tles is embodied in the civil legislation of the whole of Europe. . . . Decline in religious values by no means implies moral decadence if those values are replaced by a non-metaphysical ethic. But no doubt the fear of divine punishment tends to make us better people."

A New View of Peter Abelard

In the late 11th and early 12th centuries, early medieval philosophers engaged in a sometimes bitter debate about "universals." Historians have portrayed this as a two-sided argument. "Nominalists" considered universals such as "goodness" and "justice" mere words. One could use a word such as *humanity*, but that did not mean that such an entity existed. "Realists" regarded universals as real things. Their arguments went on fruitlessly, according to the traditional historical view, until the genius Peter Abelard (1079–1142) hammered out a synthesis.

Recent scholarship has cast doubt on this account. It now appears that Abelard was "a far less pivotal thinker" than most historians once believed, writes Thompson, a professor of religious studies at the University of Oregon.

Between 1080 and 1120, the most influential writers and teachers of Western Christendom were "realists." In his proofs for the existence of God, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) seems to have assumed that universals such as goodness exist independent of good men or any other particular good objects. He defended universals "as pure and absolute," Thompson says, because he wanted "to identify them with the highest pure absolute, that is, with God." Although Anselm was chiefly a theologian, later thinkers focused on philosophical questions: how universals relate to particulars, and how particulars became different from one another.

In the traditional version of what happened before Abelard, historians identified four or five competing "schools" or "theories" and divided these between nominalists and realists. This scheme, Thompson says, rests mostly on Abelard's own writings and those of his pupil, John of Salisbury (d.

1180)—and their testimony, it now seems, is not trustworthy.

The most celebrated nominalist was Roscelin of Compiègne, who, according to a contemporary, taught "the theory that a universal was a verbal utterance [*sententiam vocum*]." Anselm branded Roscelin a "heretic of dialectic." Abelard, who was Roscelin's student, also portrayed him "as an incompetent logician." The theories advanced by such earlier thinkers appeared, in the standard account, to be
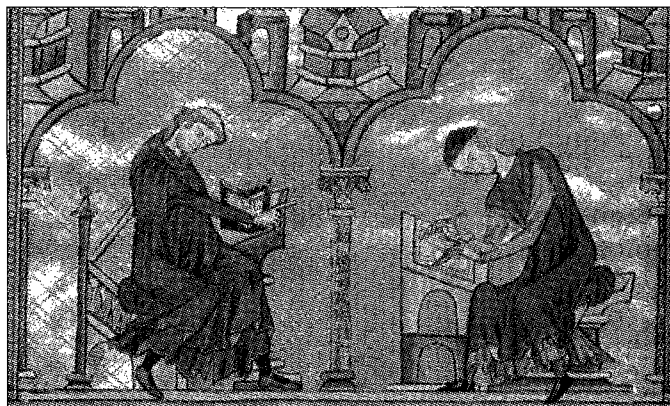
A French cleric instructs his pupil. In Abelard's day, the Catholic Church sustained the Western intellectual tradition.

fragmentary and incoherent, until Abelard made his great contribution in *Logica Ingredientibus*, proposing that a word could be both a verbal utterance (*vox*) and a significant term (*sermo*). But the discovery of new texts and more careful readings of long-known ones, Thompson says, have changed this picture. Even the famed nominalist Roscalin, it now seems, wanted to identify the realities to which the *voces* referred and "believed that every *vox* tagged some thing in the world."

That and other evidence suggest, Thompson says, that before Abelard there was "a movement toward a coherent rethinking of universals along antirealist lines." To dispel the confusion that persisted required "a clever technician," not a greatly original thinker. Abelard filled the bill.