Peter Lombard and Abelard:
The Opinio Nominalium and Divine Transcendence

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This paper has a double inspiration. One is my own investigation of Peter Lombard’s doctrine of God, as part of a larger study of his theology. The second is the discovery, on the part of William J. Courtenay, following Artur Michael Landgraf, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and Johannes Schneider, of the fact that the Lombard appeals to an argument derived from the Nominales of the early twelfth century. Citing this argument, whose earliest expression he traces to Peter Abelard, Courtenay describes it as “the principal opinio Nominalium, namely, that whatever God at one time knew, willed, or was able to do, He always knows, wills, or is able to do. By the third quarter of the twelfth century, this theory had been reduced to the axiom: once it is true, it is always true (semel est verum, semper est verum).”¹ As Courtenay points out, this principle, stated in Abelard’s Theologia “scholarium”, rests on the idea that nouns have a unitary signification, although they also have other consignifications when they are used in propositions that include verbs in different tenses, voices, or moods. In the Theologia “scholarium”, Abelard uses this notion to support one of his most notorious ideas, the claim that God cannot do better, or other, than He does.²

There is another argument of the Nominales, mentioned in passing by Courtenay,³ to which Landgraf, Chenu, and Schneider called attention earlier, a parallel analysis of verbs. According to this view, a verb signifies two things, an action and the time when the action takes place. A single action is signified, irrespective of the time. The time is only a passing circumstance. It is a consignification which does not alter the proper signification of the verb. Thus, the nominalist maxim, semel est verum, semper est verum, can be applied just as easily to

¹ Courtenay 1990, 46. I have capitalized “He” in referring to the deity in this quotation for the sake of consistency.
² Ibid., 46-50.
³ Ibid., 46, 56 nn. 8, 12.
propositions stating actions as to propositions making statements about the things signified by nouns. As these earlier scholars note, the Lombard makes express reference to this nominalist argument concerning verbs in his treatment of God's power. For his part, Courtenay adds as well that the Lombard reprises Abelard's nominalist argument in his treatment of God's knowledge. As with Abelard, Courtenay observes, he uses it to defend God's immutability. At the same time, the Lombard turns the self-same argument against Abelard, in attacking his claim that God cannot do better or other than He does.

It is precisely the Lombard's appeal to this nominalist principle of the semantic unity of nouns and verbs and his concurrent anti-Abelardian application of it that I want to address in this paper. At first glance this looks like a paradox or inconsistency. But, I will argue, the Lombard's tactics are perfectly comprehensible in the light of the doctrine of God which he defends more generally, in the light of his views on what we can know about the divine nature, and in the light of how he sees the function of the *artes* in helping us to clarify our ideas in so doing. In this connection, what is at issue is not only the nominalistic understanding of nouns and verbs but also the type of logic which this understanding accompanies. As for the first point, the Lombard seeks to reclaim for western Christian thought a theology of divine transcendence. In this theology the deity is seen as absolute being, being as such, the supreme metaphysical reality. Man, according to Peter, can gain an understanding of this reality through metaphysical reasoning. He views the deity as utterly inexhaustible in Himself and as totally unconditioned and unbounded by His workings in the creation and man. At the same time, Peter's goal is to de-Platonize the nature of God. For him, God's actions are always free. They are never constrained, either by anything external to Him or by

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5 Courtenay 1990, 53-5.