The Logic of the Nominales,  
or, The Rise and Fall of Impossible Positio

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Introduction

The twelfth century Nominales were without doubt the followers of Peter Abaelard and they were probably so called on account of their theory of universals. As my witness I call the Archpoet who on a Sabbath night probably in 1164 or 1165 had a vision of heaven where, he tells us:

Hic nec Aristotilem vidi nec Homerm,  
tamen de sententiis nominum et rerum,  
de naturis generum atque specierum  
magnus mihi protulit Augustinus verum.

Post hec ad archangelum loquens Michaelum,  
qui regit per angelos populum fidelem,  
ab eo sum monitus, ut secreta celem,  
et celi consilia nemini revelem.

Though Bonaventure’s account of how the Nominales got their name is surely a red herring, the Nominales do seem to have maintained the unity of propositional contents in the face of variations in tense. What we know of their views suggests, indeed, a simpler reason for their name than that offered by Bonaventure. They apparently held that accusative infinitive constructions may serve as names for what is signified by the corresponding propositional tokens. These nominalizations are called ‘quasi-names’ by Abaelard.

I think that we are safest, however, if we follow the Archpoet since as far as we know he had no philosophical axe to grind. Chenu’s association of the Nominales with the realist Bernard of Chartres is entirely untenable.

1 This is an extract from a much longer paper of the same title. In order to save space I have done away almost entirely with Part 1, condensed the argument in Part 2, and suppressed all but the barest textual references in the footnotes. I hope at some time to publish the paper in its entirety.
3 List of texts, 64a.
Just like today's anti-realists Abaelard derived conclusions about entailment and argument from ontology and philosophical semantics. Where today's anti-realists are intuitionists, however, Abaelard and the Nominales were connexivists. Connexive logic has as its leading idea that 'no proposition should imply or be implied by its own negation'. Since half of this principle is found in the Prior Analytics and is reported in de Syllogismo Hypothetico, it was bound to be acknowledged in some form by all dialecticians. Abaelard held that the most peculiarly proper principle of Nominalist logic followed from the basic connexive principle. This is the claim that conditionals whose antecedent and consequent differ in quality are false. To understand the character of Nominalist logic it is thus necessary to understand the nature of Abaelard's support for connexivism and in particular why he advocates this account of the conditional.

Abaelard's connexivism ultimately rests upon an ontology of individual forms and I so will begin with a very brief survey of this and its relationship to his theory of language. The main part of the paper explores Abaelard's theory of logical relations and its application by the Nominales. In particular I propose that they were probably the inventors of positio and that they rediscovered the Liar. I conclude with a discussion of two paradoxical claims made by his followers but not by Abaelard and some suggestions about the later history of the logic of the Nominales.

1. Abaelard's Ontology: A Very Brief Summary

The mediaeval problem of genus and species is not the same as the modern problem of universals. Mediaeval discussions concern a very limited range of predicates and have three distinct aspects, ontological, epistemological and semantical. We moderni, on the other hand, tend to be generous with respect to candidate predicates but to limit ourselves mainly to questions of ontology. A crucial difference is that two mediaevals might both have radically individualistic ontologies, or even the same ontology, but yet offer quite different resolutions of the problem of universals. Their different accounts of predication could easily allow each to abuse the other as a proponent of the sententia nominum or sententia rerum.