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Reason, the Ethical Subject and Sin in the Thought of Peter Abelard [1]

Introduction

One of the most startling aspects of the philosophical theology of Peter Abelard in his *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian* is his insistence to think of God as, above all else, a rational God. Abelard does not appear to experience God as primarily characterized by goodness or being but by reason. Jolivet has commented that the *Dialogue* has as its «point essential» that «la raison est de caractère divin» and that, «l'usage réglé de la raison a donc son fondement en Dieu». [2] If Jolivet were absolutely correct in this characterization of Abelard, we ought to find Abelard's thought rather surprising. For Abelard would appear to be quite outside of his own tradition in this depiction of God: Reason was not cast as one of the Transcendentals by medieval thinkers; St. Anselm, in his *Monologion*, first defines God as *summe bonum*; in St. Bonaventure, God, who is above all essence and knowledge, is approached when all intellectual activity ceases and union acheived through the transforming power

[1] I would like to thank Dominik Perler for his useful suggestions on how this paper might be improved.

[2] J. JOLIVET, *Abélard*, Éditions Seghers, Paris, 1969, p. 92.

of love; and St. Thomas Aquinas thinks God ontologically as *ipsum esse subsistens*.

Abelard states quite clearly in his *Dialogue* that everything which God does, or permits to be done, is done for a reason. [3] What God does for a reason ensures that the thing done is good. [4] It might be thought that Abelard makes the good and reason equally primordial in God, but the text does not support this thought. It is true that in the *Dialogue* the supreme good of human kind is said to be God, but Abelard never suggests that reason is dependent on the good or that they might be mutually dependent upon one another. The latter paragraphs of the *Dialogue* do suggest that Abelard means to invert the Platonic hierarchy. [5] Whatever the significance of favouring the primacy of reason over the good for our understanding of God, it is crucial to our understanding of Abelard's ethical theory. For Abelard announces the primacy of reason as a quite general principle, insisting that, «what has no reasonable cause for being done cannot be done well.» [6]

Quite what Abelard thought this inversion amounted to will depend on how we understand his use of the term 'reason'. He stres-

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[3] «...it is certain that God never permits anything without a reason and does nothing except rationally so that his permission as well as his action are reasonable...» (*A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian,* trans., Pierre J. PAYER, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979, p. 165); «...certumque insuper sit nequaquam aliquid Deum sine causa permittere nihilque omnino nisi rationabiliter facere, ut tam permissio ejus quam actio rationabilis sit...» (*Dialogus* in *Petrus Abaelardus, Opera*, Vol. II, ed. Victor COUSIN, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim-New York, 1970, p. 713).

[4] «so it is clear that whatever happens to be done or not to be done has a rational cause why it is done or not done. Therefore [*ideoque*], it is good that it be done or good that it not be done...» (*ibid.*, p. 165); The *ideoque* might be meant in the stronger sense of «for that reason» or «on that account»; «...patet itaque quidquid contingit fiere, cur fiat vel non fiat rationabilem habere causam; ideoque bonum est illud fieri vel bonum est non fieri...» (*ibid.*, p. 713).

[5] Plato says that the Good, «is the cause of knowledge and truth; and so, while you may think of it as an object of knowledge, you will do well to regard it as something beyond truth and knowledge and, precious as these both are, of still higher worth» (*The Republic*, Book VI, 508, trans. F. M. CORNFORD, Oxford, 1945).

[6] *Dialogue...*, p. 169.

ses that the *Dialogue* is an inquiry into the most rational system of belief and that the debate itself should seek to be rational. [7] This is still a current usage the concept of 'reason'. But when Abelard says that God does everything for a reason are we to understand him to be still using 'reason' in the manner in which we do today? Were he to do so, Abelard would be quite outside of his own tradition and this ought to make us pause and wonder if his concept of reason is the same as that prevalent today after the thinkers of Modernity.

Abelard has a lot to say about reason and its relation to subjectivity. [8] Through an examination of what Abelard says about the ethical subject and sin I hope to approach Abelard's concept of reason. In *Section I* we shall see that Abelard has a very particular notion of reason: while reason is the core of the ethical subject, the role of belief, revelation, and affectivity in the exercise of reason ensures that reason in the thought of Abelard has a richer character than that which is presented in the Modern tradition. During this discussion it will become clear that the ontology and epistemology of the ethical subject in Abelard is characterized by finitude. We shall see in *Section II* that Abelard consistently argues that sin is not as pervasive as it might seem — his position is especially clear with respect to original sin — and this precisely *because of* human finitude.

Section I: The Ethical Subject

It is a famous feature of Abelard's ethics that the deed or action of a person is neither good nor bad. [9] The locus of value resides in an intention predating any physical expression. As Abelard puts it, «what is done is not what matters, but with what mind it is done.» [10] Abelard makes it clear that we must look inward when seek-

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[8] Verbeke has commented that Abelard, «represents an important stage in the progressive disclosure of subjectivity.» («Peter Abelard and the Concept of Subjectivity» p. 2, in *Peter Abelard, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, ed. E. M. BUYTAERT, Leuven University Press, 1974.

[9] *Dialogue...*, p. 158

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 161; Jolivet tells us that Urbain II at the end of the eleventh century had written in these same terms (*Abélard*, p. 87).

ing the ethical [11] and as the following passage makes clear, Abelard identifies an intention with a reason. [12]

In speaking of the participants in the crucifixion, Abelard comments, «nor is God's intention and theirs the same in the same deed...since they will it to occur for different reasons.» [13] This is Abelard's key example for his thesis that the deed is indifferent to praise or blame. [14] God, Christ, Judas and the Romans all participate in the doing of the crucifixion: God and Christ blamelessly, Judas sinfully and the Romans without sin. If the deed is the same, [15] then clearly, it is not the locus of the ascription of value. Ethics concerns the mind, the intention or reason, behind the action. It is also clear from the quoted passage that an intention or reason is the will proper; the identification is quite explicit. [16]

There is the possibility that Abelard's position is an expanded and systematized account of a passage in Anselm's *De Veritate*. Anselm tells us about a man who feeds a poor man but, as he puts it, for the wrong *cur*. The man fed the poor man because it made him happy

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[11] «The time when we consent to what is unlawful is in fact when we in no way draw back from its accomplishment and are inwardly ready, if given the chance, to do it.» (*Peter Abelard's Ethics*, trans., D. E. LUSCOMBE, Oxford, 1971, p. 15); Cf. *Ethics*, p. 55.

[12] The explicit identification of reason with intention is missing in the *Ethics* though it is suggested in many places in that work. It is not very clear what Abelard takes an intention to be in the *Ethics* and if the identification in his dialogue is taken as good for Abelard's thought generally, it has the advantage of making somewhat clearer what kind of thing an intention is ontologically.

[13] *Dialogue...*, p. 163; «...nec eadem intentio est in eodem facto illorum quam Dei...cum scilicet id diversis de causis velint fieri» (*Dialogus*, p. 712).

[14] *Ethics*, p. 29.

[15] That the deed is the same is tied to the difference Abelard sees between nature and the Law. This difference is discussed below.

[16] It should also be pointed out that value does not reside in any more interior aspect of the subject such as desire or pleasure. Cf. J. JOLIVET, *Abélard*, p. 88; Antonio CROCCA, *Abelardo: L'altro versante del medioevo*, Liquori Editore, Napoli, 1979, pp. 135 and 138; and the very thorough discussion of L. M. DE RIJK on the independence of intention from desire in his *Pierre Abelard: Scherpzinnigheid als hartstocht*, B. V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappig, Amsterdam, 1981, pp. 177-181.

to do so, he did not feed the man for the sake of justice. Anselm appeals to the reason one acts and locates the value in the reason rather than in the deed, which is the same irrespective of the reason. [17]

Abelard has both an epistemological and ontological interest in reason. He finds reason to be limited in both regards. As we shall see, reason is the locus of the ethical subject, but neither reason nor the ethical subject is co-extensive with the human ethical situation and to believe otherwise commits the subject to constant and insurmountable sin.

The ethical subject is identified with reason. There can only be sin once a person has reached the age of «discretion» and when the person «has knowingly inclined to good or evil.» [18] Reason is the only possible locus of sin [19]; sin can only be commited by those who know the Law. Even though the Romans were responsible for the crucifixion, Abelard argues that the Romans cannot be said to have sinned for they were unaware of the Law. In light of what they did believe, they showed themselves to be pious. The question of belief is a central part of the interiozation of sin; to sin is not any bodily or physical thing one might do but is an interior orientation to what one understands as the Good. [20] Abelard's thesis is that we can know our states of belief and we often do very consciously set our intentions [21] and sin only concerns what we can know. [22]

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[17] *De Veritate*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. SCHMITT, Thomas Nelson and Sons, Edinburgh, 1946, Vol.I, pp. 193-4

[18] *Dialogue...*, p. 107 and p. 112.

[19] There are many passages to support this claim. Here are two: Speaking of «natural compassion» Abelard tells us, «through it we are concerned with coming to the aid even of crimminals themselves who are in affliction, out of a certain human or carnal affection, not out of a reasonable affection» (*Dialogue...*, p. 117); And about intemperance, he says that it, «is a certain weakness and impotence of the mind which renders it incapable of resisting those of its impulses which are contrary to reason. Through these the infirm mind is drawn into the miserable captivity of vice...» (*ibid.*, p. 122)

[20] S. VANNI ROVIGHI has pointed out that St. Thomas adopts the same point of view as Abelard (in *Abélard. Le «Dialogue». La Philosophie de la logique*, Cahiers de la Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie, Geneve, 1981, p. 18).

[21] More often than not, of course, no such conscious consideration is given and Abelard, like all medievals, had an extremely powerful theory to explain such

Sin accrues where one consciously orientates towards evil. [23] If someone understood herself to be about to do evil and did not re-order herself then she would sin. Abelard's intuition is that this is probably not awfully common. Be aware that Abelard does not think one would hereby be doing good, merely that one would not be sinning. To have a good intention, Abelard is very specific about this, one must not only believe that one is doing good — if one did not think this much one would be sinning — but what one believes to be good must also be good so far as God is concerned. [24] As Abelard points out, non-believers satisfy the first condition but not the latter. [25] Those who executed the martyrs did so with great zeal for what they believed God wanted of them but they were in error and caused evil. [26] Abelard writes,

> «...the Lord, in distinguishing works according to right or wrong intention, carefully called the mind's eye, that is, the intention, sound and, as it were, free of dirt so that it can see cearly...» [27]

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action. Abelard uses the Aristotelian concept of *habitus* in talking about virtues and vices (*Dialogue...*, pp. 90 and 109).

[22] «...he is not to be called a transgressor who does what is forbidden, but he who consents to that which it is evident has been prohibited...» (*Ethics*, p. 27)

[23] Kundera is a bitter contemporary opponent of any such understanding of fault; using Oedipus, Kundera argues that there is a concept of punishment for wrongdoing that refuses to excuse ignorance. Cf. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 177ff.

[24] «...an intention should not be called good because it seems to be good but because in addition it is just as it is thought to be, that is, when, believing that one's objective is pleasing to God, one is in no way deceived in one's own estimation.» (*Ethics*, p. 55)

[25] It is a consequence of this position that the non-Christian cannot truly sin. Abelard transforms the Christian community into the chosen people.

[26] De Rijk puts the point nicely: «Dit betekent dat als iemand kwaad(d.w.z. iets wat tegen de Wil Gods ingaat) doet, maar hij is zich van de strijdigheid met Gods Wil in het geheel niet bewust, dan is hij niet schuldig, maar: kwaad blift kwaad!» (*Pierre Abélard...*, p. 176).

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

The extra condition is to ensure that one do good, not that one not sin. The concept of sin in Abelard is therefore seen to be quite subjective and centers on knowledge of the Law and a conscious intention to do good in view of the Law.

Going hand in hand with this epistemology of sin is the concept of positive law. Abelard speaks at some length about the moral judgemnts made by men on the basis of custom and for the sake of social utility. [28] He gives the example of a mother who in trying to keep her child warm draws her too close and smothers the child. The woman acted from love, but still the bishop punishes her even though he is aware that this was the case. [29] Abelard states that the bishop acted rightly because he established an example for future carers to be on their guard. [30] There are other passages in the same vein and clearly Abelard sees a large role for utilitarian judgements that keep in view the good of the whole community. But he is equally strenuous in insisting that such temporal judgement in no way reflects on the sin involved. Abelard's subjective concept of sin ensures that this is simply beyond the bishop to know. [31] It is not that he questions the role of mediating structures [32] but that he thinks to know the hearts of people is not open to us.

Connecting both aspects of this epistemology of law and sin is a solution to moral impropriety related in Judith C. Brown's fascinating book, *Immodest Acts*. Benedetta Carlini, a nun in 17th Century Italy, was a well-known mystic investigated by the authorities and found to have suffered demonic possession. In the course of the investigation it was discovered that she had engaged in acts of les-

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[28] «The right of positive justice is what is instituted by men to safeguard utility or uprightness more securely or to extend them, and is based on custom alone or on written authority...» (*ibid.*, p. 120)

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[31] «For man do not judge the hidden but the apparent...» and God alone, «...truly considers the guilt in our intention and examines the fault in a true trial.» (*Ethics*, p. 41)

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 63 and 99; one commentator has made a tentative parrellel between Abelard and Luther. Cf. JOLIVET, *Abélard*, p. 89.

bian sex, a near incomprehensibly vile thing at the time. Though the deeds were said to be sinful, it is clear that Benedetta was not thought to have sinned, for Benedetta was concluded to have done these deeds «without her consent and will» and was not punished for her deeds. [33]

Brown convincingly argues that the punishment of Benedetta, life-long imprisionment in her convent,

> «...was not linked primarily to her sexual transgressions but rather to her monastic status, her claims to miraculous favors, and her noteriety... [such women] had gained a popular following and in a few instances even influenced the decisions of popes and kings...such women had to be isolated from the rest of society...they also had to be treated severely as a warning to other women who might try to gain power over others through similar means.» [34]

Admittedly, Beneddeta's story takes places centuries after Abelard, and in the Renaissance rather than the Middle Ages, but it is surely uncanny how Abelardian the authorities' actions were.

Benadetta's story is a parrellel to Abelard's example of the mother and child. This example is introduced by Abelard as more than epistemological. Abelard means the example, I think, to point to the fact that the intention is one thing and the world in which implementation must take place quite another. The example depicts something of ontological importance. Abelard's thought seems to be that we ought to expect the world to thwart our intentions but this is no cause for anxiety. While there is a radical contigency and complexity to implementation, nevertheless at the level of the intention, in the interior, this contigency is absent.

Such a conception places the ethical subject over against the contingency of the world and indeed the body. The example of the

[33] *Immodest Acts*, p. 130.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 135; To see the parrellel, consider DE RIJK's gloss on an example from Abelard, «in dit geval...zal de menselijke rechter de monnik zwaarder straffen dan de leek, omdat zijn vergrijp tegen de sociale orde... ernigster is dan dat van de leek.» (*Pierre Abélard...*, p. 186-7).

religious captures wonderfully the contingency of the body and its apartness from the ethical subject. [35] This contingency is but an intensification of the struggle that Abelard is so fond of talking about and an extension in the vision of the finitude of the subject. To the extent that one is an ethical subject one is before the Law, but the Law is outside, and other than, the body and nature in general.

Abelard's dualism [36] is not that standardly accredited to Christian thought; the dualism of soul and body so dear to Plato. It is rather the ethical subject who is found to be distinct form her body and nature generally. [37] Dualism of any kind are somewhat unfashionable, and some for good reasons. Yet, I think Abelard shows how benefical it is to think in terms of this specific dualism. It is very hard to think the finitude of the subject, especially when the notion of the «founding subject» still dominates so much of the way in which we think of human subjectivity.

Abelard's thought can, I think, be taken as a critique of «the founding subject» — a subject who is all pervasive in virtue of her rationality which is assured, self-reliant and controlling. [38] Abelard

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[35] Kundera has described this very same relation of the ethical subject to her body in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 154 ff. There are numerous other passages in the same book that argue the identification of the interior and value. Compare Kundera's concepts of poetic memory (p. 208) and love (p. 236) on the interior/value identification and his conception of the sinless body (pp. 237 and 297).

[36] Commenting on notions of the unclean in Jewish Law, Abelard asks, «why, I ask you, can contact with a bed be polluting in reference to the soul.» (*Dialogue...*, p. 69).

[37] This dualism may be untenable: Foucault has made a strong challenge to the possibility of any such dualism. He has argued that any and every order, whether moral, political or scientific, produces it subjects, body and soul, as it were, such that one could not understand a distiction between one's ethical self and one's body. It is only fair to note that there are hesitations in Foucault's work — see *The History of Sexuality* — and one wonders what he would make of Kundera's example.

[38] John Locke argues, «...nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with, the clear and self-evident dictates of reason, has a right to be urged or assented to...» (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A. S. PRINGLE-PATTISON, Oxford, 1924, Bk. IV,Ch. 18, p. 348); Kant writes, «...that reason of itself and independently of all experience commands what ought to happen» (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans., J. W. Ellington, Hackett Publishing Company, 1981, p. 20).

rejects this account of human subjectivity because he does not think that the reason of the subject is co-extensive with the human situation. The exercise of reason, for Abelard, is central to who the subject is and he agrees that reason, but only in his special sense of the mind «knowingly inclining» towards this or that, is assured, self-reliant and controlling. [39] However, it is clear that its sovereignty is far from pervasive. The ethical subject of Abelard «knowingly inclines» on the basis of what she believes to be true, and not on the basis of what she knows to be true — save in the sense that Revelation can bring one to true belief. Abelard's *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian* closes with the natural law of the philosopher, discovered by unaided reason, being surpassed by the Law of the Christian granted in Revelation. The intentions of the human subject are dependent upon her belief and for these intentions to be truly good the beliefs of the subject must be brought within the True by Revelation. [40]

The Moderns were correct in insisting upon the relation between what one knowingly does and control [41] but, Abelard would add, they badly miss judged to what extent one knowingly does anything. Rational enquiry can adjudicate between belief systems but true belief is revealed not discovered by rational enquiry. The Christian reproaches the philosopher for his obstinacy in not accepting Christian faith despite it offering «a perfect example» of the virtues. [42] He then insists that it was only in Christ that this perfect example be-

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[39] Abelard argues that neither desire nor deed is the locus of sin for, «...what is less within our power is less worthy of being commanded...we always have dominion [*in nostro arbitrio*] over our will and consent.» (*Ethics*, p. 25-7).

[40] Crocca points out that Abelard never really solves the problem of how to corroborate subjective values with the transcendantal values of divine law. (*Aberlado...*, pp. 143-144).

[41] Locke writes that the mind has, «...a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any and all desires, and so all, one after another, is at liberty to consider the objects of them, examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty man has...and when upon due examination we have judged, we have done our duty, all that we can or ought to do in the pursuit of our happiness...» (*An Essay...*, Bk. II, Ch. 21, pp. 146-7).

[42] *Dialogue...*, p. 75.

came known, [43] that reasons can be used to defend one's faith against those who do not share it but that no one can be convinced by reasons unless they are already inclined to the beliefs which support those reasons. [44] Abelard could not be further away from Modern thought in this conception of the limitedness of reason. [45]

There is an even more profound difference between Abelard's and the Moderns' understandings of reason. In a number of passages, Abelard equates his notion of «knowingly inclining» with charity or love. [46] Abelard makes it very clear in his *Introductio ad Theo-*

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[43] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

[44] Jolivet correctly, in my opinion, renders the relation between reason and faith in the thought of Abelard as follows: «Il semble donc qu'Abélard se proposait de montrer comment de la morale philosophique on pouvait passer à la foi chrétienne, non par déduction...mais en vertu d'un certain rapport entre cette foi et la raison.» (*Abélard*, p. 91) It is not obvious why the relationship between faith and reason would not be more rigorous if reason where the character of God, as Jolivet thinks.

[45] Cf. J. Locke, *An Essay...*, pp. 356-362; While I agree with Tullio Gregory when he argues that revelation founds reason in the thought of Abelard, I think his talk of «une homogénéité radicale» is a little strong; I prefer Jolivet's talk of «un certain rapport» between the two. Gregory writes, «l'identification de la *ratio*, qui a rendu possible la connaissance du mystère trinitaire, avec la révélation de cette vérité de la part de Dieu, exclut la possibilité de considerer la *ratio* comme une faculté autonome... il y a entre l'une et l'autre une homogénéité radicale; la *ratio* est capable de vérité en tant qu'elle est illuminée par le Dieu révélateur; la connaissance de la vérité chrétienne est un *donum Dei*, de même que *donum* est la foi. («*Ratio* et *natura* chez Abélard» in *Pierre Abélard, Pierre le Vénérable*, Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, n° 546, 1975, p. 573. It ought to be pointed out, however, that Gregory is not alone in thinking the identification a very strict one: De Gandillac agrees with Brunner when the latter claims that for Abelard, «...la raison elle-même est d'essence religieuse. (*Abélard. Le «Dialogue»...*, p. 18).

[46] *Ibid...*, pp. 101, 102, 107 and 112; «Revera, si proprie virtus intelligatur, quae videlicet meritum apud Deum obtinet, sola caritas virtus appellanda est» (*Dialogus...*, p. 681); Cf. *Ethics*, pp. 27 and 39; Luscombe has speculated that the *Ethics* was meant to be part of a larger theological work dealing with faith, charity and the sacrements; the *Ethics* would have then been that part dealing with *caritas*. Cf. «The *Ethics* of Abelard» in the volume, *Peter Abelard, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, p. 76-8. I am assuming that Abelard uses charity in the Pauline sense — «through love be servants of one another» (Gal 5: 13) — and understands it to be Christian

logiam [47] that it is through love (*per affectum charitatis*) that one approaches closer to God,

> «Indeed, no one, he says [Gregory the Great], is said to have charity of himself, but if someone should extend love to another, then there will be charity. It is of the nature of God to proceed, to extend oneself in a certain manner into something through the affect of love, such that one loves a thing plainly and joins oneself to it through love.» [48]

This identification suggests that included in the concept of reason, in the very important sense in which it is the locus of virtue or vice, Abelard understands there to be some affective component. Indeed, it is not only human intentions that are partially characterized by affectivity, but the divine also. Abelard describes the context of creation,

> «God is said to go out from Himself to creatures through the affect or effect of love, since it can be said that God Himself is love, or that he makes something lovingly out of charity, in accordance with the affect or effect which He is able to have amongst creatures.» [49]

The constant identification of «knowingly inclining» and thus reason with love or charity suggests a very different light in which

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love. At 1 Thess 1:3, Paul tells us that the three Christian virtues are faith, hope and love. Cf. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edd. Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy, Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, p. 1408.

[47] The translations of this work are my own.

[48] «Nemo enim, inquit, ad semetipsum charitatem dicitur habere, sed dilectionem in alterum extendit, ut esse charitas possit. Procedere itaque Dei est, sese ad aliquam rem per affectum charitatis quodammodo extendere, ut eam videlicet diligat ac ei per amorem se coniungat» (*Petrus Abaelardus...*, Vol. II, p. 100). In the last sentence I have understood Abelard to be telling us how the human subject might imitate God through charity.

[49] «Deus a seipso ad creaturas exire dicitur per benignitatis affectum sive effectum, cum hoc ipsum quod benignus est, aut benigne aliquid ex charitate agit, secundum affectum vel effectum quem in creaturis habeat, dicatur» (*Ibid.*, p. 101).

to understand Abelard's inversion of the Platonic hierarchy. The passages of the *Dialogue* quoted at the beginning of this essay are a partial description of the nature of God and His action. However, from these passages of the *Introductio*, it is clear that God is both rational and loving, that the one characteristic informs the other such that it might be better to think in terms of a concept of willing reason or loving reason. Abelard is not Platonic, he does not prioritize love over reason but nor does he have a concept of reason as became current in the Modern period and which is still dominant today where Modern thought is still fashionable.

Abelard is firmly within that Christian tradition which holds Love and Reason to be the source of value. Which is to say that both enter into the notion of charity in which consists the greatest ethical bearing open to the human subject. Abelard regularly quotes St. Augustine,

> «Finally, if amongst the gifts of God nothing
> is greater than charity, and if there is no greater
> gift of God than the Holy Spirit, then what more
> could follow than that God himself is charity
> and that charity is from God?» [50]

The Abelardian subject has an ontology founded upon both reason and affectivity and an *intentio* must reflect the influence of each. Charity or love is the greatest of affective states as the subject approximates to the nature of God in love. In hate, the subject is furthest from being like God and hating reason is a state of utter sinfulness. As was noted, Abelard holds that, given what we believe, we always have it in our power to incline the mind in a good or bad intention. However, the provenance of knowing-affective subjectivity is restricted and it is only this limited knowing-affective «space» that can be the locus for the ascription of value. Abelard, we have seen, concluded that the experiences of our bodies and control of our actions are beyond us. But it is because the subject has some measure of con-

[50] «Denique, si in donis Dei nil majus est charitate, et nullum majus donum dei est quam Spiritus Sanctus, quid consequentius quam ipse sit charitas quae dicitur Deus et ex Deo?» (*Ibid.*, pp. 21 and 113).

trol over her ethical intentions — and it will be remembered that Abelard does envisage that it could be lost to an intense lust or impulse — that sin has a place, but only this place, in human life. For the rest, the subject and God must accept finitude. [51]

It is this vision of human finitude that underpins the division in Abelard between the ethical relation of the subject to God and the ethical relation between the subject and society. Luscombe has spoken of an «apparent paradox» in Abelard's ethics: If value is so internal, and so private an affair between the subject and God, how can Abelard be so committed to the somewhat blunt norms of society? [52] It seems hard to reconcile the strong humanism of Abelard with his acceptance that the political subject is a possible victim of the society in which she lives. [53] There appears to be something rather hopeless and cynical in this conception of the political subject until one realizes that Abelard's conception of political community is dictated by his conception of the ontological status of the subject: it is finitude which makes it necessary that the subject be a possible victim before the norms of society. It is because of the relation between the subject and God, a relation that cannot be imitated by the subject and society, that it must be accepted that the political community is a non-perfectible community and that it is a false hope to believe that it could be a perfectible community. [54] Indeed,

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[51] *Pace* Verbeke («Peter Abelard...», p. 2), it seems to me that Abelard may intend his use of the famous Greek adage, «know yourself», in its original sense of «hybris». Abelard's text is replete with the limits of the subject and a general thrust of his work is a call to theology to recognize that ethics is ultimately between God and the subject and not society and the subject. This last point is well made by Crocca: «Abelardo avverte e denuncia vigorosamente l'irriducibilita dell'etica cristiana e della vita religiosa ad un sistema di norme e di valutazioni tutto esteriore...» (*Abelardo...*, p. 142); Cf. DE RIJK, *Pierre Abelard...*, p. 187.

[52] Cf. D.E. LUSCOMBE, «The *Ethics...*», p. 84.

[53] De Rijk rightly observes, «terwijl er in zijn tijd zeker bepaalde stromingen zijn geweest die anndrongen op een verzachting van de rigoreuze penitentiele praktijk, geeft Abelard nergens in zijn *Ethica* te kennen tot die richting te behoren.» (*Pierre Abelard...*, p. 188).

[54] I must then disagree with Luscombe's resolution of the putative paradox in Abelard's thought: Luscombe claims that it is Abelard's hope that the authorities will become more discerning and that, «*Know thyself* is also an appeal to know

Abelard's conception provides the only avenue to a true hope of a community infused with value, that between subject and God. If this is thought to be too «other-wordly» by some, I think Abelard would ask why it is so hard to accept human finitude, what fear founds the refusal to think that there might be something greater than ourselves and what confidence drawn from human history gives hope for the perfectibility of the political community?

Section II: Sin

When one compares Anselm's writings to those of Abelard, one is struck by the fact that Abelard's concerns seem to be wholly different from Anselm's. The very phenomenology is different: Anselm describes the will most thoroughly in reference to angelic sin whereas in Abelard the discussion is always in reference to the human body and human interaction. The impression is that Anselm is a grand theorist, enunciating the universal structures of created will and its role in history. Abelard, however, examines concrete situations in detail, discovering that so nuanced is the human ethical situation that little is as it might seem. This orientation goes to the very heart of Abelard's understanding of ethics. It is precisely against the background of the complexity of the human ethical situation that Abelard's ontology of the ethical subject is developed. [55] Contrary to appearances, Abelard is as ontological a thinker as Anselm — and it will be seen that Anselm is not so indifferent to the peculiar experience of the human person when discussing the will and ethics.

Abelard himself must have been equally surprised for while he is fond of citing Saint Augustine he all but never cites Saint Anselm,

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others» (The *Ethics*..., p. 84). If I am correct, Abelard's *Ethics* is quite the opposite; it is to expose the false hope of knowing others. Nor can I agree with Jolivet that Abelard's discussion of intention restricts him from saying anything about political philosophy. (*Abélard*, p. 95). Rather, I agree with De Rijk that Abelard's discussion of intention is to say a good deal about political community; see his excellent pages in *Pierre Abélard*..., pp. 184-189; For example, De Rijk makes the interesting observation, «menselijke rechtspraak heeft volgens Abelard uiteindelijk het *maatschappelijk karakter* van de daden op het ogen.» (*Pierre Abelard*..., p. 186).

[55] A point nicely developed by Crocca, in his *Abelardo*..., p. 138-9.

though he does employ more than one of Anselm's ethical concepts. Indeed, in some respects, I think he writes against Anselm. Reading Anselm leaves one very unnerved. To sin, so as to loose the grace of God completely, is all too easy according to Anselm. The *affectio iustitiae* is lost in an instant when God is forsaken through a created will failing to persevere in the justice which had been freely bestowed by the Godhead. [56]

Abelard is quite different. Anselm's account of the *affectiones* does not employ the language of the *habitus* — the general scholastic thesis of habit founding tacit knowledge and behaviour. This thesis is very much a part of Abelard's ethics and it is used by him to block the rather sudden fall into sin that is such a feature of Anselm's account. Abelard's definition of a habit shows this very well: «For a habit is a quality of a thing not present in it by nature but acquired by striving and deliberation, and which it is difficult to alter.» [57] If one were to consciously strive to lose the grace of God then, indeed, sin awaits. The use of habit has the advantage that few people are likely to actually become utterly sinful but it also means that once one has striven towards being utterly sinful any change of heart is hard to affect.

Abelard's use of the concept of habit entails that it is hard to sin such that God is utterly forsaken. To sin is to consent to what is unfitting [58]: «For what is that consent unless it is contempt of God and an offence against him?» To have disdain for God is to sin. It only reaches its supreme manifestation in hell when, from despair of ever being relieved of their suffering, the sinful, «burn with all the greater hatred for him by whose judgement they are punished.» [59] One suspects that Abelard does not believe that most people set their minds to disdain God even as they *do* what is unfitting.

That this is Abelard's belief can be seen from a remarkable passage in the *Ethics*. In a section entitled, *Of Irremissible Sin*, Abelard tells us that the only such sin is to blaspheme against the Holy Spi-

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[56] See, for example, Anselm's *Opera Omnia*, Vol. II, pp. 141 and 171.

[57] *Dialogue...*, p. 109; Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 90 and 117.

[58] A definition in Anselm, if not made explicit or used systematically.

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

rit, to replace love by hate. This is understood to be done when people, «...by saying against their conscience that he [Christ] casts out devils by Beelzebub, the prince of devils...» [60] And even yet, a person saying this could still be forgiven if they were to repent. But, Abelard adds sorrowfully, such people would never seek repentance such is their hatred or contempt of God. Apart from the example bespeaking a profound experience of a forgiving God, it shows to what lenghts one must go to consciously hold God in utter contempt. Most people, Abelard seems to think, muddle through life in a mixture of ignorance, confusion and forgetfulness.

Thus it is a constant emphasis of Abelard's that it is truly hard to hold God in contempt, that human finitude does not amount to sin. The early pages of the *Ethics* argue this general line by showing that the body in itself ought not to be thought to be sinful, that the human person is not ridden with sin in virtue of her nature. In regard to the human body and nature generally, one can say that Abelard considers it indifferent, ethically speaking, and that it is only how a person stands in relation to the Law that determines how the body is relevant to sin for each person. A religious must relate to the body differently than those who have not taken Holy Orders. Abelard tells us that the Apostle gave an indulgence to the married to mutually consent to enjoin in carnal pleasure. [61] A more perfect life is possible and it is the religious who is offered this by the Law in not consenting to such pleasure. The Law commands one's relation to the body and only in relation to the Law can one sin. The body itself is beyond sin in this sense. [62] As long as one remains standing in the correct relation to the Law prescribed by one's position in view of the Law, one cannot sin, regardless of what may occur with one's body. [63]

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[60] *Ethics*, p. 97.

[61] *Ethics*, p. 23.

[62] Cf. Jean Jolivet, «Eléments du Concept de Nature chez Abélard» in his collection, *Aspects de la pensée medievale: Abelard. Doctrines du Langage*, Vrin, Paris, 1987, p. 69 and A. Crocca in *Abelardo...*, pp. 136-7.

[63] Abelard gives a remarkable example to illustrate this point: «...if someone compels a religious who is bound in chains to lie between women and if he is

I think that Abelard owes a debt to Anselm for this understanding of the body and his general position that sin is to consent to what is unfitting, where this is understood to mean to do something for a reason unacceptable to the Law. [64] However, I believe Abelard is more systematic than Anselm and actually makes his positions more cogent. An example of this treatment is Anselm's thought that the appetites are not in themselves sinful but to will *inordinate*, to consent to their promptings without regard to justice, is sinful. [65] This is Anselm's opinion of the body prior to the Fall of Adam. Adam has made the body sinful through his will. The nature of Adam, his *voluntas naturalis*, had no necessity to sin until Adam ate forbidden fruit. His personal will corrupted his created nature, a nature created good by God, imposing necessity upon that nature. [66] Human nature has come to possess sinful desires; Anselm tells us that he, «*nolens concupisco*» and that people have desires to which, «*non voluntate consentiunt.*» [67] Through the sin of Adam human nature came to have an *egestas naturalis*, a poverty or want of nature. This nature is such that infants sin by necessity.

Abelard does not accept that this poverty of nature is sinful, but he does accept part of this picture. He argues that a person can experience an overwhelming desire or suffer a fear, «so great as to prevail over reason,» and such desires, he admits, «...easily turn the mind from its original intention and lead to the contraries.» [68] He does not

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brought to pleasure, not to consent, by the softness of the bed and through the contact of the women beside him, who may presume to call this pleasure, made necessary by nature, a fault?» (*Ethics*, p. 21).

[64] However, Abelard talks of consenting to what is unfitting rather than adopting the Anselmian language of abandoning justice.

[65] Anselm writes of the appetites that, «...quare non eos sentire, sed eis consentire peccatum est.» And, a little later, «quare non est in eorum essentia ulla iniustitia, sed in voluntate rationali illos inordinate sequente.» (*De conceptu virginali, Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. SCHMITT, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946, Vol. II, p. 144).

[66] «Et quia tota humana natura... tota infirmata et corrupta est» (*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 141); *Ibid.*, p. 165; The sin of Adam, Anselm tells us, does differ from that of infants in that his can be thought of as cause and theirs as effect.

[67] *De concordia praescientiae et praedestinationis et gratiae dei cum libero arbitrio, Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 274.

[68] *Dialogue...*, p. 114.

cast this as sinful, however. In fact, in the voice of the philosopher, Abelard argues an absolutely incredible position in the *Dialogue*.

Abelard never corrects or even addresses in the voice of the Christian the claim made by the philosopher that some vices are present in humankind at the time of creation: «...the good substance of human nature shares in many evils from its very creation.» [69] Abelard lists anger and lust as examples of natural vices or evils. He also notes that the elements, of which the body is made, ensure that there is suffering. Indeed, Abelard points out that the demons after the fall received bodies so that they might suffer. [70] The concept of beatitude makes the same point by being thought of by Abelard as a release from these sufferings. Sickness, death, lameness and other «troubles» and «adversities» are surmounted in the afterlife. [71] Importantly, Abelard adds that once beatitude is received there is no more possibility of sin for human nature is no longer at odds with the Law. [72] Thus, God is seemingly admitted by Abelard to be accountable for natural evils and more, that God must understand the difficulty He has presented to the human subject. Abelard does not make God malicious: A difficulty placed there by God is not to be thought sinful.

The elements that constitute the body in this life ensure that there exists a state of tension between human nature so constituted and the Law. [73] This tension sets the stage for the struggle that can lead to sin if lost. [74] That the body and Law stand in an «opposition» ensuring a «fight» is, [75] I think, a part of the picture of human finitude that Abelard draws for us. That persons should sin is in no way commendable but God has to appreciate the predicament He puts persons in.

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[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 125-6.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

[73] «So too nature itself or the constitution of the body makes many prone to luxury just as it does to anger, yet they do not sin in this beacuse that is how they are, but through this they have the material for a struggle so that triumphing over themselves through the virtue of temperance they may obtain a crown (*Ethics*, p. 5).

[74] *Dialogue*, p. 44.

[75] *Ibid.*, p. 109.

This is the remarkable implication of Abelard's silence on the philosopher's claims. The constant refrain in Abelard's writing, that sin is not as pervasive as is sometimes thought, is a response to the predicament of the human ethical situation.

Abelard nowhere says that the «evils» of human nature are sinful, nor that infants are condemned to sin by them. In this, he differs from Anselm. Because of this difference, Abelard opposes Anselm's account of original sin and adopts a position that eludes the two classic failings of the doctrine. On Anselm's account, original sin cannot be an insurmountable obstacle to acting as God would wish of human kind. Mary, after all, purges her nature through faith. [76] But more, that Anselm thinks this, ensures that his position also falls foul of the other problem: How can Christ's life be profoundly meaningful to people who have a radically different nature to Him. [77] Christ, because Mary had purged her nature of sin was born with a human nature not stricken with sin, humankind does not have this advantage.

Abelard, in arguing that human nature is not sinful of itself, places humankind and Christ on an equal footing. This footing is not without its problems. The Law does entail that certain experiences issuing from this nature are unfitting for the consent of people. As already noted, it is for this reason that Abelard speaks of a struggle. This is the struggle between having a nature and having to relate to this nature as the Law demands. Abelard's favoured description is to struggle so as to receive a crown, the glory and «supreme tranquillity» of the afterlife. [78] Christ is the exemplar of how to live before the Law. Since Christ was born with exactly the same nature as all other people, such a life is meaningful to human kind. Abelard here executes a fundemantal shift of emphasis in the conception of what it is to be an ethical subject: his ethical dualism, with the body beyond the ethical, ensures that the subject is freed from any preor-

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[76] Anselm writes, «...etiam si in tota virginis essentia peccatum esset, tamen ad huiusmodi conceptionis munditiam per fidem munda fieri posset» (*De conceptu virginali*, Vol. II, p. 160).

[77] *Ibid.*, p. 160.

[78] *Ibid.*, pp. 109 and 123; Cf. *Ethics*, p. 13.

dained sin and as Antonio Crocca writes we find, «la nascita di una nouva etica, che riconquista la sua dimensione interiore e valorizza l'uomo come protagonista e 'faber'» del suo mondo morale.» [79]

His account of original sin [80] then does not focus on the body at all, but on punishment. Abelard argues that infants are punished not through fault but simply because Adam belongs to their lineage. [81] This is a peculiar idea, that one is punished through no fault of one's own and Abelard has a disturbing passage where he stàtes that infants who die before baptism are damned. [82] We can but find this conclusion something of a failing in Abelard's thinking. The situation is not parallel to that of the woman and her punishment by the bishop. That situation was defined through finitude, here, however, subject and God relate outside of finitude. The best that can be said is that Abelard does at least manage to think through a decrease in the sin of infants and thus of the «mitissima poena» that they suffer.

The diminishment of sin in Abelard is a consequence of his ethical dualism. This dualism, which posits the body and action beyond ethics, centers on an ethical subject who defies herself through rationality and affectivity. The ethical subject of Abelard has neither a self-possessed rationality nor unstructred emotion; she is neither Modern nor Post-Modern, one might say. Rather, she is someone who is aware, in some measure, of her ethical situation, understands the Law and knowingly orientates towards its strictures and expectations. But more, she has the gift of charity. It is within her possibilities to found all her intentions in loving reason, an ethical bearing that is

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[79] *Abelardo...*, p. 148.

[80] I thus disagree with LUSCOMBE when he comments that Abelard's *Ethics* does not address the problem of original sin («The *Ethics* of Abelard» in *Peter Abelard, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, p. 79). DE GANDILLAC thinks that the *Ethics* does address the problem of original sin («Intention et Loi chez Abélard» in *Pierre Abélard, Pierre le Vénérable*, p. 587) and I would add that Abelard has a good deal to say about the problem in his rigorous resistance to, what CROCCA describes as, «... il pessimismo anthropologico patristico-agostiniano del dualismo radicale carne-spirito...» (*Abelardo..*, p. 133).

[81] *Ethics*, p. 63.

[82] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

structured to being open to the another ethical subject in howsoever ways such another subject should be. In being motivated by *caritas*, the greatest of God's gifts, Augustine and Abelard tell us, the subject joins to another and is present to her but never completely, both separated from one another by finitude and linked through the same to God.