

Reading 11: From Peter Abaelard's *Ethica*

Peter Abaelard (1079-1142) is famous for his love affair with Heloise and its consequence, his castration. He was one of the greatest philosophers of the twelfth century and also one of the most controversial. Abaelard knew nothing of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* which was not translated until fifty years after his death. He knew Augustine's work very well.

Introduction and 1. Definition of morals (moral powers)

['Morals concerns vices and virtues'.]

Abaelard opens his discussion rather abruptly with a definition of morals as vices or virtues of the mind disposing us to evil or good. 'Morals' is used here in the sense in which we say that someone has no morals, or is of very high morals. Our morals are thus, like Aristotle's virtues, dispositions, that is inclinations of a certain kind. Abaelard characterises them as inclinations of the mind rather than of the body. Unlike Aristotle he holds that physical virtues and vices are morally irrelevant.

Note that the implied definition of good morals as inclinations to good works and of bad morals as inclinations to bad works suggests that the character of the morals derives from that of the acts. This is something that Abaelard will explicitly deny below.

['Of the vice of the mind which concerns morals']

Abaelard notes that there are non-moral virtues and vices of the mind as well as moral virtues and vices. Again Aristotle would disagree with at least some of his examples. The distinction between the moral and the non-moral virtues is that we are praised for possessing the moral virtues

2. Mental disposition to do bad things is not the same as sin.

['The differences between sin and vice inclining to evil']

Abaelard argues that the possession of a particular disposition inclining us to good or to bad acts is not of itself morally significant. Merely being inclined to become angry is not sinful. Indirectly, however, the possession of a vicious disposition can be morally significant in that it presents greater opportunities for moral victories on overcoming it. Abaelard mentions for the first time *consent*, the crucial concept in his moral theory. He also notes that features shared by good and bad people are morally indifferent. Implying again that the mere possession of particular physical and mental powers and inclinations are is not morally significant.

3. Sin as consent.

['What is mental vice and what is properly said to be sin'.]

This section contains the main exposition of Abaelard's theory of sin as consent. Abaelard defines sin here as 'consent to that which is not fitting'. Vices are thus inclinations to consent to what is not fitting. Abaelard explicates this definition a little: 'consent to what is not fitting' is 'contempt of God and an offence against him.' By implication, then, what is not fitting is what is contrary to a divine injunction. Abaelard characterises contempt further as not doing what we believe we should do on God's account or not refraining from doing what we

believe we should not do on God's account. Note that this apparently entails that in order to sin we must have beliefs about whether or not our (intended) actions conform or do not conform with God's wishes. As an aside Abaelard notes that he can now give a negative definition of sin. This is important since in the Augustinian theory of sin it has no positive reality.

198-200: Abaelard argues that to will to perform a bad act is not to sin but only consenting to perform that act. This sounds a bit odd in English and it might be better to translate the Latin word used by Abaelard (*voluntas*) as 'desire' though it is usually translated as 'will'. What he is thinking of are the kinds of cases where we say of someone she had a strong desire to slap his face but managed to resist the temptation. Likewise 'she really wanted (i.e. willed) to hit him but decided not to'. It is crucial for Abaelard's theory to distinguish between the desire to do something and the decision to attempt to act on that desire. Against the suggestion that desires themselves are good or bad, that is sinful, Abaelard argues that:

- (a) sometimes we sin without having a bad desire, or will, and
- (b) sometimes we do not sin when we have bad desire, or will.

The case for (a) is Abaelard's version of Augustine's 'fleeing servant' argument. Abaelard's analysis of what happens here is that the servant has a desire to avoid death and no desire at all to kill his master. In order to satisfy his desire to avoid death, however, he is forced to kill his master. According to Abaelard he thus kills his master unwillingly. Abaelard says that the servant acts under compulsion. Presumably he means to hypothesise that the only way for him to avoid death is to kill his master. He also claims that this is an example of unwilling sin so he must suppose that the act of killing is a sin independently of the will and intention of the servant. But presumably the servant knows that there is a divine injunction against killing, and so knows that killing is a sin. Abaelard thus argues that the servant did sin since he consented to kill his master. His desire throughout, according to Abaelard, was to do something fitting - to preserve his own life. The only means to achieve this end, however, required him to consent to do, and to do, something evil. His desire for what was fitting and the circumstances that he found himself in forced the means upon him. He did, however, have a choice between (i) employing a means to save his own life which would lead to him acting sinfully or to (ii) giving up his own life. According to Abaelard, he unwillingly made the wrong choice. Note that he does not appeal to Augustine's account of sin as lust, or cupidity, a disordered desire to secure or retain what can be taken from one against one's will.

Abaelard extends his analysis of the logic of desire. He claims that it does not follow from the fact that *A* desires *X* in order to achieve *Y* that *A* desires *X* without qualification. So it does not follow from the fact that a man desires to give me his hat in exchange for five dollars that he desires, without qualification, to give me his hat. This is perhaps true, though in some sense if a man desires that his wound be cauterized in order that he be healed, he does in fact desire that his wound be cauterized.

This argument leaves us with the servant not desiring to kill his master which is half of what Abaelard needs since he wants an example of an unwilled sin. He simply asserts that the consent to the act of killing is sinful, apparently without qualification.

Abaelard next argues against an objection that if our action is not forced then the desire to do what is not fitting - the bad will - is itself sinful. His example is the case of someone who desires and consents to his desire for, presumably illicit, sexual intercourse. Against this he

notes that if the desire itself were sinful then someone who has the same desire but does not succumb to it will also sin. This he thinks is absurd. Rather the man who overcomes his desire achieves a moral victory.

Abaelard next makes for the first time the point for which his theory was famous and for which, amongst other things, he was condemned. He argues that just as the possession of a vicious inclination is in itself morally irrelevant, so the performance of an unfitting, or inappropriate, act is in itself morally irrelevant: 'an action adds nothing to merit whether it proceeds from a good or a bad will'. All that is relevant in determining someone's moral status is whether or not he consents to what is unfitting. So long as he does not consent to an inclination to do something (which he believes to be) unfitting, he does not sin. Desire for illicit sexual intercourse is not itself sinful, consenting to act on such a desire is. Note that Abaelard's theory seems to have the striking consequence that one may without moral fault have desires of the most dreadful kind imaginable. Indeed someone who has such desires is apparently in a position to secure a much greater moral victory than someone whose desires are entirely pedestrian and easily contained.

Abaelard summarises: 'in such things also the will itself or the desire to do what is unlawful is by no means to be called sin, but rather ... the consent itself.' And only the consent. Abaelard apparently holds that once we have consented to the desire to do something unfitting we have an intention to do something unfitting: '... we are inwardly ready, if given the chance, to do it.' This intention is necessary and sufficient for sin. Whether we are able to accomplish the intended act or not is irrelevant. The person who strives to act unfittingly but fails is precisely as great a sinner as the person who succeeds in acting.

2 There follows a rather difficult discussion of the difference between wanting something and wanting to want something. Augustine had argued that if I want *X* if and only if I want to want *X*. Abaelard denies this pointing to differences between what we might call first and second order desires. A man may desire to have sexual intercourse with a woman but not at all desire to have that desire - he would much prefer to be without it.

In support of his claim that actions are in themselves morally irrelevant, Abaelard argues the pleasure that is had through the action if the intention is realised adds nothing to the sinfulness of the intention. He argues strongly that pleasure is not sinful. He thinks that it would be bizarre if God had so constructed us physically that we could not avoid sinning in eating or reproducing. He is especially offended, it seems, by the suggestion that legitimate sexual relations are not sinful but taking pleasure in them is. He thinks that it would be entirely unreasonable for God to permit sex in marriage but to require sexual acts 'to be done in a way in which it is certain that they cannot be done.' No natural pleasure, according to Abaelard, can be a sin and so a monk chained down between two women does not sin when he becomes sexually aroused. Various scriptural passages apparently indicating that pleasure in intercourse is a sin are dealt with by offering alternative interpretations of them.

Thus Abaelard distinguishes:

- (a) the will, or desire, for something;
- (b) consent to pursue this desire;

(c) the act of attempting to achieve what is desired.

After we consent to doing *X*, Abaelard says, we have an intention to do *X* .

Just as we often desire to do unfitting things without consenting to our desires, Abaelard notes, we also consent to do unfitting things which we do not desire to do. This happens when we are ignorant in some way about the circumstances of our action. For example, a man who sleeps with a woman who he believes to be his wife but who is in fact another man's wife.

Abaelard's takes his theory to require that divine commandments are understood to refer to consent rather than to the actions which they apparently refer to. His argument for this is that the outcomes of our intentions are not in our control but our consent to our desires always is. Furthermore if the commandments referred to the actions rather than the intentions whether we do or do not sin would be entirely a matter of chance, or luck. In addition, if the commandments refer to actions rather than intentions some of them cannot be kept. For example there can be no guarantee that someone will not accidentally marry his sister - he may have been separated from her at birth and not be able to recognise her. So ignorance excuses an unfitting action for Abaelard. Likewise if the commandments referred to actions rather than intentions, then rich men would easily be able to perform some morally laudable actions, such as giving alms, which might be practically impossible for poor men.

Again the very same act is sometimes done wickedly by one man and quite properly by another. For example when two men hang a convict one out of justice and the other out of anger. Abaelard supports his case with an examination of God's commandment to Abraham that he sacrifice his son. Here God's intention is right even though the action is wrong, so there is no blame.

Abaelard's own conclusion is that '... there are four things which we have put forward in order carefully to distinguish them from each other, namely (1) the vice of the mind which makes us prone to sinning and then (2) the sin itself which we fixed in consent to evil or contempt of God, (3) next the will for evil, and [finally] (4) the doing of evil.' He follows this by distinguishing the sin = consent, from the performance of the sin = the performance of the intended action. He distinguishes three stages in sin (a) suggestion, (b) pleasure, (c) consent; followed by (d) the performance of the intended action. The distinction between these stages is seen in Eve's sin; the devil made a suggestion, Eve anticipated pleasure in following the suggestion, she consented to the suggestion; and took a bite of the apple.

4. The suggestions of demons.

Abaelard notes that demons as well as other humans may incite us to sin but claims that they do this through their knowledge of the natural world and not supernaturally.

5. Why the works are punished rather than the sin itself.

A consequence of Abaelard's theory is that only we ourselves and God can know that we sin. Humans have no access to the minds and intentions of other humans. A possible objection to his theory is that the fact that humans punish external acts might seem to indicate that it is the acts which are sins. Abaelard denies this and argues that human laws and institutions can deal only with what is public. Often this has the consequence that acts which are not the consequence of sinful intention are punished and acts which are the result of such an intention are not. So a woman who accidentally smothers her child is punished by the legal authority -

the bishop, but a man who the judge knows to be guilty as accused but who be proved to be so, is not punished.

6. Spritual and carnal sins.

Abaelard notes that though all sins are spiritual - mental acts of consent - nevertheless some sins are said to be carnal. He explains this by referring sins of the soul to psychological weaknesses, sins of the flesh to bodily weaknesses. Apparently what he has in mind is the distinction between a psychological state like envy and a more physical desire such as sexual lust.