

Philosophy 302

Mediaeval Philosophy

Lecture 11



Abaelard and Heloise

Abaelard's Ethical Theory

Morals = vices or virtues of the mind
disposing us to evil or good

Dispositions of the mind, not of the body

A disposition to act badly is not itself ethically significant

Paradox:

The stronger is the disposition to act badly, the greater is the opportunity to be good.

Abaelard's Crucial Idea

All that is ethically relevant is CONSENT

Not dispositions, or desires

To sin = to consent to that which is not appropriate
or not to consent to what is appropriate

= to show CONTEMPT for God

= to DISOBEY the DIVINE COMMANDS

= Not to do what we believe God wishes us to do
or not to refrain from doing we believe God
wishes us not to do.

So to sin we must have beliefs about God's commands

Proof that only consent is ethically significant:

**(a) Sometimes we sin without having a bad desire,
or will,**

and

**(b) Sometimes we do not sin when we perform a
forbidden act.**

Sin without Desire: The Fleeing Servant

He kills his master to save his own life

He desires to preserve his life

At no time does he desire to kill his master

So he kills his master unwillingly

He sins because he shows contempt of God

He consents to kill his master without desiring to kill his master

Further examples of the analysis:

Where X is a means to achieve Y we may desire Y but not desire X without qualification

I desire to give you my hat in return for five dollars

But I don't desire to give you my hat without qualification

I desire to have my wound cauterized in order to heal it.

But I don't desire to have my wound cauterized
'*simpliciter*'.

Even if the action is not compelled, the desire itself is not evil

E.g. Consenting to illegitimate sexual intercourse

“Sin is not lusting for a woman but consenting to lust; the consent of the will is damnable, but not the will for intercourse.”

The possession of a particular desire is in itself
not sinful

The performance of the desired action is in itself
not sinful

According to Augustine:

If we want something, then we **WANT TO WANT** it

According to Abaelard:

We sometimes **DO NOT WANT TO WANT** what we in fact do want

Action without Sin: The Chained Monk

According to Abaelard:

It is bizarre to suppose that God created us so that we necessarily experience certain pleasures but designated those pleasures as sinful

A monk chained between two women cannot avoid feeling pleasure

But he does not sin in feeling pleasure.

We do not always sin when we perform forbidden acts

A woman forced to have sex with another woman's husband does not sin

A man tricked into sex with a woman other than his wife does not sin

A man who unknowingly marries his sister does not sin

To sin one must:

(a) be free from coercion

(b) know that one's action, properly described, is forbidden

(1) It is forbidden for me to have sex with my sister

(2) This woman is my sister

Therefore it is forbidden for me to have sex with this woman

The argument is valid but I sin in having sex with this woman only if I know that (1) and (2) are true.

The same act committed by two men may
be a sin in one case but not in the other

Example: Hanging a man

It all depends on the intentions which they have.

Summary:

We must distinguish:

- (a) vice = a disposition to desire what is forbidden
- (b) consent to this desire
- (c) the intention to act
- (d) the act itself

Only (b) is in itself a sin. With (c) we have a sinful intention

Human Laws

Because of the limitations of our knowledge we punish actions not intentions