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Editor's Introduction

by Jeffrey E. Brower

I.

Abelard Scholarship. Peter Abelard (1079–1142) has long been recognized as one of the most important and most controversial figures of the Middle Ages. Although perhaps best known today for his dramatic love affair with Heloise, he made important contributions to virtually every area of the philosophy of his day. Indeed, his work—together with that of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109)—represents the high point of philosophical speculation in the Latin West prior to the recovery of Aristotle in the mid-twelfth century.

The last few decades have witnessed a steady increase in the interest and appreciation of Abelard's intellectual achievement. In fact, the attention now being devoted to his work is unprecedented, and a growing number of scholars, with special expertise in a wide variety of areas (including intellectual history, philosophy, theology, and medieval Latin paleography), are devoting themselves to the task of making this work accessible to the broader philosophical community. Much still remains to be done; we are only just beginning to recover and appreciate the full significance of his thought. Even so, the signs of progress are unmistakable, and there is good reason to hope that, in the years to come, Abelard will take his rightful place alongside other luminaries such as Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William Ockham in the minds of contemporary philosophers.¹

The articles in this volume reflect and extend the growing philosophical interest in Abelard. In addition to furthering our understanding of issues already debated in the scholarly literature, they call attention to areas of Abelard's thought heretofore neglected, and demonstrate how his views in these areas contribute to current debates in metaphysics,

¹ For an overview of contemporary scholarship on Abelard, see John Marenbon, "The Rediscovery of Peter Abelard's Philosophy," *Journal of History of Philosophy* 44 (2006): 331-351.

philosophical theology, and ethics. In what follows, I provide a brief introduction to these articles designed to situate them vis-à-vis both Abelard's own philosophical corpus, as well as important secondary literature on it.

II.

Overview of Articles. Abelard's philosophical writings can be usefully divided into two groups, corresponding to two chronological phases of his academic career – the dialectical writings, which occupy roughly the first twenty years of his teaching and writing (c. 1100s-1120s), and the writings on theology and ethics, which occupy roughly the second twenty years (c.1120s-1140s). The dialectical writings – including most notably his *Logica 'ingredientibus'*, *Dialectica*, and *Tractatus de intellectibus* – focus on issues that twelfth-century philosophers regarded as “logical”, but that we now think of as falling within philosophy of language, mind, and metaphysics, as well as logic proper. The writings on theology and ethics – most notably his *Theologiae, Sic et non, Commentaria in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanus* in the case of theology, and *Collationes* and *Scito te ipsum* in the case of ethics – focus on issues that have always been recognized as falling squarely within philosophical theology and ethics.

Like Abelard's philosophical writings, the eight articles included here can also be divided in two groups. Articles 1-4 focus on Abelard's views in dialectic, giving particular attention to his views in philosophy of language and metaphysics. Articles 5-8 focus on Abelard's views in theology and ethics, giving particular attention to his views about the proper subject of moral evaluation and the nature and function of various kinds of law (natural, divine, and civil). Although this division of the articles is useful heuristically, inasmuch as it reflects the division of Abelard's own writings, it should not be taken too rigidly. As we shall see, two of the articles in the first group explore the relationship between

Abelard's views in dialectic and philosophical theology, whereas the final essay of the second group concerns itself with the relationship between Abelard's dialectical and ethical views.

Articles 1-4: Dialectic. Abelard's dialectical views – and in particular, his views in philosophy of language and metaphysics – are perhaps his most enduring legacy, and certainly the part of his thought that has attracted the most attention from philosophers in recent years. Nor is it hard to see why. Like so many of our contemporaries, Abelard is committed to an overarching, nominalistic program in philosophy – one which relies on subtleties in philosophical semantics to avoid excessive commitments in metaphysics.

In the first article of this volume, “**Abelard on the Mental**,” Peter King addresses an issue at the very heart of Abelard's philosophical semantics – the nature of meaning. What is it for a spoken or written term to have meaning? And what explains the sameness or difference of meanings within or across natural languages? Abelard's answers to these questions, King argues, involves appeal to a “language of thought” hypothesis (not unlike that of Jerry Fodor) according to which words inherit their meaning from thoughts which are themselves linguistic in character. After explaining Abelard's views about the “vocabulary” of mental language, King turns to Abelard's views about compositionality, and in particular to complications associated with the joining of words to compose various kinds of statement.

If the first article provides the general framework for Abelard's theory of meaning, the second addresses a specific issue arising from within it – namely, the possibility of contextual variation in meaning. In “**Abelard on Context and Signification**,” Ian Wilks explores a development in Abelard's thinking on this score. In his earliest writings, Wilks argues, Abelard is led by pressures from within traditional Aristotelian semantics to insist that words must be understood in a context-neutral way, and hence independently of the truths of the sentences in which they occur. Over time, however, he comes to think that words can legitimately alter their meaning according to context, and indeed that considerations of truth

must often be relied on to determine particular meanings for particular contexts. Wilks motivates and explains this change in attitude, connecting it to Abelard's developing vocation in theology

In the third article of the volume, "**Abelard's Assault on Everyday Objects,**" Andrew Arlig brings us from philosophical semantics to metaphysics proper, introducing us to an important aspect of Abelard's nominalism – namely, his views about persistence or change. Abelard is notorious for claiming that nothing can survive the loss or gain of parts, and hence that there are no concrete material objects of the sort taken for granted by common sense. Arlig presents and explains Abelard's reasons for accepting this counterintuitive position, contrasting his views along the way with certain views in the contemporary literature such as four-dimensionalism. Arlig concludes with an examination of an apparent inconsistency in Abelard's position, stemming from a willingness to allow human beings to survive the loss and gain of parts. Although initially puzzling, Arlig argues that we can gain insight into Abelard's views – and their ultimate coherence – by looking to developments in the work of his followers, the so-called *Nominales*.

A fourth article, "**Abelard's Changing Thoughts on Sameness and Difference in Logic and Theology**" by John Marenbon, rounds out the articles on dialectic. In this article, Marenbon invites us to reconsider Abelard's theory of sameness and difference, especially as presented in the *Theologia Christiana*. Many contemporary commentators (myself included) have assumed that this theory essentially includes a bold metaphysical thesis – namely, the introduction of a form of numerical sameness without identity. Marenbon challenges this assumption, arguing that close attention to the theological context in which Abelard develops his theory – and in particular, doctrinal developments occurring within that context – reveals yet another aspect of Abelard's nominalism. Indeed, as Marenbon sees it, Abelard's theory of sameness and difference is not so much a metaphysical thesis as a semantic one.

Articles 5-8: Theology and Ethics. As already indicated, the articles in this second group all touch in one way or another on issues associated with the second phase of Abelard's academic career. During this phase, Abelard was striving to develop a theological system that would provide satisfying answers to the most fundamental ethical questions, including "What is the ultimate good for human beings?" and "How is that ultimate good to be achieved?" Indeed, as Abelard sees it, systematic theology cannot but include a positive ethical theory – especially concerning the nature of moral goodness and badness and the laws which govern moral action.

In the first member of this second group of articles, "**Abelard on Degrees of Sinfulness**," Jeffrey Hause introduces Abelard's ethics. He begins by outlining Abelard's general 'intentionalist' account of sin and merit, an account which is perhaps nearly as notorious as his nominalism about universals. After locating this account historically, and clarifying some of its more difficult aspects, Hause turns to a difficulty that threatens its overall plausibility – namely, his specific understanding of the distinction between mortal and venial sin (and degrees of sinfulness more generally). Hause explores the implications of this difficulty at length, ultimately suggesting that a solution may be found in the direction of Abelard's views about natural law.

The next two articles pick up on aspects of Abelard's views about natural law—exploring, in particular, complications having to do with its relationship to one or more of the other types of law – namely, divine law (as revealed in Jewish and Christian scriptures), and civil law (as developed by particular governments or societies). The difficulty, in each case, lies in explaining how Abelard can uphold the value of these other types of law, despite the fact that they go significantly beyond the natural law.

Thus, in an article entitled, "**The Law was Given for the Sake of Life: Peter Abelard on the Law of Moses**," Sean Eisen Murphy examines Abelard's views about significance of divine law, focusing in particular on Jewish law. Jewish law poses a special

difficulty for Abelard, since as a Christian he is committed to recognizing both its value (as preparatory for the law of Christ) and its imperfection (in comparison with this same law). Murphy cuts a clear path through some extremely difficult material, arguing that Abelard's views, especially as presented in his *Collationes*, can only be understood against the backdrop of his other theological writings, from which the relationship of divine law to ethics can be more clearly discerned.

In the next article, “**In Accordance With the Law:’ Reconciling Divine and Civil Law in Abelard,**” Amber Griffioen turns to Abelard's view of civil law. As is well known, Abelard claims, in a number of places, that civil authorities are often obligated – indeed, morally obligated – to punish the innocent, even when they know them to be innocent. But how can this be? How can the civil law require us to punish someone we know has done nothing wrong? And how can this counterintuitive view be squared with Abelard's intentionalism, or ethics of consent, which would seem to require just the opposite? Griffioen provides answers to these questions by offering an account of how Abelard's views about civil law derive their authority not only from natural law, but also from divine law, both Jewish and Christian.

The final article, “**Abelard (and Heloise) on Intention**” by Margaret Cameron, provides a fitting close to the volume, placing Abelard's ethical views – in particular, his intentionalism – in the context of broader developments in his thought. In a number of recent works, Constant Mews has argued that the two phases of Abelard's career must be seen as both (a) a continuous development, and (b) deeply influenced by Abelard's interaction with Heloise. By investigating Abelard's use of the term ‘*intentio*’ in his dialectical and ethical writings, Cameron tests Mews's thesis, ultimately agreeing with him about the continuity of Abelard's thought but questioning the extent to which its shape shows the influence of Heloise. In the course of prosecuting her case, Cameron arrives at some bold conclusions

about the nature of Abelard's intentionalism, which not only challenge the standard interpretation but also suggest avenues for further research.²

*Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana*

² I am grateful to Michael Bergmann and Susan Brower-Toland for helpful comments on an earlier draft.