

PETER ABELARD'S METAPHYSICS OF THE INCARNATION

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine Abelard's model of the incarnation and place it within the wider context of his views in metaphysics and logic. In particular, we consider whether Abelard has the resources to solve the major difficulties faced by the so-called "compositional models" of the incarnation, such as his own. These difficulties include: the requirement to account for Christ's unity as a single person, despite being composed of two concrete particulars; the requirement to allow that Christ is identical with the pre-existent Son, despite the fact that the pre-existent Son is a (proper) part of the incarnate Christ; and finally the requirement to avoid Nestorianism, i.e., the position that Christ's proper parts are persons in their own right. We argue that Abelard does have adequate solutions to these problems. In particular, we show that his theories of relations and predication can be put to use in defence of a compositional account of the incarnation.

Introduction

While Abelard's accounts of the Trinity and the atonement have been much investigated, it is surprising that his account of the incarnation has not received the same attention, since there is much textual evidence that the problem exercised him as a metaphysician just as much as a theologian.

The most fundamental problem of the incarnation, within the mainstream Chalcedonian tradition, is explaining how a single person can be fully divine and fully human, without compromising the unity of the individual; how a single person can have two "natures," and indeed what a "nature" actually is. By Abelard's day, a wide range

of models had been suggested, and even more were developed later. A broad but useful way of classifying them on the basis of the metaphysical assumptions in play is to distinguish between those we call “identity models,” which posit only one property-bearer in Christ, and those we call “relational models,” which posit two.¹ One variety of relational models are the so-called “compositional models.” Such models are built on two main assumptions: that Christ’s divinity and his humanity are concrete particulars,² and that Christ is the composite of these two concrete particulars, which are somehow internally related within him.

Abelard is a particularly interesting proponent of the compositional model of the incarnation. In some ways he offers its very archetype. By greatly emphasising Christ’s composite status and making this the most fundamental and distinctive feature of his model of the incarnation, Abelard makes the challenge of reconciling composition and resulting oneness in Christ even harder than some his predecessors had done.

In this paper, we examine Abelard’s model of the incarnation and place it within the wider context of his views in metaphysics and logic, for which he was well known in the Middle Ages and is still prominent in the history of philosophy.³ In particular, we consider whether Abelard has the resources to solve the major difficulties that compositional models face: the requirement to account for Christ’s unity as a single person, despite being composed of two concrete particulars; the requirement to allow that Christ is identical with the pre-existent Son, despite the fact that the pre-existent Son is a (proper) part of the incarnate Christ; and the requirement to avoid Nestorianism, i.e., the position that Christ’s proper parts are persons in their own right. We argue that adequate solutions to these problems can be reconstructed from Abelard’s texts. In particular, we show that his theories of relations and predication play important roles in defending a compositional account of the incarnation. A fundamental element of this defence is the distinction Abelard introduces between *proprie* and *improprie* predication, where the latter allows the transference of properties from God the Son (the divine nature) to Jesus (the human nature) and vice versa, and from both to the composite Christ.

A preliminary note on the texts from which we draw evidence for the account we will argue for: the most important texts in which

Abelard addresses the problem of the incarnation in his *Expositio symboli apostolorum*, his *Theologia Christiana*, written during his Paraclete period in the 1120s, and his *Theologia* “*Scholarium*” (also known as the *Introductio ad theologiam* or *Theologia*), written perhaps ten years later and partly based upon the *Theologia Christiana*.⁴ Of these, the authenticity of the *Expositio* is disputed, being sometimes attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux. In this paper, we adopt the majority view that the *Expositio* is by Abelard. We argue that a single coherent model of the incarnation may be found in all three of these works—as well as several others which we cite less extensively—and this in itself may be evidence for Abelard’s authorship of that text. If in fact the *Expositio* is inauthentic, the case for our attribution of this model to Abelard is not greatly diminished, as no key element of our interpretation depends upon that text alone. More generally, the same model of the incarnation can be found throughout Abelard’s writings, from different periods of his career; we do not detect any notable progression or development or change of the model from the earlier works to the later ones.⁵

The Outlines of Abelard’s Account of the Incarnation

One of Abelard’s clearest statements of his understanding of the incarnation is the following:

For even though, in accordance with his divinity, [Christ] was begotten solely by the Father, and in accordance with his humanity he was born solely from his mother; and one thing is the nature of God, another thing is the nature of man, one thing is divinity, another thing is humanity; there is only one person in Christ, consisting of two natures.⁶

Here, Abelard makes it evident that, in his view, Christ’s divinity and his humanity are two different (*alia*) natures; nevertheless, Christ is one individual (*una persona*). Elsewhere, he writes:

Surely the substance or nature which is assumed is different from the one which assumes, even if they aren’t different persons. . . . For . . . in Christ there are two substances, that is the divine and the human ones, but a single person consisting of two substances or natures.⁷

Abelard here is even more explicit that the two natures are distinct from each other, and the justification given here is that one is assumed

(*assumpta*) and the other does the assuming (*assumens*).⁸ Moreover, Abelard characterises each as “substance or nature” (*substantia vel natura*).⁹ An accurate grasp of the meaning of this expression is crucial to understanding Abelard’s position. It is well established in the literature that *substantia* is used by Abelard to refer to a concrete particular (an Aristotelian substance rather than an Aristotelian substantial form), and this is very much in line with Abelard’s general metaphysical views, which Peter King puts succinctly like this:

Abelard holds that the concrete individual, in all its richness and variety, is more than enough to populate the world. . . . He defends his thesis that universals are nothing but words by arguing that ontological realism about universals is incoherent. More exactly, he holds that there cannot be any real object in the world satisfying [Aristotle’s and] Boethius’s criteria for the universal, namely something present as a whole in many at once so as to constitute their substance (i.e. to make the individual in which it is present what it is). (King 2008)

The fact that Abelard thinks of the two natures of Christ as concrete particulars also comes across in his occasional use of the term “thing” (*res*) to refer to them. Abelard calls Christ “two things” (*duae res*).¹⁰ He tells us that in the incarnation, God the Son, or the divine *res*, becomes united to another “thing of another nature” (*rem alterius naturae*), that is a human *res*:

Indeed, in accordance with this union of the person, when God is said to have become man or when it is granted that he will be something different from what he was at first, this is to be understood [as derived] not from a change of nature but from the union in one person [of two natures], namely because God will unite to himself a man to make up a single person and he will bring together with himself in this union a thing of a different nature.¹¹

Christ is said to be the result of the composition (*unionem; sibi . . . conjunxerit; sibi sociaverit*) of two concrete particulars (*res*) into a single *persona*; he has in this sense two constituent parts.¹²

An important commitment Abelard makes in the passages we have seen so far is that the two constituent parts of Christ are of equal ontological status. They are both *res*: they are the same type of entity. Lauge Nielsen sees their common ontological status as grounded in

the fact that they are both fully determinate *qua* concrete particulars, commenting that “Abelard in his interpretation of nature as substance or *res* has arrived at a determination which in his eyes is common to God and man” (Nielsen 1982, 218).¹³ We share this interpretation, and see Abelard’s position as plausibly derived from Aristotle’s *Categories*, where one of the distinctive features of the individuals falling under the category of substance is precisely full determination (in quality, quantity, state, etc.).¹⁴

To this extent, Abelard’s model of the incarnation is distinct from, and more radically compositional than, models which stress the ontological difference between the two components of Christ and hence lend themselves perhaps more naturally to dependency relations between the two components.¹⁵

The picture that emerges so far, then, is that Abelard holds that the two natures are quite literally two particulars, of equal ontological status, which are concrete parts of Christ. But Abelard has now to explain how on his account the two concrete parts make up one single individual.

Crucially, Abelard posits that the divine nature is “assumens” and the human nature is “assumptus.”¹⁶ Following on from the first passage quoted above (p. 29), he writes:

[E]ven though the Word which assumed man is different in nature from the man who is assumed, and there are not two Christs—[one] assuming and [the other] assumed—but one Christ only.¹⁷

So the composition of two substances in Christ is to be understood in terms of “assumption”: one substance, the divine nature, assumes the other, the human nature. Abelard sheds light on the nature of the relation of assumption by means of an analogy, that of grafting. He writes:

For the shoot too, grafted onto the trunk of a different nature, gives the whole tree its own nature’s name, as when an oak is grafted on a fig, the whole tree is called oak, and not fig, that is, as the tree is to be called by the name of the nobler part which bears fruit, so it is to be known too by its fruits.¹⁸

This analogy illustrates an important aspect of Abelard’s account of the incarnation which we have already stressed. For Abelard, to say that Christ unites a human nature to a divine one is to say that Christ

is composed of two concrete particulars of different kinds, each of which bears its own set of properties. Abelard's statement of the position is in line with the Chalcedonean creed: in Christ there are two united but not compromised natures:

The spiritual nature which is united to our corporeal nature was prior, and now too as before it persists as spiritual nature and *does not become corporeal*.¹⁹

So the divine part of Christ and his human part are different in properties—as we said earlier, they have each their own nature. But that does not tell us how these different properties, borne by the parts, may be ascribed to the whole.

Abelard uses his grafting analogy to fill in precisely this gap. He draws our attention to the fact that when one tree is grafted onto another, *we call* the resulting compound by the name of the “nobler” (i.e., the assuming) one: thus, if an oak is grafted onto a fig, the resulting tree is referred to as an oak.

The analogy thus explains why Christ is generally referred to as divine rather than as human: *in our minds* the divinity tends to overpower the humanity. The emphasis is on a *nominal*, rather than real, union of the two natures. Throughout the passage where the grafting analogy is offered, Abelard uses vocabulary of calling or naming: *vocabitur*, *vocari*, *dicitur*, and so on; the human person of Christ “will be called, rather than will be” (*vocabitur, potius quam erit*) the Son of God. Importantly, Abelard also adds in the relevant passage that the human person is called the Son of God in a qualified way (*non incongrue dicitur*). We will come back to explaining the precise meaning of this.

Composition of Natures

But what sort of union does Christ, the compound resulting from the assumption by one nature of the other, have? Abelard begins developing an account of it while addressing the problem of how God the Son could become man without losing his divinity, i.e., without changing in nature.

An orthodox account of the incarnation requires the incarnate Christ to be identical with the pre-incarnate Son; Abelard recogn-

ises the importance of this requirement.²⁰ Let us call it the *identity requirement*.

Lauge Nielsen argues that the passages in which Abelard adheres to the identity requirement cannot be understood in a straightforward way, because Abelard equivocates on the term “person”:

[W]e must first observe that it is fundamental to Abelard’s theology of the Trinity that the divine persons are not persons in the same way as created human persons. For this reason there is according to Abelard no definition for “person” which is common to created and uncreated beings. It is therefore hardly probable that Abelard’s meaning . . . is that Christ as God and man and as person is quite simply identical with the second person in the Trinity. It would be more natural to suppose that Abelard’s meaning is that Christ is God and thus as the Word is the second person in the Trinity. (Nielsen 1982, 219–20)

But this is an inadequate explanation, for two main reasons. The first is that Abelard does not appeal to the multiplicity of meanings of “person” in the relevant contexts. The second, and more fundamental, is that the problem facing Abelard, and anyone trying to understand his texts on this subject, does not revolve around the meaning of “person.” All that is stipulated by the identity requirement is that the whole incarnate Christ be numerically identical with the pre-incarnate Son, and the problem arises from the fact that, on a composite model such as Abelard’s, the pre-incarnate Son is a proper part of the whole incarnate Christ. Whether any of these entities are referred to as “persons” or not, and what we mean by “person,” have no bearing on the problem. Even if we say that the pre-incarnate Son is a “person” in one sense of the term, and the composite Christ is a “person” in another sense of the term, that will not help us to explain how a composite entity can be identified with one of its proper parts. The problem, then, remains unresolved.

Richard Weingart offers another possible reconstruction of Abelard’s position, which seeks to explain how he can uphold the identity requirement. According to Weingart, Abelard in fact does not hold a composition account at all—at least, not so consistently and thoroughly as we have suggested (1970, 112, 114).²¹ The identity of the pre-incarnate Son with the incarnate Christ is Abelard’s starting point,

and the question that troubles him is how to account on this basis for the incarnate Christ's duality of natures.²² Although one might find in Abelard's writings some weak support for such an interpretation, there is, as we have seen, overwhelming textual evidence that Abelard does hold a compositional account of the incarnation. Weingart's claim runs directly against the passages (some of which we have already looked at) where for Abelard the incarnate Christ is a *totum* resulting from the union of two natures.²³ And even Weingart himself acknowledges this textual evidence (1970, 112). It thus seems that Weingart's defence of Abelard on the question of the identity requirement really boils down to a mere unjustified assertion: although Abelard regards the Son as constituting only a proper part of the incarnate Christ, *nevertheless* he also regards the Son as identical with the incarnate Christ. But in the absence of any explanation of how Abelard is in a position to make such an identity claim, this is little better than an attribution to Abelard of outright inconsistency.

Of the two suggestions made by Lauge and Weingart, we find Weingart's more fruitful to explore—but we have reasons to offer why Abelard's position is not inconsistent and can be justified metaphysically.

Our reconstruction of Abelard's position on the identity requirement focuses, like Weingart's, on Abelard's claim that in becoming incarnate God the Son was not literally transformed into a human being. Rather, he was *joined to* a human being. We have already seen the following passage, which makes this clear:

Indeed, in accordance with this union of the person, when God is said to have become man or when it is granted that he will be something different from what he was at first, this is to be understood [as derived] not from a change of nature but from the union in one person [of two natures], namely because God will unite to himself a man to make up a single person and he will bring together with himself in this union a thing of a different nature.²⁴

In the incarnation God the Son becomes *related* to Jesus' soul and body, and in virtue of this the Son acquires true humanity.²⁵ But to become human for him is not to be transformed into a human; it is not to undergo a change in his own properties. How are we to make sense of this? We want to suggest that the pivotal metaphysical tenet

on which Abelard's position on the incarnation rests is to be found in his very interesting theory of relations. We endorse here the account that Jeffrey Brower gives of it, which we first briefly present; we then show how it offers a way of accounting for the incarnation that fulfills all the requirements Abelard has set out.²⁶

Consider two individuals, Simmias and Socrates. Simmias is taller than Socrates. The mainstream way of accounting for this in contemporary metaphysics is to posit, in Brower's words, "an entity to which both Simmias and Socrates are somehow jointly attached (namely, the dyadic or two place property *being-taller-than*)" (1998, 606). But, Brower argues on the basis of textual evidence to be found in the *Logica ingredientibus*,²⁷ this is not the way Abelard (and other medieval thinkers in the Aristotelian tradition) account for it. For Abelard, the relation "is to be explained [solely] by a pair of ordinary heights—say, *being-six-feet-tall* in the case of Simmias and *being-five-feet-ten* in the case of Socrates" (1998, 607). The mere instantiation of Simmias's and Socrates' heights necessitates that the relation "being taller than" holds between them. In more general terms:

Abelard takes relations to be dependent beings—that is beings that depend for their existence upon the existence of other characteristics. . . . [R]elations are dependent in the sense that they are necessitated by the exemplification of certain other characteristics. (Brower 1998, 618–19)

On Brower's account,²⁸ Abelard holds a reductive theory of relations whose central point is that *there is (ontologically) nothing to a relation* over and above the non-relational properties in virtue of which something is in a relation with something else.

We want now to argue for the importance of Abelard's theory of relations for his explanation of how the Son could become human *without change*.

We have seen that, for Abelard, "relations" and "relational properties" can be reduced to the monadic properties of the related objects; that is, the instantiation of the relevant monadic properties is sufficient to account for their being related—it is all there is to it. Applying this to the incarnation, for Abelard, *for the Son to become incarnate* is nothing other than for the Son to *become related* to a human being.²⁹ In virtue of such a relation, the Son can be *called* human (we will

discuss this point further in the next section). But the relation is an ontologically free lunch:³⁰ it is nothing over and above the *relata* and their monadic properties. When the Son becomes incarnate, he does not change or undergo any metaphysical modification at all. Thus, the incarnate Christ just straightforwardly *is* the pre-incarnate Son. The identity requirement is therefore met.³¹

We can now see how Abelard is in a position to make some key claims:

Thus as soul and flesh mutually united in one single person persist distinct in their own natures, so that *the one in no way changes into the other*—otherwise they would in no way be called two things—divinity is united to humanity in this way too. . . . The spiritual nature which is united to our corporeal nature was prior, and now too *as before it persists as spiritual nature and does not become corporeal*.³²

Also, crucially, from the account just given it follows that when God the Son becomes incarnate no new entity is formed. There is no “Christ” over and above the Son and the human being to which he becomes related, although being related, they make up a *totum*. Abelard’s resulting account of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ is very much in line with his general nominalism, as we have already noted in analysing the grafting analogy, and with what we have already seen about Abelard’s account of property ascription to Christ. That contrasts with more “robust” metaphysical accounts which do posit that real changes are brought about in the incarnation, the most extreme examples being kenotic christologies, which hold that the Son actually loses essential divine properties to accommodate his new human ones.³³

Predication and Inconsistent Properties

The nominalist approach described so far also allows Abelard to address one of the main issues in the metaphysics of the incarnation, namely how Christ can bear apparently contradictory properties. Christ, according to orthodoxy, is both divine and human, but there are certain essential properties of divinity that are incompatible with certain essential properties of humanity. For example, what it is to be divine includes being a-temporal, but what it is to be human includes

being temporal. The problem is how to ascribe both properties to the one Christ without inconsistency.³⁴

Abelard is clear that it is Christ's parts—his human nature and his divine nature—that are temporal and eternal respectively. There is no contradiction in this. The contradiction arises only if *one and the same* property-bearer bears these inconsistent properties; but on Abelard's model there is no metaphysically robust and unified subject to bear them. Abelard writes:

We say that the Lord Jesus Christ in accordance with his human nature has had a beginning, but that in accordance to his divine nature he is eternal.³⁵

When we talk about Christ, we can “distribute” (at least some of) the properties that pertain to each of his parts across the whole Christ. This distribution is not indiscriminate, however. Abelard seeks to lay down some sort of principles governing what one is justified to say about Christ:

When Christ is properly (*proprie*) said to be at the same time God and man, this is three things together, each of which with its distinct own nature, namely the Word, the human soul, and the flesh; however, for the sake of making clear the union of such different natures in a person in Christ, often we intermingle the terms so that we mention now the Word, now the soul, now only the flesh; and sometimes we attribute features that are properly God's to a man or vice versa.³⁶

Abelard points out that some properties may be “properly said” (*proprie dicatur*) of the composite, while others are properly associated either with one constituent or with the other, and cannot be transferred to the other constituent or to the composite.³⁷ For example, he comments:

God, however, is not a corporeal thing; neither does he consist of parts in such a way that he can come apart. Thus God properly speaking mustn't be said to be flesh or man. Otherwise conversely man would have to be said properly speaking to be God.³⁸

So while the properties of being human or being bodily may properly be attributed to Christ's human part, Abelard denies that they may be properly predicated of Christ as a whole. “God is man” is not a *proprie* predication. Yet the very possibility of the incarnation requires that

it is not a false predication either. Abelard conceives of three types of property-ascription:³⁹

1. *Proprie* ascriptions, such as “The Son is divine.”
2. *Improprie* ascriptions, such as “The Son is human.”
3. *False* ascriptions, such as “Peter is divine.”

Types (1) and (3) are straightforward. Abelard sometimes uses the term *incongrue* to express falsity; its contrary, *non incongrue* covers both (1) and (2). An ascription can thus be *improprie* without being *incongrue*.

Distinguishing type (2) from the others is not so easy. Abelard does not offer an account of the three types of property ascriptions—which can only be reconstructed from how he uses them. Nielsen, for example, gives one suggestion for how we should understand type (2): he takes *improprie* to be synonymous with *figurative*, following Abelard’s own use of the term *figurative* (in passages such as *Theologia Christiana* IV.44, noted above). If *improprie* means simply “figurative,” it would be natural to take *proprie* to mean “literal,” that is, “not figurative” (Nielsen 1982, 220–21). Nielsen explains:

That a statement is figurative . . . mean[s] . . . merely that its meaning is not immediately intelligible from the wording, since there is no essential agreement between the objects to which, respectively, the subject term and the predicate term refers. (Nielsen 1982, 221)

But this is not, in itself, explicatory. If, in the case of an *improprie* ascription, “there is no essential agreement” between the subject and the predicate, what sort of agreement is there?

We suggest instead thinking of a *proprie* ascription as being made in virtue of what the thing itself is, and an *improprie* ascription as being made indirectly; in virtue of something different from what the thing itself is, e.g., one of its accidents. For example, Socrates is *proprie* said to be rational and *improprie* white when his hair turns white. In the case of Christ, the Son is *proprie* said to be divine, because it is in his own nature to be divine. But it is not in his own nature to be human. Hence, he is *improprie* said to be human, in virtue of the human nature to which he is united. The ascription is indirect, but nevertheless legitimate. Similarly, properties that belong to its parts can ascribed *improprie* to the whole; they belong to the whole in virtue

of belonging to one of its parts. (This is the case, for example, in the grafting analogy examined above, where the resulting tree is called by the name of its nobler part.)

If this is right, Abelard's position is very much in line with Aristotle's distinction between what a thing is in itself (*kath' auto* or *per se*) and what a thing is in virtue of something else (*kath' allo*); and his *proprie*-predication maps onto Aristotle's *per se*-predication. In *Metaphysics* V 18, Aristotle specifies that something may be predicated of a subject *per se* if it belongs to it in virtue of its essence.⁴⁰ For example, all triangles have angles that add up to two right-angles, and nothing that is not a triangle has this feature. Having angles that add up to two right-angles, then, is a property that any given triangle has through its own nature, and it has this property *per se*.⁴¹

Abelard did not have access to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, so he could not have based his account of *proprie* predication upon Aristotle's account of *per se* predication. Nevertheless, there is a strong similarity between them. As we have seen, Abelard holds that some attributes, e.g., being eternal, are predicated of the Son in virtue of his divinity. He bears this property in virtue of his divine nature, which is identical with the Son. So this is said of him *proprie*, because it is said of him in virtue of himself. That seems to correspond very closely to Aristotle's understanding of *per se* predication in the sense described above. Other attributes, according to Abelard, may be predicated of the Son in virtue of his humanity. For example, he is a man. He bears this property in virtue of his human nature, which is *not* identical with the Son. So this is said of him *improprie*, because it is said of him in virtue of something which is not himself, but to which he relates. So in the case of Christ, the distinction between *proprie* and *improprie* attributions may be identified with the distinction between attributions that are made in virtue of a nature which is identical with the subject and attributions that are made in virtue of a nature which is not identical with the subject but only related to it.

In sum, then, Abelard holds a sophisticated compositional theory of the incarnation, according to which Christ is composed of a divine nature and a human nature, these two being conceived as concrete particulars and parts of Christ. They are united in virtue of God the Son entering in a relation with a human being, but without undergo-

ing any real change; in this way the immutability of the divine nature is preserved. Moreover, the two parts have their own properties, but these properties may also be ascribed to the composite, Christ, either *proprie* or *improprie*. The distinction between *proprie* and *improprie* predication is the breakthrough that allows Abelard to save the adequacy of the compositional approach and show how it is compatible with traditional, orthodox language about Christ.

Two Natures, Two Persons?

When the bishops at Chalcedon stated that Christ's two natures were united "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation," the first two stipulations were intended to proscribe Eutycheanism, while the final two were aimed at Nestorianism. They went on to specify that the natures were not "parted or separated into two persons." Regardless of whether Nestorius himself actually taught this or anything like it, the claim that Christ's two natures constitute distinct persons, united only accidentally or by conjunction rather than true hypostatic union, is known as Nestorianism.

Merely distinguishing between the two natures of Christ does not, in itself, entail Nestorianism; only if the human nature is characterised in such a way that it constitutes a person by itself does Nestorianism follow. But from what we have seen, Abelard seems vulnerable to the charge that he does precisely this. He appears to conceive of Christ not as a single person who is both divine and human—rather, there are a divine person and a human person, who are quite distinct from each other, in some way related or teamed up.⁴²

Is Abelard committed to the view that Christ's human nature constitutes a person distinct from his divine nature?²⁴³ Certainly he explicitly rejects such a conclusion, stressing that the duality of Christ's natures does not entail a duality of persons.⁴⁴ But can he say this and remain consistent with what he says elsewhere? For example, there is evidence that Abelard appears to conceive of the divine and human natures in Christ as *agents*, that is, subjects of personal actions, which seems at least to suggest strongly that they are persons. For example, when he considers whether Christ could have sinned, he poses the question as "whether the man in Christ (*homo in Christo*), united to divinity, could lie or sin."⁴⁵ The wording of the question is important:

not only does this formulation seem *prima facie* explicitly Nestorian in itself, but being able to sin is the sort of property that *persons*, i.e., concrete individuals, have. The very fact that the question can be asked suggests that Abelard conceives of the human nature as a person.

Nielsen gives further causes of concern. He comments that, for Abelard, it is not simply the case that the two natures are subjects—they are the *primary* subjects in Christ. The composite Christ is a subject *only* in a secondary or derivative kind of way. Nielsen writes:

Abelard's analysis of statements relating to Christ, based on the distinction *proprie-improprie*, presuppose that the subject relationship should be congruent with the nature relationship, so that the subject should basically follow the substance, or, in other words: Abelard . . . considers the parts to be the primary subjects. (Nielsen 1982, 222)

Nielsen does not spell out precisely what he means by “primary subjects,” or what it means to say that Christ’s natures (according to Abelard) are “the” primary subjects in Christ. But the implication is that the properties of the secondary subject supervene upon the properties of the primary subject. That is, any property which the secondary subject may bear, it bears only in virtue of some property (or properties) borne by the primary subjects. In this way, on Nielsen’s interpretation, Abelard can hold that Christ still retains in some derivative sense subject-hood (and hence agency) and avoid the Nestorian charge:

This does not, however, mean that Abelard does not consider the incarnate person as being a subject for the actions and the passions of his two natures, but merely that the person as a subject is identical with his parts inasmuch as the parts are immediate subjects, whereas the person is only a subject to the extent that the union between the parts creating the person exists. (Nielsen 1982, 222)

In articulating his interpretation, Nielsen appeals to Abelard’s discussion of the fact that properties which are attributed directly to the parts of Christ (or to the parts of a human being) may be attributed indirectly to the whole Christ (or to the whole human being).⁴⁶ But while this is, in our view too, an accurate interpretation of Abelard, it is at best a weak defence against the charge of Nestorianism. Even if it is true that the composite Christ is a subject, if this subjecthood is dependent upon the subjecthood of his parts, then the Nestorian

problem remains. For the Nestorian charge derives from the fact that Christ's parts are characterised as persons, not from any supposed lack of personhood on the part of the composite Christ.

The way Abelard seems to address the issue is by invoking the principle that a person cannot be a part of a person as its larger whole. For example, a human soul is a rational substance, but it is not a person, *because it is joined* to a human body: the composite is a person. Similarly, in Christ, the human nature is such a part, so it too is not a person.⁴⁷ Abelard appeals explicitly to this reasoning when he writes:

Hence divinity united to humanity in Christ must not be said to be a single person in itself, and humanity another person, but the two together are a single person, who properly speaking is called Christ.⁴⁸

One might justify Abelard's statements on the assumption that personhood is associated with playing the active role of "assuming," which we discussed above. Just as the soul and the body in an ordinary human being are both parts of him but do not play similar roles *as* parts, the same thing holds with Christ's natures. Only one of them is a person, because once they are conjoined, their metaphysical roles within the compound are different. The person is the divine nature or Son, which (as we have seen) Abelard holds is identical with Christ as a whole. Also, Abelard does not think that the human being Jesus existed before the union. On these grounds, he could consistently deny that the human nature in Christ is a person, while also hold that the divine nature is a person.

Conclusion

Abelard's metaphysical genius is unmistakably displayed in his account of the incarnation. The model he offers is complex and subtle, and very much in line with his general nominalist views. In particular, his theory of the nature of relations and his theory of the different kinds of predication allow him to avoid many of the weaknesses traditionally associated with compositional models. Whether or not he does so successfully from a theological point of view is not for us to say, but as we have shown, the course of his arguments sheds a great deal of light on his metaphysical positions.⁴⁹

Notes

1. As we have argued elsewhere (Marmodoro and Hill 2009, 101).
2. This claim places compositional models within the category of “concretist” accounts of the incarnation. Such accounts conceive of Christ’s natures as concrete particulars rather than as sets of properties (as “abstractist” accounts do). See Plantinga 1999, 183–84; and Leftow 2002, 277–79.
3. On both Abelard’s past philosophical obscurity and the current revival of interest in his work, see Marenbon 2006, 331–34. Peter King speaks with no hesitation of his “genius,” and accounts for his fame like this: “Abelard’s metaphysics is the first great example of nominalism in the Western tradition. While his view that universals are mere words (*nomina*) justifies the label, nominalism—or, better, irrealism—is the hallmark of Abelard’s entire metaphysics” (King 2008).
4. On the chronology and dating of Abelard’s works, see Mews 1985, which, although primarily concerned with Abelard’s *Dialectica* and *Dialogus*, relates them to his other works within the context of his career, and gives a summary of the dating of all of Abelard’s works (Mews 1985, 130–32). Mews gives a similar summary later (Mews 1987, 20–23).
5. In this paper, we cite Abelard’s theological works in the edition by J.-P. Migne in vol. 178 of the *Patrologia Latina*. Citations to this edition are given in the standard form of PL followed by column numbers and sections. Where later critical editions exist, we cite them too: the Corpus Christianorum (Continuatio Mediaevalis) editions (Buytaert et al. 1969–), in the form CC followed by volume and page numbers; and De Santis (2002), in the form S followed by page numbers. We also cite Abelard’s *Logica ingredientibus* in the edition by B. Geyer (1919–1933), in the form G followed by page and line numbers.
6. “Quamvis enim secundum divinitatem ex solo Patre sit genitus, et secundum humanitatem ex sola matre sit natus, aliaque sit natura Dei, alia hominis; aliud sit divinitas aliud humanitas; una tamen est in Christo persona, in duabus naturis consistens.” *Expositio symboli apostolorum* PL 624b, our translation (as in all the quotations below).
7. “Alia quippe est substantia vel natura quae assumpta est, quam assumens, licet non sit alia persona . . . [E]nim . . . ita econtrario in Christo duae substantiae sunt, humana scilicet ac divina, sed una in duabus substantiis vel naturis persona.” *Theologia “Scholarium”* III.78 CC XIII 533; PL 1108a, our italics.
8. We will come back later to the nature of the relation of “assumption.”
9. The *vel* here introduces a complementary and explicative concept after the first one mentioned.
10. *Theologia “Scholarium”* III.75 CC XIII 532; PL 1107a.
11. “Secundum quam quidem unionem personae, cum Deus homo factus dicitur aut aliud quam primitus fuerit esse conceditur, non hoc ex mutatione substantiae sed ex unitate personae intelligendum est, quia videlicet Deus hominem sibi in unam personam conjunxerit et rem alterius naturae in hanc unionem sibi sociaverit.” *Theologia “Scholarium”* III.81 CC XIII 534; PL 1108c–d.
12. We follow the convention in discussions of this topic of using “parts” in a philosophically rather loose sense, to refer to the constituents of Christ.

13. Nielsen also relates this claim, that in Christ divinity and humanity fall into the same category and have (in some sense) equal ontological status, to Abelard's use of the body-soul analogy, which we investigate below. Nielsen argues that Abelard's prior commitment to the similar ontological status of Christ's two natures is required for his use of this analogy.
14. Like other Latin-speaking scholars of the twelfth century, the only works of Aristotle to which Abelard had access were the *Categories* and *De interpretatione*. Together with Porphyry's *Isagoge*—an introduction to the *Categories*—and Boethius's commentaries on the two Aristotelian works and Porphyry, and his own original writings on the subject, these formed the bedrock of twelfth-century logic. See Marenbon 2004, 21–22.
15. We can distinguish between compositional models which accord the components equal ontological status and those which do not, as we have argued elsewhere (Marmodoro and Hill 2010, 472–86). Bonaventure, for example, proposed a model that, like Abelard's, conceived of Christ as composed of two concrete particulars, but he stressed the difference between them to the extent that they fall under quite different metaphysical categories. According to Bonaventure, Christ's humanity is (or at least acts like) an accident rather than a substance. See Cross 2002, 78–81.
16. *Theologia "Scholarium"* III.78 CC XIII 533; PL 1108a. See above, pp. 29–30.
17. "Quamvis aliud sit in natura Verbum quod hominem assumpsit, quam homo ipse assumptus; nec duo sunt Christi, assumens et assumptus, sed unus Christus." *Expositio symboli apostolorum* PL 624b.
18. "Nam et surculus trunco alterius naturae insertus toti arbori propriae naturae confert vocabulum: ut si aesculus coctano inseritur, aesculus, non coctanus tota arbor dicitur a digniori scilicet parte quae fructum affert ita nominanda, sicut et ex fructu suo cognoscenda." *Sermo* 1 M 386c. However, the analogy works only if we think of a sort of graft hybrid, where the resulting plant contains tissues of both parents' kinds and keeps producing foliage and fruits of two kinds. Ordinary cases of grafting would not serve as a good analogy because the nature of the two parents is compromised and changed.
19. "Prius autem spiritualis substantia erat quae corporeae nostrae conjuncta est, nunc quoque sicut prius spiritualis permanet, non corporea facta est." *Theologia "Scholarium"* III.75 CC XIII 532; PL 1106d–1107a. The insistence that Christ's two natures are not "mixed" was a common element of late ancient and medieval writing on the incarnation, going back to the definition of Chalcedon. Its target was the Monophysites and their claim that Christ had only a single nature, which was both divine and human.
20. See, for example, *Expositio symboli apostolorum* PL 622c; *Theologia Christiana* IV.66 CC XII 295; PL 1281a.
21. Weingart even suggests that Abelard's commitment to the identity requirement causes him to over-stress Christ's divinity at the expense of his humanity, although he thinks Abelard is still largely orthodox on this matter (Weingart 1970, 105, 109).

22. Weingart comments: “Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Abailard pertinaciously confesses the divinity of Christ. . . . [H]e regards the divine consubstantiality of Jesus Christ as the *sine qua non* of the christological affirmation” (Weingart 1970, 98).
23. Abelard refers to Christ as the *persona tota* or simply the *totum*: “That man, who is united to the Word of God into one person, was assumed, and the resulting whole (*totum*) is Jesus Christ.” *Sermo* 2.8 S 184; PL 394d
24. “Secundum quam quidem unionem personae, cum Deus homo factus dicitur aut aliud quam primitus fuerit esse conceditur, non hoc ex mutatione substantiae sed ex unitate personae intelligendum est, quia videlicet Deus hominem sibi in unam personam conjunxerit et rem alterius naturae in hanc unionem sibi sociaverit.” *Theologia “Scholarium”* III.81 CC XIII 534; PL 1108c–d.
25. Appealing to Christ’s human soul as a guarantee of his true humanity was a standard trope in Christian theology ever since the late fourth century and the condemnation of Apollinarius of Laodicea, who denied that Christ had a human soul at all.
26. Abelard did not explicitly bring his account of relations to bear on the question of the incarnation; we make this connection, thereby using Abelard’s own metaphysics to support his position on the incarnation.
27. *LI*, 216–17 quoted, translated, and analysed in Brower 1998, 611.
28. We cannot enter here into the reasons Brower puts forward to motivate this interpretation of Abelard; see Brower 1998, 622–23.
29. This is a point of disanalogy with the grafting case seen above, where the relation unifying the fig and the oak is internal to the oak.
30. This is the expression, borrowed from D. M. Armstrong, that Brower uses to describe relations for Abelard (Brower 1998, 621).
31. *Theologia “Scholarium”* III.70–71 CC XIII 529–30; PL 1105d. Abelard’s theory of relations also allows him to address a related theological worry. The Son, being divine, has no location to start with. But it might seem that becoming human would involve a change in this respect—from being un-located in space to being located in space. Abelard denies such a conclusion. The Son’s human body is located in space, and the Son is only related to it in such a way that does not involve real change.
32. “Sicut ergo anima et caro in unam ad invicem conjunctae personam in propriis naturis sic discretae permanent, ut *nequaquam haec in illam commutetur*—alioquin duae res nequaquam dicerentur—ita et divinitas humanitati conjuncta. . . . Prius autem spiritualis substantia erat quae corporeae nostrae conjuncta est, nunc quoque *sicut prius spiritualis permanet, non corporea facta est.*” *Theologia “Scholarium”* III.75 CC XIII 532; PL 1106d–1107a, our emphasis.
33. The kenotic model was originally proposed by Gottfried Thomasius; see, for example, Welch 1965, 48. A significant minority of philosophical theologians defend versions of the model today; see Evans 2006.
34. Non-compositional models, in particular, struggle with this. Some defenders of non-compositional models argue either that the apparently inconsistent properties are not inconsistent at all (so it is possible for Christ, as a single property-bearer, to bear them), while others admit that the properties are inconsistent but deny

that they are all essential to true humanity or true divinity (so Christ does not bear them all). Others, finally, admit both the inconsistency and the essential nature of the properties, concluding that Christ lacks either some essential divine properties (kenotic theories of the kind just mentioned) or some essential human properties (various forms of docetism).

35. "Dominum Iesum Christum secundum humanitatem incepisse, secundum vero divinitatem aeternum esse praedicamus." *Theologia Christiana* IV.145–146 CC XII 338; PL 1309a–b.
36. "Cum itaque Christus proprie dicatur Deus et homo simul, hoc est tria illa simul in naturis propriis discreta, Verbum videlicet, anima humana et caro: ad ostendendum tamen unitatem personae tam diversarum in Christo naturarum, ita saepe vocabula permiscemus, ut modo Verbum, modo animam, modo etiam carnem dicamus; et nonnunquam quae propriae sunt Dei, homini ascribamus, vel e converso." *Expositio symboli apostolorum* PL 624d–625a.
37. In fact, Abelard does not simply distinguish between the two natures in this passage, but also distinguishes between the two components of the human nature, namely the body and soul. So there are some properties which are appropriately attributed to the divine nature, some which are appropriately attributed to the human soul, and some to the body—although Abelard does not here tell us what they are. A fine-grain analysis of property ascriptions, distinguishing between those of Christ's human soul and his body, is beyond the scope of this paper.
38. "Deus vero nec corporea res est nec partibus constat ut dissolui possit. Deus ergo nec caro nec homo esse proprie dicendus est. Alioquin et homo e converso proprie Deus esset dicendus." *Theologia "Scholarium"* III.76 CC XIII 532; PL 1107b. See also *Theologia Christiana* IV.46 CC XII 285–86; PL 1274b–c.
39. See, e.g., *Theologia Christiana* IV.44 CC XII 385; PL 1273d–1274a.
40. 1022a25–35, in Kirwan 1971, 55–56. See also Ross 1924, vol. 1, 334, for more on the different foundations of predication *per se*.
41. 1025a30–34, in Kirwan 1971, 65.
42. Indeed, Abelard's account might appear reminiscent of the more extreme doctrine of adoptionism, according to which the Son merely "adopts" the human being Jesus. The eighth- and ninth-century Spanish adoptionists were accused of teaching this view, which was attacked (above all by Alcuin of York) on the grounds that it denied the true union of divinity and humanity, just like Nestorianism. Whether this was an accurate portrayal of the adoptionists' actual views is, once again, a moot point; see Cavadini 1993, 24–44, 107–27.
43. Weingart holds that he is not: "Both his contemporary adversaries who charged him with Nestorianism and his modern interpreters who hold that because of his concept of God's unchanging self-consistency he works from an essentially Nestorian perspective are mistaken in their reading of Abailard" (Weingart 1970, 110). But as we have seen, we have reason to reject Weingart's understanding of Abelard. There is much textual evidence, which Weingart appears to ignore, that Abelard thinks of each nature not in an abstract way, as a set of properties, but in a concrete way, as a particular individual, in which case the Nestorian charge is not rebutted.

44. See, for example, *Expositio symboli apostolorum* PL 624b, quoted above, p. 29.
45. “[Q]uaeritur si homo in Christo, unitus divinitati, mentiri aut peccare poterit” *Commentaria in epistolam Pauli ad Romanos* I.3 u. 4 CC XI 98; PL 823b.
46. *Expositio symboli apostolorum* PL 625b–c, discussed above.
47. H. C. van Elswijk summarises Abelard’s view on this neatly: “Le Christ est une personne unique, composée de deux substances ou de deux natures, la nature du Verbe et la nature de l’homme . . . [Abélard] déclare sans hésitation qu’en la personne unique du Christ, le Verbe n’est pas une personne *per se*, car alors il y aurait une personne dans une personne” (van Elswijk 1966, 431).
48. “Divinitas itaque humanitati in Christo coniuncta per se ibi persona una non est dicenda, et humanitas altera, sed due simul una sunt persona, quae proprie Christus dicitur.” *Expositio fidei in symbolum Athanasii* PL 631a; see Nielsen 1982, 219; and Weingart 1970, 114. See also *Expositio symboli apostolorum* PL 624c, where Abelard writes; ‘Persona quippe quasi per se una dicitur, hoc est, substantia quaelibet rationalis ita per se ab aliis rebus disjuncta, ut ipsa substantiam cum aliqua re alia non constituat. Quandiu ergo anima humana in corpore est, persona dici non potest, quia carni conjuncta unam hominis personam atque unam rationalem substantiam cum ea constituit. Sic et Verbum homini in Christo unitum unam Christi personam, non duas reddit.’
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