Presentation 2 – Peter Abelard Working Notes

Slide 1: Title

Slide 2: Who Was Peter Abelard?

Peter Abelard is certainly the most dramatic philosopher of the early Middle Ages. His life was full of controversy, ambiguity and complexity. He was certainly a very abrasive, choleric person, with a large amount of hubris and seems that in every circumstance of his life he encountered or created trouble. He was highly intelligent, a charismatic teacher, “He was a brilliant orator: literally crowds of students attended his lectures. He had a religious spirit but a restless personality, and his life was full of dramatic events: he contested his teachers... often argued with his theological colleagues and underwent ecclesiastical condemnations.” (Pope Benedict XVI). Abelard was a poet and musician, good-looking (according to his own testimony) ... One of those people who was genuinely good at everything and all the more infuriating because of it. In his own writings he claims he is a victim of the envy of his opponents, some ask if he is merely the victim of his own pride. (McInerny).

He is, arguably, the greatest logician of the Middle Ages and is equally famous as the first great nominalist philosopher. He championed the use of reason in matters of faith (he was the first to use ‘theology’ in its modern sense), and his systematic treatment of religious doctrines are as remarkable for their philosophical penetration and subtlety as they are for their audacity. Abelard seemed larger than life to his contemporaries: his quick wit, sharp tongue, perfect memory, and boundless arrogance made him unbeatable in debate—he was said by supporter and detractor alike never to have lost an argument—and the force of his personality impressed itself vividly on all with whom he came into contact. (*Stanford*, Peter Abelard).

Slide 3: Historical Context (When/what he lived/wrote/taught

* Peter Abelard was born in Palais, Brittany, France in 1079 (Late 11th century). He died 1142 (mid 12th century) aged 62 or 63).
* He is contemporary with Anselm of Canterbury (slightly later) living through a general revival in education and philosophy which occurs from around c. 1000 due to the relative stabilizing of the political society of the time (Viking raiders become “Normans” and settle down). Trade and travel increase, and new cities emerge. From this point onwards (beginning with Anselm, but seen very definitively in Abelard, philosophy becomes increasingly argumentative, technical and academic. Philosophy is becoming an increasingly specialized discipline.
* Early Medieval Philosophy period. Philosophy and theology become more clearly distinguished from one another; both become more systematic, rigorous and precise, with increasingly technical language.
* There is an increased role in “dialectic” - a form of reasoning based on dialogue of arguments and counter-arguments, advocating propositions (theses) and counter-propositions (antitheses).
* His knowledge of classical texts is limited to the works of Boethius, Augustine and very limited translations of Aristotle, Plato, and the Neo-Platonists.
* Life of Abelard:
  + Born into lesser nobility and received a good education. He was familiar with Cicero, Horace, Juvenal, Ovid, Lucan, Seneca and Vergil.
  + Abelard chose to pursue philosophy over knighthood. He renounced his inheritance.
  + Studied under William of Champeaux.
  + He argued with William on the problem of universals and set up a rival school around 1104 (age 25) - Early signs of perfectionism and workaholism – He later set up successive schools closer to Paris. According to Abelard, “he bested his teacher in the debate, and gained the reputation of a dialectician of note.
  + Around 1113, Abelard decides to study Theology under Anselm of Laon (eminent of his day). He became critical also of Anselm. In one anecdote his fellow students were taunting Abelard in his criticism of Anselm. He offered to comment on the book of Ezekiel to show them how theology should be taught. They laughed at him, and yet the following day when they again came to mock him, they were so dazzled by his commentary that they stayed to take notes. They urged him to continue. But Anselm became critical of Abelard in his jealousy.
  + In his later career, in the wake of the disaster of Heloise, Abelard began teaching at the Abbey of St. Denis near Paris primarily on theology, and in particular the Trinity. “His method of philosophical analysis was seen as a direct challenge to more traditional approaches, and a synod, convened in Soissons to examine Abelard’s writings, condemned them (charging him with Sabellianism a trinitarian heresy) and required Abelard to make a public avowal of faith, an experience he found humiliating; shortly afterwards he was allowed to settle in a wild and uninhabited section of land, to devote himself to contemplation.” (Stanford)
  + Abelard continued to antagonize the monks at St Denis, arguing with them that their beloved founder could not possibly have been Dionisius the Areopagite.
  + Believing himself threatened, he left secretly for Champagne and there petitioned to lead monastic life elsewhere. He initially remained in solitude. Nevertheless, he did not remain in isolation since his students came to him constantly, encouraging him again to teach. In this time, he constructed the oratory (and Abbey) named for the Paraclete and gave it to Heloise and the nuns, whose convent had been expropriated. Around 1126, Abelard accepted an invitation to become the Abbot of the monastery of St Gildas de Rhuys in Brittany. “Abelard found the monks of Saint Gildas difficult and obstructive—even dangerous—and he claims that there were several attempts on his life while in residence. During this period, he wrote the *Historia Calamitatum* and corresponded with Héloïse.”
  + By the mid 1130s Abelard was given permission to return to Paris and retain his rank of Abbot, to teach in the schools of Mont Ste. Genevieve. Around the late 1130s, Abelard taught until the convening of the Council of Sens in 1140. William of St. Thierry wrote to Bernard of Clairvaux with claims of heresy in Abelard’s teaching and Bernard and Abelard met to discuss this. Since Bernard was not satisfied, “Abelard was charged, for which he appealed to the Pope, but the council was upheld. Abelard was condemned and excommunicated, and his works were burnt at St Peter’s in Rome. Abelard set out for Rome to see if he could reverse the judgement. He never got there. En route, he stopped off at Cluny, where Peter the Venerable was the abbot. The abbot persuaded Abelard to make peace with Bernard, and this was done. Abelard settled at Cluny, where his humility and devotion were a source of edification to the monks and to Peter the Venerable himself.”
  + Abelard died on April 21, 1142. It is said the words “I don’t know.” Were his last
* His key philosophical writings include:
  + *Sic et Non, “Yes or No”*
  + Ethica seu Scito teipsum, “Ethics, or, Know Yourself.”
  + Logica ‘ingredientibus’, “Logic” (starting with the words “To those beginning…”).
  + Dialectica, “Dialectic.”

Slide 4: Sources/Influences and Supporters/Antagonists

Sources/Influences

* Boethius
* Aristotle (limited to his logical works)
* Plato
* Porphyry

Supporters:

* Heloise
* Peter the Venerable, Abbott of Cluny

Antagonists:

* William of Champeaux
* Anselm of Laon
* St. Bernard of Clairvaux
  + Bernard’s core accusation was that Abelard applied logical arguments to questions of faith/theology (particularly the Trinity) which were irrelevant. The two differ because Bernard sees an organic unity between the life of prayer, the spiritual life and the intellectual life (mystical thinker) so questions about the nature of God are directed towards knowing God. Faith then works to advance the knowledge of God, more than abstract arguments or dialectical finesse. He is critical of Abelard’s description of faith as *existimatio,* with it’s implication that belief was merely an opinion.
  + On the contrary, Abelard was convinced of the utility of logic for theology, not because he wanted to reduce faith to the level of reason, but rather to defend and understand the faith with a most powerful weapon.
* William of St Thierry
* Fulbert, Canon of Notre Dame

Slide 5: Main Philosophical Ideas Theories &/or contributions to Philosophy

* Metaphysics – The Problem of Universals, Abelard the first Nominalist
  + Argues that ontological realism about universals in incoherent. (Basically, universals cannot exist as real tangible objects) - he posits that “universality is not an ontological feature of the world but a semantic feature of language.” (Stanford)
* Logic and Philosophy of Language
  + He devised a purely truth-functional propositional logic... and worked out a complete theory of entailment as it functions in argument. (Theory of logical consequence.)
  + His logic bears significance for linguistics, especially in the area of semantics and names of universals
* Faith and Reason
  + See Bernard of Clairvaux
* *Ethics, Know Thyself* – Intentionality
  + Influenced by pagan philosophers
  + “Abelard insists on the priority of the interior in morals. It is our inner intention, our consent, that makes an external act good or bad and not vice versa. The measure of morality is thus firmly located in the interior act, in intention and consent.”
  + He opened himself up to the charge of subjectivism
  + Emphasis on striving for purity of heart

Video Clip Transcript – The Story of Abelard & Heloise

And now to the most scandalous affair of the 12th century. Peter Abelard was in the prime of his life. In his mid-thirties, he was a successful, intelligent, and popular scholastic and teacher of logic and theology at the cathedral school in Paris. While he previously had no time for romantic entanglements, it was in the middle of these turbulent years that love came to Abelard.

Her name was Heloise. She was a young girl, probably around 17 years old, the niece of Fulbert, a Canon of Notre Dame. Fulbert greatly loved his niece and had aimed to give her a good education, which was well invested since Heloise was very intelligent. After Abelard met Heloise, being attracted to her looks and aptitude for learning, he suggested to Fulbert that he might lodge in his house and privately tutor her in the spare time when he was not teaching at the school. Fulbert agreed delightedly due to his love for and pride in Heloise, never suspecting the tutor of any less than proper intentions towards his niece.

Abelard’s personal memoirs, *The History of My Calamities*, recounts the affair that ensued. Abelard’s teaching at the cathedral school suffered greatly from the distraction and it was not long before the surrounding town became aware of the scandal. “Heloise fell pregnant, and Abelard took her off to Brittany, where in the house of his sister, their son Astralabe was born.” (McInerny) He was named after the Persian astronomical instrument, said to elegantly model the universe. The child was left in the care of his aunt.

Fulbert, who had by now discovered the secret, was outraged at the circumstances. Abelard, to placate her uncle, and because of his own desire for and possessiveness of Heloise promised to marry the girl. However, she refused vehemently. Heloise did not want to become an obstacle to the success of Abelard’s career as a philosopher and selflessly preferred to end the affair. She declared that she “preferred love to wedlock and freedom to chains.” That is that she preferred to love Abelard for himself and not for any social advantage marriage would give her, a state which she compared to prostitution. She preferred rather what she understood to be a disinterested love. For Heloise “the intention toward the ideal relationship was all important,” an ethic that Abelard shared and yet he refused to accept her arguments. He recounts, “But at last she saw that her attempts to persuade or dissuade me were making no impression on my foolish obstinacy, and as she could not bear to offend me; so amidst deep sighs and tears she ended in these words: “We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our love has been.” In this the whole world knows, she showed herself a prophet.”

The two married intending to keep it a secret. Fulbert, still furious, made the marriage known to the public, so Abelard removed Heloise from her uncle’s house and took her to a convent making her wear a postulant’s habit, attempting to mitigate the spread of the gossip and maintain the secret. Further “infuriated by this, Fulbert who assumed that Abelard was trying to get rid of Heloise, in company with friends, burst into Abelard’s room one night and emasculated him... the effect on Abelard was decisive and permanent.” (McInerny)

After this horrific event, Abelard recalled that “it was shame and confusion in my remorse and misery rather than any devout wish for conversion which brought me to seek shelter in a monastery cloister.” It was only later that Abelard could write of the incident “to Heloise with hindsight, seeing it as an act of God’s mercy which rid him of his personal dilemma along with the torments of the flesh.” His entry into the Abbey of St Denis was fast tracked with the period of novitiate waived, and Abelard recalled that “his wound was scarcely healed when the clerks were clamoring for him to continue his teaching from the cloister, now for the sake of charity, educating the poor rather than the desire for personal wealth and fame.

The conclusion of this unfortunate affair was of course not the conclusion of Abelard’s adventures which included extensive theological and philosophical disputes and a generally tumultuous scholastic career, the climax of this tumult being his disputes with Bernard of Clairvaux which at one point resulted in the papal condemnation of his work and the threat of his personal excommunication which fortunately was lifted through the mediation of Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny. His later correspondence with Heloise indicates his true conversion and the honest pursuit of his philosophical and theological work. For the part of Heloise, she also took vows in the Benedictine convent of Argenteuil, devastated at the turn of events. She later moved to the Abbey of the Paraclete, which was founded by Abelard. Heloise never forgot the love she had for Abelard and when initially they begin their correspondence years later, she writes of her frustration in his regard. Abelard responds gradually encouraging her to turn her devotion to God alone. Their later correspondence oriented itself more towards his spiritual direction in the running of the monastery since she had become abbess. Abelard and Heloise were eventually buried together in the Abbey of the Paraclete.