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Where Does Material Essence Realism Come From? A Speculative Note on Anne Grondeux's Paper

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The occasion of Anne Grondeux's solid and parsimonious paper in the present volume is the occurrence of the phrase *omne genus materialis causa est suae speciei* ("every genus is the material cause of its species") in the *Glosulae in Priscianum Maiorem* (ad XVI.3) linked to William of Champeaux. The phrase immediately calls to mind the theory of material essence realism (MER), so called after an influential formula proposed by Martin Tweedale (1976). Tweedale's suggestion is based on a passage in Abelard's *Glosses on Porphyry*, where some realists with respect to universals are said to conceive of a universal as a thing (*res universalis*), described as the material essence (also called substance) present in each member of a species. This material essence is said to be one in itself, although diversified in individuals by subsequent forms (Abelard 1919, p. 10; see Tarlazzi 2018, p. 110, n. 6).

Tracing back Champeaux's phrase to its explicit source—namely Boethius' *De hypotheticis syllogismis* (I, iii)—and taking into account the only explicit quotation of the same treatise found in Abelard (Abelard 1933, p. 512) as well as its doctrinal context—namely the exposition of the position of those who acknowledge the existence of universal things—Grondeux concludes that Abelard probably made the connection between Champeaux's quotation of Boethius in the *Glosulae* and Champeaux's realism of universals. A conclusion that is at the same time highly plausible and characteristically careful. This short comment is an attempt to push that line one step further in order to see whether what Champeaux read in Boethius might have contributed to shape his conception of universals, and hence, MER. In that sense, what is aimed at in the following is a

speculative answer to the question "where does MER come from?" or, rather, "where might MER have come from?"

William of Champeaux's occasion for claiming that every genus is the material cause of its species is an intriguing example given by Priscian in his discussion of conjunctions in book XVI of the *Institutiones.* A conjunction is a part of discourse that joins other parts of discourse together; furthermore, a conjunction shows or expresses (*demonstrat*) *either* a power (*vis*)—when it signifies that some things exist at the same time, as in *et pius et fortis fuit Aeneas* ("Aeneas was at the same time brave and pious")—or a certain order (*ordinatio*)—when it shows or expresses a certain consequence of things (*consequentia rerum*), as in *si ambulat, movetur* ("if she walks, she moves"). Thus, conjunctions express relationships among things and, as it seems, those relationships can be either something like contingent coexistence (it happens that Aeneas is both brave and pious) or something like necessary entailment (things in the world are such that one cannot walk without moving). As Priscian observes, many of those relationships are causal. Thus, for example, the conjunction *enim* may express a cause of realisation (*causa effictionis*) as in *movetur, ambulat enim* ("she moves, for she is walking") (XVI.3).

William of Champeaux notes the (possibly) perturbing character of the example. He recalls that *enim* is called an "effective" conjunction (*effectiva*), meaning that what it is attached to is an effect and not a cause. But in the case at stake, walking seems to be a cause rather than an effect: one could indeed think that it is because one is walking that one is moving, so that the walking would cause the moving. However, this is not so, William explains, drawing on Boethius' authority: since, as Boethius says, a genus is the cause of its species (*causa enim speciei genus est*; *De syllogismis hypotheticis*, I, iii), and since walking is a species of the genus moving, "walking" does indeed express an effect and not a cause.

But still, one might want to object—*pace* Boethius and Champeaux—that it nonetheless makes good sense to say that walking is a cause of moving. It seems, then, that the (possibly) perturbing character of the example *movetur, ambulat enim* is due to the encounter of two types of causality. Walking causes moving in the sense that walking is a sufficient

condition for moving: if one walks, one necessarily moves. But moving causes walking in the sense that moving is a constituent of walking: walking is a kind of moving.

Now, since i) Priscian takes moving to be a cause and walking an effect—and Champeaux agrees—and ii) Champeaux justifies that claim with Boethius' thesis that a genus is the cause of its species, and finally iii) the type of causality Priscian seems to have in mind is one that holds between a constituent (i.e. the cause) and what is constitutes (i.e. the effect), Champeaux might have found in Priscian, or, for that matter, in his own interpretation of Priscian, the idea that a genus is a constituent of a species. Furthermore, since, according to Priscian, conjunctions express relationships among things, Champeaux might have found in Priscian, or again, in his own interpretation of Priscian, the idea that a genus is a *real* constituent (i.e. a constituting *res*) of the species. Provided that is correct, it shows that grammatical matters were possibly more than a mere occasion for Champeaux to develop his own metaphysics, for one can read Priscian—by himself, but even more in conjunction with Boethius—as reasoning on the background of a metaphysics that is akin to the one that will be associated with Champeaux, and in particular, with his MER.

But where does the word *materialis* in William's formula *omne genus materialis causa est suae speciei* come from? The term does not appear in Priscian, nor in Boethius in the relevant passages. An obvious and highly plausible source here is Porphyry's *Isagoge*. In the chapter on difference (III.10), one reads that since things in the world are composed of matter and form, or rather, are constituted in a way that resembles hylomorphic constitution (*rebus … ad similitudinem materiae specieique constitutionem habentibus…*), just as a statue has bronze as its matter and a certain shape or figure as its form, so the common human being (*homo communis*), i.e. the species, is constituted by a matter-like genus and a form-like difference.

In that chapter, and contrary to what Boethius will do later, Porphyry does not say anything about a causal relation holding between a genus and its species. However, the fact that he illustrates the cases of the constitution of things and species with the statue example suggests that Aristotle's

Physics was in the back of Porphyry's mind when he wrote that section of the *Isagoge*. We know that Porphyry wrote a (lost) commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* (Romano 1985). In *Physics* II, 3, 194b24–26, Aristotle introduces a first sense in which something is a cause, namely in the sense of "that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists," as, for example, "the bronze of the statue." Now if that passage in Aristotle did in fact motivate Porphyry to give the statue example in the *Isagoge*, one can speculate that what Porphyry had in mind was the idea of a genus being something akin to a material cause with respect to a species.

Thus, combining the elements found in Priscian, Boethius, Porphyry, and Aristotle, one can elaborate the following genetic scenario for William's MER: in Priscian, William found the idea that a constituent is the cause of what it constitutes (moving is the cause of walking, in that sense); in Boethius, William found the idea that a genus is the cause of its species; and in Porphyry (writing possibly under Aristotle's influence), William found the idea that the genus is a material constituent of the species. As the title of this short comment suggests, and as shown by the argument developed above, such a genetic scenario is highly speculative. It is not meant to prove anything—how could it?—but merely to follow a possibly fruitful line of thought directly inspired by Anne Grondeux's excellent paper.

Let me finish with a short remark on methodology. There is an ongoing discussion among historians of philosophy as to where one can legitimately look for relevant theoretical elements with respect to a given doctrinal question. The case of universals is paradigmatic in that respect. Firmly grounded in the prologue of the *Isagoge*, the pivotal doctrinal question in the case of universals is this: what are genera and species? But does that mean that relevant doctrinal elements to reconstruct and assess a given account of universals can only be legitimately taken from passages—typically *Isagoge* commentaries—explicitly raising that precise issue? To be sure, such passages will provide a highly relevant source, and they are the ones one should have a look at in the first place. However, as Anne Grondeux's paper demonstrates—and my speculative comment intends to show—it can also be fruitful to look for relevant

doctrinal elements in (relatively) exotic contexts, such as grammatical discussions, as in the present case, and the same argument can be made for quite a number of other doctrinal fields (theology, physics, law, biology, etc.) The lesson, I take it, is this: just as it is necessary to begin by looking at the direct exposition or development of a given theory, it would be a pity to discard in advance exotic contexts displaying promising signs.

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