



FACULTY OF ARTS

TITLE: CONSEQUENTIAL INTENTIONALISM
SUBTITLE: AN EVALUATION OF THE APPLICABILITY
OF PETER ABELARD'S ETHICS

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Ancient and Medieval Philosophy and Classical Philology

Master's Programme

Essay/Thesis:	15 hp
Program and/or course:	AMP070
Level:	Second Cycle
Semester/year:	H2019
Supervisor:	Juhana Toivanen
Examiner:	Christiana Thomsen Thörnqvist
Report no:	

Abstract

Keywords: Medieval ethics, Abelard, Intention, Consent, Morality, Society, Consequentialism

In his *Ethica*, Peter Abelard argues for *consent* as the only criterion for moral evaluation. This argument of Abelard seems to present his ethical system as subjective and therefore cannot be put into practice. This paper seeks to critically analyze the practicality of Abelard's ethical system in the human society. Taking into consideration some ethical debates of the twelfth-century, some criticisms of Abelard's moral ethics of consent are discussed. However, I will assert that in spite of these criticisms, Abelard's ethical system is nonetheless (1) consistent and (2) objective. Establishing the consistency and objectivity of the ethical system of Abelard will lead me to the conclusion that Abelard's ethical system is applicable in the human society.

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Introduction

It is an uncontested fact that the medieval era was a rich philosophical period in Western history. Philosophy in this era was pursued by means of passionate and extensive debates over a wide range of philosophical issues such as the existence of God, ethics, metaphysics, logic etc. It was in this climate of vigorous philosophical debates that Peter Abelard emerged and made significant contributions. Though the title as the greatest logician of the twelfth century is ascribed to Abelard, his brilliance was exhibited in many other areas of philosophy. He wrote on topics in the fields of theology, metaphysics, logic, and ethics among others. In his ethics, he talked about intention or consent as being the main constituent for evaluating a moral action.

Peter Abelard, “the keenest thinker and boldest theologian of the 12th Century”¹ was one of the prominent thinkers of the medieval era. As I have already indicated, Abelard had a great reputation for being a logician. John of Salisbury described Abelard as being “so eminent in logic that he (Abelard) alone was thought to converse with Aristotle”². In exhibiting his brilliance, Abelard had a lot of intellectual confrontations with some of his contemporaries including his teachers. Notable among these intellectual debates is his victory over William of Champeaux a distinguished philosopher and teacher of the twelfth century on question concerning universals. As stated earlier, Abelard was reputed not only in philosophy but also in theology. It is his ideas in theology that set forth his ethical view (Marenbon 1997, p. 324). Abelard’s decision to live a theological life of a monk was largely based on the unfortunate aftermath of his love affair with his student (who later became his wife for a period of time) Heloise.

As an iconic thinker of the medieval era, several investigations have been taken into the works and ideas of Peter Abelard. While most modern research on Abelard is conducted in relation to his works on logic³, there are a few studies that focus on his ethics. As mentioned above, in his ethical writings, Peter Abelard argues for an intentionalist theory of ethics.

¹ See Chambers Biographical Dictionary 9th edition, 2011, p.1278

² <https://historyofphilosophy.net/abelard-ethics>

³ Some studies on the works of Abelard’s logic includes; *The Semantical Impact of Abailard’s Solution of the Problem of Universals* by L.M. De Rijk, Peter King’s *Peter Abailard and the Problem of Universals in the Twelfth Century*, and Jacobi Klaus’ *Abelard and Frege: the Semantics of Words and Propositions*

Abelard's fundamental claim is that what determines the moral goodness of the action of an ethical agent is neither the action, the desire nor the pleasure of the agent but the intention. This theory of ethics immediately brings certain questions to the fore- How does one know what an agent's intention is? Why should intention and not some other consideration be the sole determinant of what is a morally good action? If an intentionalist view of ethics refuses to consider the consequences of actions, is it practicable in human society? The dominating debate on the ethical view of Peter Abelard is on whether or not the intentionalist ethical view of Abelard is objective or subjective. The early 20th century Catholic commentators criticized Abelard's ethical theory as subjective (Bejczy 2003, p. 3). Frank Desiano accused Abelard for presenting a relatively subjective view of ethics. To Desiano, Abelard's ethical view makes the consent of a moral agent paramount to other consideration when evaluating an action which therefore makes evaluating a moral action dependent on the agent (Desiano 1971, p. 640). Similarly, scholars like James Keenan and Micheal Clanchy both maintain a subjective view of intentionalism (Keenan 1993, p. 208; Clanchy 1997, p. 278-79). Moreover, Odon Lottin presenting a more extreme subjective view of Abelard than the aforementioned scholars by asserting that there is no objectivity in the intentionalist moral theory of Abelard (Lottin 1948, p. 421-22). István Bejczy also criticizes Abelard for postulating an inconsistent position. On the other hand, John Marenbon is of the view that the ethics of Abelard is rather objective. Marenbon asserts that when Abelard describes sin as 'contempt of God'⁴, it encompasses 'conscience' which enables every normal adult individual to distinguish between what that individual chooses to do for God and what that individual should do for God. To Marenbon, what one must do for God in a particular situation applies generally to all people in the same situation. (Marenbon 1997, p. 265-67)

The major aim of this paper is to give a critical evaluation of the practicality of the ethical view of Peter Abelard. I will assert that in spite of the criticisms and problems associated with Abelard's intentionalist theory of ethics, his theory is nevertheless defensible. I will carry out my objectives in two steps. Firstly, I argue that Abelard's intentionalist account of ethics is a relevant ethical theory as it takes into consideration the limitations of humans and suggests to them better ways of approaching issues of morality having in mind these limitations⁵. Secondly,

⁴ See Abelard's *Ethica* p 3, trans. P. V. Spade

⁵ See Abelard's *Ethica*. Abelard is of the view that humans are unable to truly know the intentions of others

I investigate to what extent the ethical view of Abelard could be used in society to regulate the relations between individual humans.

This paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 provides the philosophical background to Abelard's theory of ethics. My focus in this section will be to bring to light the philosophical currents in the area of ethics during the period in which Abelard espoused his intentionalist theory of ethics. This will shed light on what led Abelard to adopt his particular ethical framework. In Section 2, I analyze and clarify the arguments Abelard provides for his intentionalist theory of ethics as presented in his *Scito te ipsum or Ethica*. In section 3, I will show that Abelard's ethical system is not inconsistent and subjective as has been criticized by some scholars. The major problems that arises with the application of Abelard's ethical system is identifying how to evaluate others morally and also sustaining the discussions of morality since humans are incapable of knowing the intentions (which is the only criterion for moral evaluation according to Abelard) of others.

Section 1

Philosophical antecedents

Marenbon maintains that "Abelard's view on intention may be seen as the continuation and development of a long tradition, which was shared by all the thinkers of the twelfth century" (Marenbon 1997, p. 252). Marenbon's observation suggests that it would be quite impossible to properly appreciate the full import of Abelard's intentionalist ethics without placing it in the philosophical context in which it emerged. While I do not agree with Marenbon that Abelard's view of intention was part of a tradition shared by all thinkers of the twelfth century⁶ nevertheless a critical look at Abelard's own ethical writings brings to light three traditions of ethical thought in the twelfth century with which he was engaged; Augustinian ethical thought, Stoic ethics and the ethical thought of Anselm of Laon.

1.1 Augustinian ethics

It is important to point out from the start that one cannot possibly do justice to the full breadth of Augustine's ethical thought in this rather short piece of work. What I seek to do here is to

⁶ Porter, for instance, claims that Abelard's contemporaries found his ethical thought shocking. See Porter's *Responsibility, Passion and Sin*

unveil some aspects of St Augustine's moral philosophy that will provide some philosophical background for understanding Abelard's own theory of ethics. Consequently, I shall focus particularly on Augustine's *On the Sermon on the Mount* partly because *intention* as an important ethical concept features prominently in it. Another reason for focusing on Augustine's *On the Sermon on the Mount* I is that it had influenced the ethics of Abelard significantly. (Knuuttila 2004, p. 180)

Commenting on what Jesus said about adultery, Augustine writes, "we should indeed reflect upon the fact that He did not say 'everyone who covets a woman' but who looks on a woman to lust after her, that is, directs his attention to her with the purpose in his mind to lust after her"⁷. Augustine proceeds to list three steps in the commission of sin which are (1) suggestion, (2) pleasure and (3) consent. One should note that he excludes the element of action. According to Augustine even if one never carries out the action of seeking the forbidden pleasure to which one has consented to in one's heart, one has nevertheless sinned. What Augustine does not discuss here is the reverse situation of carrying out a forbidden pleasure to which one nevertheless does not consent. This is because Augustine is focused on instances where a person is persuaded rather than compelled to act out a forbidden pleasure. Thus, notwithstanding the above observations, one cannot claim that Augustine totally dismisses the relevance of action in his ethical thought. For instance, in *On Lying*, he writes, "When however, the works in themselves are evil such as thefts, fornications, blasphemies or other such; who is there that will say that upon good causes they may be done, so as either to be no sins, or what is more absurd, just sins?"⁸.

Augustine is here making the interesting claim that there are acts that are evil in themselves regardless of whatever 'good' intentions may be attached to them. Thus in addressing this apparent tension in Augustine's ethics, Decosimo argues that Augustine permits lying and killing (two acts Augustine classifies as evil in themselves) in contexts where God has commanded the agent to do them. (Decosimo, 2010, p. 672). It seems to me therefore that

⁷ See Augustine, Augustine's The Lord's Sermon on the Mount (trans. J.J Jepson) Westminster: The Newman Press.1948, p.43

⁸ See Against Lying Retrieved from www.newadvent.org/fathers/1313.htm.

Augustine could be saying that bad intentions makes one sin but good intentions does not necessarily make one good. This therefore does not make Augustine a strict intentionalist⁹.

1.2 Stoic Ethics

Stoicism as a distinct philosophical school of thought originated during the classical period in ancient Greece. Its influence has persisted throughout the centuries to the present period. Of particular interest in the present context, however, is the stoic ethical philosophy as it existed during the medieval period, particularly in the twelfth century, since this tradition of ethical thought seems to have exerted some considerable influence on Abelard's ethical theory¹⁰.

Sandrine Berges is of the view that while Stoic ethics was prevalent during the twelfth century, it was nevertheless complemented by the presence of discourse about Aristotelian virtue¹¹. Aristotelian ethics had an influence on some medieval philosophers including John of Salisbury and Heloise (Berges, 2013, p. 671). Abelard was no exception to the influence of some of the works of Aristotle. The *Categories* of Aristotle though a logical work influenced the ethics of Abelard (Bejczy 2003, p.8). Bejczy argues against the opposing view that twelfth century discourse on ethics was almost entirely dominated by stoicism. Be as it may, scholars in twelfth century philosophical thought generally agree that stoic ethics featured prominently in discourses about ethics although it was not used in its original ancient form.

It is important to point out from the onset that the chief emphasis of stoic ethics from its very inception has been on the concept of virtue. Epictetus maintains that "all men should wish rather for virtue than for wealth" (Epictetus, *The Work of Epictetus*, Trans. T. Wentworth Hugginson, p.422). However, what is this 'virtue' so much esteemed by stoic philosophers?

⁹ This contrasts with Gareth Matthew's claim that Augustine was an extreme intentionalist in ethics. (Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)

¹⁰ See Abelard's *Dialogue between a Philosopher, Jew and Christian*. The philosopher in this dialogue espouses mainly stoic ethical principles.

¹¹ The Aristotelian ethics was translated into Latin around the mid-twelfth century which made it much more accessible around that period, however, it must be noted that some of medieval scholars including Heloise had considerable knowledge in Greek.

In an apparently simplistic manner, Seneca¹² opines that “virtue is nothing but right reason”¹³. One should not however take Seneca’s definition of virtue to mean that possessing virtue is merely a matter of being able to reason correctly on ethical matters. Seneca expects that one should put one’s ethical knowledge into practice. Thus he writes, “Virtue depends partly on training and partly upon practice; you must learn first and then strengthen your learning by actions”⁸.

Above, we see some similarity with Aristotle’s conception of virtue where virtue involves development of character by means of habitually performing virtuous acts. However, the stoic conception of virtue disregards the significance of human emotions and desires for attaining virtue. Indeed, the stoic idea of a good person is that of an ethical agent who is moved purely by rational considerations to do what is right regardless of his or her feelings or emotions. This stoic conception of virtue and what it means to be a good person was very prevalent in the twelfth century. According to Sellars, the influence of this conception of virtue accounts for Abelard’s disregard for the emotions and desires in determining what is ethically right (Sellars, 2013.p.4). It is important to note here that the stoic conception of virtue does not entail indifference towards the actions of the ethical agent.

1.3 Ethics of Anselm of Laon

As espoused by Marenbon, one of the immediate patristic idea of sin that excited the writings of Abelard on ethics was the ‘stage’ theory of Anselm of Laon. (Marenbon 1997, p. 253). This ‘stage’ theory seeks to present sin as a series of events of an action. Firstly, one gets the idea to commit sin. This *suggestio* happens suddenly. *Suggestio*, comes to one’s mind because of one’s bodily pleasure or by the works of the devil. According to Anselm this unpremeditated suggestion or *propasio* -a Stoic notion- is unavoidable to humans. This is as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden .An example is this *suggestio* one sees an attractive married woman and is struck by a sudden desire to have sexual intercourse with her. Anselm asserts that this stage of *suggestio* is not in itself sinful. (2) The next stage is *delectatio* in which

¹² I have employed Senecan conception of virtue because it exerted a dominant influence on stoic ethics in the twelfth century. See Bejczy, The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle ages, 71 for the claim that Cicero and Seneca were the most widely read authors of the twelfth century

¹³ See Seneca, Seneca’s Letters from a Stoic. (trans. R. M. Gummere), New York: Dover Publications Inc. 2016, p.164; p. 325.

one contemplates whether or not to go ahead to have sexual intercourse with the attractive married woman. According to Anselm, this stage is sinful because one considers the act to sleep with the attractive married woman with pleasure. (3) However, consenting to the pleasure of sleeping with the attractive married woman constitutes a further sin, as one moves from the venial sin of *delectatio* to mortal sin of *consensus*. (4) Finally, if one is able to perform this *opus* of sleeping with the attractive married woman, it constitutes an even greater sin (Knuuttila 2004, p. 179).

Though Anselm's ethical view admits of consent as a criteria for determining the moral worth of an action like Abelard, it nonetheless accepts *delectatio* as a sufficient condition for evaluating a moral action. Thus, Anselm accepts stage two as a sufficient criterion for moral evaluation while Abelard does not accept stage two as a sufficient criterion for moral evaluation. Abelard argues to the contrary that the will or desire one develops towards a sinful act cannot be said to be a sufficient ground for concluding that one has sinned (Porter 2000, p. 373).

Section 2

In this section, I discuss Abelard's arguments for his theory of ethics. It is worth mentioning that Abelard's remarks that are relevant for his ethics are scattered form, throughout his philosophical corpus. However, I shall use Abelard's *Scito te ipsum or Ethica* as the primary text in presenting his theory of ethics. I have chosen this work because in it Abelard expounds his view of ethics in a much more exhaustive and systematic manner than he does in his other works. Therefore, taking into account other works of Abelard on ethics may bring light to certain details but will not change the general interpretation of Abelard's ethics presented here.

In the *Ethica*, Abelard commences his argument for his theory of ethics with an explication of the fundamental concepts of vice, virtue and sin. This approach is indeed to be expected: an early grasp of these concepts is necessary for understanding Abelard's exposition of his whole system of ethics. According to Abelard, vice -*viciū*- is what makes us disposed to sin -*peccatum*- (Ethica, p.2)¹⁴. Abelard notes that the 'vice' spoken of here refers to mental vices or

¹⁴ This page number as well as subsequent page numbers in this section are in reference to the page numbers in Abelard's *Scito te ipsum*, translated by P.V. Spade

vices of the mind as distinct from bodily vices. Examples of the former include proneness to laziness while examples of the latter include lameness and blindness -Abelard still proceeds to make a distinction between different kinds mental vices, claiming that even though mental traits such as ignorance, and forgetfulness are mental vices they are nevertheless not the subject matter of moral discourse.(ibid. p.1) Thus the distinguishing feature of mental vices as fitting subjects for moral discussion to Abelard is that “uoluntatem inclinant ad aliquid quod minime conuenit fieri uel dimitti” translated as “they incline the will to do something that is not appropriate to do or to be left undone” (translated by me). Virtue, as opposed to vice, is makes us disposed to good deeds. Thus one can conclude that for Abelard, virtues and vices are both dispositions to action rather than actions themselves.

Another significant point Abelard makes again is that while vice makes a person disposed to sin, it is not sin. Sin, properly speaking, is “consent to what is inappropriate” and this consent is what makes a person guilty before God¹⁵. According to Abelard, sin is also not merely bad action. Sin, in its truest nature, Abelard says, is scorn for the creator and this scorn is “not to do for his sake what we believe we ought to do for his sake, or not to renounce for his sake what we believe ought to be renounced” (Abelard, *Ethica*. p 3, trans. P. V. Spade)¹⁶.

With the fundamental concepts of his ethical theory clearly delineated Abelard proceeds to consider how these concepts play out in various ethical scenarios.

2.1 Willing and Consent

Firstly, Abelard considers whether the willing a bad deed necessarily constitutes sin. Abelard asserts that ones will or desire alone is not sufficient to evaluate the moral worth of one’s actions. To Abelard, whether or not one wills a bad or a good will does not make one a good or bad person. Developing a bad will or an ill desire is like an obstacle that one must overcome to obtain a reward at the end. On the other hand, having a good will just makes it easier for one to be good. It must be stated that having a good will alone does not make one good. For instance one may have a good will and yet end up sinning The scenario Abelard brings up here for examination is the case of an innocent slave who under duress and against his will kills a cruel

¹⁵ Abelard does not give any precise definition of “consent” but one may surmise from the general tenor of his argument that it refers to voluntarily acceding to the inclinations of one’s will.

¹⁶ Id nequaquam facere propter ipsum quod credimus propter ipsum a nobis esse faciendum, vel non dimittere propter ipsum quod credimus esse dimittendum. (Abelardi, *Scito te ipsum* p. 6, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

master in order to preserve his own life. Abelard argues against his interlocutors that what the innocent slave willed was not to kill his master but to preserve his own life and consequently his willing cannot be described as bad. (ibid.p.4). Nevertheless Abelard acknowledges that the slave committed a sin by slaying his master not because it was willed by the slave but because he consented to perform the act. Abelard anticipates the objection that his argument answers to situations where one is compelled by some circumstance to will what one otherwise does not want. What about the instances where a person freely wills a bad deed? Does this not constitute sufficient ground for saying the willing itself is sin? In response to this objection, Abelard invokes the scenario of man who is filled with lust upon seeing a woman and desires to engage in coitus with her (ibid.p.5). According to Abelard, it is quite possible for the man to restrain his will and not permit it to lead to the performance of the deed. In that case, Abelard opines that the man would have had an opportunity to exercise the virtues of self-restraint and moderation. Consequently, the bad will in this case, would have turned out to serve a good purpose. He writes:

For what great deed do we do for God's sake if we don't put up with anything opposed to our willing but instead accomplish what we will? Indeed who thanks us if in what we say we are doing for his sake, we are accomplishing our own will? (Abelard, *Ethica*. para. 23, trans. P. V. Spade)¹⁷.

Hence, just voluntarily willing a bad deed, in Abelard's view does not necessarily amount to sin. One may ask if there could be an 'involuntary sin'. It appears so because one can consent to a bad act although one may not will to do such an act. However, it seems a little difficult to understand how the concept of 'involuntary sin' is. The problem here might lie in the lack of clear distinction between the concept of 'will' and the concept of 'consent'. Desiano is of the view that 'will' as employed by Abelard in his *Ethica* lacks the modern connotation of "a clear, conscious directing of oneself" (Desiano 1971, p. 634) Is it however possible for a person to *consent* to a bad deed against their will as it appears in the case of the slave who killed his master unwillingly. Nevertheless the crux of Abelard's argument here is that voluntarily willing a bad deed does not amount to sin since the vital element of consent is absent.

¹⁷ Quid enim magnum pro Deo facimus si nichil nostrae uoluntati aduersum toleramus, sed magis quod uolumus implemus ? Quis etenim nobis grates habeat si in eo quod pro ipso nos facere dicimus, uoluntatem nostram impleamus? (Abelardi, Scito te ipsum p.12, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

2.2 Pleasure and Consent

Secondly, Abelard undertakes an examination of whether the pleasure felt in sinning is itself necessarily sinful. Abelard maintains that to hold that the bodily pleasure itself is necessarily sinful is absurd since that would mean every kind of pleasure human beings feel in doing anything must then be classified as sin. Thus people who are married must then be charged with sin for enjoying the pleasure in sex. Abelard considers this view to be erroneous.

He writes:

Hence not even married couples are exempt from sin when they are brought together by his bodily pleasure that is permitted to them, and neither is one who enjoys a delicious meal of his own fruit. All sick people too would be at fault who favor sweeter foods for refreshment, in order to recuperate from their illness. They surely don't take these foods without pleasure; otherwise if they took them they wouldn't help (Abelard, *Ethica*. para 36, trans. P.V. Spade)¹⁸.

Abelard further shows the absurdity of this position by pointing out that since God himself is the source of the bodily pleasures, these pleasures cannot by themselves be sinful because otherwise God would have to be blamed for leading men to sin. The bodily pleasures, as Abelard sees them, are an inescapable part of human existence and to vilify them as sinful as such would be to cut out a fundamental part of human existence.

Here again, Abelard's claim is that only when one voluntarily consents to them does one become guilty before God. Consider again another interesting scenario Abelard presents:

For example, if someone forces someone in religious orders, bound by chains, to lie among women, and is led into pleasure---but not into consent---by the bed's softness and the touch of the women around him, who can venture to call this pleasure nature has made necessary a sin (Abelard, *Ethica*. para. 42, trans. P. V. Spade)¹⁹.

¹⁸ Vnde nec coniuges immunes sunt a peccato cum hac sibi carnali delectatione concessa permiscentur, nec ille quoque qui esu delectabili sui fructus uescetur. Essent etiam in culpa quilibet infirmi qui ad recreationem ut de infirmitate conualescant suauioribus cibis fouentur, quos nequaquam sine delectatione sumunt, uel si sumerent non prodessent. (Abelardi, Scito te ipsum p.18, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

¹⁹ Veluti si quis religiosum aliquem uinculis constrictum inter feminas iacere compellat, et ille molliciae lecti, et circumstantium feminarum contactu in delectationem, non in consensum, trahatur, quis hanc delectationem quam natura fecit necessariam culpam appellare presumat? (Abelardi, Scito te ipsum p.20, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

According to Abelard, the monk in the above scenario, in spite of feeling pleasure from the caresses of the women, would nevertheless *not* be guilty of committing sin. What is lacking in this instance as a necessary condition for imputing sin is *consent*.

2.3 Action and Consent

Abelard next tackles the question of whether the actions a person does with the body can necessarily constitute a basis for the imputation of sin. In response to this question, Abelard opines that the action a person performs with his body makes no difference as far as the imputation of sin is concerned (ibid.p.10). The plausibility of Abelard's claim arises from the fact, which Abelard himself recognizes, that there are instances where people perform bad deeds either through force or ignorance. In such instances, it is not clear how performing these bad deeds would count as a sufficient condition for claiming that the person has sinned. He writes:

Now as for things that ought not to be done, I don't think it escapes anyone how often they are done without sin, for example when they are committed through force or ignorance. For instance if a woman subjected by force has sex with the husband of another woman, or if a man somehow deceived sleeps with a woman he thought was his wife, or if by mistake he kills someone he believed should be killed by him in his role as a judge. So it is not a sin to lust after another (person's) wife, or to have sex with her; the sin is rather to consent to this lust or to this action. (Abelard, *Ethica*. p 11, trans. P. V. Spade with modification)²⁰

Particularly interesting, is Abelard's attempt to show how the indifference of action to sin plays out in a person's relationship with God. He considers for instance, the role of Judas in the arrest and crucifixion of Christ when he betrayed Jesus Christ for a reward. In Abelard's opinion, even though Judas did what was in accordance with the will of God, he was nevertheless guilty for his action. The point here is that action, whether good or bad is not at all relevant in determining whether sin is present or not . Another instructive example Abelard presents is Biblical story of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

²⁰ De his autem quae fieri non debent quam sepe absque peccato fiant, cum per uim scilicet aut ignorantiam committantur, neminem latere arbitror. Veluti si qua uim passa cum uiro alterius concubuerit, uel aliquis quoquomodo deceptus cum ea dormierit quam uxorem putauit, uel eum per errorem occiderit quem a se tamquam a iudice occidendum credidit. Non est itaque peccatum uxorem alterius concupiscere uel cum ea concumbere sed magis huic concupiscentiae uel actioni consentire. (Abelardi, Scito te ipsum p.24, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

The difficult question here is why God would command Abraham to perform a deed that is bad. In response, Abelard claims that God is exculpated from any guilt of sin by the fact that his *intention* was good in commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, as later became evident in the story. Similarly, in attempting to carry out what God had commanded, Abraham himself could not be charged with sin since he was not acting out of scorn for God.

Thus so far Abelard has shown what does *not* count as sin or scorn against God and consequently what does not count as morally bad (which is the same as what is sinful). The question that remains to be answered is what the standard of judging moral goodness is. It is not enough to perform the negative task of showing what moral rightness or wrongness does *not* consist in. One must also perform the positive task of providing some criteria for judging in specific cases whether moral rightness is present or not. Abelard's awareness of this problem is seen in the two scenarios he presents for analysis.

The first scenario concerns a poverty stricken woman who inadvertently sleeps over her baby and kills the baby in the process. According to Abelard, not knowing whether the woman's act was intentional or not, a bishop summoned to pass judgment in the situation can only pass judgment based on the woman's external deed. Similarly Abelard presents the case of a Judge who is compelled to punish an otherwise innocent person whose accusers adduce adequate evidence he has committed some crime. The judge is compelled by the external evidence provided to pronounce the otherwise innocent person guilty. According to Abelard both the judge and the bishop must pass judgment irrespective of the fact that they lack knowledge of the true intentions of those whom they are judging. They must pass judgment in the interest of preserving public order and deterring would-be law breakers. This suggests that laws and 'morality' as practiced in our various societies are just to regulate the behaviors of the people and not to truly judge them morally as "a scorn for God" . This is because these laws and 'morality' are not able to truly take into consideration the necessary ingredient of *consent* in their evaluations. However, it will be inappropriate to say that laws and 'morality' are not important in the society, because given human limitations, they are the best we can have. Abelard writes:

These things are done not so much out of duty to justice as out of the proper balance needed for the administration of justice, so that, as we said, in preventing public injuries we have regard for general pragmatism. Hence we often punish the least sins with greater penalties, not giving so much

consideration with the fairness that comes with justice to what fault preceded as thinking with the discretion of foresight how great a disadvantage can come from them if they are punished mildly (Abelard, *Ethica*. para 88, trans. P. V. Spade with slight modification)²¹.

Abelard concedes here that a person's action can be said to be good but only on the basis that it proceeds from a good intention (ibid.p.23). But what is the criterion for determining what a good intention is? Abelard proceeds to enumerate the basis for calling an intention "good". In a rather categorical tone of voice, he asserts that an intention cannot be said to be good just because it *appears* to be good to the agent- but rather that; the agent must believe the intention to be pleasing to God and additionally the belief of the agent must be true. Abelard says:

Otherwise the infidels themselves would also have good deeds, just as we do, since they too believe no less than we do that through their deeds they are saved or are pleasing to God. (Abelard, *Ethica*. para. 109, trans. P. V. Spade)²²

Thus in Abelard's view, it is not enough to say that X's intention is good because X himself believes so. X's belief that his intention is good must correspond to the true state of affairs, i.e. X's intention must *really* be good and not merely apparently so. According to Abelard this in turn has implications for judging whether a person's action counts as sin or not. When a person acts, believing wrongly that his action is pleasing to God, he cannot be said to have sinned in the proper sense of the word. i.e., in the sense of acting scornfully towards God. A good example Abelard provides in relation to this point is the persecution of Christ and his followers (ibid.p.29). According to Abelard those who persecuted Christ and his followers believed themselves to be acting in a manner pleasing to God even though they actually weren't. Their 'sin' in this case consisted merely in acting out of ignorance and not out of scorn for God. On the contrary if they had acted against their conscience—acted against what they *believed* to be right--- then their action would have properly counted as sin. These persecutors cannot be said to have been good even though they did not sin in the proper sense. Their persecution therefore can only be described as non-bad.

²¹ Et haec quidem non tam iusticiae debito quam dispensationis aguntur temperamento, ut, quemadmodum diximus, publica preueniendo dampna communi consulamus utilitati. Sepe igitur minima peccata maioribus penis uindicamus, non tam aequitate iusticiae adtendentes quae culpa precesserit quam discretionem prouidentiae cogitantes quanta hinc contingere possit incommoditas, si leuiter puniantur. (Abelardi, *Scito te ipsum* p.44, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

²² Alioquin ipsi etiam infideles sicut et nos bona opera haberent, cum ipsi etiam non minus quam nos per opera sua se saluari uel Deo placere credant. (Abelardi, *Scito te ipsum* p.54, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

Can one say that Abelard provides us with an adequate criterion for determining what counts as good intention? Does he also provide us with an adequate criterion for what counts as sin? What are the major problems associated with this intentionalist approach to ethics. These questions will be addressed in the next section of the paper?

Section 3

Is Abelard's ethical theory practically plausible?

Abelard's ethical theory received a lot of criticisms from some of his contemporaries. A notable figure among his critics was Bernard of Clairvaux who did not only criticize Abelard but went the extra mile of convincing the Council of Sens to condemn some aspects of Abelard's ethics (Bejczy 2003, p. 12). In addition to his contemporaries, more recent scholars have not been afraid to subject Abelard's ethic to criticisms. In this section, I will discuss two major criticism of Abelard which are that his ethics is (1) inconsistent and that it is (2) subjective. These discussions will enable me to further investigate whether or not Abelard's ethics could be applicable in a society.

Istvân Bejczy criticizes Abelard's ethical theory for being inconsistent. According to Bejczy, while Abelard's declared intent is to defend the claim that deeds are wholly irrelevant for moral evaluation, the contrary claim---that deeds must be taken into account in making moral judgments---can nevertheless be identified in Abelard's ethical writings (Bejczy 2003,p.3). Considering, for instance, Abelard's commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*²³, Bejczy notices that for Abelard, like Aristotle, virtue consists not merely in knowing or willing what is right but in executing what is right. Thus merit is acquired through the execution of good acts and not merely in willing them or knowing what they are. (Bejczy, 2003, p.8). Again, taking a critical look at Abelard's discussion of virtue in his *Collationes* or *Dialogue between the Jew, Philosopher and Christian*, Bejczy argues that Abelard, in that ethical work, identifies virtue

²³ See Commentary on Aristotle's categories. (Ed) B. Geyer In *Beitrage zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters* 21(2). Aschendorff: Munster 1921.

with being able to carry out good acts. This is seen, according to Bejczy from the manner in which the Philosopher in Abelard's *Collationes* discusses the virtues of courage and temperance (Bejczy, 2003, p.9).

According to the Philosopher in Abelard's *Collationes*, without the virtues of courage and temperance, one cannot *execute* the virtue of justice and if the virtue is not carried out into act it perishes²⁴. Bejczy's claims suggest that Abelard contradicts himself when in his *Ethics* he maintains that deeds are irrelevant to determining the virtuousness of a person²⁵.

Indeed, turning to Abelard's *Ethics* itself, Bejczy adduces further examples to support his claim that Abelard's ethical theory is inconsistent. According to Bejczy one finds in Abelard *Ethics* the view that certain acts are intrinsically evil so far as they contradict the will of God. Thus he questions how it is possible to hold the view that certain acts are intrinsically evil while still maintaining that moral evaluations must be based wholly on the intentions of the ethical agent (Bejczy 2003, p.12-13).

It would be recalled that for Abelard, one's intention is not good merely because one *believes* one's actions corresponds to the will of God but because one's action truly corresponds to the will of God. The point Bejczy is making above is that by providing such a criteria Abelard renders intentions, at least as the only significant factor in moral evaluation, void.

Furthermore, Bejczy argues that Abelard's notion of consent in his *Ethics* presupposes the capacity on the part of the ethical agent to form an objective moral judgment of his intended act. (Bejczy 2003, p. 18). And it is this capacity for forming objective moral judgments about one's intended acts which determines whether or not one makes a good consent. Thus consent is bad if one is able to appraise that what one is going to do is bad but nevertheless consents to doing it. This is clearly a reverse of Abelard's line of thought for in this case it is the objective nature of the act that determines whether the intention is good or bad and not the vice versa. What Bejczy seems to be saying here is that in order to know the nature of the consent of the moral agent, Abelard seems to require us to have some idea about what kinds of actions it would be right to consent to and what kinds of action it would not be right to consent to.

²⁴ See Marenbon, John and Giovanni Orlandi (eds. and trans.), 2001, Peter Abelard: *Collationes*, Oxford: Clarendon.

²⁵ One may recall Abelard's example of the slave whose action of killing his master had no moral bearing on his will to kill his master so far as consent was absent. Here one sees a good example of a will who's moral worth swings free of the actions of the ethical agent.

Is Abelard's ethical theory inconsistent? Does Abelard in spite of himself find a place for human actions in the practice of moral evaluation? The answer to these questions depends on whether Abelard, in the first place set out to totally exclude human actions from the domain of moral evaluation. Certain scholars have tried to argue that on certain interpretations of Abelard's ethical works, it turns out that he never meant to discount the place of deeds in moral evaluation²⁶. However, granted that deeds in themselves have moral worth as Bejczy has proved, Abelard's position is still sustainable. The fundamental question to which Abelard is trying to respond is, at what stage can we evaluate one's action morally? To this question Abelard says that it is at the stage of *consent*. According to one interpretation, when Abelard is saying that actions themselves are morally irrelevant, he could mean that the act does not add or subtract from the moral appraisal of a person. This is not to say that Abelard admits that deeds in themselves are morally relevant. Because to him, the goodness or badness of an act is solely dependent on the intention of the moral agent. For instance an act like killing will be good if the intention for such an act is good or bad if the intention for this same act is bad. This position of Abelard is made clearer with an example he gives concerning the betrayal of Jesus Christ by both God and Judas Iscariot which led to his (Jesus Christ) crucifixion. With the same act of betrayal, Abelard describes Judas for sinning because his intention for betrayal Jesus was bad and yet maintained that God did no evil because his intention was good. The inference here is that actions in themselves even if they should have moral worth will yet not be relevant in the moral evaluation of an individual. Bejczy therefore seems to be judging Abelard by standards other than those of Abelard's, and thus falls into some error of which he accuses some contemporary adversaries of Abelard. (Bejczy 2003, p. 3)

Abelard's ethical system has also widely been criticized for being subjective. This criticism is reverberated by so many scholars that one might be tempted to accept it as fact. Odon Lottin gives an extreme interpretation of the subjectivism of Abelard's ethics by maintaining that Abelard out rightly denies an objective morality (Lottin 1948, 421-422). In the article *Of God and Man: Consequences of Abelard's Ethic* Frank Desiano states "temporally prior to the internal act, law has moral meaning only when informed by an act of consent. While it appears difficult to accuse Abelard of excessive subjectivism, nevertheless it remains clear that man's moral act of consent or intention is primary before all" (Desiano 1971, p. 640). This subjective

²⁶ See Jean Porter, "Responsibility, Passion and Sin: A reassessment of Abelard's ethics". In *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Fall, 2000), pp. 367-394

view of Abelard's ethics though in different ways is reiterated by many other scholars including D.E. Luscombe, Josef Fuchs, James Keenan, M.T. Clanchy and Servias Pinckaers (Luscombe 1971, p. xxxii; Fuchs, 1981, p. 106-108, Keenan 1993, p. 208-209; Clanchy 1997, p. 278-279; Pinckaers 1986, p. 28-31)²⁷. There is an underlying view that runs throughout the arguments of all those who accuse Abelard of postulating a subjective ethical system. This view is that, by Abelard making intention the central criterion for moral evaluation, morality becomes dependent on the individual. That is to say that what is considered as right or wrong mainly becomes the decision of the ethical agent.

Abelard may respond to this criticism of subjectivism by stating that:

Thus an intention isn't to be called good because it appears good, but more than that, because it is such as it is considered to be -that is, when if one believes that what he is aiming at is pleasing to God, he is in addition not deceived in his evaluation. Otherwise the infidels themselves would also have good deeds, just as we do, since they too believe no less than we do that through their deeds they are saved or are pleasing to God" (Abelard, *Scito te ipsum* para. 109, trans. P.V Spade)²⁸.

The above statement of Abelard is not to say that he is asserting two contradictory assertions. That is saying that intention is the only criterion for moral evaluation and also that intention is not the criterion for moral evaluation.

This apparent contradiction is easily resolved by making a distinction between what could be considered as a first-order question and what is considered a second-order question. By insisting on the centrality of intention or consent of an individual, Abelard is responding to a second-order question as to what is necessary for ascribing moral responsibility rather than a first-order question about the objective view of morality. This makes it possible for Abelard to hold an objective standard of morality while clinging onto consent or intention as the criterion for moral evaluation (Porter 200, p. 366-367). This objective standard of morality is tacitly entailed in Abelard's ethical system when he advocates for intention as the sole consideration for moral judgments. This is because sinning to Abelard is simply and objectively to 'scorn God'. And to him (Abelard) each and every individual knows when he or she sins. The only exceptions are

²⁷ See Porter, Jean, "Responsibility, Passion, and Sin: A Reassessment of Abelard's Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Inc., Vol. 28, No. 3 (Fall, 2000), 366-68

²⁸ Non est itaque intentio bona dicenda quia bona uidetur, sed insuper quia talis est, sicut existimatur, cum uidelicet illud ad quod tendit, si Deo placere credit, in hac insuper existimatione sua nequaquam fallatur. Alioquin ipsi etiam infideles sicut et nos bona opera haberent, cum ipsi etiam non minus quam nos per opera sua se saluari vel Deo placere credant. (Abelardi, *Scito te ipsum* p.54, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

children and those who are mentally deficient and they are incapable of sinning. This knowledge of good and bad is revealed to everyone through natural laws and with the help of 'conscience' one is able to apprehend it in a particular situations (Marenbon 1997, p. 265-67).

After establishing the consistency and objectivity of Abelard's ethical system, the next focus will be on determining whether it is applicable in the society. This aspect is so obviously important that it is surprising that many scholars have not looked into it. This is because the aim of every ethical theory should not be only to provide an abstract criterion for moral evaluation but also a practical view of it. After establishing that Abelard's ethical system is consistent and objective, what remains is evaluating to what extent Abelard's ethical system can be applied in a human society. As has already been explained in the Section II of this paper, Abelard postulates an intentionalist view of morality where one's consent is the central and main criterion for moral evaluation. The obvious question that follows from Abelard's position is- how can one be assessed morally if intentions is the only criterion that should be considered? Being able to assess people's actions successfully will help us to reward good people and to punish evildoers thereby promoting good behaviors and deterring bad ones.

Anticipating this objection, Abelard responds:

Rather God alone, who pays attention not so much to the deeds that are done as to the mind with which they are done, is truly thinking about the guilt in our intention and tries the fault in a true court (Abelard's *Ethica*, trans. P.V. Spade para 82)²⁹.

He further adds:

Thus he is called the tester of the heart and reins, and is said to see in darkness. For where no one sees, there he sees most of all, because in punishing sin he doesn't pay attention to the deed but to the mind, just as conversely we don't pay attention to the mind that we don't see but to the deed we know (Abelard's *Ethica*, trans. P.V. Spade para 83)³⁰.

These statement of Abelard suggest that it is only God who can adequately judge the moral conduct of an individual. This is because God is the only one who can adduce the true intentions of a person. But since humans do not have the omniscient power of God, how can humans

²⁹ Deus uero solus qui non tam quae fiunt, quam quo animo fiunt attendit, ueraciter in intentione nostra reatum pensat et uero iudicio culpam examinat. (Abelardi, *Scito te ipsum* p.40, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

³⁰ Vnde et probator cordis et renum dicitur et in abscondito uidere. Ibi enim maxime uidet ubi nemo uidet, quia in puniendo peccatum non opus attendit sed animum, sicut nos e conuerso non animum quem non uidemus, sed opus quod nouimus. (Abelardi, *Scito te ipsum* p.40, ed. D.E. Luscombe)

evaluate the moral actions among themselves? Here, Abelard suggests that humans should punish or reward others based on the consequences of their actions. This is only so as to prevent pain or danger in the future and to promote the wellbeing of all. Abelard gives an example on a woman who out of love accidentally kills her own child in an attempt to comfort him by placing him by her side for warmth. Abelard maintains that though the woman has not sinned she nonetheless has to be punished in order to deter other women from committing a similar mistake.

I will argue that amidst the limitations of humans, Abelard advocates a consequentialist way of life for humans. This consequentialism is used in the a loose sense and it does not mean that an action is morally good or bad depending on the results of the action, but rather in the legal sense to mean that an action is to punished or rewarded results of the action in the legal sense. Here, it should be noted that there is a shape contrast between what is legal and what is moral. Legality denotes set of laws that have been enacted by authorities to which one is punished for breaking them. Morality on the other hand is concern with beliefs, norms and principles that are considered as right or wrong by a particular society. Something can be legal but not moral and vice versa.

It seems that it could be deduce from my examination of Abelard's ethical system that discussion of morality and moral issues in the society is meaningless or of no importance. This assertion could arise out of the fact that it has be established in the examination that humans do not have the capacity to successfully evaluate others morally. This is because humans are incapable of accessing the intentions of others which is the necessary factor of Abelard's ethics. However, this assertion of rendering morality non-importance cannot be substantiated as God cannot be excluded from human affairs in Abelard's society. With the omniscience of God, God is more than capable of rewarding good conduct and punishing bad ones. The idea of God makes morality and discussion of moral issues even more important.

Conclusion

What is one to make of the relevance of Abelard's ethics for contemporary times in the light of the ensuing discussions? What emerges from these discussions is that Abelard's ethics of intention is supplemented with an ethics of action. As have been discussed, Abelard departed from his contemporary philosophers on the ethical discussions of their time by making 'intentions' the sole criterion for moral evaluation. This proposition brings to Abelard many criticisms. Notably among recent criticisms of Abelard's ethics is that it is inconsistent and subjective. However, from section three of this paper we can say that these two major critiques against Abelard are to be rejected. Further analysis of the ethic of Abelard led us to the declaration that moral evaluation can only be sufficiently executed by God as he alone can truly apprehend the intentions of an individual. Also, it was realized that Abelard's ethical system is applicable to human society. However, it is only applicable from a consequential point of view. This move I think helps to address the practical difficulties associated with a purely intentionalist ethics and thus make Abelard's ethics more applicable to human society. Abelard himself of course, believes that in order for any human society to thrive, human actions must be considered as an important factor when judgments have to be made. However, he does not consider such judgments as carrying any serious moral weight since for him it is only the intention that matters. Further studies could be taken to determine whether this consequential application of the ethic of Abelard is a rule-consequentialism.

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