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QUIDAM HOMO EST ASINUS: THE ORIGINALITY AND INFLUENCE OF PETER  
ABELARD UPON MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

By:  
Timothy Ernst  
B.A., Hanover College, 2005

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
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for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2011

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A Thesis Approved on

November 28, 2011

by the following Thesis Committee

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Blake Beattie, Thesis Director

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Ann Taylor Allen

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Thomas Maloney

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## ABSTRACT

### QUIDAM HOMO EST ASINUS: THE ORIGINALITY AND INFLUENCE OF PETER ABELARD UPON MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

Timothy Ernst

November 28, 2011

Historians and philosophers alike remember Peter Abelard as the most brilliant, original, and influential philosopher of the twelfth century. Much of this reputation stems not from Abelard's intellectual contributions but due to Abelard's scandalous personal life and the nonexistence of documents of Abelard's contemporary philosophers. Though brilliant, Abelard exerted little influence through his ideas. Unlike a modern professor who changes the paradigms of his discipline with innovative theses, Abelard was a skilled teacher who sought to teach students the skills they required to advance their careers within a reformed Catholic Church, which was newly interested in logic, philosophy, and theology. Seen from this perspective, Abelard has much more in common with his contemporary intellectuals and is more consistent with the context of his age than the secondary scholarship typically recognizes.

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## HISTORIOGRAPHY

Peter Abelard was among the most famous intellectuals of the Christian West in the twelfth century, but today few people besides specialists in medieval history and philosophy know anything of him.<sup>1</sup> The nature of the documentary evidence is partially to blame. Abelard devoted a large portion of his own writing to logic and theology, two difficult subjects for non-specialists to understand. Even specialists within these disciplines may have trouble with Abelard's writings due to the differences between standardized logical and theological terminology of twelfth-century France and the present. Thirteenth-century philosophy and theology is better represented in academia and even in more popular studies as well. Philosophers like Aquinas or Bonaventure wrote on a wider variety of topics, many of which are highly appealing to those in search of spiritual writings. Abelard wrote on spiritual matters as well, but always through the eye of the logician; every term had to be scrupulously defined and consistently used and every implication of every definition thoroughly probed for the sake of validity. Such work must have been labor intensive to think and write, and it is often challenging to read, especially for those who lack an appreciation of formal logic and are more concerned with the content of an argument than its form.

If his intellectual writings were all Abelard left behind, he might have been of interest only to philosophers and intellectual historians, but he also left an autobiography,

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<sup>1</sup> M.T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 1.

the *Historia Calamitatum*, as well as a number of letters to his lover and wife Heloise. These sources account for much of the continued interest in Abelard, because they are fundamentally different from much of the self-conscious writing of previous eras and reveal a great deal of scandal, sex, and difficulties in Abelard's personal life. When historians or popular audiences who are ill-suited for logical analysis or theological argument could make little sense of Abelard's most important works, they could always turn to his sentimental writings for steamy romance and stories of his persecution at the hands of the Church. Credulity of the veracity of Abelard's claims is unwarranted; like any autobiography the *Historia Calamitatum* is a heavily biased source full of holes on subjects on which Abelard preferred to remain silent, but unlike many autobiographies of his age it makes reference to real people and events rather than to spiritual archetypes.<sup>2</sup>

The document also clearly reveals its author's personality. Though he frames the book as a letter of consolation to an unnamed friend, Abelard consistently demonstrates his arrogant, contentious nature far more than he consoles. So great was his conceit that he believed however terrible his friend's sufferings were, they were "in truth nought, or at the most but of small account"<sup>3</sup> in comparison with his own. Despite its bias, the *Historia Calamitatum* is a rich source for the historian due to its reflection of Abelard's psychology. The degree of individuality it exhibits has often led historians to use Abelard as an archetypal example of an intellectual during a new age in European history which they frequently dub the "Twelfth-Century Renaissance."

Urban Holmes claims the term "Renaissance" should be defined prior to debate

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Brooke, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1970), 24; Henry Adams Bellows, trans., *The Story of My Misfortunes: The Autobiography of Peter Abelard* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958), xxii.



concerning its applicability:

The word 'Renaissance' itself is something that we must define at the outset. We pay too much attention to the etymological sense, that of 'rebirth,' and forget how the word is actually used by most of us. In this connection a renaissance is not necessarily the rebirth of anything. It is a sudden increase of enthusiasm and intensity in a given stream of culture. It does not have to be implied that new materials, new models, have been produced from somewhere. The quickening of enthusiasm comes from some catalyst—to use the terminology of chemistry—which produces an intense and brilliant reaction in a continuous current which is already there. Once enthusiasm has been aroused there is, of course, a search for new materials and enlarged knowledge is an inevitable result. In studying the circumstances of a renaissance we must endeavor to define the current of ideas which was present and to evaluate the nature of the catalyst which suddenly appeared.<sup>4</sup>

During the twelfth century a sudden increase in enthusiasm for the Latin classics, law, theology, philosophy, art, architecture, and vernacular poetry developed.<sup>5</sup> Abelard rose out of and contributed to some of these developments through his study of philosophy and theology. Many historians have described the twelfth century as a renaissance and Abelard as a fixture of it, but this description has not been universally accepted.

The first historian to use the term was Charles Homer Haskins, who in 1927 published a book titled after the term which was intended primarily for students and those with an amateur interest in the period. Haskins, much like Abelard with his theological writings, wrote the book on the basis of his own students finding it difficult to believe that the middle ages was a period of anything other than barbarism and ignorance. This erroneous view of the Middle Ages has proven quite durable despite the efforts of historians to correct it. In order to emphasize that the Italian Renaissance was not such a great divergence from trends in the twelfth century, Haskins applied the term to show the

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4 Urban T. Holmes, Jr., "The Idea of a Twelfth-Century Renaissance," *Speculum* 26, no. 4 (October 1951): 643.

5 Brooke, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 13.

continuity between the eras.<sup>6</sup>

As a celebrity of twelfth-century France, Abelard figures heavily into Haskins's survey, though Haskins's analysis is flawed, particularly with regard to the problem of universals and particulars, the great debate in logic in the twelfth century. Particulars are easy enough to grasp even for those unfamiliar with the issue. They are nothing more than the individual entities which make up the world of experience. Universals are a bit more difficult to classify. Abstractly, they are the categories into which the human mind sorts its experience of particulars and are signified by terms like "animal" or "human being" according to the claims of realists and conceptualists. The debate considered how universals should be regarded. *Realists* claimed them to be real things just as particulars are real things, while *nominalists* believed they were only words. Abelard is often associated with the nominalist camp due to his famous claim in the *Logica Ingredientibus* that "it remains to ascribe universality to utterances alone,"<sup>7</sup> but there is no consensus as to exactly what Abelard's view of the problem should be called. Often debates of this kind seem to be little more than wrangling with definitions only for the sake of mental gymnastics, but Haskins clearly understood the eventual implications of nominalism and why they were important. All sorts of concepts such as the Church, Christendom, or more abstract matters of doctrine like the Trinity involve universals, and unless universals are upheld as real things all sorts of problematic questions on these subjects come to the fore.<sup>8</sup>

According to Haskins's view nominalism is a sort of intellectual anarchism, but

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6 Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957), v.

7 Richard N. Bosley and Martin Tweedale, eds., *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy: Selected Readings Presenting the Interactive Discourses Among the Major Figures* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997), 383.

8 Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 352.

twelfth-century nominalism was more a form of anti-realism than of Pyrrhic skepticism. It denied, he says, the validity of the realists' arguments, because no known thing fit the definition of a universal, which is not quite the same thing as claiming that universals were only metaphysical detritus. Later versions of nominalism were much more extreme in their attacks on the existence of universals, and claiming a link between the two, as Haskins does, without studying the change in the context of the debate is an error.

Like many other historians, Haskins also misinterprets Abelard's *Sic et Non*. This misinterpretation comes about as a result of the human mind's desire to find convenient explanations for inconvenient facts or a lack of firm evidence and connections within a narrative. In the *Sic et Non*, Abelard collected and arranged hundreds of quotations from scripture and the patristic thinkers such as Augustine, Jerome, and Origen. He collated them around several differing questions in which he had personal interest and organized the responses into those who answered "yes" and those which responded "no." This method was of great importance to the *questio*, which would become the dominant academic method from the thirteenth century onward, though Abelard did not invent it nor was he the only man in his period to use it. Several scholars from the nineteenth century forward have been confused by Abelard's failure to provide a definitive answer to the questions he raises in the *Sic et Non*. Their response has been to further reinforce the idea that nominalists were intellectual anarchists, free thinkers, or rebels against Church authority. They claimed, as Haskins does, that showing the contradictions between authoritative sources undermined the Church's ability to define doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Abelard's silence seems especially pressing when *Sic et Non* is compared to the *Sentences* of Peter

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

Lombard, which does give an authoritative resolution to the contradictions, but Abelard and Lombard had different goals and different audiences for their respective works. These facts are typically misconstrued or ignored when an author wishes to argue that the middle ages were a time of powerful intellectual ferment which an anti-intellectual Church attempted to quash. Holding up Abelard as a free thinker serves to show that intellectual activity was more than parroting the official line of the Church, but the number of philosophers accused of heresy, including Abelard himself, illustrate this fact quite well. The juxtaposition of discordant authorities in the *Sic et Non* serves a more subtle and rudimentary purpose than Haskins succeeded in realizing.

Roger Llyod's work differed little from Haskins's. He maintains the usage of "renaissance" as a term to define the twelfth century, though his survey focuses more on personalities like John of Salisbury, whom Haskins had not considered as thoroughly. Llyod found the century to be *sui generis* due to its outpouring of creativity.<sup>10</sup> He attempted to draw a connection between the major individuals he considered and their greater context to forge "a *via media* between the view of Carlyle that the hero makes history, and the more fashionable view of the Marxists that the hunger of the anonymous masses is history's differentiating term."<sup>11</sup> Examination of the intellectual contributions of the period gave Llyod ample documentary evidence. Most people of the day, of course, never wrote anything, while the more practical political and economic documents fail to provide the flavor of the times found in intellectual and personal documents that is a necessary ingredient in reconstructing the mentality of the time.

Jacques Le Goff wrote on the era firmly from the position of social history in his

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Llyod, *The Golden Middle Age* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

*Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, but his interpretation is heavily ideological. In the United States, Le Goff might be politically lumped together with professors like Noam Chomsky, who are sometimes referred to as “left wing libertarians.” They tend to distrust both government and corporate business, which they see as tools of oppression. Abelard for Le Goff represents a rarely achieved ideal: a man who controls his own labor and is therefore independent of coercive economic or political control. Le Goff goes so far as to refer to Abelard as the “first professor,”<sup>12</sup> even though Abelard’s activity differed markedly from that of a modern university professor. For Le Goff, intellectuals represented a distinct class in the middle ages because they made their way in the world by selling their knowledge through teaching and writing.<sup>13</sup> While teachers like Abelard had at least to be secular clerics and therefore members of the Church, they did not perform the same functions as priests or higher clergy who administered sacraments and the Church or the monks, who truly were the *oratores*, since much of their time was devoted to prayer and contemplation. Intellectuals were also more dependent than Le Goff would like to believe, while few twelfth-century intellectuals remained within that station throughout their lives. John of Salisbury, for example, became an archbishop. Had the circumstances of his life been different, Abelard himself may have joined the ranks of the upper clergy. His decision to study theology rather than remain a mere logician displays that he had ambition for higher office within the Church, while the political patronage he received from Stephen de Garlande illustrates at least some dependence.

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12 Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 35.

13 *Ibid.*, 1.

For being so concerned with intellectuals in the middle ages, Le Goff also often misunderstands their concerns. He claims that nominalism argued that words signify things and are therefore based on reality, but this is in fact the claim of realism that twelfth-century nominalism argues against.<sup>14</sup> For nominalists a word e.g., “Peter” signifies since it refers to Abelard, but a word e.g., “horse” can only be predicated of an actual horse and therefore is not an extramental universal thing. Le Goff’s error so simplifies the debate between nominalists and realists that it makes their contention seem juvenile. He also follows Haskins’s incorrect appraisal of *Sic et Non*.<sup>15</sup> Abelard figures heavily into Le Goff’s argument, and so construing him as the ultimate twelfth-century free thinker was distinctly to his advantage, even if the description was not quite valid.

Sidney Packard made a more radical iteration of Haskins’s thesis: the twelfth century renaissance was not an earlier, separate renaissance, but the beginning of a continuum that ended with the Italian Renaissance.<sup>16</sup> Originally published in the late 1920s, Haskins’s thesis was nearly a half century old and had begun to show its age by the time Packard published his work in 1973. According to Packard, scholars in the twelfth century began to move past the immediate implications of the texts they had to more original arguments and were much less isolated from each other than they had been in the past.<sup>17</sup> While this may be true, that seems a poor reason to bind the twelfth century to the Italian Renaissance, a period occurring centuries and several world changing events later.

Abelard is always an important figure for anyone who argues for a “renaissance”

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14 Ibid., 45.

15 Ibid.

16 Sidney P. Packard, *12<sup>th</sup> Century Europe: An Interpretive Essay* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 150.

17 Ibid., 180.

of the twelfth century, but Packard, in contrast with many other historians, refers to him as a *conceptualist*.<sup>18</sup> While realists believe universals exist as things or in things, and nominalists believe universals are words rather than things, conceptualists claim universals do have real existence but as images within the mind and as words. Abelard is sometimes referred to as a conceptualist due to a few of the ambiguities in his writings on universals and particulars.

R.N. Swanson takes a contrary position to Packard, claiming that the middle ages were generally a series of “renaissances.”<sup>19</sup> Swanson’s claim illustrates a deep problem with the continued use of this term: if it can be applied to anything—and the period of history from the time of Charlemagne to fifteenth century Italy has been described as every type of renaissance or series of renaissances imaginable—the term is too loose to mean anything. Swanson did not foolishly engage in meaningless semantics, for his book is a survey targeted primarily at students just beginning to delve into medieval studies who still suffer under the misconception that the entirety of the medieval period may be described as the dark ages. Swanson is satisfied with continued use of the term “renaissance” to describe the twelfth century so long, as he says, the label is understood to be “only a label, but one applicable to something recognizable (although perhaps not instantly) as a movement with profound repercussions and implications, and with a certain integrity.”<sup>20</sup>

Though he attempts to illustrate medieval intellectual sophistication, Swanson provides an incomplete introduction to the problem of universals. He misuses some of

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18 Ibid., 187.

19 R.N. Swanson, *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 210.

20 Ibid., 210.

the terminology by lumping each of Porphyry's categories other than *genus* and *species* together as *accidents*. A full treatment of the complex problem of universals would be misplaced in a brief survey, especially when the goal is merely to illustrate that medieval intellectuals, "renaissance men" that they were, were quite capable of engaging in abstract debate, but oversimplification of a complex debate disadvantages the student who attempts to research the primary literature and finds that *accident* was not defined quite as Swanson claims it was.

Though Haskins's thesis has had a long academic life, it has also had a fair share of critics. Eva Matthews Sanford delivered a presentation on possible flaws in Haskins's thesis which she later converted into an article for *Speculum*. Sanford attacks Haskins's claim from the position both of historical evidence and semantic definition. Historically, people of the twelfth century did not consider themselves radically different from or better than those of the preceding age, while those of the Italian Renaissance viewed people who lived just a century before them as barbarians.<sup>21</sup> She also takes issue with some of Haskins's chronology. Haskins claims the twelfth-century renaissance lasted until 1250, but following the traditional date for the beginning of the Italian Renaissance in 1300, a scant fifty years separates the two. While dates like this are always arbitrary, Sanford fails to see a significant reason to differentiate the Italian from the Twelfth-Century Renaissance if the issue is only a separation of five decades.<sup>22</sup> Though she does find some utilitarian use for the term as an analogy to explain to students that not everything about the medieval period was ignorance, superstition, and brutality, anyone

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21 Eva Matthew Sanford, "The Twelfth Century—Renaissance or Proto-Renaissance?" *Speculum* 26, no. 4 (October 1951): 636.

22 *Ibid.*, 635.



who uses the term must keep in mind that it is only an analogy and not a real thing whose qualities historians should be arguing over.<sup>23</sup>

Following Sanford's advice, Christopher Brook questioned the use of the label but did not discard it entirely. Sanford and Brook play nominalists to Haskins's realist. Brook in particular emphasizes how those skilled in rhetoric and disputation can make the ethereal seem to be flesh:

It must be firmly stated at the outset that the phrase "the twelfth century Renaissance" has no precise meaning. It carries overtones, and these are essential to understanding an exciting epoch in human history. We are still far from a full comprehension of the depths of the love of men of that age for the antique, or of the meaning of twelfth century humanism. But it is vain to search for a definition. Historians love to use labels of this kind; and in the hands of a master they can assume real meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Stephen Jaeger goes to greater extremes in questioning the label. He finds no reason to use it at all. At best it was a term of convenience which scholars continued to use due to academic inertia, since the invention of the term made discussing the era easier, even though the documentary evidence never demonstrated the merit of it.<sup>25</sup> He focuses his analysis on John of Salisbury and Otto of Freising, who are often upheld as the epitomes of the twelfth-century renaissance for the literary style they used to chronicle the events of their day. Although Abelard typically represents the philosopher while his great foe St. Bernard plays the role of the archetypal monk and power broker, John and Otto may be better sources to consult on the view of the era itself, however, since their goal was to write about their times rather than explore the depths of human reason and divine mystery. Jaeger finds both men to be possessed of a deep seated pessimism regarding

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23 Ibid., 641.

24 Brooke, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 13.

25 Stephen Jaeger, "Pessimism in the Twelfth Century 'Renaissance,'" *Speculum* 78, no. 4 (October 2003): 1152.

their age and a preference for the scholarship and direction of world affairs from the preceding century rather than the forward-looking optimism typically associated with the later Italian Renaissance.<sup>26</sup> If the term “twelfth-century renaissance” is understood primarily as an analogy, Jaegar’s claims may not make much difference, but the human mind all too often confuses the metaphorical for the real, and he is likely correct in claiming historians would be better off scrapping the term altogether.

Without the term, history seems to be at a loss though. Clearly the twelfth century was different from what came before and after it, perhaps to enough of a degree that it should be viewed as a discontinuity. R.I. Moore, most often quoted as an expert on medieval heresy and religious dissent, finds the word “revolution” to be an appropriate term for the period of which the twelfth-century renaissance is an intellectual manifestation. Some historians have described the Gregorian reform movement of the Church in the eleventh century as a revolution, but Moore wishes to apply the term more broadly and for a longer duration; his book covers Europe from 970 until 1215. This seems impossibly long for a revolution, which is typically conceived of as a quick, sudden change. Moore admits that this change took quite a number of years, but the effects of the change were radical enough that it should be called revolutionary.

Moore sees a discontinuity between the organized, powerful civilization in Europe in the thirteenth century and the preceding period of feudal anarchy that resulted from the collapse of the Carolingian Empire. Eventually the chaos in politics and religion became too much to bear, and people began to support initiatives that would bring order out of the chaos. The Church instigated two such movements with the Peace of God and Gregorian

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1182-1183.

reform, but the secular world also attempted to make life more predictable by tying laborers to the land to ensure they performed the requisite labor to generate surpluses when formerly the nobility had been more concerned with doling out land as a reward for military service. This control of labor allowed those in power to exploit it more efficiently. With surplus food, not everyone needed to farm, and surplus workers could build cities and produce artifacts for trade while others could join the Church or use their intellectual talents in the management of this new system.<sup>27</sup>

Moore's thesis could be criticized for equivocating "revolution" with "renaissance," but between the two terms, Moore's is more appropriate. His claim that the period of feudal anarchy immediately prior to what is typically referred to as the twelfth-century renaissance marked the beginning of an attempt to bring order out of chaos not only correctly understands human nature—surely it must not have taken long for the typical medieval man or woman to grow weary of the constant feudal warfare between the knights and desire some safety, security, and a return to a more centralized political regime—but it also explains why intellectuals like Abelard or Gratian attempted to resolve the apparent contradictions in authoritative sources. The desire for order was so strong that it transcended politics and economics and manifested even in academia. Several of the movements Moore discusses definitely have the flavor of revolution as well. The Gregorian reform movement had a vanguard and an ideology, and it along with the restructuring of labor hurt and displaced many people who became unsure of how they fit into society afterward. The world of 1215 was certainly vastly different from the world of 970, and the great Gothic cathedrals, the *summae* of Aquinas, or the poetry of

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<sup>27</sup> R.I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970 – 1215* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 36-38.

Dante may not have been possible were it not for the changes that occurred in this period. This raises the question of how Abelard himself fits into this era; he could be seen as a reflection of the prevailing trends, a catalyst for the world to come, both, or neither.

Recent intellectual histories on such a subject are harder to find. Though it is ironic that such a subject is underrepresented in the secondary literature given the frequent citations of Abelard as representative of an intellectual awakening in Europe, the rise of social history and “history from below” methodologies has led to a neglect of intellectual issues and figures, since intellectuals are by definition part of the elite class that leaves behind documents. While many of Abelard’s contemporaries may have been intensely interested in speculative academic issues such as universals or the Trinity, the peasant toiling in the fields had not the education, leisure, or enthusiasm for such debate, though he did make up the vast majority of the population. Despite their small numbers, intellectuals often do play an important part in the milieu of an era. By defining terms, beliefs, and values they influence the way a society at large thinks. David Luscombe and Constance Bouchard have written on the intellectual climate of the twelfth century. Luscombe focuses specifically on Abelard and his influence while Bouchard considers a wider array of evidence to construct an argument on the life of the mind in twelfth-century France generally.

Luscombe in *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard’s Thought in the Early Scholastic Period* traces the dissemination of copies of Abelard’s writings and studies the texts of students of Abelard to pinpoint the nature of his influence on later intellectuals.<sup>28</sup> He argues that while several of Abelard’s texts were widely read, he did

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28 D.E. Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard’s Thought in the Early Scholastic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), ix.

not exert as much influence as the number of manuscripts containing pieces of his writings might attest. Pope Innocent II sentenced Abelard to perpetual silence at Sens and forbade his students from advocating or defending his errant ideas, while Abelard's methods of logic and theology were often also practiced by his contemporaries who became his critics and enemies. Luscombe determines that Abelard "was less a teacher of truth than an analyst and a receiver of formulae and of the mass of *auctoritas*."<sup>29</sup> He did not influence the future through his original arguments, which were condemned, as much as he taught methods for researching, interpreting and evaluating authoritative evidence, skills the schools of Laon and St. Victor also taught.

Bouchard upholds Abelard as a prime example of her argument, but she oversteps the boundaries of her evidence. She claims that the intellectual discourse of the twelfth century was based on contradictions. She sees this not as a struggle to come to proper arguments by examining possible opposing truth claims so much as a desire to maintain "opposites that both denied and required each other."<sup>30</sup> Though such a claim seems postmodern, Bouchard's monograph is too thoroughly researched and her writing too clear for it to be considered a work of that camp. Nonetheless, her claim is impossible to support due to an inherent misunderstanding of what a contradiction is. If two statements are contradictory, they *cannot* both be maintained, for affirming one requires the negation of the other. Her conceptualization of a contradiction is actually a false dilemma. She claims that this "contradiction-as-worldview" resulted from Gregorian reform, which divided the world into the secular and the ecclesiastical as opposing categories for people,

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29 Ibid., 308.

30 Constance Brittain Bouchard, "*Every Valley Shall Be Exalted*": *The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth-Century Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), ix.

but she seems not to grasp that secular and ecclesiastical are not contradictions but contraries, since animals or rocks are neither secular nor ecclesiastical. Even when royal power and the Church did not view each other favorably, they still frequently relied on each other, indicating perhaps that these categories were not as clear and distinct in the twelfth-century mind as Bouchard would like to believe.

True contradictions are something quite different from the evidence Bouchard cites. Statements like “it is raining outside” and “it is not raining outside” are contradictions. The truth of one necessarily entails the falsehood of the other. No intellectual discourse could be sustained on maintaining two contradictory statements as true at the same time, for such is the thinking of the schizophrenic. When this equivocation of contradiction with contrary is resolved properly, Bouchard’s thesis becomes much less revolutionary than it might first seem, since all she can do is explain that thinkers of the period worked to resolve intellectual conflicts dialectically just as philosophers had been doing since the time of Plato and Aristotle, a claim no one would oppose. While sources like *Sic et Non* or Gratian’s *Decretum* provide her with a vast array of collections of conflicting claims, Gratian attempted to resolve these conflicts within canon law so that the canon lawyers had sensible guidelines with which to work, while Abelard indicates that though two sources may seem contradictory, the sense in which they are true may differ, rendering them not contradictory *per se*, but she fails to account for many of Abelard’s instructions in the prologue of the *Sic et Non*.

While changes in historical methodology have shifted focus away from intellectual history, Luscombe and Bouchard reveal a perhaps deeper problem. Much of Luscombe’s book is a catalog of various copies of Abelard’s writings according to their

likely dates of copy and Bouchard's argument is based on an improper definition of some of her terminology followed by a creative use of evidence. Due to the increasing specialization of all academic disciplines, intellectual history becomes difficult to write without merely summarizing arguments and texts or making glaring errors in interpretation. A proper appraisal of Abelard requires an understanding of his arguments that is hard to grasp without a deep knowledge of theology and logic. Even specialists on these subjects disagree on relatively minor points in Abelard's writings, and many secondary sources are impenetrable by any but the most specialized reader. This conflict can be observed in biographies of Abelard in which some authors mainly consider the historical details of his life while others attempt to connect his thought to his experiences. Occasionally Abelard's various biographers reveal more about their own times and their audience than they do about Abelard.

One of the earliest twentieth-century biographies of Abelard was Joseph McCabe's. McCabe possessed advantages that many other Abelard scholars did not in that he had been a priest, but his departure from the Church left him hostile to nearly everything about it.<sup>31</sup> McCabe obviously sees Abelard as much like himself, someone who had led both the secular and religious life, but McCabe also possessed Abelard's persecution complex which led him to attack the Church through inaccurate interpretations of Abelard. Early in the work McCabe labels Abelard a conceptualist and claims Abelard's view of universals and particulars is only different in form from that of later medieval intellectuals.<sup>32</sup> Such views continued to be assumed as fact even today, since so little effort is applied to understanding the problem of universals from its

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31 Joseph McCabe, *Peter Abélard* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1901), v.

32 *Ibid.*, 29.

twelfth-century or philosophical context, and having been a priest McCabe always seemed a great authority on the Church's philosophy. McCabe also erroneously claims Abelard compiled the *Sic et Non* primarily to emphasize the lack of agreement among the patristic thinkers and thus destroy the credibility of their authority.<sup>33</sup> McCabe's biases call his arguments into question, and his biography also offers little more material than the *Historia Calamitatum*. Even so, as early as 1901 a scholar with first-hand knowledge of life in the Church had labeled Abelard as a free thinking conceptualist who wished to undermine ecclesiastical authority, a view which is still occasionally advocated today.

J.G. Sikes later published a mostly intellectual biography of Abelard in 1932. Sikes attempted to explain the events of Abelard's life in the context of his intellectual career, and produced one of a handful of biographies that took Abelard seriously as a thinker rather than as the center of scandal. For many years to come, Sikes's work was the only one which dealt primarily with Abelard's thought in such a comprehensive and complete way that an educated audience could understand something of Abelard's contributions to logic, theology, and ethics. While Sikes did understand that Abelard's logical training greatly shaped his views of later subjects and that much of his theological writing must be viewed in the context of twelfth-century heresy, he placed a bit too much emphasis on the intellectual heretics of Abelard's day.<sup>34</sup> According to Sikes, Abelard wrote mostly in response to the heresies of twelfth-century dialecticians like Berenger of Tours and Roscelin, though he did acknowledge that less erudite heretics like Tanchelm of Antwerp held some influence on Abelard's ideas, if only as a part of the greater context of heretical thinking in twelfth-century France. While Abelard did dedicate time

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33 Ibid., 146.

34 J.G. Sikes, *Peter Abailard* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), 248.



to refuting the trideism of his master Roscelin, he also quarreled with all his teachers and primarily meant to defend the use of logic in theology by refuting his former master's logic-based heresy. Despite these shortcomings, Sikes did produce a serious guide to Abelard's thought without wallowing in the more fantastic events of his life.

Leif Grane wrote a fairly standard review of Abelard's autobiography, but unlike his predecessors he interprets Abelard according to Haskins's thesis of the twelfth-century renaissance. Grane's biography is short and clearly intended for a broad audience, as it lacks the depth of a more serious work. He views Abelard as a prominent figure of the twelfth-century renaissance who interpreted religious truth from the perspective of a classical humanist and thus initiated the medieval questioning of authority.<sup>35</sup> The claim that Abelard was a religious skeptic is widely held but incorrect, and the classical humanist label is anachronistic. Abelard did not differ much from his contemporaries in his regard for classical learning, for learning the Roman classics was instrumental in acquiring fluency in Latin and mastering rhetorical style. Grane's view that Abelard was a prime example of a milieu has merit, but his claims rest too much on Haskins's thesis, which may have created a new term at its inception, but has lost much of its original influence.

Michael Clanchy has written the most recent biography of Abelard in which he blends several methodologies of contemporary history to explain the context of the twelfth century through a specific focus on Abelard. Clanchy initiates his work with a bit of a hyperbole, claiming that "Peter Abelard, now forgotten, was once the most famous

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<sup>35</sup> Leif Grane, *Peter Abelard: Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages* trans. Frederick and Christine Crowley (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1964), 162.

man in the world.”<sup>36</sup> Abelard certainly believed himself to be the most famous man in the world, and while he is not as well known as other medieval personalities in the popular psyche, he is still today the subject of a vast amount of specialized academic writing. Clanchy’s biography is nonetheless incredibly ambitious, covering every facet of Abelard’s life. By dedicating each chapter in the book to one of Abelard’s roles, Clanchy hopes to explain the twelfth century at large, since Abelard at one point or another in his life donned so many of the masks that a twelfth-century man might wear: master, monk, lover, and heretic.<sup>37</sup> Clanchy should have, however, brushed up on his logic before attempting such a work. The study of logic exerted a powerful influence on Abelard’s worldview, but Clanchy misunderstands many of Abelard’s terms and never connects one branch of Abelard’s intellectual work to another. He additionally sometimes becomes mired in digressions due to his desire to use Abelard as a looking glass for the entire twelfth century.

Though each of these biographers focused specifically on Abelard, others have attempted to consider Abelard and Heloise together. More recent scholars are apt to consider the influence of Heloise on Abelard due to the advance of feminist historical interpretations, but considering Heloise apart from Abelard has proven notoriously difficult due to the lack of documents. Though the titles of these works suggest they consider both Abelard and Heloise equally, they in fact treat her as little more than an ancillary character in Abelard’s drama.

These dual biographies sometimes follow the standard biographical conventions, but treat Heloise and Abelard as a single research subject. Étienne Gilson composed one

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<sup>36</sup> Clanchy, *Abelard*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

the first of these biographies according to what he believed the thoughts and emotions of Abelard and Heloise were within the context of their philosophic ideas and the events of their lives.<sup>38</sup> Gilson was a historian of philosophy and is sometimes classified as a Neo-Thomist, though he often differed from the views of that movement markedly. Gilson's work focuses primarily on the relationship between the lovers, though he does provide some philosophical analysis as well. D.W. Robertson considered Abelard much as previous scholars had: "Abelard is thought of as a rebel, a radical innovator, one of those few men whose insights enable them to open up new perspectives to be exploited fruitfully in the future."<sup>39</sup> Even before Robertson published, scholars like Luscombe began to question just how original and influential Abelard had been, but Robertson's work presents other problems as well. Robertson does not write much on the historical Heloise, preferring to focus on how Heloise has been viewed as a lover by the poets of various periods of history. He also makes a claim supported nowhere else in the historiography: the *Historia Calamitatum* and the letters between Abelard and Heloise were meant to be an *exemplum* for the nuns at the Paraclete, and have been misinterpreted by scholars ever since.<sup>40</sup> Though this argument is far outside the mainstream of Abelard scholarship, Robertson claims that it is obvious to anyone who understands twelfth-century religious writing. He fails to provide any explanation as to why, if it is so obvious, other historians have failed to endorse his view.

A more serious work is Constant Mews's *Abelard and Heloise*, which is essentially an update of Sikes's intellectual history of Abelard. Mews has largely made

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38 Étienne Gilson, *Heloise and Abelard* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), v.

39 D.W. Robertson, Jr., *Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Dial Press, 1972), xi.

40 *Ibid.*, 118.

the study of Abelard his academic career since his days as a graduate student studying under the likes of Luscombe and John Marenbon. His book is misleadingly titled, for he writes little on Heloise herself, who again must be rendered as only a support character to Abelard's drama. Mews claims "that the evolution of Abelard's thinking about language, theology, and ethics is marked by continuity rather than by rupture and that it cannot be understood apart from the influence of Heloise, whose intellectual achievement is much more difficult to identify within the documentary record."<sup>41</sup> The first argument of his thesis is sound, and it would be erroneous to claim that Abelard's training and work in logic did not influence his subsequent intellectual endeavors, but his second claim is notoriously difficult to explain for the very reason he identifies. Part of the attraction between Heloise and Abelard lay in their intellectual work—Abelard explicitly mentions this in his autobiography as he explains his seduction of her—but discovering to what extent Heloise may have influenced Abelard's scholarly development is impossible given the nature and number of sources from Heloise herself.

The most recent of the biographies of Heloise and Abelard as a pair is James Burge's *Heloise and Abelard: A New Biography*, a work targeting a popular audience that unfortunately has little scholarly merit and is predicated on a number of misconceptions. Though nearly all scholars who undertake any study of Abelard write about the affair, Burge focuses on it with the rapacity of a tabloid publisher whose writing reeks of pseudo-intellectual Freudian language: "In the totality of letters, early and late, we meet Abelard and Heloise as people: we know about their most intimate terms of endearment; we even know about the passion of their lovemaking, of the frantic, stolen moments in

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41 Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

churches, of inventive sessions and erotic role-play.”<sup>42</sup> Though Burge reflects the popular obsession with sex that dominates popular culture, few historians would likely be surprised that medieval people did in fact have romantic relationships. Such disproportionate attention to the affair detracts from the other areas of importance of Abelard’s life, particularly his intellectual work, which is seen as boring in comparison.

Nonetheless, Abelard is rare among his contemporaries and medieval intellectuals in general for having had such a disastrous relationship, and perhaps Burge could be forgiven for basing an obviously commercial venture on a topic quite likely to sell books. He cannot, however, be forgiven for misrepresenting facts, especially when he could have availed himself of so many quality secondary works. He refers to Abelard’s *Apologia contra Bernardum* as “misleadingly titled.”<sup>43</sup> Though a popular audience is unlikely to know much if any Latin, Burge could have cited a translation showing that the *Apologia* is not misleadingly titled at all, for in this context *apologia* means “defense” rather than “apology.” While Abelard’s life was as dramatic as any film, when it is presented in this way the only result is incorrect understanding, because the people and events have been divorced from their context in favor of simple answers.

Any historiography of studies of Abelard must consider not just history and biography, but also the writings of philosophers for whom Abelard is obviously an important figure. Unfortunately, much of the philosophic writing on Abelard attempts to paint him as a realist, nominalist, or conceptualist, usually according to the prejudices of the author. Anglophone philosophers typically classify Abelard as a nominalist.

Nominalism is much closer philosophically to the analytic linguistic philosophy of the

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42 James Burge, *Heloise and Abelard: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 7.

43 *Ibid.*, 262.

Anglophone world than realism, which compares favorably to continental European philosophy. Neo-Thomists who are inimical to anti-metaphysical Anglophone philosophy are more likely to classify Abelard as a conceptualist or moderate realist who acted as a precursor to Aquinas and his moderate realism, thereby preserving continuity within the medieval philosophic tradition. Abelard's own arguments are ambiguous enough that he can be interpreted as falling within any of these camps, but these labels were invented long after the twelfth century and are not useful in classifying his thought historically. Philosophers analyze arguments on the basis of the arguments' validity or invalidity rather than according to historical context, for too much focus on a philosopher's private life can lead to fallacious arguments of motive. Too little concern for historical context, however, has led to needless bickering over a small number of Abelard's arguments. The lack of complete translations of Abelard's extant corpus means that once these arguments become established, they become the context according to which any of Abelard's arguments is analyzed and are thus difficult to refute without recourse to accessible primary documents in translation.

John Boler lends credence to Abelard being a conceptualist through explaining the implications of some of Abelard's ambiguity on what he calls the *status* of a thing. While *status* was one of the technical terms Abelard coined in his argument on universals, he never specifies what a *status* is. Abelard is clear that the *status* is not a thing and therefore does not fit the definition for a universal, but he says it does allow the human mind to classify several individuals into a distinct category such as genus or species. This capacity of the *status*, according to Abelard, led the realists to mistake it for a universal. Yet Abelard does not claim what the *status* is if not a universal. Boler does not

believe he classified it as a word nor that Abelard believed a *status* could be predicated of a thing. This leads to a problem, since Abelard's solution cannot be metaphysical since it does not explain the existence of a universal thing nor logical since the argument does not treat the *status* as a word which can be predicated. Boler thus argues that Abelard's solution is essentially psychological, as the *status* is a mental image abstracted from a thing by the understanding.<sup>44</sup> While he does not explicitly call Abelard's argument conceptualist, by embracing a psychological interpretation he implies exactly this.

Frederick Copleston, an English Jesuit priest, wrote a history of philosophy from the ancient world to the twentieth century for seminary students. As a work written by a Catholic priest to educate Catholic seminarians, it includes an entire volume on medieval philosophy as well as a heavy bias in favor of the Church. Copleston did not dedicate an entire chapter to Abelard, though he writes multiple entries for Aquinas and Augustine. He deals with Abelard thematically, mostly addressing the problem of universals and particulars. Though Copleston was British, as a Jesuit priest and a Neo-Thomist he dissents from the typical British view of Abelard as a nominalist and instead claims he was a forerunner to Aquinas's moderate realism.<sup>45</sup> In this way Copleston preserves continuity within scholasticism and claims it as a distinct period in the history of philosophy rather than interpreting it as a method used by medieval philosophers.

Many of the interpretations of Abelard's logical arguments have been written in the second half of the twentieth century by British philosophers who insist *contra* Copleston that Abelard was a nominalist. They also frequently link Abelard's

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44 John F. Boler, "Abailard and the Problem of Universals," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (October 1963): 50-51.

45 Frederick Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, vol. 2 of *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Double Day, 1950), 151-153.

nominalism to discoveries in logic and set theory supposedly first made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Martin Tweedale in *Abailard on Universals* provides several extended excerpts of Abelard's logical writings in the original Latin with facing English translations. Tweedale hopes these excerpts with his accompanying argument will demonstrate that Abelard constructed a philosophic foundation for logic.<sup>46</sup> Though Tweedale dedicates most of the book to explaining Abelard's arguments, the sixth chapter compares Abelard's rejection of universals as individual things to Gottlob Frege's set theory. John Marenbon, another extensive researcher of Abelard's life and thought, wished to overturn the previous view that Abelard was mostly a critic who did not offer arguments of his own. Marenbon argues that Abelard was more than a critic but acknowledges that Abelard did attack realist arguments, though he did not systematically arrange his thought.<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey Brower, like Tweedale, connects Abelard's thought to more recent logical theories. He claims Abelard as a nominalist due to what he perceives as Abelard's preference for individual entities over universal types.<sup>48</sup> Each of these arguments displays the linguistic Anglophone philosophy which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and was essentially nominalist.

Other philosophers give more consideration to Abelard's ethics. Neither philosophers nor theologians grant much consideration to Abelard's theology, but philosophy does still grant a special place to his ethics. Abelard differed from many of his predecessors on the subject by analyzing ethics from the basis of intention. Many subsequent commentators have thus labeled Abelard's ethics "intentionalist," claiming

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46 Martin M. Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1976), ix.

47 John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

48 Jeffrey E. Brower, "Abelard's Theory of Relations: Reductionism and the Aristotelian Tradition," *The Review of Metaphysics* 51, no. 3 (March 1998): 607.



that Abelard argues the intention alone renders an action good or bad. John Porter instead sees Abelard's ethics as not simply intentionalist, but also based on the concept of consent to the contempt of God's will.<sup>49</sup> Intentionalist ethics can be entirely subjective; the ethical agent only acts badly if he intends to do harm. Porter instead believes Abelard's ethics has an objective basis, as God's will must be objective and immutable.

Though some of Abelard's biographers have attempted to place more emphasis on Heloise, feminist historians have gone further in focusing on her exclusively. The only extant documents by Heloise are her letters to Abelard, and so focusing on her to his exclusion seems a difficult task. Drawing any conclusion about twelfth-century women based on Heloise's life is also problematic. Heloise did not lead any more typical a life than Abelard did, and while Abelard played many roles in his life that might be commonly observed among the twelfth-century populace, Heloise, due to her level of education and her eventual position of leadership at the convent Paraclete, was especially atypical for a twelfth-century woman. Despite her elite position, feminist historians and philosophers continue to rewrite the dominant narrative of Heloise.

Andrea Nye argues that Heloise should be considered a philosopher in her own right, but because her style and form are essentially feminine, the male-controlled philosophic canon excludes her. Men who have dominated the philosophic landscape since the pre-socratics see philosophy as logical and dialectical while Heloise writes from an emotional perspective and her writings have thus been dismissed as hysterical raving.<sup>50</sup> Nye ignores a number of secondary historical sources which heavily criticize Abelard for

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49 John Porter, "Responsibility, Passion, and Sin: A Reassessment of Abelard's Ethics," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 28 no. 3 (Fall 2000): 392-393.

50 Andrea Nye, "A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise," *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (Summer, 1992): 16.

responding to Heloise's passionate entreaties so coldly, including Mews who claimed that Heloise influenced Abelard as much as he influenced her. While Heloise does make philosophic arguments to Abelard in her letters, these do not represent a cohesive philosophic worldview. Heloise focuses exclusively on her own situation, but makes no argument as to anything universally true for humanity or even for women based on her own experience. If Nye's argument for Heloise were universalized, no claim could ever be excluded from philosophy on the basis that its exclusion would somehow injure a certain group of people or limit human knowledge. Though this erosion of standards has largely come to pass, if it were ever fully imposed the resultant relativist fallacy would prevent philosophy from even establishing and defending its own existence as a discipline.

Shulamith Shahar makes a less dismissive argument surmised in the title of her work, *The Fourth Estate*. She claims women in the middle ages must be understood as a distinct class in society, because unlike men they formed a distinct subcategory in the traditional tripartite division of medieval society into nobility, clergy, and peasantry.<sup>51</sup> According to Shahar, Heloise's arguments differ from those of Abelard precisely because she was not simply an abbot like him, but also a woman, which led her to have much different views. She particularly focuses on Heloise's view of marriage. Heloise denounced marriage, because it renders the relationship contractual rather than free. This is part of the basis of courtly love; the characters in the story love each other outside of marriage so that their emotions remain free rather than legally or religiously defined. This reflects women's disenchantment with being pawns in political marriages that were

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51 Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (New York: Routledge, 2003), 12.

not based on love.<sup>52</sup> Though Shahar devotes attention to Heloise herself rather than her position as Abelard's lover, she makes her into a representative of an ideal type rather than an individual. The explication of this ideal type is, of course, Shahar's task, and doing so does describe the gender-based historical context in which Heloise lived, but it does not recreate Heloise as an individual. The lack of significant evidence about her life outside of her letters to Abelard may make any such reconstruction unfortunately impossible.

Most of these scholars have produced valuable sources for any concerted study of Abelard, while a relative few have focused attention on issues sure to garner attention but not improve the understanding of him. To borrow from John of Salisbury, every historian and philosopher "to make a name for himself, coins his own special error."<sup>53</sup> The major shortcomings of these studies can be divided into several categories. Some are written from a broad perspective in which Abelard becomes only a piece of evidence. Others are, as per the usual requirements of academia, so narrowly focused and technical they are impenetrable to all but the most specialized of specialists. All of them somehow consider Abelard a remarkable figure in some way. While Abelard certainly led an atypical life and is unique among medieval intellectuals in that so much of his personal writing and primary documents written about his life survive, scholars should be on guard against the temptation either to grant Abelard a disproportionate amount of attention due to the availability of scandalous evidence or to eliminate Abelard's individuality to make him a mere representative of a larger grand narrative on a twelfth-century "renaissance."

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52 Ibid., 76.

53 John of Salisbury, *Historia Pontificalis*, trans. Marjorie Chibnall (London: Thomas Nelson and Son, 1956), 117.

Understanding Abelard as an academic requires a thorough reading of his texts and a consideration of the context in which he wrote them. Understanding him as a man requires a review of his autobiography along with those secondary sources which address the areas of his life on which Abelard chose to remain silent.

## INTRODUCTION

Though concern for Abelard's intellectual work is usually confined to specialists in philosophy, the details of his personal life are better documented than any other medieval philosopher and often receive considerable attention due to their dramatic nature. While understanding his private life is key to understanding Abelard, the scandalous details of his life not only receive more attention than is warranted, they also lead to the conclusions that Abelard stands among those larger than life individuals who show that the twelfth century was a "renaissance" and that he was a truly original and special figure. Despite the tragedy of Abelard's life and his superhuman arrogance, he was not a Nietzschean superman but rather a man of his times who left behind some interesting personal documents including an autobiography and many letters. Much of the private lives of other medieval philosophers is shrouded in mystery, since they concentrated so much more on their work than self-defense.

Much of the information of Abelard's life comes from his autobiography, the *Historia Calamitatum*, or *The Story of My Misfortunes*. Figures in the preceding centuries had not produced autobiographies as Abelard had. While the literate of previous centuries had not continued the practice of writing about themselves, twelfth-century authors were beginning to rediscover the genre, but they usually directed it heavily toward religion. Abelard discusses religious themes in his book, but he connects

everything to the events and people in his life as individuals rather than the archetypal figures often found in other hagiographies.<sup>54</sup>

Abelard composed the *Historia Calamitatum* after leaving the monastery of St. Gildas de Rhuys in Brittany.<sup>55</sup> In the book, Abelard focuses on his miseries, rendering it, as all autobiographies are, an inherently biased source.<sup>56</sup> The fact that Abelard is so careful to name real people but then to engage in biased reporting indicates that he may have intended the document to announce his return to teach in Paris. A Parisian audience would have been familiar with many of the adversaries Abelard mentions. He had certainly made many enemies in his life, and it would have served him to denounce them prior to his arrival.<sup>57</sup>

Though he gives no precise date for any event, Abelard is at least clear when referring to places. He was born in Le Pallet in Brittany, an area renowned for producing witty clerics.<sup>58</sup> He mentions little of his early life or family relations except to say that his father was a knight who valued education and ensured that his sons had access to it.<sup>59</sup> Abelard so took to intellectual endeavors that he gave up his right of primogeniture as the eldest son and “fled utterly from the court of Mars that I might win learning in the bosom of Minerva.”<sup>60</sup> Though he may have renounced his inheritance, Abelard never gave up the outlook of a militant twelfth-century knight. He repeatedly uses martial language in describing his conflicts throughout his life. Achieving success in Paris required him to

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54 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 124.

55 Mary M. McLaughlin, “Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of his ‘Story of Calamities,’” *Speculum* 42, no. 3 (July 1967): 464.

56 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 67.

57 McCabe, *Peter Abélard*, 223.

58 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 29.

59 *Ibid.*, 135-136.

60 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 1; Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 35.

form alliances and take political sides at court in a dance not far removed from actual warfare.<sup>61</sup> He also never lost the contentious nature of a warrior eager for battle, for he quarreled with many of his academic superiors.

Abelard explains that of all the academic disciplines he gravitated most easily to logic, which in the twelfth century was equated with dialectic from the *trivium* of the liberal arts. As did many students of the day, he traveled throughout France following an itinerant master, though he never specifies who this instructor was.<sup>62</sup> This master was none other than Roscelin of Compiègne, a well known but controversial master of dialectic who, in a treatise on the Trinity, denied the unity of the Persons. The Church would have declared Roscelin a heretic for this teaching had he not recanted.<sup>63</sup> Announcing himself as the pupil of such a controversial figure would have won Abelard undue negative attention upon his reentry of Paris. While he continually took pains to dissociate himself from his first teacher and makes no specific mention of Roscelin within the *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard never falsely denied being Roscelin's student.<sup>64</sup>

Education in earlier periods of medieval Europe occurred mainly within the monastic schools, but by the twelfth century the cathedral schools had begun to replace them as centers of learning. Northern France possessed prolific numbers of cathedral schools. Those of Rheims and Laon focused on dialectic, but it was Paris that would become preeminent in the academic culture of France and eventually the site of the first university north of the Alps.<sup>65</sup> Abelard arrived in this academically exciting environment in his early twenties, but he had foresight enough to be secretive about his early education

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61 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 130.

62 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 2.

63 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 21-22.

64 Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 36.

65 Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 48-49.

under Roscelin.<sup>66</sup> A negative reputation as a student of a heretic would have ended a scholarly career prematurely; an enthusiastic student and supporter of Roscelin certainly would have faced insurmountable difficulties gaining the approval of Abelard's desired Parisian instructor, William of Champeaux, who held philosophic ideas opposed to those of Roscelin.

Abelard attributes great intellectual ability to William, but confesses that he earned William's enmity by attacking his philosophic positions.<sup>67</sup> Unamused by his young pupil's precocious arguments, William became Abelard's first enemy in both academic and state politics. Having alienated William and gained a following among the students, Abelard recounts that he decided to found his own school at "none other than the castle of Melun, at the time a royal seat."<sup>68</sup> Abelard later moved his seat of instruction from Melun to Corbeil, after which he records that he ceased to teach and returned to Brittany due to illness brought on by excessive study. After his recovery he returned to Paris to again study under William who had become the bishop of Châlons.<sup>69</sup> Without hesitation Abelard continued to attack William's philosophy.

Eventually many of Abelard's fellow students began to believe he was much brighter than William, and they forsook the veteran for the upstart.<sup>70</sup> Though Abelard attempted to set up schools at Paris and Melun, he could not completely evade William's influence, and finally settled on Mont Ste. Geneviève. The Mont allowed Abelard to maintain a position near Paris, but it already held a reputation as a home for unorthodox

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66 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 68.

67 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 3.

68 *Ibid.*, 4.

69 *Ibid.*, 4-5.

70 Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 39.



thinkers. Roscelin himself had taught there before he began wandering through France.<sup>71</sup> Abelard had truly become a master, and despite William's continued attempts at interference, his position remained safe.

Since theology and philosophy were so closely linked in the middle ages, it would have been unfitting for Abelard to continue to study one while remaining ignorant of the other. His knowledge of logic could assure many students would seek him for instruction, but with an understanding of issues more critical to the Church he could improve his image by mastering another subject. A more thorough knowledge of theological argument and scripture could also prevent a scholar from falling into the trap of heresy.<sup>72</sup> Abelard writes that Anselm of Laon had long been considered preeminent within the field of theology, and so he began attending his classes.<sup>73</sup> As a speculative thinker fond of argument, Abelard could not find Anselm of Laon, who taught through glossing scripture rather than through debate which Abelard craved, an inspiring instructor.<sup>74</sup> Abelard soon fought with Anselm just as he had with William, and this battle held political as well as academic implications.

After ceasing to attend Anselm's lectures, some of Anselm's other students challenged Abelard to deliver a public lecture on a notoriously difficult to interpret passage from Ezekiel using only dialectic. Most believed Abelard would fail miserably, and so few attended the first lecture. Those in attendance were amazed with their classmate's ability, and word soon spread of Abelard's lecturing skill.<sup>75</sup> Having again triumphed intellectually, Abelard returned to Paris, where he became a canon of Sens, to

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71 McCabe, *Peter Abélard*, 41-42.

72 Ibid., 54.

73 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 9.

74 Brooke, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 40.

75 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 11-12.

teach, but here he would initiate the sequence of events that began the great struggles of his life.<sup>76</sup>

Having triumphed in all his intellectual battles, Abelard began to grow bored and arrogant. He writes that he believed himself to be “the only philosopher remaining in the whole world”<sup>77</sup> and now sought to add sexual conquest to his growing list of accomplishments. The target of Abelard’s advances would be “Heloise, the niece of a canon who was called Fulbert.”<sup>78</sup> The affair between Heloise and Abelard would assure their place in history, for imagination is often drawn to exceptions and oddities. The inherent drama of the lovers’ story has sometimes secured an interest among historians and philosophers for Abelard.

To ensure his successful seduction, Abelard appealed to Fulbert’s greed. Though he desired a tutor for Heloise, he did not wish to splurge on the cost of private instruction. Abelard told Fulbert that he would teach the woman and pay a nominal fee in return for room and board, as care for a household distracted him from his studies and was becoming too expensive for him to pay.<sup>79</sup> Fulbert assented to the arrangement believing he had purchased the services of one of the most famous teachers in France. As the affair and its concealment came to dominate Abelard’s time and energy, he began to neglect his academic work. Rather than continuing his studies of logic and theology, he complacently reused old lecture material in his classes and focused on writing love letters and poems for Heloise.<sup>80</sup> Many people in Paris knew of the affair; only Fulbert remained

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76 Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfooy, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14-15.

77 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 14.

78 *Ibid.*, 16.

79 *Ibid.*, 17.

80 *Ibid.*, 19.

ignorant of what was transpiring in his own home.<sup>81</sup> After finally catching the lovers in the act, Fulbert promptly expelled the cleric from his house.

As a woman, Heloise possessed no right to conduct such a liaison, for it was a dishonor to Fulbert who, as a man, could seek vengeance on Abelard. Abelard sensibly wished to avoid any violence Fulbert might visit upon him. The obvious option for rendering sexual relations legitimate was marriage, but Abelard wished the marriage to be kept a secret, a stipulation to which Fulbert agreed.<sup>82</sup> Heloise, though unabashed of her relationship with Abelard, had no wish to marry him. Heloise believed a marriage would detract from Abelard's calling as a philosopher.<sup>83</sup>

Heloise was no fool. She knew that a marriage would endanger Abelard's career. Marriage publicly communicated the sexual nature of husband and wife. Though no specific canon law forbade marriage among secular clerics provided they had not taken the vow of celibacy, advancement within the academic hierarchy often led to such vows, especially for teachers of theology.<sup>84</sup> Abelard desired a secret marriage to avert Fulbert's wrath while preserving his position at Notre Dame. Had the marriage been a matter of public record, the Church may have required him to resign his position so that a preferable candidate could fill the prestigious appointment. Fully aware that a marriage would jeopardize her lover's career, Heloise felt marriage was a selfish act that would preserve her honor but end the contributions of a brilliant philosopher.

Fulbert agreed to Abelard's plan for a secret marriage but soon began to abuse Heloise for having the affair and damaging his honor.<sup>85</sup> Abelard abducted her from her

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81 Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 52.

82 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 21.

83 Ibid., 28.

84 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 191.

85 Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 53-54.

uncle's home and sent her back to Argenteuil, where he had the nuns assemble a habit without a veil for her.<sup>86</sup> Fulbert became incensed, believing Abelard intended to dissolve the marriage, and so began to plot his revenge. While Abelard was asleep in his room at Notre Dame, Fulbert's hired thugs broke in through the aid of one of Abelard's servants whom they had bribed and then castrated Abelard.<sup>87</sup> Wounded and humiliated, Abelard became a monk at the monastery of St. Denis, and bade Heloise to become a nun at Argenteuil.<sup>88</sup> Despite his public shame and entrance into the cloister, Abelard did not reform his combativeness nor relinquish philosophy.

In some ways Abelard's academic activity was enhanced by entering St. Denis. He now had access to the monastery library and the scriptorium. During his years at Melun, Corbeil, and Notre Dame Abelard had focused on logic. Though his castration and entrance into the religious life did not suppress his combativeness, it did provide him with a new topic upon which to focus his energies as well as the sources needed for such pursuits. As a monk, Abelard would apply his thought on logic to theology.

Yet when Abelard originally entered St. Denis, he did not initially continue his teaching. He seems genuinely to have wished to live the contemplative monastic life of solitude and reflection, but he continued his combative ways by constantly complaining of the worldliness of the monks of St. Denis. Abelard may have entered the monastery with less than noble motives, but he soon came to the desire to reform himself.<sup>89</sup> The throngs of students, however, had no intention of leaving Abelard to his contemplation, nor did the monastery wish to relinquish the fees Abelard received for his services.<sup>90</sup>

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86 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 29.

87 Ibid., 30.

88 Ibid., 32.

89 Grane, *Abelard*, 72.

90 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 34.

At the behest of his students, Abelard composed a work of theology on the Trinity.<sup>91</sup> He titled the work simply *Theologia*, but it is distinguished from several other of Abelard's works by its first words: "*Summi Boni*." Abelard through his criticism of Anselm of Laon had made enemies of two of the master's students, Alberic of Rheims and Lotulf of Novara. Abelard presents his adversaries' motivations as an expression of jealousy of his intellectual superiority.<sup>92</sup> The two were well enough connected in the Church that they managed to summon Abelard to the council of Soissons after claiming his *Theologia* expressed heretical views. Cono of Palestrina, the papal legate to France, found Abelard's theology to be heretical and sentenced him to cast his own book into the flames in addition to confinement at the abbey of St. Medard, a monastery dedicated to reforming wayward monks.<sup>93</sup> Cono soon overturned his own sentence due the hostility he aroused by levying it and allowed Abelard to return to St. Denis after but a brief internment.<sup>94</sup>

Abelard's trial had taught him the importance of authority and research to support his arguments; he would not as before rely simply on his skill in dialectic. In his investigations in the St. Denis library, Abelard discovered Bede's *History of the Apostles* in which Bede claims the monastery of St. Denis had not been founded by Dionysius the Areopagite. Abelard rather foolishly chose to share his research with his brothers, again angering them, though he claims he meant only to joke.<sup>95</sup> While the modern mind may find the monks' anger unfounded, Abelard had, whatever he intended, gravely insulted them. Dionysius the Areopagite had been a convert of none other than St. Paul, had been

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91 Grane, *Abelard*, 74.

92 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 36.

93 Ibid., 42-43.

94 Grane, *Abelard*, 76; Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 122.

95 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 47.

a bishop, and had, according to medieval tradition, written a mystical philosophic treatise which scholars now know was merely signed under the pseudonym Dionysius. The monastery of St. Denis was the royal monastery of France and St. Denis one of the kingdom's patron saint. For Abelard to jestingly suggest that the famous Dionysius the Areopagite had no connection to the monastery, even with the backing of the Venerable Bede, was quite foolish. Having again made himself unwelcome among his brethren, Abelard would again leave the monastery, though after his heresy trial he would now need further support to do so.

Abelard did not have the authority to leave St. Denis as he had in the past. Not only had Abelard become suspect after Soissons, but Abbot Adam also feared Abelard might enter another monastery. Abelard gained the intercession of Count Theobald of Champagne, but Adam still would not allow him to leave and further sully the monastery's reputation. After Adam died, his successor Suger maintain this policy. Abelard then turned to his old political patron, Stephen de Garlande, to appeal to King Louis the Fat. With the threat of royal intervention, Suger agreed to a compromise which allowed Abelard to withdraw from the monastery as a hermit so long as he remained obedient to Suger rather than any other abbot.<sup>96</sup>

Though he was safe from the other monks, Abelard did not endure solitude for long. Students again sought his retreat, converting his initial hermitage into a larger compound complete with cultivated fields worked by the students so that Abelard would be free to teach. Abelard had dedicated his original oratory to the Trinity, but he rededicated the expanded compound to the Paraclete, the Greek term for the Holy Spirit

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96 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 49-51; McCabe, *Peter Abélard*, 180.

in John's Gospel with a particular emphasis on the Holy Spirit's role as comforter.<sup>97</sup>

Abelard indeed felt comfort here, surrounded by his willing students rather than disgruntled monks or envious adversaries. This point in Abelard's life would also prove extremely intellectually fertile. Here he would continue developing his logic and revising his earlier theological arguments.

Abelard's reputation continued to grow for the better, but the quiet life of a rural academic was not to be for him. The abbot of the monastery of St. Gildas in Abelard's native Brittany died in 1125, and the monks of the abbey elected Abelard to be their new abbot. Under such circumstances, Suger could hardly deny Abelard's entrance there.<sup>98</sup> Though abbots held immense power in the twelfth-century Church hierarchy, Abelard despised his new position. Born a knight and spending most of his life in France, Abelard could not even speak the native Celtic of Brittany or understand the speech of the monks under his charge.<sup>99</sup> He certainly had no desire to learn the native tongue and immediately began annoying the monks at St. Gildas with his moralizing just as he did at St. Denise.

While Abelard attempted to shepherd his own wayward monks, Abbot Suger continued his own agenda to aggrandize St. Denis. He discovered a forged land deed in the monastery library that stated the land of Heloise's convent of Argenteuil actually belonged to his monastery. Abelard and Heloise had never completely lost contact even after they entered the religious life, but Heloise's eviction remade their relationship into something official. Now a prioress, Heloise asked Abelard for help after she and her nuns lost their convent. Abelard bequeathed the Paraclete to them, and Pope Innocent II

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97 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 55.

98 McCabe, *Peter Abélard*, 200-201.

99 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 61-62; Clanchy, *Abelard*, 53.

confirmed the donation in 1131, making the Paraclete into an official convent. Abelard now became a spiritual adviser to Heloise and the nuns, and his position as the convent's male overseer allowed him frequently to leave St. Gildas for the Paraclete, providing him with welcome relief from his own unruly monks.<sup>100</sup> The distance between St. Gildas in the western portion of Brittany and the site of the Paraclete in Champagne is well over three hundred fifty miles. The countryside at that time was infested with bandits and robbers, thus making journeys between the two abbeys perilous as well as long. Abelard came to spend increasing amounts of time abroad. Though long hours on the road saved Abelard some frustration from administering his own monastery, the monks at St. Gildas used the time to plot against him.

They eventually became angry enough over Abelard's continued moral sanctions that, according to him, they began to plot to kill him. During one of his frequent trips to the Paraclete, Abelard had sustained a significant injury after falling from his horse. He claimed they attempted to poison him as he recuperated, though he may have exaggerated to draw a parallel between himself and St. Benedict.<sup>101</sup> The lack of discipline eventually became enough of an issue that Abelard sought to solve the problem by calling in the papal legate and threatening the monks with excommunication.<sup>102</sup> Despite their oaths to Abelard and the pope, the monks of St. Gildas returned to their mischief, prompting Abelard to flee the monastery to return to Paris and resume teaching. Abelard ended his autobiography with his final attempt to restore order at St. Gildas and wrote nothing of the final decade of his life, yet within that final decade he would contend with his greatest

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100 McCabe, *Peter Abélard*, 200-201.

101 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 74.

102 *Ibid.*, 75.



adversary.

Though the exact date of Abelard's return to Paris is unknown, he most likely arrived during the early 1130s when Stephen de Garlande was again in political favor at court and could assure Abelard a position. This time Abelard taught on Mont Ste Geneviève, a personal territory of Stephen's, rather than at Notre Dame.<sup>103</sup> He continued to revise his *Theologia* in addition to composing a new work on ethics titled *Scito te Ipsum* and the unfinished *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*. The theological writings again led to Abelard's undoing. A revised copy of the *Theologia* found its way to the Cistercian monastery of Signy where William of St. Thierry became alarmed by its contents. He wrote a rebuttal to Abelard's arguments and mailed this along with a letter informing Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian abbot and foe of Abelard's particular brand of philosophic inquiry, of the possibility of heresy within Abelard's teaching.<sup>104</sup> As a zealous advocate of Gregorian reform, enemy of Stephen de Garlande, and proponent of scriptural based argumentation, Bernard found much to despise in Abelard, and the two men would remain bitter enemies nearly until Abelard's death.

Though Abelard never specifically names Bernard in his autobiography, scholars believe that when Abelard complained that his teaching at the Paraclete aroused suspicion from "certain new apostles," one of whom "made it his boast that he had revived the true monastic life,"<sup>105</sup> he was referring to Bernard and perhaps to Norbert of Prémontré, an associate of Bernard's whom Abelard regarded as a fraud.<sup>106</sup> Whatever mischief Norbert

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103 Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 23.

104 Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 124.

105 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 59.

106 Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 20.

may have caused, Bernard proved the more implacable foe. Born to a Burgundian aristocrat and a pious mother in 1090, Bernard and each of his five brothers and one sister all entered the religious life. In 1112 Bernard entered Cîteaux, the reformed Benedictine monastery where the Cistercian movement originated.<sup>107</sup> Bernard took an interest in Abelard after the Breton philosopher had revised the work for which he had been condemned at Soissons, for he feared dialectic applied to theology placed reason above the authority of the Church.<sup>108</sup> Though Bernard was a fierce proponent for spirituality and orthodoxy, he held a number of political connections that also endangered Abelard's position.

Stephen de Garlande often held important titles under King Louis VI, but the king died on August 1, 1137. His successor, King Louis VII, chose to favor Suger of St. Denis and Bernard over Stephen. Suger and Bernard hoped that their influence with the young king would lead to a new era of reform within the Church in France. They worked to isolate enemies of their reform agenda, including Stephen and his allies like Abelard. The new king came to have antipathy for Abelard.<sup>109</sup>

Bernard had already entered into ecclesiastical politics even before he gained influence at court. In 1130, Pope Honorius II died and the election of his successor produced a split within the Church. While a minority within the Conclave backed Innocent II, the majority favored Peter Leonis who took the name Anacletus II. In the resulting battle for supremacy between the two, Anacletus held sway in Rome and the rest of Italy while Innocent fled to France where King Louis, the French nobility, and

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107 Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 106.

108 Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought from Saint Augustine to Ockham: A Survey of the Dominant Ideas and Thinkers of the Middle Ages; and of Their Sources and Influences* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 91.

109 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 226.

Bernard rallied to his cause. Bernard believed his activity in ecclesiastical politics in France was a sacred duty. When Anacletus died in early 1138, Innocent and Bernard initiated a new wave of reform and had no desire to return to the chaos of schism.<sup>110</sup> They would deal with any dissent swiftly to prevent the return of the upheaval they had witnessed in the eight previous years.

Completely lacking an understanding of ecclesiastical politics and diplomatic decorum, Abelard could not adapt to the new situation. Bernard, Suger, and Pope Innocent considered Abelard's theological and philosophical questioning to be a criticism of the political and religious order that they had recently restored. Fear motivated them to prevent Abelard from continuing his inquiries and label him a heretic to silence him.<sup>111</sup>

Bernard secured permission from the Bishop of Paris to preach publicly against Abelard and made accusations of heresy against him to the pope. To avoid a second trial for heresy, Abelard convinced the Archbishop of Sens to allow a meeting between himself and Bernard in 1140. Abelard had hoped that by holding a council at Sens he could confront Bernard as his accuser, thus allowing him to discredit Bernard as nothing but a bully. Bernard was most displeased; he had no desire to confront as powerful a debater as Abelard. Bernard therefore mailed letters to the pope to ensure the condemnation of Abelard's claims concerning the power of the Persons of the Trinity, the substance of the Holy Spirit, and the purpose of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>112</sup>

Abelard's plans thus ruined, he appealed to Rome directly; however, Bernard sent letters to the pope before Abelard even began his journey to the Curia. Innocent II then

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110 Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 113; Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 227.

111 Constant J. Mews, "Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval," *Speculum* 77 no. 2 (April 2002): 371.

112 Grane, *Abelard*, 129; Mews, "Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval," 344; Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 30.

excommunicated Abelard in July of 1141. Beaten and broken, Abelard retreated to the abbey of Cluny where his supporter Peter the Venerable was abbot. Peter, more gifted in social grace than Abelard, negotiated a reconciliation between Abelard and the Church and even with Bernard, thus securing the rescission of his excommunication. By the terms of the reconciliation, Abelard agreed to remain at Cluny and correct the parts of his writing which had been deemed heretical, while Bernard agreed to cease denouncing him in public. In old age and poor health, Abelard lived the last of his days in quiet contemplation at Cluny. He died in 1142.<sup>113</sup>

Such a tumultuous life has earned Abelard much attention from scholars who have often referred to him as the most original and most influential thinker of the twelfth century. He is usually held to have anticipated such later developments in medieval philosophy as moderate realism, intentionalist ethics, the *quaestio* as the centerpiece of philosophic inquiry, and the dialectical resolution of conflicts in authoritative sources in philosophic proofs. Though evidence of all of these may be found in Abelard's writings, he was neither the first nor the only intellectual to employ them. Indeed, each was part of the intellectual context of Abelard's day, and he used them just as all his own instructors had. Though a brilliant contributor of many positive arguments rather than a mere critic, Abelard was not the intellectual radical that his private life has often suggested. His questions, the most important method in philosophy, were largely the same as those of his contemporaries, while his answers became additional contributions to twelfth-century intellectual life that found supporters but did not replace the alternatives.

Much of Abelard's method and terminology is consistent with the preexisting

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<sup>113</sup>Mews, "Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval," 353; Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 374; Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 152.

philosophic tradition and is often found in other disciplines such as law. It did not originate with Abelard, but was rather part of the twelfth-century methodology of which Abelard was only a participant. Whatever influence he could have exercised on future generations was limited by his convictions for heresy and the rediscovery after his death of the complete Aristotelian corpus which shifted philosophic inquiry in new directions. When these inconvenient facts are ignored and Abelard's contributions can be compared to those of the giants of the thirteenth century, he appears to be one of the greatest intellectuals of all time, but such claims are sustained more by sentimental attachment to his dramatic personal life than to the facts of his contributions. Abelard was not a highly original nor influential philosopher. He was not the world's first professor. He was rather a brilliant teacher who, through great skill and wit, attracted great crowds of students to whom he taught what he believed to be certain, established truths rather than innovative theses.

## UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARS

Before to Abelard's intellectual career both in importance and chronology was logic. All his later contributions to theology and ethics would be based on that initial academic pursuit that gained him a reputation for brilliance, arrogance, and contentiousness. The primary philosophical debate in the twelfth century was on the problem of universals and particulars, which was concerned with individual things and the logical categories into which they fit. The prevailing argument was called *realism*, because it claimed the broad categories were not simply elements of the human understanding or arbitrary schemata for the organization of sense data, but were themselves real things.<sup>114</sup> By the time of Abelard's early life, scholars had begun to question this thesis which Abelard himself would eventually himself reject.

To contribute anything to logic required a rigorous education not only in logic itself, but also in grammar and rhetoric, the three together forming the *trivium* of the seven liberal arts. The formal study of logic of the period was much more linguistic than symbolic or mathematical, and students therefore needed a prior grounding in composing sentences and arguments and the technical vocabulary that logic always generates. As this area of study laid the foundation for Abelard's future intellectual pursuits, he used, as a logician, what he believed were properly formed and worded arguments, while he

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<sup>114</sup> Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 29.

applied logic to each future intellectual endeavor.

Abelard first achieved fame by besting his own teacher, William of Champeaux, in a logical dispute during which Abelard claimed William's view that there is numerically one human essence manifest in all people requires this one essence to be in multiple locations at once.<sup>115</sup> He quickly earned a reputation for rebelliousness, wit, intelligence, and pride that made him appealing to some but troublesome to others. Prudent students usually silence their reservations with their instructors' arguments until such time as they have achieved a level of mastery that allows the disagreement to be a purely academic matter. Abelard would not wait to be admitted to the ranks of the masters before attempting to destroy the realist position. Such impudence has in posterity made Abelard's argument seem highly nuanced and original; however, the Peripatetic of Pallet owed a great deal of his own views on logic to his teachers Roscelin and William due to Abelard's use of insights from both his former instructors. While Abelard's counter of realism seems to be a new course in twelfth-century logic, other logicians had already begun to question the coherence of realism long before Abelard made himself famous.

Realism itself possessed origins which were more revolutionary than have been acknowledged. As the reform movement continued within the Church, the reformers found a convenient philosophical bedrock in realism which allowed them to support arguments on the Trinity and original sin. While Abelard's contributions to logic were a necessary step in the narrative of the discipline, the twelfth century was not a time of intellectual innovation so much as it was a time of collection, review, and resolution of

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115 James N. Jordan, *Western Philosophy From Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 337.

conflicting arguments, and Abelard's contributions were very much consistent with this context making him perhaps not so rebellious and novel as he might appear. His tempestuous nature won him the admiration of many students, but it also earned him critics and enemies, costing him the potential influence he may have had after his death. Abelard's logical arguments should be seen as a manifestation of the milieu in which he lived rather than as a distinct discontinuity within the development of the western intellectual tradition.

Though intellectual life had been largely dead in the West since the Dark Ages, it began to revive by the eleventh century. Before Anselm of Bec composed his philosophical monographs, the last and only philosopher of any repute prior to the 1000s in Europe had been John Scotus Erigena, who translated Greek texts for King Charles the Bald of France.<sup>116</sup> The Frankish empire constructed by Charlemagne still as yet exercised a degree of centralized control over Europe despite having been broken into three parts. In what was still a relatively orderly world, intellectual activity could continue to grow. Erigena and other monks in Ireland were some of the few people in the West with any knowledge of Greek, which allowed them to read philosophic texts that had never been translated into Latin. The institution of feudalism, however, began to take its toll on society. The Frankish kingdoms became hopelessly fragmented as the kings divided the land into benefices, and the nobles fought private wars and feuds with each other. A number of raiders poured from the North, South, and East, engulfing large sections of Europe in war and uncertainty, two poor conditions for academic study. Even the Church felt the lack of stability as the papacy became a political pawn which the Roman nobility

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<sup>116</sup> Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 112.



and the German emperor fought to control.

The source material that intellectuals require to begin any inquiry had not yet recovered to the position it held prior to the fall of Rome in the West. Very little of ancient Greek philosophy aside from Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's logical treatises survived in Latin translation. Texts originally composed in Latin by Cicero or Seneca survived in great numbers, but Roman philosophic writing often lacks the speculative qualities of its ancient Greek predecessor.<sup>117</sup> Monks carefully examined what little they possessed, preserving what they had rather than attempting to break new philosophic ground as the world around them seemed to revert to the chaos from which the Franks had not long ago rescued it.

The monks required a tool for their efforts to conserve their intellectual holdings. What little investment in philosophy there was between the end of the Carolingian Empire and the twelfth century applied the use of this tool, dialectic, to the problem of universals, which became the prime philosophic concern after the return of stability in the twelfth century.<sup>118</sup> The method for sifting through the various authoritative sources on canon law and theology was the philosopher's tool of dialectic, the last of the subjects of the *trivium*.<sup>119</sup> Built upon the foundation of the previous study of rhetoric and grammar, dialectic formed a linguistic analysis of what today is labeled "term logic."<sup>120</sup> While any academic pursuit requires some understanding of logic, often the student passively absorbs it during the course of study. Rarely does the law or biology student exert an effort to study logic itself, even though he often makes use of the tool. In the eleventh

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117 McCabe, *Peter Abélard*, 74.

118 Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 137.

119 Leff, *Medieval Thought from Saint Augustine to Ockham*, 93; Grane, *Peter Abelard*, 15.

120 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 23.

and twelfth centuries this situation was reversed; a student had to learn logic before progressing toward what the educators of the day believed were more specialized studies. Nevertheless, as a tool invented by the ancient Greek philosophers, dialectic had not yet shaken its philosophic baggage. While students might learn dialectic to apply it to legal study, they learned it through philosophic argumentation. Unfortunately teachers of logic did not possess a wide variety of texts. They were restricted to Latin translations of Plato's *Timaeus*, which lacks much use of dialectic in comparison to Plato's other dialogues, Aristotle's logical treatises called the "*logica vetus*," Porphyry's *Isagoge*, and Boethius's commentaries on it. Many copies of these works had been made during the previous centuries when philosophers were more isolated and more interested in preserving knowledge than breaking new ground.<sup>121</sup>

The *Timaeus* did not hold much interest for logicians, because it is really a work on cosmology delivered mostly as a monologue. Without debate or conversation the interplay of dialectic is not properly illustrated. The texts on logic, however, would contribute much of the style and vocabulary of eleventh and twelfth-century logic. This new enthusiasm for the study and application of logic sometimes produced eccentric results. The Church required a legal justification for much of its reforming activities, but ultimately the Church's power rested on scriptural authority. As the institution ordained by God to save as many of the souls of the human race as possible, it also had to define and codify its doctrine to prevent opponents from claiming it had not the power to act as it now did. The experiment of combining dialectical analysis with ambiguous religious doctrine sometimes produced results the Church found unacceptable.

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121 Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 136; Leff, *Medieval Thought from Saint Augustine to Ockham*, 63.

The neo-platonist Porphyry, in order to simplify some of Aristotle's teaching, had written on the five *predicables*, the categories by which predicates are related to subjects. Briefly, the five categories are *genus*, a collection of several species; *species*, a collection of several individuals; *difference*, any essential characteristic which separates two or more things; *property*, a capability or capacity of all things within a species; and *accident*, which Porphyry says is that which "comes into being and passes away apart from the destruction of the substratum."<sup>122</sup> More properly, an accident is a characteristic which does not define a thing essentially and may therefore change without altering what the thing is. Accidents have importance, because they allow the human mind to detect change. Though a change in accidents alone does not show a change in substance, whenever a substance changes some the accidents will change.

By the eleventh century, the Church had begun to codify its teaching on sacraments, but still had not yet reached the level of certainty it would possess years later. On the subject of the Eucharist, the Church leaned toward transubstantiation, but had not made official pronouncements, leaving some dialecticians to apply their art in hopes that they could more properly elucidate religious truth. One such dialectician was Berenger of Tour who by his logical arguments initiated the Eucharistic Crisis. He subjected the tentative argument for transubstantiation to dialectical scrutiny. If during the Eucharist the substance of bread and wine changes into the substance of the body and blood of Christ, the accidents of the respective substances should also change appropriately. Since no change in accident can be observed after the ritual takes place, the host must not change in substance, but rather in some other way. Berenger argued that since, as

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<sup>122</sup> Porphyry, *Isagoge*, trans. Edward W. Warren (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1975), 27-48.

Aristotle says, all things are a composite of form and matter, the host could change from bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ if the form changed rather than the matter.<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, the Church did not accept Berenger's reasoning and he eventually recanted his opinion.

One of Berenger's major critics was Lanfranc, the abbot of the monastery of Bec and mentor of the future St. Anselm. Anselm adopted his master's orthodoxy. Rather than allow logic to control the direction of inquiry and risk crossing the line from proper dogma into heterodoxy as Berenger had, Anselm used logic to uphold the Church's authoritative position. While a man like Berenger may have been tolerated or lightly reproached in an earlier era, with the reform movement underway a threat to the Church's ability to define doctrine also called its other arguments into question, arguments which were necessary as the foundation of the movement. Anselm demonstrated this use of logic to support religious authority in his argument for God's existence.

Anselm argued that God's existence was logically necessary:

Hence even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.<sup>124</sup>

Anselm's fool has claimed that God does not exist, but Anselm showed that since God's existence is logically necessary only a fool could make such a claim. Anselm's argument shows what a useful tool logic could be when it was applied to religious questions by the right hands. One of Anselm's opponents—none other than Roscelin, Abelard's first

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123 Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 145.

124 S.N. Deane, trans., *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, 2nd ed. (La Salle: Open Court, 1968), 8.

instructor—displayed the dangers of pushing logic to far.

Unfortunately nothing of Roscelin’s writing survives, and any of his claims must be pieced together from counterarguments made by his critics. Based on Anselm’s refutation of him, Roscelin belonged to a nascent group of anti-realist philosophers usually called *vocalists*. The vocalists made the problem of universals and particulars the most pressing problem in twelfth-century logic. While Anselm had merely assumed realism without defending it, the anti-realists took issue with this unqualified assumption and used logic to show that realism was incoherent.<sup>125</sup> The problem of universals already had a long history in western philosophy, but the Church’s settling on realism as the bedrock for what it defined as religious orthodoxy renewed the debate, though now primarily as an issue of logic rather than of metaphysics. Understanding the problem requires a knowledge of the technical vocabulary on universals and particulars in use since the days of the ancient philosophers. Neither realists nor anti-realists crafted much new vocabulary or many new definitions, as their goal was to find a harmonious resolution to the problem rather than create new positions.

Most of the initial definitions came from Aristotle, who in the *Categories* defined the terms twelfth-century intellectuals used in the debate on universals. While “thing” is an ambiguous, indeterminate term in everyday speech, it became a technical term in medieval logic following Aristotle’s definitions. Though he gives them no proper names, Aristotle’s *things* are the same as Porphyry’s predicables.<sup>126</sup> Rather than developing an ontology, Aristotle sought primarily to define how the term “thing” might be used in an

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125 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 25.

126 J.L. Ackrill, trans., *Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 4.

argument. He also, in *On Interpretation*, described universal and particular things. A universal can apply to many things by demonstrating a category to which they belong while a particular, such as a proper name, signifies an individual.<sup>127</sup> Since he did not specifically state what type of existence, if any, a universal had in his writings available to twelfth-century philosophers, they had to search his works and elsewhere for clues.

Porphyry's *Introduction* or *Isagoge* further clarified Aristotle's definitions, but his refusal to answer certain questions stirred the imagination of later scholars. In the beginning of the work Porphyry states he will lay aside the questions as to whether genera and species have real existence, whether they are material or immaterial, and whether they mental or extramental.<sup>128</sup> Obviously the second and third question are irrelevant unless the first is answered in favor of real rather than conceptual existence. Besides providing important questions, Porphyry also established genera and species as the universals which primarily qualified as things. They therefore became fixations in arguments on universals.

Boethius followed Porphyry's precedents, but attempt to answer the unanswered questions. He would use a dialectical method of showing the incoherence of the positions he wished to argue against prior to making an affirmative argument, the same method used by scholastic philosophers throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>129</sup> Rather than explain how the concept of a universal thing might be attacked by looking at the meaning of "thing," Boethius instead focuses on the definition of a universal as a thing common to many things. The obvious argument against the existence of universals is that a universal

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127 Ibid., 47.

128 Porphyry, *Isagoge*, 27-28.

129 Paul Vincent Spade, ed. and trans., *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals: Porphyry, Boethius, Abelard, Duns Scotus, Ockham* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 21.

is one thing, but one thing cannot be common to many unless it is common to its parts such as how a human body is common to its organs, common through successive possession like a horse or slave that has had many owners over time, or common through the experience of multiple entities as a play is common to multiple viewers.<sup>130</sup> Genus and species are not common in these ways, and Boethius's three examples of things that are common to many are themselves particulars except for the play which is more an event than an existing entity. Since genus and species are not common to things in any of the ways Boethius explains, he concludes they are nothing at all.

To argue that universals do exist, he shows the invalidity of this claim. If genera and species are nothing, then ideas of them come from nothing. This cannot be, since only nothing comes from nothing. If they are only ideas with no firm basis other than the particular things they supposedly represent, then objective knowledge of particular things becomes suspect, since things in the world change constantly, but knowledge must be certain. Particular things are easy to know through the senses, but the mind can abstract the concepts of genus and species from the sense data. If genus and species are only concepts abstracted from sense data but with no real existence of their own, a discontinuity between thought and reality emerges leaving a mass of skepticism in its wake and reducing knowledge to mere opinion.<sup>131</sup> This method of arguing which Plato also used in the form of dialogues became the standard method of all medieval philosophic investigation. Abelard used it himself, but he did not invent it; he learned it when he read the foundational texts under Roscelin's tutelage.

Boethius offers a solution based on his understanding of Aristotle and Porphyry,

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130 Ibid., 22.

131 Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 139.

though he backs away from the argument soon after completing it:

Therefore, things like this [i.e. universals] exist in corporeals and sensibles, but they are understood apart from sensibles, so that their nature can be gazed on and their distinguishing peculiarity comprehended. For this reason, when genera and species are thought, their likeness is gathered from the single things they exist in. For example, from single men, dissimilar among themselves, the likeness of humanity is gathered. This likeness, thought by the mind and gazed at truly, is the species. Again, the likeness of these diverse species, which likeness cannot exist except in these species or in their individuals, makes a genus when it is considered.<sup>132</sup>

Boethius's answer sounds like a moderate realist or conceptualist solution. A universal can only be understood apart from a particular within the mind, but the concept is abstracted from the similarities between the individual natures of particulars. Boethius quickly qualifies that he suggests the argument not because he sincerely believes it, but because his sources lead to it: "But we have carefully followed out Aristotle's view here, not because we would recommend it the most, but because this book, [the *Isagoge*], is written about the *Categories*, of which Aristotle is the author."<sup>133</sup> By claiming better solutions to the problem of universals existed than his own, Boethius left the debate to continue well into the middle ages.

Roscelin initiated an intellectual feud with Anselm by applying his own view of universals and particulars to the Trinity. Rather than use logic to prove a doctrine of faith, Roscelin submitted a doctrine to logical scrutiny to find its implications. He argued from the anti-realist position that the Trinity was a word rather than a thing. For the Trinity to be an existent thing, the Father as well as the Son would have had to have become incarnate in Jesus, because the Trinity is said to be one substance with three Persons. Since only the Son became incarnate, the Persons of the Trinity would have to

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132 Spade, *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals*, 24.

133 *Ibid.*, 25.



be separate entities, and thus the word *Trinity* referred to no thing but was simply a word used to refer to a collection of three things. Such an argument implied Christianity was polytheistic and was thus obviously heretical, and Anselm sought to denounce Roscelin in 1090.<sup>134</sup> Roscelin managed to save himself by recanting his argument, but he remained a controversial figure.

Roscelin belonged to a group of dialecticians called the *vocales* because they believed that dialectic analyzed words rather than things.<sup>135</sup> Anselm mocked Roscelin's ideas, claiming that Roscelin believed a universal was only a *flatus vocis*, a puff of air exiting the mouth as the word is spoken.<sup>136</sup> Since Boethius claimed that a universal was a thing common to many things, but no such thing could be experienced, Roscelin claimed that the spoken word itself, which medieval philosophers considered a thing since the puff of air was a body, was the only thing common to many things. Whatever the ontology of universals or however the human mind may come to know them, human beings think in language, therefore, any universal concept must be expressed through words.<sup>137</sup> While *vox* is often translated as "word," it is closer in meaning to "voice." A *vox* is any articulated vocal sound made as the vocal cords vibrate the air. Roscelin's teaching may have been considerably more complex. None of Roscelin's writing on the subject survives, and the term "*flatus vocis*" comes from Anselm's counter arguments. Anselm was not unknown to engage in philippics and straw man arguments against his opponents, but it is clear Roscelin did not believe the realist definition of a universal held merit.<sup>138</sup>

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134 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 21-22.

135 *Ibid.*, 25.

136 Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals*, 10.

137 Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 138.

138 *Ibid.*

Unsurprisingly, Abelard became suspicious of realist solutions due to his course work with Roscelin. As seen earlier, Abelard studied under William of Champeaux in Paris after leaving Roscelin's tutelage. William initially argued what is referred to as "exaggerated realism" or "material essence realism." This argument says the numerically singular essence of a species is present in all members of the species, and the members of the species only differ by their accidents.<sup>139</sup> After Abelard's disproved this idea, William adopted indifference realism, which states that "man" maybe predicated of both Socrates and Plato, because they do not differ in being a man. The universal thus applies to the two particulars in this example indifferently rather than essentially.<sup>140</sup> Abelard found this argument unconvincing as well.

Though he refuted William directly during class by explaining the obvious flaw in the exaggerated realist solution was the contradiction between the essence being numerically one but also existing in multiple locations, Abelard wrote his formal refutations to realism years later in his *Logica Ingredientibus*.<sup>141</sup> Though likely composed before 1120, Abelard fought with William on the subject of universals in the early 1100s. His more mature mind would properly delineated the arguments at this later date.<sup>142</sup> To make his refutation Abelard relied on the *reductio ad absurdum* which can make his reasoning difficult to follow, particularly since Abelard could not avail himself of modern logical symbols:

But perhaps it will be said that according to this opinion rationality and irrationality are not less contraries because they are found in the same thing, i.e. in

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139 John Marenbon, *Early Medieval Philosophy (480 – 1150): An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 132; Jordan, *Western Philosophy From Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 337; Brower and Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 66.

140 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 5-6.

141 Jordan, *Western Philosophy From Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 337.

142 Tweedale, *Abailard on Universals*, 13.

the same genus or in the same species, unless they are also grounded in the same individual. But this also is shown: rationality and irrationality are, indeed, in the same individual because they are in Socrates. They are simultaneously in Socrates and Brunellus. But Socrates and Brunellus are Socrates. Socrates and Brunellus are indeed Socrates, because Socrates is Socrates and Brunellus, and this because Socrates is Socrates and Socrates is Brunellus. It is shown as follows that, according to this opinion, Socrates is Brunellus: Whatever is in Socrates other than the forms of Socrates is that which is in Brunellus other than the forms of Brunellus. But whatever is in Brunellus other than the forms of Brunellus is Brunellus. Whatever, then, is in Socrates other than the forms of Socrates is Brunellus. But if this is the case, since Socrates is that which is other than the forms of Socrates, then Socrates himself is Brunellus.<sup>143</sup>

William had stated that the universal essence inhered in particulars, but that it became differentiated into particulars through accidents that Abelard here refers to as “forms,” which the particulars themselves did not share with each other. Abelard believed that William’s argument that a universal, numerically one material essence of two or more particulars would lead to the implication that the material essence contained contradictory qualities like rationality and irrationality. William countered that these would only be contrary if found within the same particular, but Abelard found this explanation wanting, as they would be within the same particular by being within the universal.

Without modern variables, modifiers, and operators, Abelard had to explain his argument in everyday Latin vocabulary. He chose “Socrates,” the variable for a human being defined as “mortal rational animal” and “Brunellus,” a common name for a donkey which is defined as irrational. The name Brunellus is Latin for “Brownny,” a name as familiar to medieval students as “Socrates.”<sup>144</sup> Socrates and Brunellus share the universal animal as their material essence, so Abelard must prove that Socrates and Brunellus as a pair are equivalent to Socrates. If this is so, then Socrates has the contradictory

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143 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 380.

144 Spade, *Five Texts on the Medieval Problem of Universals*, 31n7.

properties of rationality and irrationality; William's argument will be shown to be contradictory and therefore false. William claimed that as individuals Socrates and Brunellus were not the same, because they were separated by their distinctive accidents. The material essence is whatever is in Socrates and Brunellus with exception to these forms. This leads to an absurd conclusion. Whatever is in Brunellus other than his accidents is his material essence, which has already been defined as mortal irrational animal. Socrates shares this material essence, but is differentiated from Brunellus by his rationality, therefore he possesses both rationality and irrationality even if he is said to be a different manifestation of the material essence animal, while Abelard added insult to injury by claiming that anyone who believed in material essence realism would have to believe that Socrates was an ass. William did not cease to advocate for realism in the face of Abelard's attack, but no one, not even William, seriously advocated for material essence realism again. This is Abelard's most influential contribution to the western intellectual tradition, and scholars often attribute the later shift away from extreme forms of realism to Abelard's argument. They fail to realize that realism itself remained the dominant medieval view of universals, and several scholars other than Abelard questioned its validity.

William altered his realist argument slightly, but Abelard still found it unconvincing. The second argument did, however, influence Abelard's future conclusions. Socrates and Plato both fall under the universal "human being," because they do not differ from each other in their being human.<sup>145</sup> Abelard easily dismissed this idea: "There are those who understand that agreeing in human being negatively as if it

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145 Marenbon, *Early Medieval Philosophy*, 132.

were said: Socrates does not differ from Plato in human being. But we could also say that he does not differ from Plato in stone since neither is a stone.”<sup>146</sup> Since a negative cannot be properly proved, arguments in favor of realism must be affirmative. Proving that Socrates and Plato do not differ in being human is not as powerful as proving that they agree in something. Yet the idea that diverse particulars could be described as “being” something did interest Abelard though not as an argument in favor of universals. Abelard had only refuted William’s argument; he did not provide a competing claim for what a universal might be during his challenges to William in the classroom. Nevertheless, the logical dispute between master and student had become personal. William’s students found Abelard’s anti-realism more convincing, prompting them to begin taking classes from Abelard. Deprived of any students to teach, William took vows and entered a monastery.<sup>147</sup> Though his victory had cemented his reputation as a gifted intellectual, it won Abelard enemies as well. William was exceptionally well connected and an advocate of reform, which relied on some form of realism as a philosophic basis for its vision. Just as Roscelin had made himself suspect by redefining the Trinity in an unorthodox way, Abelard’s challenge to realism as well as his humiliation of William marked him as a possible enemy of the movement, especially when considered with his association with Stephen de Garlande. Some of Abelard’s popularity was no doubt due to his reputation as a rebel rather than to the power of his argument.

While Abelard and William became personal enemies, and Abelard remained unconvinced of the validity of William’s arguments, he did borrow facets of William’s indifference realism just as he had borrowed from Roscelin. William had stated that

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146 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 383.

147 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 8.

“human being” was a universal since Plato and Socrates did not differ in being human. Abelard coined a new term, the *status*, for this, but “ the *status* of human being [is] its being a human, which is not a thing.”<sup>148</sup> Since the *status* is not a thing, it cannot be a universal in the realist sense, but the term is important for Abelard’s later intellectual endeavors. What Abelard had discovered was that no thing in existence could fulfill the Boethian definition for a universal and therefore, as he claims, “it remains to ascribe universality to utterances alone,”<sup>149</sup> which sounds like a nominalist claim. Roscelin had made a similar claim, but his vocalism was significantly more crude and naïve than Abelard’s view. Roscelin had claimed that the only universal was the *flatus vocis*; the word itself applied to many things. For the vocalists like Roscelin, words were things. Abelard’s understanding is more abstract, because he makes a distinction between a *vox*, which refers to Roscelin’s *flatus vocis*, and a *sermo*, which signifies the abstract concept behind a word that allows it to be predicated.<sup>150</sup>

In academia, arguing from the *via media* is often an easy solution. The advocate does not have to reinvent the issue, discover new technical language, nor invest time in original research. He may merely pluck bits and pieces from the arguments of others to make his point. If he is diligent, he avoids the obvious counter arguments that may have foiled the endeavors of the authors of his sources. Effectively he takes a position by refusing to take one, thus rendering his argument unassailable, and Abelard knew that in logic the correct answer is the one which cannot be disproven. Abelard’s argument cannot be considered innovative based solely on its content.

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148 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 385.

149 *Ibid.*, 383.

150 Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 150.

Logic is an odd discipline in that it is a content free form of reasoning. The logician does not look to what is said, but the form in which it is said. Abelard's contribution to the problem of universals follows the dialectical pattern associated with most scholastic philosophy. He disproves competing claims before making his own. He even assumes that William's argument must be true so that he can prove it implies a contradiction. The method was as old as many of the sources Abelard read at Roscelin's feet. Boethius makes use of it extensively in his commentary on Porphyry. Abelard did not invent this style of arguing; indeed he himself had been taught by others to use it. Through his cleverness Abelard had shown what a powerful tool dialectic could be, and how thoroughly a *reductio ad absurdum* could destroy an argument, but many other students learned these methods in the twelfth century, often from the same men who instructed Abelard.

Abelard's attack on realism did make him a celebrity. He dared to assault a widely held, Church-sponsored philosophic view. As a teacher, William likely would have expected his students to argue against him from time to time, but Abelard arrogantly humiliated William in front of his other students, left class, and set himself up as a master in his own right at the tender age of twenty-two. Though he certainly attributed his success to his own brilliance, Abelard must have had help from Stephen de Garlande, even if no formal process of certifying teachers existed. Abelard's brazen actions certainly made him attractive to many students who saw him as a rebel against advocates for what once had been a revolutionary movement in the Church, but by now was beginning to become the status quo. Such views rendered Abelard suspect in the eyes of the reformers who now considered him a personal enemy. Whatever perspective one may

choose, Abelard's choice of career, field of study, method of arguing, and contribution all remain consistent with the environment and trends of twelfth-century France. What at the time seemed novel is actually a manifestation of a deeply set conformity.



## THEOLOGY AND THE TRINITY

The Trinity represents a difficult puzzle in Christian doctrine, which is what made it so suitable a topic for Abelard to teach. In the early years of the Church a number of intellectual heretics such as Arius and Sabellius violated the orthodox view by claiming either that there was no unity in the Trinity or that there was no distinction between the Persons. Abelard himself saw how the arguments of his contemporaries could lead to further heresy. Roscelin's vocalism led either to unitarianism or trideism while William's realism ended in pantheism.<sup>151</sup> Abelard's students, having already passed through his curriculum on logic, wished him to go further by applying that logic to the doctrine of the Trinity. According to Abelard, his students claimed "that it was futile to utter words which the intellect could not possibly follow, that nothing could be believed unless it could first be understood, and that it was absurd for any one to preach to others a thing which neither he himself nor those whom he sought to teach could comprehend."<sup>152</sup> To fulfill his students' request, Abelard sought to provide a logical justification for the Trinity.

Before articulating any claim of his own, Abelard had to study the previous claims made about the Trinity, especially those made by Augustine and Boethius, both to

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151 A.S. Turberville, *Medieval Heresy and the Inquisition* (London:Archon Books, 1964), 7.

152 Bellows, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, 36.

comprehend the technical language surrounding the problem as well as to understand the nature of the issue itself. The problem of the Trinity seems to relate to number. It includes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in one God, but one does not equal three. Augustine had, however, envisioned a case in which things might be the same and distinct: “But as there are two things, the mind and the love of it, when it loves itself; so there are two things, the mind and the knowledge of it, when it knows itself. Therefore the mind itself, and the love of it, and the knowledge of it, are three things, and these three are one, and when they are perfect, they are equal.”<sup>153</sup> In some sense, these things are identical, because they all arise from the same entity and cannot exist unless the others exist as well. Yet self love and self awareness are also not quite the same as the mind; self love cannot think nor can self awareness feel. Augustine had provided an example in which things could be considered the same and different, and thus Abelard understood the problem of the Trinity to be an issue of identity and distinction rather than arithmetic.

Boethius too had composed a work on the Trinity, in which he states: The belief of this faith concerning the unity of the Trinity is as follows: “The Father they say is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Therefore, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, not three Gods.”<sup>154</sup> While this is the conclusion that must be reached to provide correct understanding of the Trinity, Boethius does not demonstrate how this arrangement is logically possible. He does state that “the cause of this union is the absence of difference,”<sup>155</sup> but does not state how this view can be harmonized with the distinction

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153 Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of St. Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1948), 2: 792.

154 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 317.

155 *Ibid.*

between the Persons. While he goes on to give a number of cases in which things may be said to be the same or different along with a great deal of other Christian mystical digressions, he never mentions a case in which something may logically be said to be both the same and distinct. He claims only that the Persons of the Trinity differ in number without differing in essence, never offering a clue as to how this particular argument can be sustained.<sup>156</sup>

Obviously Abelard did not feel these arguments were quite sufficient. Meeting the new challenges to the Church's control of doctrine would require new arguments based on sound reason. Just as Anselm of Bec had shown that only a fool could claim that God did not exist, Abelard hoped to demonstrate that the Church's teachings were logically coherent while any counter claim was of such invalidity that it could be claimed only by the witless. By teaching his students through the application of logic to religious doctrine, Abelard could thus introduce a new approach to the teaching of theology. Ultimately he found distinctions between the meaning of "sameness" and "difference" as they applied to essence, number, and definition allowed him to explain the unity of the Trinity.

Abelard's first theological monograph on this subject, the *Theologia "Summi boni,"* was condemned for Roscelin's crime of trideism at the Council of Soissons.<sup>157</sup> Abelard expanded the material of his original work in subsequent editions titled *Theologia Christiana* and *Theologia Scholarium*.<sup>158</sup> Abelard knew to remain orthodox he would have to argue that each of the Persons of the Trinity is co-eternal and none of them

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156 Ibid., 319.

157 Mews, "Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval," 359.

158 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 126-127.

exists prior or posterior to the others either temporally or logically.<sup>159</sup> The unity in essence among the Persons overcomes this issue, but it does not sustain the distinction of the Persons, and Abelard's attempts to provide analogies and metaphors for this distinction made him heterodox in the eyes of the religious authorities, thus dooming his reputation and eventually ending his career under a papal ban of perpetual silence which lasted until his death a short time later.

Much like Aristotle, Abelard provides definitions and examples of all the philosophic vocabulary he needs to make his argument, then like Boethius or many of his own contemporaries probes these definitions for ambiguities which will allow him to reach a conclusion. What the ancient and Patristic philosophers had proven was taken by Abelard and other medieval philosophers not only to be true, but also along with scripture all anyone required to make any theological argument. Any time philosophy seemed to clash with religious truth, the conflict was resolved with a distinction in the meaning of one source or another. Though they were heavily reliant on the work of previous philosophers, medieval philosophers did not confine themselves merely to repetitions of previous scholarship. Abelard himself, to combat the influence of his old teacher Roscelin, claims that the fact Porphyry did not discuss a type of difference which relates specifically to the difference between the Persons "poses no problem for us. . . . There are many other types of difference besides those Porphyry distinguishes which we are forced to allow."<sup>160</sup> As a neo-platonist, Porphyry had no interest in providing an apology for the Trinity, nor did he provide an exhaustive list of examples for every type of difference; he provided the definitions of difference itself which, as a logician, Abelard sought to exploit

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159 Brower and Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 70.

160 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 321.

in his own formal proof. Even so, Abelard provided no innovative redefinition of sameness or difference.

Abelard begins by defining essential sameness as a state occurring when two or more things “have numerically the same essence, in the sense that this and that are numerically the same essence.”<sup>161</sup> Abelard does not mean *essentia* here to mean *quiditas*, that which makes something what it is, as later philosophers often did. In twelfth-century usage, “essence” is synonymous with “thing,” and in this case essential sameness is numeric sameness, meaning the Trinity is not a collection of three gods or even divine substances, since the Persons are numerically the same thing.<sup>162</sup> To clarify, Abelard claims that “a blade and a sword are numerically the same essence,”<sup>163</sup> because the Latin words *ensis* and *macro* which mean “sword” and “blade” are held to be so alike in meaning that they are interchangeable and therefore refer to the exact same thing.<sup>164</sup> Abelard has thus given a definition for essential sameness that relies on numerical sameness.

Abelard mentions that things may possess essential sameness, “even though they are distinguished by their distinguishing features.”<sup>165</sup> If two distinguishing features inhere in the same thing, then the thing is understood to be the same rather than two separate things even though the distinguishing features are different, thus things might be *different* without necessarily being *separate*. Abelard cites a typically Aristotelian distinction between form and matter which together form an essence. In a wax seal used to seal correspondence, the image of the seal is distinct from the wax, because they differ

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161 Ibid.

162 Brower and Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 228.

163 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 322

164 Ibid., 322n4.

165 Ibid., 322.

in distinguishing feature—the wax is material while the image itself is not—yet they are the same essentially since they cannot be separated from the wax seal.<sup>166</sup>

Abelard also defined what might be called definitional sameness. Entities possess this type of sameness when they are identical to each other “like a blade and a sword, or Marcus and Tullius . . . For not only is a blade a sword and a sword a blade, but also it is a sword from the very fact that it is a blade.”<sup>167</sup> The negation must also hold, so whatever is not alike in definition cannot be one thing from the very fact that it is another. With each of these definitions in concert, Abelard claims that the Persons of the Trinity are essentially the same since they are numerically one God, but they differ from each other in distinguishing feature and definition:

The Persons, i.e. the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are diverse from each other in a way like that in which those items are diverse which are diverse in definition or in distinguishing feature, i.e. by the fact that, although completely the same essence which is God the Son or God the Holy Spirit is God the Father, still one item is distinctive of God the Father, i.e. inasmuch as the essence is the Father, and another distinctive of the Son, and still another of the Holy Spirit.<sup>168</sup>

Though Abelard has explicated the multiple ways things may be the same and different, in combining them and applying them to the Persons, he made an unfortunate error, leading to his trial at Soissons where he was, like Roscelin, charged with Trideism, even though it was this heterodox reasoning of Roscelin’s that Abelard had wished to disprove.<sup>169</sup> Near the end of Abelard’s life two decades after that council, Bernard, after scrutinizing Abelard’s writings, worked to secure Abelard’s second condemnation at Sens, ending his career as a theologian. Abelard’s writings on the Trinity were certainly controversial in his own day, especially given that many of the powerful men who

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166 Ibid.

167 Ibid.

168 Ibid., 325.

169 Mews, “Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval,” 359.

condemned them did not possess Abelard's expertise in logic and perhaps interpreted his texts in a way he did not intend, but he certainly was not unique in attempting to find a proper understanding for the Trinity, nor were his arguments influential on future generations given their condemned status.

Though Abelard did apply logic to theology in a manner which had not been practiced in the West at all since the days of John Scotus Eriugena and had not been widespread since Augustine's condemnation of natural theology in the *City of God*, this fact marks his era as distinct from its past rather than rendering Abelard unique among his contemporaries. Berenger and Roscelin had made much more radical claims than Abelard had, though they suffered less for having made them than Abelard suffered for his. Anselm of Bec, in his genius, had shown that only a fool believes God did not exist and did so without recourse to pagan philosophy or patristic sources. Abelard seized the historical imagination through his actions and writings, but he was not so much a new man as a manifestation of a new historical context within the the Middle Ages, a context in which scholars sought to provide a rational basis for religious doctrine and resolve conflicts between authoritative sources.

The Trinity had always been a problem for Christian philosophers, and while Abelard offered his own interpretation of it, he had not brought the problem to the attention of the educated elite. Augustine himself had wrestled with providing a logical defense of the Trinity, and indeed had done so by arguing that things could be simultaneously the same and distinct according to various definitions for sameness and distinction. Abelard's analogy that compares the Trinity to a wax image whereby the matter itself is not the same as the image imprinted on it, even though the two categories

can only be separated in the mind but never in nature, is strikingly similar to Augustine's example of the issue of identity and distinction between mental phenomena and the mind itself. Though not expressed in similar formulae, the logic behind each argument is consistent. In form Abelard's argument is not significantly different from the claims written before his. Unlike Boethius, he does attempt a serious answer, but true to scholastic form, he cites authorities, compiles definitions, and unravels counter arguments before beginning his own. Abelard's theological monographs do not represent an attempt at a new field or an exploration into the true depths of knowledge so much as a practical guide written for students to explain how the official teaching of the Trinity was in fact the best, and how that doctrine might be logically explained and upheld against the fallacious arguments of the heretics that claimed the Church could not define doctrine because of its corruption. Nonetheless, Abelard's many enemies succeeded in condemning him on the basis of his argument at Soissons in 1121. Abelard decided that though his argument was correct, in the future he would need to place more emphasis on authority in his theological writings than he had before Soissons, and therefore he busied himself researching in the library of St. Denis.<sup>170</sup> This exercise would lead to the second of Abelard's theological contributions.

While compiling authoritative sources, Abelard saw a significant problem which would confuse students and play into the arguments of the heretics: many of the authorities contradicted each other. Many of the books of scripture even contradicted the others, although scripture was divinely inspired and thus perfect. Abelard even found that the Venerable Bede did not agree with the abbot Hilduin on the identity of St. Denis,

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<sup>170</sup> Mews, Abelard and Heloise, 126.



and he again returned to his old ways of angering his brothers, this time by continually reminding them that Bede claimed the founder of their monastery was not the famous Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>171</sup> Abelard was not the only one to find the contradictions in authority troubling. Though he had originally intended to collect quotes and organize them for easy reference during his writing, he found that his personal reference work could be immensely useful in teaching students to analyze authoritative sources for their meaning rather than simply their content.

Abelard took each quote he found which contradicted another on a single issue and organized them into opposed columns centered on 153 theological questions, titling the work *Sic et Non* or *Yes and No*.<sup>172</sup> Each issue Abelard chose to represent within the text grants insight into his thinking and include such topics as: “that no human sexual union may be without fault and not; that God is tripartite and against; that God is the cause or progenitor of evils and not.”<sup>173</sup> Though Abelard never rationalized or explained the contradictions, his recognition of them was not an attempt to undermine the Church’s authority or question the value of authoritative sources; he wished these questions to serve as classroom exercises which would train students to harmonize what only appeared to be contradiction.<sup>174</sup> Many later historians have given improper appraisals of the *Sic et Non* by failing to realize that like his theological monographs on the Trinity, Abelard intended this book to be used primarily by his own students rather than a wider

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171 Sikes, *Peter Abelard*, 18-19; Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 124.

172 McCabe, *Peter Abélard*, 143.

173 Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non: a Critical Edition*, ed. Blanche B. Boyer and Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 448, 127, 174.

174 Bouchard, *Every Valley Shall be Exalted*, 38-39; Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 355. Haskins and Bouchard claim that the *Sic et Non* undermined Church authority by exposing the lack of concord among the patristic thinkers on the issues around which Abelard groups the quotes.

audience.<sup>175</sup> It is a text book rather than a polemic, and its prologue explains how to resolve the apparent but illusory contradictions between authorities.

Much of the incorrect assessment comes from the fact that Abelard does not in the main body of the text provide a model for solving the problems brought forth by these apparent contradictions. After his difficulties at the Council of Soissons, Abelard would have been in no mood to attempt to further challenge the Church and bring greater scrutiny upon himself. To remain orthodox, he would have to claim that each source was correct despite the contradiction. A simple reading of the texts would not suffice to sustain the authority of both, and so Abelard had to teach students how dialectic might be used to analyze conflicting texts. A reading of the prologue of the work clearly illustrates that Abelard intended the text to be used in this way, rather than as a display of the lack of concord or logic within the Church. To encourage the use of reason in theological analysis, Abelard claimed that apparent contradictions in the authoritative writings did not appear because of real conflicts, but because of the limits of the untrained human understanding:

Let us not presume to denounce them as liars, or disparage them as erroneous, to whom God has said (Lk 10.16) “Whoever listens to you, listens to me; and whoever rejects you, rejects me.” And so, seeking refuge in our feebleness, let us believe it is due more to our lack of understanding, than to their failure in writing: to them, Truth said (Mt 10.20) “It is not you who are speaking, but the spirit of your Father which speaks in you.”<sup>176</sup>

Unlike the heretics, Abelard claims the inability to understand scripture and the works on the patristic thinkers arises not from the texts themselves or from any failure on the part of their authors. A mind which can only read the words without understanding their

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<sup>175</sup> Sikes, *Peter Abailard*, 78; Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 137.

<sup>176</sup> Priscilla Throop, trans., *Yes and No: The Complete Translation of Abelard's Sic et Non* (Charlotte: MedievalMS, 2007), 11.

forms or the intentions of the original author cannot correctly understand a text, and so not only is reason required, but anyone who attempts to interpret such texts must also be properly trained in the application of reason lest many erroneous and contradictory interpretations be given.

Through the prologue Abelard instructs the reader according to his method of dialectical resolution. When two sources seemed to contradict each other, the careful reader would “seek to reconcile the opposing position according to the difference of intention.”<sup>177</sup> Freed from the constraints of exaggerated realism by his previous work in logic, Abelard could be flexible in the meaning he attached to words. In isolation two passages from two different authors might seem to contradict one another if the same meaning had to apply to the words. When the words are instead seen as individual reflections of the intention of the author rather than signifying a concrete thing which exists apart from the mind, any dismissal of the texts as contradictory collapses into a simple fallacy of equivocation.<sup>178</sup> On the subject of the reality of discourse, Abelard also understood that the texts, especially those with which he and his contemporaries worked, were not original copies. Scholars of the twelfth century had to write and teach as they did due to lack of available texts. Quoting all the definitions and authorities from the outset of an argument allowed students to copy as the master read which allowed students access to materials they would not otherwise have. Much of this had to be committed to memory, as the lack of available texts prevented referencing.<sup>179</sup> Copying and recopying of works meant mistakes on the part of the scribe were inevitable in any text: “And so,

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177 Ibid., 18.

178 Grane, *Abelard*, 88.

179 Gabriel Compayré, *Abelard and the Origin and Early History of the Universities* (New York: Charles Scribener's Sons, 1893): 186-187.

what wonder is it, if there were places in the Gospels corrupted by the ignorance of scribes, that it might sometimes happen in the writings of the later fathers, which are of far less authority?"<sup>180</sup> A proper appreciation for the author's intention and the context of the work should expose the errors that too literal a reading would evoke. Abelard's lessons on *Sic et Non* allowed students to accuse people who quoted scripture without any attempt at dialectical analysis of author's intention of being uncritical or irrational.<sup>181</sup> Such accusations in turn allowed them to dismiss the more sophisticated heretics who attempted to reinterpret religious texts according to their own heterodox views.

The condemnation of Abelard's argument concerning the Trinity and his refusal to give authoritative resolutions to the questions raised in *Sic et Non* ensured that Abelard's influence had little to do with substance but much more to do with form. Many of Abelard's texts including *Sic et Non* by their arrangement anticipate the formal *quaestio* of later generations of medieval philosophers in which the author defines terms, quotes authorities, and attacks counter arguments before arguing his own position. The rudiments of such a manner of organization were prevalent enough in the sources twelfth-century scholars often used—even Boethius organized his texts this way—that Abelard cannot be credited with inventing them or even influencing their maturation. Most masters taught such a method, and the desire of twelfth-century intellectuals to find harmonious paths through apparently contradictory sources to stabilize the gains made by Gregorian reform and defeat the various challenges to the Church that had arisen in its wake ensured that many scholars other than Abelard adapted this form to their own

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180 Throop, *Yes and No*, 14.

181 Heinrich Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars in the High Middle Ages, 1000 – 1200* trans. Denise A. Kaiser (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 228.

needs. Much of the landscape of medieval philosophy and theology would remain unchanged even without Abelard. The methods he used in *Sic et Non* found greater influence through scholars who remained orthodox in the eyes of the Church.

Peter Lombard composed his own collection of contradictory quotations which he titled the *Sentences*. Besides considering a much wider, more comprehensive number of issues than did Abelard in *Sic et Non*, Lombard actually answered his questions. His book became so influential that by the thirteenth century all university students studying theology had to write commentaries on Lombard's *Sentences*.<sup>182</sup> Though he did write shortly after Abelard, Lombard was more strongly influenced by the school of St. Victor, which itself had been more influenced by the work of the students of none other than Anselm of Laon, than by Abelard.<sup>183</sup> Ironically, the school of Laon began the practice of organizing books of quotations of scripture and patristic sources long before Abelard even began the *Sic et Non*.<sup>184</sup> Abelard gained attention from later scholars principally due to his scandalous personal life. When they finally bothered much about his actual intellectual contributions, they considered them in absence of many of the academic trends of the twelfth century and declared either that Abelard was a radical free thinker who undermined ecclesiastical authority or a profound influence upon later medieval thought through his collection of patristic literature and attempts to rationalize their discordance, but each of these activities had several other twelfth-century practitioners. The fact that some of the them, like Lombard, succeeded Abelard while others preceded him shows that Abelard was only one of the distinct intellectuals of his time. There is no

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182 Bouchard, *Every Valley Shall be Exalted*, 40-41.

183 Luscombe *The School of Peter Abelard*, 94.

184 *Ibid.*, 174.

evidence to claim that Abelard tacitly influenced later medieval philosophy and theology by influencing Lombard, for Lombard had other models and served other masters.<sup>185</sup>

The use of dialectical methods to resolve apparent conflicts was not merely confined to theology either. The Church had had to develop canon law in its conflicts with secular authorities and continued to advance to ensure any actions against heretics were appropriately sanctioned. Just as when it had attempted to provide authoritative theology, the Church ran into legal problems when it discovered canon law could conflict with itself as much as the Church Fathers had in their writings. While Abelard and Lombard wished to impart some sanity to theology, the legal scholar Gratian attempted to resolve the conflicts of canon law. Though Gratian did use dialectical methods like Abelard, he was far more interested in the practical application of law than in any type of legal speculation. In passages where Gratian considers theological issues, he was probably much more influenced by his instruction under theologians at the University of Bologna than by Abelard.<sup>186</sup> Since Gratian also solves his legal quandaries by declaring one statute primary over another, it would make more logical sense to attribute any theological influence upon Gratian to Lombard rather than Abelard.

One issue canon law had to address was land ownership, since the Church was no longer a religious group but an entire institution which possessed large tracts of land, much to the chagrin of the nobility. Gratian does not consider, as Abelard might, how to resolve an apparent contradiction but rather how to argue properly that the Church can own land: "The law of nature differs also from custom and statute. For by the law of

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185 Ibid., 94. Luscombe notes that the primary influence upon Lombard was not Abelard but rather the school of St. Victor whose teachers had been strongly influenced by the scholarship of Anselm of Laon.  
186 Ibid., 217, 221.

nature all things are common to all men; . . . But by the law of custom or statute, this is mine, and that belongs to someone else.”<sup>187</sup> The problem is that God ordains the law of nature, and truly all land is his rather than the Church’s. Any further argument that the Church may validly hold land will therefore require upholding the law of custom, especially since the idea of property rights only exists in human law anyway. Gratian thus slyly claims that Paul wished for the Church to respect secular law, and since it allows the ownership of property, the Church may own land.<sup>188</sup>

The multiple attempts to rationalize past contradictions were part of the twelfth century mentality. Without some methodology for dealing with such issues, the change brought on by Gregorian reform rested on weak foundations. The Church required some kind of theoretical justification for its actions and dogmas rather than simple appeals to authority or force. When sources for such justification were consulted, many inconsistencies within the record appeared. Twelfth-century intellectuals, including Abelard, were not willing to allow such inconsistencies to halt continued development. In such a context Abelard’s work looks consistent with the twelfth-century context rather than breaking from it. Like Gratian and Lombard, he attempted to end debate over authoritative sources. Abelard had no need or desire to be an eccentric innovator of theology. Abelard was first and foremost a teacher rather than a professor. His monographs on the Trinity and the *Sic et Non* were primarily meant to assist students in developing their own theological understanding rather than initiate a debate among experts or push the boundaries of theological knowledge. He wished to defend the Church, the established order of which he was a part, from the attacks of popular heresy

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187 Ewart Lewis, *Medieval Political Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 1:34.

188 *Ibid.*

rather than expose the weakness of Church authority. Demonstrating that what the Church did teach was the most logical belief to hold was a means of solving this problem rather than the quest of a visionary for the Truth.

Abelard can also not be held to be theologically influential in terms of the trajectory of later medieval thought. The influence of Lombard and Gratian was quite extensive, but Gratian wrote a practical work which did not require the incredibly intricate knowledge of logic Abelard's works required. Lombard held the advantage of orthodoxy. By angering Bernard, Abelard made perhaps the most powerful man in Christendom his enemy. Pope Innocent II, at Bernard's behest, sentenced Abelard in 1140 to perpetual silence, condemned his work, and forbade his students to continue to argue on behalf of their master's theology.<sup>189</sup> Even Abelard's immense arrogance could enact little self-promotion under a papal ban. Later scholars would, after having been blinded by his scandalous personal life, proceed to create the myth of Abelard's influence and creativity based on similarities between his works and the works of later scholars without reference to the intellectual context of the twelfth century and Abelard's conflicts with religious authorities rather than accurately assess the value of his contribution within its context.

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<sup>189</sup> Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard*, 14.



## ETHICS

While studies of ethics had been an important topic in ancient philosophy, early medieval philosophers had not devoted much energy to continued study of the subject. The revealed truth of Christ's ethical teaching and the writings of St. Augustine sufficed for most ethical deliberation. By the twelfth century this trend began to shift, and ethics again became important due to the changes initiated by Gregorian reform. A properly informed ethical theory required both an understanding of dialectic to forge the arguments and of theology to provide the unique Christian impetus behind ethical theory. For the ancient Greeks only *eudaimonia*—happiness—was the central concern of ethics, and the individual achieved this state through a kind of enlightened self-interest which mediated his behavior toward both neighbor and state. Medieval ethical theory did not reject *eudaimonia*, but redefined it according to Christian belief; ultimate happiness came from union with God through reconciliation with him.<sup>190</sup> The peculiar Christian concept of sin meant that this reconciliation could only come about through Christ's sacrifice; no mystery cult rituals or meditations on the neo-platonic god's emanations would do. Avoiding sin required knowledge of what sin was, not through empirical observation which would tarnish the soul, but rather through an acceptance of God's revelation and a rational explanation based of that revelation. By avoiding sin it was hoped that an

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<sup>190</sup> Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus*, 81.

individual would practice virtue which was pleasing to God. Prior to the twelfth century, medieval clergy could tell the laity of Christ's commandments and warn them to reject sin, but the Gregorian reform movement made speculative rather than authoritative ethical theory important again.

Reform had made the behavior of clergy a key issue by reemphasizing monastic discipline and attempting to end corruption among priests and bishops. In doing so the reformers had made priests—and their sins—more visible among the common people. The reformers had encouraged the people to dissent from recalcitrant clergy, but when it became evident that not every wayward priest could be corrected the dissent continued to the point that it even began to threaten the ecclesiastical hierarchy that had unleashed it.<sup>191</sup> The Church required a more systematic philosophy of ethics both to enforce the renewed Gregorian reform discipline among the clergy and to answer the challenges made by the populist heretics. Ultimately defeating Donatism would require a defense of the Church's prerogative to define ethical behavior and an attack on the heretics' competing ethical ideas.

One of the more significant reasons the early medieval church had not speculated much on ethics had been its concern for ritual and the theology of salvation. Having been a Manichaean heretic himself, Augustine claimed the material world and human beings within it were inherently corrupt, and so they required Christ's salvation to escape damnation. Mercifully, Christ allowed the human race salvation through his sacrifice, to which Christians must attach themselves through obedience to the Church and proper observation of religious ritual. The key then to ensuring salvation for as much of the

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191 R.I. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent* (New York: St. Martin's, 1977), 54.

human race as possible lay in properly codifying prayer and the mass; ethical considerations were completely secondary. No mere mortal possessed enough worth in the eyes of God to warrant his salvation, and no act, however laudable, could earn it. An ethical life might indicate that a person was a true believer, but certainly the Greeks and Romans could provide ample examples of moral virtue which did them no good in the end. With little attention given to the moral value of behavior, less was paid to the intentions and motives for such behavior. Outward observance of religious ritual differentiated the Christian from the pagan.

The low point of Church history which preceded Gregorian reform had adequately proven that even a bishop might be a shining example of Christian piety in his official conduct, but his private behavior could still be wanting. In this new context many people became aware of the hypocrisy of religious figures as well as that of lay people. Discontent with this awareness manifested both in the heretics' condemnation of empty ritual and the reform monasteries demand for greater discipline among the monks.<sup>192</sup> The Gregorian reform movement had made moral intention an issue in need of definition, making it yet another matter of the twelfth-century intelligentsia. Abelard and Heloise shared this renewed emphasis on ethical theory, due to the role of hypocrisy. Abelard allowed the sentiment to seep into his scriptural exegesis. In his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, Abelard, much like the heretics, attacks empty religious ritual, but he attacks that of the Old Testament rather than that of the New:

“Because by the works of the law”—that is by outward observances of the law to which that people gave studious attention, such as circumcision, sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath, and other symbolic ordinances of the same kind—“no flesh shall be justified in his sight”—that is, in God’s sight. All such as fulfill the law

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 48.

merely according to the flesh and not according to the spirit will be accounted righteous in men's sight, perhaps—that is, according to human judgment which judges from outward and visible appearances—but not in God's."<sup>193</sup>

Heloise, after entering the religious life at Abelard's behest, felt a more personal acquaintance with hypocrisy. Though she had become an abbess and was much praised for her piety, she explained to Abelard in one of her famous letters her feelings of guilt for desiring him despite her vows: "They preach that I am chaste who have not discovered the hypocrite in me. They make the purity of the flesh into a virtue, when it is a virtue not of the body but of the mind. Having some praise among men, I deserve none before God, Who tries out the heart and the reins and sees in the secret places."<sup>194</sup> While Heloise felt she was a hypocrite for entering the convent, Abelard feared her continued pining for him would lead to her damnation.<sup>195</sup> What the Church Fathers had preached as proper conduct—the correct completion of religious ritual—now became seen by twelfth-century intellectuals as yet another type of behavior which did not guarantee salvation. For an action to be commendable twelfth-century thought held that it had to be motivated by the right reasons. Abelard certainly had many cases from his own life, including his relationship with Heloise, to provide him with examples of the influence of intention on ethical action, but he was not alone in this pursuit. Even scholars Abelard heavily disparaged like Anselm of Laon gave attention to speculative approaches to the role of intention in ethics. Abelard again epitomized the twelfth-century ethos of resolving apparent contradictions in authoritative sources to combat heresy and again failed to influence the trajectory of the discipline, not only because of his condemnation at Sens

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193 Eugene R. Fairweather, ed. and trans., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, vol. 10 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 277.

194 C.K. Moncrieff, trans., *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Knopf, 1926), 81-82.

195 R.I. Moore *The First European Revolution*, 113.

but also because he left the body of his work on ethics unfinished and the recovery of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* inspired scholars to write works which would eclipse Abelard's own .

Before he could attempt any of his own work on ethics, Abelard had to consult a number of documents including the writings of previous authorities and his correspondence with Heloise. Of the Church fathers, Augustine, even after the recovery of Aristotle, exerted the most significant influence upon medieval ethical thought.<sup>196</sup> Just as Abelard had to defeat the arguments of the new groups of dualist heretics entering into Europe, Augustine wrote his ethical treatises to overcome the theses of the Manichean heretics of his day. The Manichees too believed that the material world had been created by a evil deity and was thus evil. They claimed sin was a substance created by this evil god along with all other matter. Augustine used all the powers of his rhetoric to render such arguments nugatory. He preserved God's perfection and goodness by claiming that sin was not a substance: "For you evil does not exist, and not only for you but for the whole of your creation as well, because there is nothing outside it which could invade it and break down the order which you have imposed on it."<sup>197</sup> If sin is not a substance and God created all substances, God did not create sin. Just as darkness is a lack of light, so too is sin a lack of virtue rather than a thing in itself. The limits of human language unfortunately prevent the mind from conceiving of an absence as nothing rather than something, and thus emerges the human error of conceiving of sin as something in need of a creator for its existence. Augustine could legitimately claim that the Manichean argument that God created sin since he created everything was false, but his claim

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<sup>196</sup> Sikes, *Peter Abelard*, 180.

<sup>197</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 148.

established what sin was not rather than what sin was.

In a dialogue titled *On Free Choice* Augustine, rather like the Roman stoics and epicureans, established sin as the result of inordinate desire. He used a sympathetic example of a slave who killed his master in defense of his own life. Unlike a sociopath who wishes only to murder to cause suffering or a robber who might use deadly force to accomplish a theft, the slave had no desire to kill his master but rather only wished to protect his own life. This motive seems good, since life is a good which should be protected, and a life without fear would seem to be better still. Augustine, however, believed that the slave's motive had led him to commit a murder rather than a justifiable homicide:

To desire to live without fear is characteristic of all people, not only of the good, but also of the bad. But there is this difference. The good seek it by diverting their love from things which cannot be had without the risk of losing them. The bad are anxious to enjoy these things with security and try to remove hindrances so as to live a wicked and criminal life which is better called death.<sup>198</sup>

The desire itself is neither good nor bad; all people, good and evil, desire a life without fear. Here Augustine shows his stoic approach in claiming that the urge to protect that which is common to the good and evil alike is an indifferent rather than inherently good motive. The slave's sin lay in his inordinate desire to live his life without the fear of losing it, but his status in Roman law as property meant he could never live such a life. Had the slave been virtuous he instead would have stoically accepted the fate that God had ordained for him, for God is the only good the slave could never lose. Augustine's argument removes attention from the overt act and redirects it toward the psychology of the individual, but it also creates a tacit distinction between intention and desire. The

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198 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 562.

slave desired to live without fear rather than the death of his master, but in protecting himself with violence he clearly did intend to kill his master. Even so, Augustine was much more concerned to clarify that the sin emerged from inordinate desires for phantasms without real existence, but through his immense influence on later medieval thought Augustine conditioned subsequent moralists to see sin as something interior to the human being rather than as an act.

Heloise also directed Abelard to a consideration of the distinction between inner thoughts and outward actions within the widespread twelfth-century concern over hypocrisy. She explained that she had never wished to marry him, for their marriage rather than their affair was the true source of misery:

And if the name of wife appears more sacred and more valid, sweeter to me is ever the word friend, or, if thou be not ashamed, concubine or whore. . . . I call God to witness, if Augustus, ruling over the whole world, were to deem me worthy of the honour of marriage, and to confirm the whole world to me, to be ruled by me for ever, dearer to me and of greater dignity would it seem to be called thy strumpet than his empress.<sup>199</sup>

So long as they remained unmarried their relationship was based on love and fully voluntary. After they formalized their vows, the relationship became compulsory, regardless of whatever their feelings may have been.<sup>200</sup> As such, Heloise would have preferred to remain Abelard's mistress, an arrangement she saw as authentic, rather than wed her hypothetical Augustus for the sake of status and power. According to canon law fornication was of course sinful while marriage was virtuous, but Heloise disagreed, because the ethical value of the act came from the mind rather than the act. She also echoed Augustine's distinction between desire and intention more forcefully, claiming "it

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<sup>199</sup> Moncrieff, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 57.

<sup>200</sup> R.I. Moore, *The First European Revolution*, 114.

is the intention that makes the crime. It is not what is done but the spirit in which it is done that equity considers."<sup>201</sup> Heloise might claim that sex as an act was not inherently sinful, nor was the intention to carry on a relationship, but desiring marriage to appease the sensibilities of others or as means of securing power or an alliance was duplicitous and therefore sinful. Abelard had to consider these distinctions for any moral theory, but just as Gratian collected and codified canon law by resolving its contradictions, Abelard compiled rather than invented these distinctions into a cohesive theory of sin.

However sin might be defined, no understanding of it could be achieved without a juxtaposition between it and God's nature. Anything sinful ultimately was so, because it was offensive to God. For the dualist heretics anything material was sinful, because the true God was pure spirit while the creator was evil. Abelard believed he had already demonstrated the unity of the Trinity which subverted the heretics' claims. A unity of God's power, wisdom, and benevolence could not allow the dichotomy between a malevolent creator and benevolent non-creator. A more thorough proof of God's supreme goodness and power would not only undermine the heretical view that God created an evil material world out of cruelty, it would also have powerful implications for arguments on sin and virtue. Abelard provided this proof in the last of his theological monographs, the *Theologia "Scholarium."* Like *Sic et Non*, Abelard wrote this work as a series of theological quandaries. In structure it greatly resembles Lombard's *Sentences* but it is much less systematic and thorough, thus providing an example of a collection of more casual, less structured *quaestiones*. One of Abelard's *quaestiones* considers the issue of determinism by asking whether God can do other than what he does.

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201 Moncrieff, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 58.



By defining God as good through the benignity of the Holy Spirit, Abelard logically had to accept that anything God did was good for him to do while anything he avoided doing was good for him not to do, therefore “it seems that he can only do or omit what he does or does omit. For if it is good that he omit what he omits, then it is not good for him to do the same thing, and consequently he cannot do it.”<sup>202</sup> Since goodness is essential to God’s existence, he cannot act in any way contrary to this property any more than Socrates could be both rationally and irrationally. While it seems Abelard violated divine omnipotence by placing a strict, externally defined limit on God’s capacity to act, he reasons that human potential is actually a lack of perfection. Human goodness is accidental rather than essential, for humans have potential which they may or may not fulfill. That humans may potentially act in ways other than they do illustrates their unfulfilled potential which renders humans *imperfectus* or “incomplete.” God is fully complete, fully actualized, and possessing no potential he may only do what he does do. Abelard understood that human beings may potentially do many things God cannot “like eat, walk, or even sin, things which are totally removed from the power of divinity and completely foreign to his dignity.”<sup>203</sup> God is perfect rather than limited by lacking these types of potential. Since God does what he wills, and everything he does is good, what God wills must also be good. Anything God does not will is at least not good, though it may even be evil. God created the material world through his will, and it thus must be good otherwise he could not have willed it. Though an obsession with the physical world may originate in an excessive love for a secondary good if it eclipses the value an individual places on spiritual matters, merely avoiding the material world could not be

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202 Bosley and Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*, 19.

203 *Ibid.*, 21.

construed as morally exemplary behavior. Abelard had also stumbled upon further implications for his own ethical theories. If God is good and what he wills is good, his will must have some bearing on the goodness of human acts.

Abelard's *Scito te Ipsum*, a late work consisting of one lengthy book on the nature of sin and one short, incomplete book on the nature of virtue, illustrates Abelard's thinking on the distinctions between sin, acts, intentions and desires.<sup>204</sup> The foibles of the human mind will always make sin and its scandals far more interesting to study than virtue, but the nature of sin was a more pressing concern in any case. Despite the differences which separated heretic and orthodox believer or Abelard and Heloise from the the more conservative Gregorian reform clergy, most everyone could agree virtue at least included avoiding sin. From his previous training and logic, Abelard understood words like "sin," "vice," or "fault" might be used in ways which did not serve his purposes. Augustine had recognized that anything common to all people cannot be good in itself. Abelard applied this thinking to the minor imperfections of the human being like weakness of body or memory which are not sinful, since they "befall the wicked and the good alike" and do not "make life base or honorable."<sup>205</sup> Augustine had said sin was a lack of goodness, and these weaknesses are definitely deficiencies of something good to possess, but they are nevertheless not sins.

According to Abelard moral weaknesses or even bad actions are also not sins in themselves. A vice such as a quick temper may predispose the individual who possess it to sin, but such vices can be overcome with concerted effort. Due to human imperfection

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204 Burge, *Heloise and Abelard*, 106; Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 215.

205 *Peter Abelard's Ethics: An Edition with introduction, English translation, and notes by D.E. Luscombe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 3.

such vices are just a part of every person and do not render a person sinful for possessing them.<sup>206</sup> The presence of such deficiencies within the human character allows for the possibility of virtue, since by “triumphing over themselves through the virtue of temperance they may obtain a crown.”<sup>207</sup> Sin must lie in something other than a simple deficiency or weakness.

These weakness of character may lead an individual to either do something unfitting or to omit to do something fitting. Abelard defined the consent to inappropriate action as sin: “Now this consent we properly call sin, that is, the fault of the soul by which it earns damnation or is made guilty before God. For what is that consent unless it is contempt of God and an offense against him?”<sup>208</sup> By definition then sin is the consent to act out of contempt for God, but this definition requires some concrete examples before its principles can logically be applied to real situations. Abelard made use of Augustine’s earlier example of the slave who killed his master, but reinterpreted it according to his own theory. Augustine claimed the slave had an inordinate desire to live free from fear, but Abelard claimed he sinned “in consenting to an unjust killing which he should have undergone rather than have inflicted.”<sup>209</sup> Abelard intensifies the distinction between desire and intention that had been latent in Augustine’s argument. The slave did not desire to kill the lord, but rather to protect his own life. Neither of these desires is sinful according to Abelard’s definition. He did, however, intend to kill, and this intention is most definitely against God’s will.<sup>210</sup> The role Abelard attributes to intention

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206 Ibid., 5.

207 Ibid.

208 Ibid.

209 Ibid., 9

210 Brower and Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, 282-284; Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 262.

has led other scholars to label his work as “intentionalist” ethics, and though Abelard clearly believed a bad intention led to sin, his ever logical mind did not admit to a bland subjectivity in which an action would be labeled evil if the actor intended something harmful. The slave intended no malice; his homicide was merely a means to an end, yet Abelard still vituperates him. Sin is rather consent to the contempt of God. Since God is objectively good, the principles behind Abelard’s ethics remain objective.<sup>211</sup> It is God’s thinking about the intention that counts, not the sinner’s.

Abelard gave much less attention to defining virtue in the second book of his ethics but did treat it more fully in his *Collationes* or *Collections*, an earlier dialogue which is not complete.<sup>212</sup> Sometimes referenced under the alternative title of *A Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*, Abelard framed the work as a dialogue between the titular participants with himself acting as judge. The Jew and Christian each have a turn arguing against a proponent of pagan philosophy who identifies himself as a circumcised descendant and Ishmael, likely indicating to Abelard’s audience that he was at least from Islamic lands if not a practicing Muslim.<sup>213</sup> The inclusion of a Jew and a Christian in the debate again highlights the twelfth-century ethical concern for the possible discontinuity between outward act and inner intention. While sin was consent to contempt of God’s will, virtue was not simple acceptance of God’s will.

The philosopher prefers to follow the natural law which God as author of the world has ordained for it. The Jew of course observes the Mosaic Law. God established each of these laws to govern human behavior, but the first debate between the

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211 Clanchy, *Abelard*, 84; Brooke, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance*, 49.

212 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 220.

213 John Marenbon, *Aristotelian Logic, Platonism, and the Context of Early Medieval Philosophy in the West* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 302.

philosopher and Jew illustrates that they alone are not sufficient for virtue. The philosopher believes that Mosaic Law is superfluous, but the Jew maintains that Mosaic Law is an improvement over natural law in that it encourages the development of love:

Reflect therefore, I beg you, on the basis of these on how far the law extends the feeling of love both to people and to God, and you will realize that your law too which you call “natural,” is included within ours: so that, even if all the other commandments were put aside, then for us just as for you those which concern perfect love would be enough for salvation. You do not deny that our earliest patriarchs were saved by them, and so you should accept that we can be all the surer of salvation because the other added commands of the law have established a stricter way of life for us. These added laws, it seems to me, are concerned not so much with what constitutes a holy way of life for us as with safeguarding it. The true love of God and of our fellow humans is indeed all that is needed for every virtue of the mind, and even if there are no outward actions, the merit of a good and perfect will is in no way diminished.<sup>214</sup>

According to the Jew the law is a means to an end; it prevents people from faltering into sin and teaches them to love God and neighbor. To counter the philosopher claims following the law as a guide to life is impossible, since “you would not be able to go through a single day of the present life nor carry out your domestic responsibilities for one day, since we have to do many things—buying, carrying out business, going from here to there, to say nothing of eating and sleeping, about which there are no commandments.”<sup>215</sup> Without the hindrance of a judging God the philosopher may dispense with any warnings of divine punishment, but as a follower of the natural law, he is concerned with civic virtue and personal responsibility whose maintenance he feels the Mosaic Law inhibits. From this perspective the Jew’s argument appears selfish; his law may confirm a relationship between the individual and God, but it does little to protect the interests of others in the community. Following the law may make the devotee appear

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214 Peter Abelard, *Ethical Writings: His Ethics or “Know Yourself” and His Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*, trans. Paul Vincent Spade (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 53.

215 *Ibid.*, 69.

good, but without proper attention directed to the care of others the Jew's claims that the law increases love ring hollow.

The philosopher is similarly perturbed by the laws concerning sacrifices. An individual who loves God and neighbor should already be holy, and so making sacrifices adds nothing good to the soul. The outward observance of the law is thus empty "so far as the salvation of the soul is concerned, nor is there any doubt that, when true love of God and neighbor has made someone just, there is no longer any guilt for sin in him which would require spiritual purification."<sup>216</sup> According to the philosopher God wants pure intentions more than simple observations of religious law.

Abelard seems to be giving the philosopher the better argument, especially given his own concerns with hypocrisy which emerged during his correspondence with Heloise and with the role of intention and desire in moral actions. Nevertheless, neither the philosopher nor Jew should be making especially convincing arguments. As non-Christians they are both heathen, and Abelard likely intended his audience to dismiss much of what they said but in such a way so as not to dismiss the kernel of truth they each had. What Abelard could tacitly claim was that observation of the external forms of religion did serve a purpose but the performance of these religious duties were insufficient to establish virtue.

The succeeding debate between the philosopher and Christian more explicitly defines virtue. Like Boethius and Aristotle the philosopher defines vice and virtue as "a quality which is not naturally in a thing, but is acquired by care and deliberation and leaves the thing only with great difficulty."<sup>217</sup> The Christian agrees that virtue requires a

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216 Ibid., 71.

217 Ibid., 129.

struggle. Aristotle defined virtue as an acquired habit rather than an innate condition that is difficult to mitigate once established but a struggle to gain.<sup>218</sup> The Christian claims that any state may be classified as good if it accomplishes something, evil if it obstructs something, or indifferent if it does neither.<sup>219</sup> Virtue then must be an acquired habit which accomplishes something. Abelard's decision to include an indifferent state as a possibility is interesting, since indifference had not been much considered in ethical theories since the Stoics. "Indifferent" here refers to an act which cannot be classified as either good or bad.<sup>220</sup>

Virtuous actions are those which accomplish something related to God's divine plan: "For it is not good that someone does well, if his doing it does not fit with any divine plan but, rather obstructs it, because that which lacks a reasonable cause for why it is done cannot be done well. And something lacks a reasonable cause for why it is done when it would be necessary that something planned by God would be impeded, were it to happen."<sup>221</sup> Virtue then is not simply fulfilling God's commandments, but rather an action which contributes to God's plan. Much of the squabbling between the heretics and the orthodox certainly did nothing to accomplish God's plan. The heretics clearly were wrong. Augustine and Orosius had revealed that history was the unfurling of God's plan for the world.<sup>222</sup> Following the Church therefore contributed to this plan while dissenting from it initiated a discontinuity into history which was something wicked. Abelard established in the *Theologia "Scholarium"* that God only willed what was good. God willed the Church to occupy a special place among western historical institutions.

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218 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 179.

219 Abelard, *Ethical Writings*, 205-207.

220 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 185.

221 Abelard, *Ethical Writings*, 223.

222 Norman F. Cantor, ed. *The Medieval World, 300 – 1300* 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 46.

Heretics moved against divine providence in a way that threatened to destroy Christian unity. Even though they might desire to work no evil and intend only to follow their conscience, the heretics' intention led them to sin, since following their conscience in this case led to an objective which was opposed to God's will.

Abelard was not alone in devoting attention to the study of ethics. The continued needs of the reform movement to reinstate discipline and deal with dissent made ethics a serious pursuit just as it had reinvigorated the study of logic and theology. Anselm of Bec in *Cur Deus Homo* claimed that "to sin is nothing else than not to render God his due."<sup>223</sup> Like Augustine, Anselm had defined sin as a lack of something, but in this case a lack of justice rather than of virtue.<sup>224</sup> William of Champeaux, Abelard's former instructor, claimed God had given humanity freedom, and therefore an individual could choose to go against God's commandments. The responsibility for such poor choices of course rests with the individual rather than God.<sup>225</sup> These theories of sin as a lack of something absolved God of any responsibility for sin. Such arguments were necessary to combat heretical dualism that claimed the creator God made all things including sin to cause human suffering. The state of the individual sinner had to become more central to such arguments, since eliminating any claim that God might be responsible for evil required placing the blame on the sinner, and thus considerations of the sinner apart from his reprehensible behavior, such as Abelard's concern for intention or William's for freedom, became necessary to sustain the argument.

Perhaps the most sophisticated of this new type of ethical theory came from

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223 Deane, *Basic Writings*, 202.

224 Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 253.

225 Ibid.



Anselm of Laon, who in this area was not the dullard Abelard presents with regard to theology. Anselm claimed sin occurred in stages. The desire to commit a sin must precede any sinful action, because no one acts without will, but the desire itself is not sinful. When the person begins to seriously consider or plan to commit a sin so does the sin begin. At this stage the sinner has given consent of the will. The cycle completes when the sinner acts on the desire and commits the act.<sup>226</sup> Anselm takes this stage theory of sin further in arguing that this process results not only in the moral evil of intentional human actions but also the natural evil of the world: "While man retained the natural power of generation, he turned this quality of goodness into corruption by his sin, and thus could beget nothing but corruption from the corrupt mass."<sup>227</sup> Humanity, by introducing sin into the world, brought about the corruption that replaced God's earthly paradise with the present condition of suffering and toil it must endure. God did not create an imperfect world he then forced human beings to inhabit. The goodness of God's creation had always to be maintained both to refute the claims of dualist heretics and to remain consistent with the theological definition of God's essential goodness. However complex Anselm's ethical theory may be, it still claims that sin reaches maturity in the final act. He did examine the role of intention, but used it only to explain a stage in the process. Abelard differed in this regard by divorcing the act from any inherent moral value and placing all the focus on the intention.

Abelard perhaps went further than his contemporaries in shifting emphasis away from overt actions toward interior phenomena, but he was not alone in this shift. His thoroughness in embracing an intentionalist ethics epitomizes a much larger twelfth-

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226 Ibid., 253-254.

227 Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 261.

century trend brought about by changes within the Church that came with reform and the challenges of religious dissent. Abelard additionally had many personal reasons for beginning a study of intentionalist ethics. His correspondence with Heloise brought forth questions as to how someone who had done what was usually praised as a good act could feel a sense of shame for having done so. Heloise had not strictly intended to act in way contrary to God's will after entering the convent, but she did continue her amorous longings for her former lover, and their relationship had most certainly been contrary to God's will according to the standards of the period. Abelard also had to consider behavior beside his own. His brothers at St. Denis apparently did not meet his standards of piety or morality while his own monks at St. Gildas attempted to murder him for his ethical prudishness. In this too Abelard was not so different from his contemporaries; like many other religious figures of the period he called for a return to monastic discipline, one of both the heart and body. Just as he attempted to solve a rational problem with regard to the Trinity, so too did Abelard desire a logical ethical system to instruct those leading the religious life how to live properly and admonish those who did not.

Abelard had other personal reasons for pursuing a study of ethics besides the considerations related to his office. His personal difficulties had been severe; he needed to know that the universe was somehow a rational place. If God were rational and accessible to human reason, if he only did what was fitting for him to will, if he punished what was not fitting for human beings, Abelard's sufferings would make sense rather than seem random and irrational.<sup>228</sup> Abelard's contemporaries did not face the difficulties he

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228 Moore, *The First European Revolution*, 113.

did. Anselm of Laon, William of Champeaux, and Bernard all enjoyed positions of power and respect within the Church while Abelard, who behaved in much the same way they did after he entered St. Denis, met with no such success except for his reputation among his students. A God who judged behavior rather than intention would seem capricious indeed. Much of Abelard's special insight must have come from the circumstances of his life which led him to read the moral exemplars from scripture and patristic sources in a new light.

This new light, while perhaps extreme in its emphasis on intention, was not so far out of the mainstream for the time. Even Augustine found sin had to consist of more than a simple act. The times demanded new moral theories to keep the behavior of those leading the religious life in check and end the alternative ethical theories of twelfth-century heretics. Abelard fulfilled a need entirely consistent with those of his day. Considering intention as the *sine qua non* of sin made his task simpler; he never had to provide arguments or claims of how his own argument stood against the counterpoint of the possibility of inherently bad actions that are sinful regardless of the intention. A logician's mind prefers to limit the possibilities to a few cases from the beginning, which Abelard did by following typical scholastic formulae, distinguishing sin from actions, weakness of character, or negative inclinations.

Abelard's simplification along with the rediscovery of Aristotle's ethical writings prevented Abelard's ethical theory from exerting much influence on the future of scholastic ethics. By not considering the possibility of inherently evil acts he had not been as thorough as he should have been. It also left him open to the charge of Pelagianism, the heresy which claims human beings can be morally perfect without divine

grace. On the subject of lust with which Abelard was so well acquainted he claimed: “For he who says, ‘Do not pursue your lusts, and turn away from your will,’ commanded us not to *satisfy* our lusts, but not to do without them altogether. For satisfying them is wicked, but going without them is impossible in our feeble state. And so it isn’t the lusting after a woman but the consenting to the lust that is the sin. It isn’t the will to have sex with her that is damnable but the will’s consent.”<sup>229</sup> Though admitting that humanity is innately weak, by claiming that lust itself is not innately sinful Abelard failed to account for the role of original sin or the need for Christ’s sacrifice in a way the Church found acceptable. He had placed too much value on reason and had not reconciled reason with faith.

Even if Abelard’s ethical theory had not been condemned at Sens along with his theology, it still would have been unlikely to have had much influence. Abelard’s ethics often stand apart from other examples from the middle ages due to considerations of the thirteenth century as the standard for medieval thought. By the days of Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus the entirety of Aristotle’s work including his ethical writings had been recovered, and scholars gave much more attention to resolving the contradictions between Aristotelian and Christian ethics than considering the role of intention in sin and virtue. Perhaps the considerable attention historians and philosophers of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have paid to Abelard’s ethical writings comes not from any innovation or influence upon the thought of the twelfth century, but from the degree to which Abelard’s views remain compatible with those of the twentieth century through their emphasis on intention.

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229 Abelard, *Ethical Writings*, 6.

## CONCLUSION

The oft repeated claim that Abelard was a highly original thinker who exercised great influence on the progression of medieval philosophy has considerable force behind it. Abelard was always popular with his own students, argued bitterly with his instructors, lived a scandalous personal life, and was twice tried for heresy. He argued from a position of formal reason in opposition to his contemporaries reliance on revealed truth. Indeed, many of Abelard's contemporaries feared his continued use of formal reason, because it shifted emphasis away from faith toward the human mind like some gnostic heresy. Abelard believed he had sufficient justification for his methods. As J.G. Sikes says, "If the existence of God is accessible to human reason, then the non-Christian has no more excuse than the Christian for disbelief."<sup>230</sup> Abelard's method seems so innovative in comparison to his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, because it often resembles a twentieth century way of arguing: words are not things, meaning depends on the speakers intent, the morality of an action depends on its motive. Unlike a twentieth century thinker, however, Abelard was not a relativism, nor did he embrace logic to disprove religion.

Any claim as to Abelard's originality must consider the corpus of his intellectual work, for what is true of the man is not necessarily true of his thought. Abelard dedicated much of his concern for logic to the problem of universals, probably the most pressing philosophical problem of the twelfth century. Though Abelard questioned the prevailing realism of his day, so did many other scholars including his first master of logic Roscelin.

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<sup>230</sup> Sikes, *Peter Abelard*, 116.

Having been taught by William of Champeaux and Roscelin, polar opposites on the continuum between realism and nominalism, Abelard accepted many of their claims and combined them to form his own. The borrowing represents an ambivalence. Though Otto of Freising claimed Abelard “would scarcely so demean himself as to descend from the heights of his mind to listen to his teachers,”<sup>231</sup> that he kept so many of their assumptions displays Abelard’s trust in his instructors’ views. While Abelard’s argument on universals is certainly sophisticated and thus clearly the work of a powerful mind, it was not a highly innovative view. Roscelin had already attacked realism in a far more thorough assault than Abelard made, and the increasing intellectual sophistication of Europe in the twelfth century made questioning the traditional view of universals a popular pursuit. Abelard’s argument is one of the most thorough and coherent attacks on twelfth-century realism, but it represents the height of the era’s intellectual power rather than its author’s creativity. John of Salisbury records in the *Metalogicon* that even years after Abelard had died, his solution to the problem was merely another topic for debate at Notre Dame. Abelard’s solution had not replaced the previous answers provided by Roscelin and William.<sup>232</sup>

Theology even more so than logic was an area where excessive novelty could be a danger. Abelard himself would doubtlessly claim that his arguments on the Trinity were reflections of patristic thinking rather than his own opinions, for remaining orthodox meant supporting any claim with a mass of authoritative evidence. Abelard shared many of the assumptions of his sources, especially the idea that the problem of the Trinity was

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231 Otto of Freising, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), 83.

232 Daniel D. McGarry, trans., *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 112-113.

really a problem of identity and distinction just as Augustine and Boethius had. To a great degree, Abelard's arguments on the Trinity are not complete. He demonstrates a variety of ways that things may be the same or different, but does not arrive at a certain conclusion as to how this manifests in the Trinity. Marcus and Tullius may indeed be Cicero, and the Father and the Son may both be God, but such a claim does not fully clarify the appropriate unity and distinction among the Persons.

Abelard's ethical treatises may be his most original. His *Collationes* were dialogues rather than treatises, but his *Scito Te Ipsum* was much more consistent with his style as well as that of the time. The content of both considered the role of intention in determining the moral value of actions, a topic much considered at the time. The intellectual context of the twelfth century demanded some consideration of intention to resolve the questions raised by hypocrisy and the moral views of heretical dualism which the Church found unacceptable. Abelard gave intention far more weight than other twelfth-century intellectuals, but he was not alone in considering intention. Abelard had ample reason to write on ethics given his experiences with Heloise, his brothers at St. Denis, and his own monks at St. Gildas. The scandals of Abelard's life certainly supplied him with insights, but he was influenced by the intellectual context of the twelfth century and allowed the demands of the time to shape his views.

The level of Abelard's influence is significantly easier to determine than his originality. Two condemnations for heresy prevented his writings from exerting much influence after his death. Anyone who attempted to quote Abelard in the immediate aftermath of Sens would have been found highly suspect. By the thirteenth century and the recovery of Aristotle, scholars spent most of their energy resolving the new sources

with Christianity and writing commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Even so, Abelard taught many students during his lifetime who may be expected to have absorbed something of their master's methods if not his conclusions. The organization of Abelard's writing closely mirrors the typical dialectical arrangement of medieval philosophical treatises, and it is quite likely this is something he learned from Roscelin, though the seeds of the scholastic method may be seen in both Augustine and Boethius. Abelard certainly cannot be credited with inventing the scholastic method, nor was he its only twelfth-century proponent. Gratian and Peter Lombard also used it extensively and to much greater effect. Their work in resolving the discord among authorities was part of the twelfth-century intellectual context. Between the secular knowledge of the ancients and the revealed truth of Christ, all truth had already been recorded; it merely remained for scholars to piece these bits of knowledge together and resolve their contradictions. Subsequent philosophers had several examples of the scholastic method even without reference to Abelard's writing.

What remains is the question of why Abelard has been consistently described by historians and philosophers as influential and original. While philosophers frequently do consider the historical context of a subject of their study, those who examine Abelard are usually far more interested in his arguments than how the events of his life and times may have shaped them. Why historians have written so voluminously on Abelard is another matter. A large portion of the issue lies in the same problem which plagues all historical research: the availability of sources. Not all of Abelard's writing survives, but large portions of it do while the writings of his contemporaries are often more fragmentary. Any scholar wishing to research anti-realist philosophy need only consult Abelard,



because Roscelin's work does not survive. Much of Abelard's reputation thus stems from the fact that only his documents survive.

Abelard also wrote a variety of types of documents. Besides his philosophical work, he composed an autobiography in which he reveals that intellectual competition in the twelfth century was really quite fierce, his letters to Heloise along with liturgical hymns, and advice for his son Astralabe. Such a variety of composition makes Abelard seem more human than many of the other major players in twelfth-century intellectual life. Excessive attention to all these sources without documents written by other people of the day skews the perspective in Abelard's favor, especially since other intellectual documents of the twelfth century that survive are often less impressive than Abelard's own writing.

Besides the availability of Abelard's writing, the content of the *Historia Calamitatum* and his letters to Heloise is often more exciting than anything from any other source from the period. Abelard fully reveals himself to be quite human and vexed by serious character flaws like any other human. Abelard does not write of himself as an archetype, but speaks of his emotions and thoughts in a way that makes him quite charismatic despite—or perhaps because of—his obvious flaws. A dramatic telling does not render a story inherently original, but it can blind its audience to its true nature. The circumstances of Abelard's life are certainly unique, but he was surely not the only figure of the twelfth century who led an interesting life. He just happens to be one of few people who left an intimate account of it that we know of. This forceful personality found in the pages of the *Historia Calamitatum* can exert a powerful influence on the unwary reader. It is perhaps natural if not objective to identify with Abelard and his

suffering and thus ascribe disproportionate weight to his intellectual work based on the assumption that a man who leads an interesting life must have merit in other ways as well.

Abelard's eventful personal life wins him a high amount of attention, but historians allow themselves to fall into fallacious thinking if they consider his intellectual work too highly because of this. Abelard's weighty contribution to history is his intellectual work, but the contents of it are often misunderstood or ignored in favor of the scandalous events of his life that make for such interesting reading. A genetic fallacy, this type of reasoning has resulted in Abelard enjoying greater attention from historians than they usually show other twelfth-century intellectuals, which eventually leads to the conclusion that his work merits the extra attention. Abelard's intellectual work does deserve attention, but its qualities are often exaggerated because of Abelard's affair with Heloise and two heresy trials make him so atypical for his day. Abelard's status as a celebrity should not influence the historical view of his philosophy, which was entirely consistent with the mentality of his time.

Without the veneer of lover or heretic to cloud the judgment, another side of Abelard can show forth. Abelard was not an original thinker because he neither wanted nor needed to be. Abelard was not a professor in the modern understanding of the term. He was, however, a great teacher. The publishing requirements of professors often detract from their teaching, though it does allow them to research and push their disciplines to greater heights. Abelard did not compose for his academic peers, but for his own students. Teaching may require creativity in presentation, but it does not require innovation with regard to content. Abelard attempted to build and expand a career by

teaching students the skills they needed within the context of the reformed Church. Abelard's works are textbooks meant to assist this goal. While great teachers can have great influence, Abelard's school did not endure long after his death. Abelard's notoriety may have gained him much attention from historians, but it won him the disapproval of the religious authorities. After Sens, Abelard lost whatever influence he might have had on future generations. He could not teach and his students could not continue to advocate for his ideas. The schools of Laon and St. Victor acquired greater influence due to the loss of a competitor while Abelard's texts faded into obscurity until they were rendered largely obsolete by the recovery of Aristotle. Abelard's career required that he adopt some standardization rather than innovation, but contingency ended his influence.

Abelard the teacher was a thoroughly twelfth-century man in nearly all his characteristics. Though education greatly increased in importance in the twelfth century, it was education of harmonization and codification rather than the creation of new lines of inquiry. Much of Abelard's writing and suffering sounds very much like a twentieth-century scholar, but historians fall into anachronisms when they see Abelard as so much like themselves that they believe the similarities between their ideas and Abelard's indicates that he was almost entirely consistent with the context of their own time. A historical reconstruction of Abelard must not only focus on his personal life, but must also account for his intellectual contributions and historical context.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

**Timothy Ernst**

### **Address:**

4404 Saratoga Woods Drive  
Louisville, KY 40299  
502-500-8482  
timothyernst@yahoo.com

### **Personal Information:**

Date of Birth: 30 November 1982  
Place of Birth: Louisville, KY

### **Education:**

Saint Xavier High School, Louisville, KY, 1997 – 2001  
B.A., Hanover College, Philosophy, 2001 – 2005  
M.A., University of Louisville, History, 2008 – 2011

### **Positions Held:**

2009 – 2010 Graduate Teaching Assistant, History Dept., University of Louisville  
2008 – 2009 Graduate Assistant, History Dept., University of Louisville

### **Honors and Grants:**

2008 – 2009 Recipient, Ryant Memorial Scholarship, University of Louisville  
2009 – 2010 Recipient, Ryant Memorial Scholarship, University of Louisville