Socrates, or [ii] that the subject is here

understood by the same concept as each of those things which were

understood beforehand.[39]

To see how this works, first recall the Abelardian process of directing attention to particular

features of a thing, rather than to the whole thing. As Jacobi puts it, "We do not apprehend the

thing in its full concrete reality. In speaking and understanding, we attend to certain

peculiarities of the thing" ("Abelard and Frege", 84).[40] In other words, as Cameron tells us,

"acts of attention focus only on a nature or select property of some thing, *not on how the*

thing is in its entirety" ("Mental Perception", 30–1; emphasis mine).[41]

Now if we adopt this view, H15 tells us, we face a dilemma. Either the subject term is

not understood without a composition, or it is understood without one. If it is not understood

without a composition, then we do not know what the subject is. If on the other hand it is

understood without one, then it is understood in the same way *within* the composition as it

was before, when it stood on its own. That is, either the composition contributes to our

thought of what the subject stands for, in such a way that we cannot think of it in the absence

of a composition; or the composition does not add anything, in which case we do not think of

it differently when it figures in a composition than we do when it does not, and stands alone.

Compare for instance the thought of Socrates with the thought that corresponds to the

spoken utterance "Socrates is a human". When I think of him in the first way, either (i) I do

so without attending to his humanity—in which case I am not really thinking of Socrates at

all—or (ii) I think of him as a human, in which case nothing new is added by the composite

---

[39] "Rursus: cum dicunt prius intelligi Socratem, postea hominem Socrati copulari, et sic intelligi ut homo est, oportet eos concedere quod nulla coniunctione nullus de Socrate habeatur intellectus, vel subiectum ibi intelligatur eadem ratione ⟨qua⟩ singulum eorum quae prius intellecta sunt intelligitur" (H15 ch.I, §111).

[40] Notice that Jacobi does not explicitly endorse the successive, attention-focusing view of Rosier-Catach (though his account is consistent with hers). So the fourth argument here applies even to a minimal account of Abelard, on which all features of a thing are not attended to at once, whether or not the overall attending takes place across time.

[41] Cf. also Jacobi, Strub and P. King: "Words never capture a thing as a whole in its complexity. Instead, they draw attention to some peculiarity or distinctive property of the signified thing" ("*intellectus*", 16).

thought. In other words, either I do not really think of Socrates to begin with, or I gain nothing new by being told that he is a human.[42] Thus I take this argument to be an attack both on complexity (Claim I), as well as on successive composition (Claim II).

In all, then, it seems to be a key doctrine of Alberic and his school that thoughts are not composite, and that they are not successive entities. That is, they do not have proper parts extended across time, even if they correspond to complex utterances that have their parts successively. Predication is therefore somehow instantaneous. I am going to call this *flash predication*. In sum:

> **FP**: The thought that corresponds to a spoken sentence has no proper
>
> parts. Its formulation accordingly happens all at once.

There is a lot more to say about this doctrine, *pro* and *con.* But for now, I want to conclude with an observation: Alberic's criticisms don't just apply to Abelard. Compositionality, desirable as it is, has pushed us to think of thoughts as composite entities, in ways akin to how Abelard did. To the extent that more recent views resemble Abelard's, they are also prone to Albrican criticisms.

---

[42] Consider, for example, a brick (my analogy). Either the brick has its full character completely independent of being added into the composition of a house; or it gains some character by being put into the composition of a house—something which it didn't have before. If it gains nothing, the house is nothing new; if it gains something, it is not really fully a brick until it is part of a house.

Modern Thoughts

In "Logik in der Mathematik", Gottlob Frege expresses astonishment over the versatility of language—something he accounts for in terms of the building blocks of thought (*Gedankenbausteinen*):

> The abilities of language are wonderful. With just a few sounds and combinations of sounds, it can express a vast multitude of thoughts—including thoughts which have never been grasped or expressed by anyone before. What makes these abilities possible? It is that *thoughts have parts* from which they are built up. These building blocks of thought correspond to clusters of sounds, from which the sentence expressing the thought is built. Thus *the construction of a sentence from the parts of a sentence corresponds to the construction of a thought from parts of a thought* [emphases mine].[43]

It is striking how closely the view Frege expresses here resembles Abelard's in the *Tractatus de Intellectibus*.[44] Once again, there is a key correspondence between speech and thought, so that the construction and complexity of the former is mirrored in the structure of the latter. Thus to the extent that the criticisms of the Albricani have bite, they apply to Frege, as well

---

[43] "Die Leistungen der Sprache sind wunderbar. Mittels weniger Laute und Lautverbindungen ist sie imstande, ungeheuer viele Gedanken auszudrücken und zwar auch solche, die noch die vorher von einem Menschen gefasst und ausgedrückt worden sind. Wodurch werden diese Leistungen möglich? Dadurch, dass die Gedanken aus Gedankenbausteinen aufgebaut werden. Und diese Bausteinen entsprechen Lautgruppen, aus denen der Satz aufgebaut wird, der den Gedanken ausdrückt, sodass dem Aufbau des Satzes aus Satzteilen der Aufbau des Gedankens aus Gedankenteilen enrspricht" ("Logik in der Mathematik", 243).

[44] Note however that for Frege, thoughts, unlike sentences, are not constructed by human minds—as they apparently are for Abelard—but merely *grasped*. As he tells us, "By thinking we do not *generate* a thought, but instead we *grasp* it" ("Beim Denken erzeugen wir nicht die Gedanken, sondern wir fassen sie"; "Der Gedanke" (57 [74], emphasis mine).

as to contemporary analytical philosophers who follow his lead in this regard.[45] To show how, I will conclude by examining two more recent accounts of propositions.

In *Propositional Content* (25), Hanks characterizes the construction of meaning as follows:

> Consider Obama's assertion that Clinton is eloquent. In making this assertion Obama forms a token of a type of action, which we can symbolize as follows:
>
> $$\vdash \langle \textbf{Clinton}, \text{ELOQUENT} \rangle$$
>
> This is a type of action that Obama performs when he asserts that Clinton is eloquent. The single turnstyle, '$\vdash$' stands for predication. **Clinton** is a type of reference act, and ELOQUENT is a type of expression act.

Here Hanks, roughly like Abelard, takes the complexity of spoken expressions to be reflected on the mental level. As with spoken sentences, thoughts have parts that are, apparently, assembled successively. So when, in his example, Obama first refers to Clinton, he does so without any prior conception of eloquence. That is, he refers to Clinton in a way that does not include eloquence. Indeed, it *cannot*: as an act of referring, is an entirely different kind of act from that of expressing. Next, he expresses the property of eloquence, in a way that does not—*cannot*—include Clinton. Two acts, apparently at two times.

These general features are not unique to Hanks. Novel as his approach is, it has them in common with other approaches to propositional meaning. For example, J. King displays "Michael swims" visually as in fig. 1.

---

[45] This is not to say, however, that this view of Frege's is universally adopted in analytical philosophy: as we saw at the outset, compositionality does not necessarily entail successive composition. Still, much of contemporary analytical philosophy is unmistakably Fregean, in roughly the same way that so much medieval thought is, in a broad sense, Aristotelian.
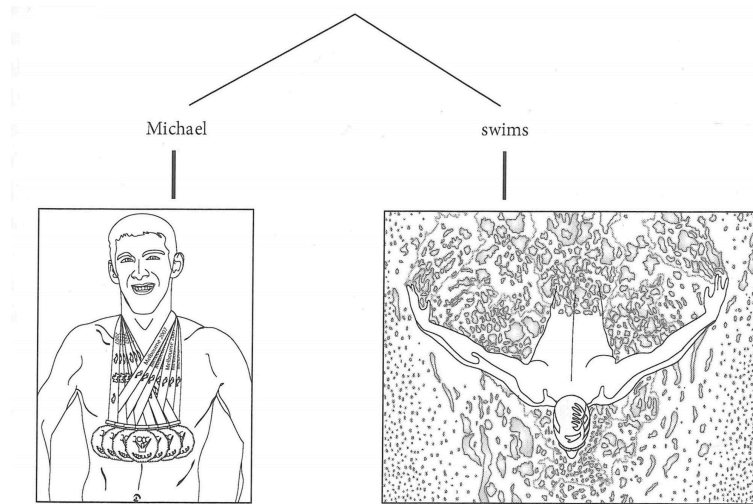
Fig. 1: the composition of "Michael swims", according to J. King

(*New Thinking About Propositions*, 51).

Again, there is the assumption that Michael is thought of, as on the left node, indifferently to his swimming. Likewise, as on the right note, the property of swimming in general is thought of, apparently without thinking of Michael in particular.

These two accounts of predication—that of Hanks and that of J. King—are, I want to stress, radically different from one another. I have selected them in large part because, in spite of their differences, their shared presuppositions run deep. Here is what I take both views, and others like them to presuppose, as well as some questions that these presuppositions prompt, viewed in light of the medieval debate:

1. Both accounts seem to presuppose either (i) that we can simultaneously carry out two independent mental acts—against the Aristotelian substantial account of mind, and all the independent arguments for it; or (ii) that the thoughts that correspond to statements like "Clinton is eloquent" are constructed in an Abelardian sequence—in which case they face the criticisms against successive construction that we saw in the

preceding section. Faced with this dilemma, which of (i) or (ii) should we prefer, and how can we address its attendant problems?

2. Both accounts are committed to the idea that the subject and predicate are different enough that neither can contain the other. Thanks to the examples, which involve predication of accidental properties like swimming and being eloquent, the problem is hidden. But it catches us off guard if we predicate essential properties like being a human or a rational animal. For example:

    > Clinton is a human
    >
    > Michael is a rational animal

    When I think the thoughts that correspond to the subject of these written sentences, do I really think of Michael or Clinton in a way indifferent to their humanity? And when I think about the predicates, do I attend to the property of being a rational animal without including Michael or Clinton in that thought? Either way, the dilemma presented in the fourth argument—which I have called the *whole-part* argument—is inescapable.

I do not doubt that these questions can be addressed by contemporary philosophers of mind and language. Indeed, I think addressing them will prove fruitful for our thinking about propositions. After all, Alberic's criticisms are serious, and that the common assumptions they bring to light have largely gone unnoticed in our time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ancient and Medieval

Anonymous. Commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* [no title]. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, 910, fols. 163ra–186vb. [**H10**].

Anonymous. *Glossae "Doctrinae Sermonum"*. Ed. Peter King. Turnhout: Brepols, 2016. [**H15**].

Anonymous. Commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* [no title]. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, lat. fol. 624, fols. 87vb–96vb. [**H17**].

Anonymous. *Glose in Aristotilis Sophisticos elenchos*. *Logica Modernorum*, vol. I. Ed. L.M. De Rijk. Assen: van Gorcum, 1962. 187–255. [**SE5**].

Aristotle. *De Interpretatione*. Trans. Boethius. Ed. Lorenzo Minio-Paluello. Leiden: Brill, 1965.

Boethius. *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis ΠΕΡΙ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΙΑΣ*. Ed. Karl Meiser. Leipzig: Teubner, 1880.

Peter Abelard. *Logica "ingredientibus" III* (*Glosses on the "De interpretatione"*). Ed.

Bernard Geyer. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 1927.

Peter Abelard. *Dialectica*. Ed. L.M. De Rijk. Assen: van Gorcum, 1956.

Peter Abelard. *Glossae super "Peri hermeneias"*. Ed. Klaus Jacobi and Christian Strub. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010. [**LI de int.**].

Peter Abelard. *Tractatus de Intellectibus*. Ed. and Trans. Patrick Morin. Paris: J. Vrin, 2015.

Peter Abelard. *Kommentar zu Aristoteles' Schrift* Peri hermeneias. Ed. & trans. Klaus Jacobi. Freiburg: Herder, 2022.

Robert Grosseteste. *Commentarius in Posteriorum Analyticorum Libros*. Ed. Pietro Rossi. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1981.

Modern

Cameron, Margaret. "Peter Abelard on Mental Perception". In *Philosophy of Mind in the Early and High Middle Ages*, edited by Margaret Cameron, 1834. London: Routledge, 2018.

Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean". Chap. 17 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001 [1978].

Ebbesen, Sten. "Medieval Latin Glosses and Commentaries on Aristotelian Logical Texts in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries". In *Glosses and Commentaries on Aristotelian Logical Texts: The Syriac, Arabic, and Medieval Latin Traditions*, edited by Charles Burnett, 129–83. London: The Warburg Institute, 1993.

Frege, Gottlob. "Der Gedanke – eine logische Untersuchung". Chap. 1 in *Logische Untersuchingen*, edited by Günther Patzig. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962 [1918–19].

Frege, Gottlob. "Die Verneinung – eine logische Untersuchung". Chap. 2 in *Logische Untersuchingen*, edited by Günther Patzig. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962 [1918–19].

Frege, Gottlob. "Logik in der Mathematik". Chap. 20 in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, edited by Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel, and Friedrich Kaulbach. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1969.

Frege, Gottlob. *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, edited by Brian McGuinness, and translated by Max Black, V.H. Dudman, Peter Geach, Hans Kaal, E.-H. W. Kluge, Brian McGuinness, and R.H. Stoothoff. Oxford: Blackwell, 1984.

Hanks, Peter. *Propositional Content*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015.

Hansen, Heine. "This Woman Is a Father? The Albricani on a Puzzle about Relations". *Vivarium* 60, nos. 2–3 (2022): 248–70.

Jacobi, Klaus. "Abelard and Frege: The Semantics of Words and Propositions". In *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Storia della logica*. Ed. V. Abrusci (ed.), Bologna: Ed. CLUEB, 1983. 81–96.

Jacobi, Klaus. "Peter Abelard's Investigations into the Meaning and Functions of the Speech Sign 'Est'". In *The Logic of Being*, edited by Simo Knuuttila and Jaako Hintikka, 145–80. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1986.

Jacobi, Klaus. "Philosophy of Language". In *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, edited

by Jeffrey Brower and Kevin Guilfoy, 126–57. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Jacobi, Klaus, Christian Strub, and Peter King. "From *intellectus verus/falsus* to the *dictum propositionis*: The Semantics of Peter Abelard and his circle". *Vivarium* 34, no. 1 (1996): 15–40.

King, Jeffrey, Scott Soames, and Jeff Speaks. *New Thinking About Propositions.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014.

King, Peter. "Abelard on Mental Language". *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81 no. 2 (2007): 169–187.

King, Peter and Andrew Arlig. "Peter Abelard". In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/abelard/>.

Keller, John Adorno. "Does Compositionality Entail Complexity?" *Philosophers' Imprint* 22, no. 4 (2022): 1–24.

Lenz, Martin. "Are thoughts and sentences compositional? A controversy between Abelard and a pupil of Alberic on the reconciliation of ancient theses on mind and language". *Vivarium* 45, nos. 2–3 (2007): 169–88.

Marenbon, John. "Medieval Latin Glosses and Commentaries on Aristotelian Logical Texts, Before c.1150 AD". In *Glosses and Commentaries on Aristotelian Logical Texts: The Syriac, Arabic, and Medieval Latin Traditions*, edited by Charles Burnett, 77–127. London: The Warburg Institute, 1993.

Marenbon, John. *Aristotelian Logic, Platonism and the Context of Early Medieval Philosophy in the West*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

Marenbon, John. *Abelard in Four Dimensions*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009.

Martin, Christopher. "Logic". In *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, edited by Jeffrey Brower and Kevil Guilfoy, 158–99. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Panaccio, Claude. "From Mental Word to Mental Language". *Philosophical Topics* 20, no. 2 (1992): 125–47.

Panaccio, Claude. "Mental Language and Predication: Ockham and Abelard". *Analytica* 14, no. 2 (2010): 183–94.

Perälä, Mika. "Affirmation and Denial in Aristotle's *De interpretatione*". *Topoi* 39 (2020): 645–56.

Rosier-Catach, Irène. "Les discussions sur le signifié des propositions chez Abélard et ses contemporains". In *Medieval Theories on Assertive and Non-Assertive Language*, edited by Alfonso Maierù and Luisa Valente, 1–23. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2004.

Rosier-Catach, Irène. "Understanding as Attending. Semantics, Psychology and Ontology in Peter Abelard". In *The Language of Thought in Late Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Jenny Pelletier and Magali Roques, 249–74. Dordrecht: Springer, 2017.

Szabó, Zoltán Gendler. "Compositionality". In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/compositionality/>.

Valente, Luisa. *Logique et théologie. Les écoles parisiennes entre 1150 et 1220.* Paris: J. Vrin, 2008.

Appendix: Parallel Arguments from H17[46]

[1] Magister Albericus probat nullum intellectum esse |**90ra**| compositum. Intellectus huius orationis 'Socrates est homo' non est compositus ex hoc intellectu qui significatur ab hoc nomine 'homo', quia cum 'homo' profertur, fit intellectus in anima, et recedit; similiter intellectus significatur ab hoc verbo 'est' et hoc nomine 'Socrates'. Et quia intellectus isti non sunt, ideo nihil ex illis fit.

[1] Master Alberic proves that no thought is |**90ra**| composite. The thought that corresponds to the phrase 'Socrates is a human' is not a composite made up of the thoughts that is signified by the term *human*, since when *human* is uttered, the thought comes to be in the mind, and then recedes; and it is likewise with the thought signified by the verb *is* and the name *Socrates*. And because these thoughts do not exist [all at the same time], nothing comes from them. Similarly, the thought signified by the phrase 'Socrates is a donkey' or 'Socrates is four-footed' is not a composite made up of the thoughts signified by the phrase.

[2] Similiter intellectus significatus ab hac oratione 'Si Socrates est asinus, Socrates est quadrupes,' non est compositus ab intellectu significato ab hac oratione 'Socrates est asinus' nec ab intellectu significato ab hac oratione 'Socrates est quadrupes.' Quia si quis habet illum totalem intellectum habet unamquamque partem eius, ergo habet istum intellectum Socratem esse asinum, ergo habet falsum intellectum, ergo qui habet verum intellectum tantum, habet falsum.

[2] Similarly, the thought signified by the phrase 'If Socrates is a donkey, Socrates is a quadruped' is not a composite of the thought signified by the phrase 'Socrates is a donkey', nor of the thought signified by the phrase 'Socrates is a quadruped'. For if someone has that whole thought, then he also has all its parts. Therefore, he has the thought that Socrates is a donkey; therefore he has a false thought. Therefore, someone who has only a true thought also has a false one.

[3] Similiter intellectus significatus ab hac oratione 'Omnes apostoli sunt salvi praeter Iudam' non est compositus, quia quicumque haberet illum intellectum, falsum intelligeret.

[3] Similarly, the thought signified by the phrase 'All the disciples were saved except Judas' is not a composite, because whoever had that [true] thought would [also] think something false.