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978-0-521-77596-0 - The Cambridge Companion to Abelard

Edited by Jeffrey E. Brower and Kevin Guilfooy

Excerpt

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JEFFREY E. BROWER AND KEVIN GUILFOY

Introduction

Peter Abelard (1079–1142) is a philosopher and theologian whose reputation has always preceded him. Indeed, to this day he remains among the best-known figures of the entire Middle Ages.¹ Although one can hardly overestimate the value of his intellectual legacy, his reputation owes at least as much to his flamboyant personality and to the sensational details of his biography. Very early on Abelard established his place as one of the most celebrated masters in Paris by challenging – and then defeating – his teachers and rivals in public disputation. In some cases, he literally drove these rivals out of business: he stole their students and set up his own schools (the first when he was only twenty-five) just down the road from them. He aroused the fiercest devotion in students, and the fiercest enmity in rivals. He also inspired the love and devotion of (some would say merely seduced) a seventeen-year-old Heloise. But when Heloise became pregnant and ran away with him to be secretly married, Abelard earned the hatred of her uncle and guardian, Fulbert, who was also the canon of Notre Dame. In fact, Fulbert's anger was so great that he hired a group of thugs to seize Abelard and have him castrated, in an effort to put a quick end to their relations. Although Abelard spent the rest of his days as a monastic – he and Heloise having taken religious vows shortly after his castration – he continued to provoke the strongest reactions among those he encountered. For example, shortly after he was elected abbot of the monastery at St. Gildas, he was forced to flee the institution in fear of his life, having aroused such hostility in his fellow monks that they actually tried to kill him! Not surprisingly, his efforts at philosophical theology produced much the same reaction. Several of his works were publicly condemned for heresy (on two separate occasions), subsequently

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burned, and Abelard was excommunicated from the Church (though his excommunication was revoked shortly before his death). Obviously no attempt to assess Abelard's place in history can ignore these aspects of his life. Nonetheless, it is to his intellectual achievements that the current volume is devoted.

In philosophy, Abelard is best known for his work in language, logic, and metaphysics, which – together with the philosophical theology 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.² The fact that Abelard was writing “prior to the recovery of Aristotle” makes it difficult to situate him squarely with respect to either his predecessors or his successors, though important lines of influence can be traced in both directions. During his own lifetime, John of Salisbury claimed that Abelard alone really understood Aristotle and gave him the honorific title “Peripatetic of Pallet.”³ In actuality, however, Abelard's thought draws on a number of intellectual traditions, including not only Aristotelianism, but also Platonism and Stoicism. Thus, in language and logic, Abelard emphasizes the role of propositions (rather than terms), developing a theory of propositional connectives and propositional content; in ethics, he stresses the importance of intentions, both developing the ideas of Augustine and anticipating in certain ways the work of many modern philosophers such as Kant; and in metaphysics, he initiates an influential reductive program, which comes to be known as “nominalism.” Even his provocative and controversial work in philosophical theology has a lasting influence on the development of scholastic thought, despite its being twice condemned as heretical.

It is not difficult to see why, of all the great philosophers of the Middle Ages, perhaps none appeals more than Abelard to the sensibilities of contemporary analytic philosophers. His pioneering work in areas of contemporary philosophical concern – namely, language, logic, and metaphysics – as well as his independent spirit in ethics and theology, virtually guaranteed that he would be among the first medieval thinkers to be taken up and championed within the Anglo-American philosophical tradition. As one of the first – and best – to undertake an overarching, nominalistic program in philosophy, moreover, he remains a source of insight and inspiration for many.

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Over the past few decades, scholarship on Abelard has begun to flourish, and the attention now being devoted to his work is unprecedented. Even so, we are only just beginning to recover and appreciate the full significance of his thought. Most Abelardian scholarship to-date has proceeded in a piecemeal fashion, with the result that connections between the various parts of Abelard's thought have been obscured and certain aspects of his thought have been ignored altogether.⁴ In this volume, we begin the process of rectifying this situation. The essays collected here not only survey the complete range of Abelard's thought, but also approach his thought systematically and with a kind of analytical rigor that is sometimes lacking in more historical studies. Moreover, in addition to displaying recent developments on topics already of concern to scholars, these essays highlight philosophically valuable areas of Abelard's thought that have until now been neglected, showing wherever possible precisely how Abelard's views contribute to current debates in philosophy of language, logic, metaphysics, philosophical theology, and ethics. The result, we believe, is a volume that significantly advances the current trend in Abelardian scholarship while at the same time making up for some of its deficiencies.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

Because one of our primary aims in this volume is to provide a comprehensive introduction to Abelard's thought, we have organized its essays around his most important philosophical, theological, ethical, and literary works, taking into account not only the influences that shaped their development, but also the way in which they influenced Abelard's contemporaries and successors. Thus, the volume begins (in chapter 1) with a consideration of the main historical, political, religious, and academic influences on Abelard's writings, and concludes (in chapter 10) with an examination of the influence of Abelard's work on subsequent medieval thought. The chapters falling in between address everything from his contributions to literature and poetry (chapter 2) to his writings on metaphysics (chapter 3), philosophy of language (chapter 4), logic (chapter 5), mind and cognition (chapter 6), philosophical theology (chapters 7–8), and ethics (chapter 9).

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The division of the chapters of this volume is designed to reflect natural divisions within Abelard's own writings. These writings fall naturally into four categories: literary writings, dialectical writings, philosophical theology, and ethics.

Literary writings

In line with the mandate of the *Cambridge Companion* series to which this volume belongs, the bulk of its essays are devoted to Abelard's *philosophical* writings. It is important to recognize, however, that Abelard's philosophical writings represent only one part of his larger *oeuvre*, which also includes a number of other works best described as *literary* in nature (such as letters, autobiography, hymns, and poetry). Abelard's most important literary writings may be listed as follows:⁵

1. *Historia calamitatum* (= *The Story of My Misfortunes*) This work is a narrative account of Abelard's misfortunes as a philosopher and theologian over thirty years. Although autobiographical in nature, it takes the form of a letter: it is addressed to an unnamed friend, attempting to console him by inviting him to contrast his own struggles with Abelard's greater sufferings. Most of the details we know about Abelard's life derive from this work, including the account of his many confrontations with academic, political, and other rivals.
2. *Epistolae* 2–8 (= *Letters* 2–8) These seven letters comprise the famous correspondence between Abelard and Heloise, and together with the *Historia calamitatum* (= *Epistola* 1), with which they typically circulated, they are perhaps the best known and most widely translated parts of Abelard's work. They include Heloise's request for, and Abelard's attempt to provide, an authoritative basis of religious life for women, as well as a monastic Rule for women.
3. *Hymnarius Paraclitensis* (= *The Paraclete Hymnary*) According to his own testimony, Abelard wrote a number of non-religious songs, but this collection comprises his extant liturgical music. The hymns in this collection were written for the Abbey of the Paraclete and intended to form a complete hymn-cycle for the liturgical year.

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4. *Planctus* (= *Lamentations*) This work consists of a group of six lyrics or laments in which figures from the Old Testament protest the circumstances and injustice of their impending deaths or the deaths of those they love.
5. *Carmen ad Astralabium* (= *A Poem for Astralabe*) This work is a poem dedicated to Abelard's son, Peter Astralabe. In addition to summarizing the most important aspects of Abelard's ethics, it offers Astralabe practical advice on his studies, the nature of women, and other topics.

The importance of Abelard's literary writings – both historically and literarily – is hard to overestimate. Not only are they valuable in their own right, but they also provide unique insight into the personal and historical circumstances of one of the period's greatest minds. Because this insight sets the stage for a proper understanding of his philosophy, and has been the subject of scholarly debate for over a century, the first two chapters of the volume provide some assessment of Abelard's literary works and their relation to his philosophical writings.

Each of the first two chapters takes Abelard's *Historia* as its point of departure. In chapter 1, John Marenbon draws on it to provide a brief biographical sketch of Abelard's life and to supply a context for the proper understanding of his intellectual development. The *Historia* sheds significant light, Marenbon argues, not only on Abelard's own views, but also on their relationship to that of his predecessors. In chapter 2, Winthrop Wetherbee assesses Abelard's role as a literary artist. Here again, he argues, the *Historia* supplies the relevant context, showing Abelard to be a master of both the narrative and lyric form.

Dialectical writings

If the first two chapters of the volume discuss Abelard's non-philosophical works, as well as provide the intellectual context in which his more philosophical works were written, the remaining chapters address the philosophical works themselves. Here again the chapters are organized according to natural divisions of Abelard's writings. In the case of his philosophy, these divisions correspond to three main categories: dialectic, philosophical theology, and ethics.

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"Dialectic" (or "Logic") is the name of the discipline that, together with grammar and rhetoric, comprises the *Trivium* of the ancient curriculum. As Abelard himself points out (*Dial.* 146.10–20), the early medieval study of this discipline focuses on a small number of ancient logical texts, which come to be known collectively as the "old logic" (*logica vetus*). These texts include the following: two works of Aristotle, the *Categories* and *On Interpretation*; one work by Porphyry, the *Isagoge*, which is an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*; and four works by Boethius, *De topicis differentiis* (= *On Topical Differences*), *De divisione* (= *On Division*), and the two treatises on categorical and hypothetical syllogisms, *De syllogismis categoricis* and *De syllogismis hypotheticis*.

Like most twelfth-century logical works, Abelard's dialectical writings take the form of glosses or commentaries on one (or more) of the seven texts comprising the old logic. Although they follow the subject matter and arrangement of these ancient logical texts, it is important to emphasize that Abelard's discussions in them go far beyond the analysis of authoritative texts. As with most other commentaries written during this period, Abelard's dialectical writings provide him with an occasion to develop his own views. Indeed, Abelard's views often emerge in his extended excursions on the text, typically triggered by some question or problem arising either in the text itself or in debates with his contemporaries.

The following works are generally regarded as Abelard's most important dialectic writings:

1. *Logica "ingredientibus"* (= *The Logic [that begins with the words] "For beginners"*) This work – which is commonly referred to by its incipit, "*Ingredientibus*" – was intended to be a cycle of extended commentaries on the whole of the *logica vetus*. All that survives of it, however, is the commentaries on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, Aristotle's *Categories* and *On Interpretation*, and Boethius's *De differentiis topicis*.⁶ Abelard's reputation as a nominalist derives, in large part, from the commentary on the *Isagoge* in which he defends the view that universals are words (*voces*) or names (*nomina*). This is, perhaps, the best-known and most widely translated section of his philosophical work.
2. *Dialectica* (= *Dialectic*) This work, which is missing the beginning and perhaps the end as well, is an independent treatise in logic divided into five sections: (1) Aristotle's categories and parts

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of speech, only the second part of which is extant; (2) categorical propositions and syllogisms; (3) the rules of inference or “topics”; (4) hypothetical propositions and syllogisms; and (5) division and definition.

3. *Tractatus de intellectibus* (= *A Treatise on Understandings*) This work discusses the mechanisms of cognition through a five-fold mental process: sense, imagination, thought, knowledge, and reasoning. Thought by some to be a section of the *Grammatica* – a larger work (now lost) that Abelard may have written – the *Treatise* develops and expands the theory of cognition required for Abelard’s logical and semantic views.
4. *Logica “nostrorum petitorum sociorum”* (= *The Logic [that begins with the words] “At the request of our friends”*) – also known as the *Glosulae* (= *little Glosses*) A commentary on Porphyry, generally agreed to have been composed after the *Ingredientibus* and *Dialectica*. It is sometimes thought that in this work Abelard significantly develops his account of universals beyond that initially offered in the *Ingredientibus*.

There is still considerable scholarly dispute about the chronology of Abelard’s dialectical writings. Much of the debate has focused on the relationship between the *Logica “ingredientibus”* and the *Dialectica*. Although these works constitute Abelard’s most developed logical writings, they contain what appear to be several quite different discussions of predication, propositions, mental images, and even universals. Until recently, most scholars regarded the *Ingredientibus* as the earlier of the two works.⁷ Due to the influence of recent work by Constant Mews, however, the consensus has shifted: now the *Dialectica* is typically regarded as the earlier of the two (written between 1117 and 1121), though the *Ingredientibus* is often thought to be a fairly early work as well (completed before 1121).⁸ A third possible view – which we find attractive – is that the *Ingredientibus*, though actually the earlier of the two works, was revised a number of times (perhaps each time Abelard taught through the logical curriculum), and hence contains in its final form many doctrines that postdate anything to be found in the *Dialectica*. On this view, the *Ingredientibus* represents Abelard’s views as they evolved over a period of time, whereas the *Dialectica* represents his attempt to produce a stand-alone textbook at a particular moment in his career.

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These are not the only possible views one can take with respect to the relative dating of these two works.⁹ But they are sufficient to indicate that the chronology of Abelard's dialectical writings has been a focus of much contemporary Abelardian scholarship, and will continue to be for some time to come.

Although Abelard thinks of his dialectical writings as dealing with issues in logic, they in fact contain his treatment of issues that we would now recognize as falling within a number of different domains, namely metaphysics, philosophy of language, logic, and philosophy of mind. Since Abelard's contributions to these areas constitute his most enduring legacy, a separate chapter of the volume is devoted to each.

In chapter 3, Peter King provides a systematic introduction to Abelard's metaphysics, discussing his nominalism – or better, *irrealism* – about such topics as universals, propositions, events, times other than the present, natural kinds, relations, wholes, absolute space, and hylomorphic composites. As King's chapter demonstrates, Abelard's nominalism, far from being merely a position on the problem of universals, is in fact a sophisticated and integrated metaphysical program. In chapter 4, Klaus Jacobi explicates the main aspects of Abelard's philosophy of language, including his views about the semantics of terms and sentences, indicating along the way how Abelard's views about language developed in the connection with standard views of the time about dialectic and grammar. In chapter 5, Christopher Martin discusses Abelard's views in logic. He focuses on Abelard's theory of entailment, which according to Martin emerges as part of an ingenious attempt to unify certain traditional views about topical differences and conditional or hypothetical sentences. Finally, in chapter 6, Kevin Guilfooy presents and explains Abelard's views in philosophy of mind and cognition, arguing that these views play an important role in the development of Abelard's dialectical views in general, and hence deserve more attention than they have previously received.

Philosophical theology

During his own lifetime, Abelard was a much-sought-after master in the area of dialectic. His writings about language, logic, and metaphysics were recognized by his contemporaries as insightful and

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original, and his colorful personality made him extremely popular with students. By contrast, his work in theology was not, on the whole, well received. Indeed, the same colorful personality that helps to explain his popularity in dialectic aroused the suspicion of many powerful figures in the Church, and partly accounts for his reputation as one of the period's most notorious figures.

Although Abelard composed a number of works in philosophical theology, the most important are the following:

1. *Theologia* (= *Theology*) This work occurs in three different versions: an early version, *Theologia "summi boni"* (= *The Theology [that begins with the words] "The Highest Good"*),¹⁰ and two later versions, *Theologia Christiana* (= *Christian Theology*) and *Theologia "scholarium"* (= *The Theology [that begins with the words] "Among the schools"*). The first version of the *Theologia*, which was undertaken at the request of certain students who wanted an explanation of the Trinity, was condemned at the Council of Soissons in 1121. Although the embarrassment and public humiliation caused by this event was significant, Abelard continued to develop and defend his original account of the Trinity in two subsequent versions of the *Theologia* (the second of which was nearly three times the size of his original work). Despite his efforts, however, even the final version of his *Theologia* was condemned, at the Council of Sens 1140/1141, and as a result he was subsequently excommunicated (though only temporarily) from the Church.
2. *Sic et non* (= *Yes and No*) Apart from a short preface, this work consists entirely of quotations from Church fathers and other Christian authorities, organized in such a way as to provide opposing (i.e., "yes" and "no") answers to questions about important issues of theology. Although ultimately intended to serve as a textbook for students, Abelard began compiling it shortly after his first condemnation and apparently used it initially as a notebook to which he could turn for groups of quotations to illustrate points about the Trinity and Christology. The text as a whole is important for the light it sheds both on issues of debate in twelfth-century theology, as well on the development of the scholastic method of disputation, which comes to dominate the teaching and writing of philosophy and theology during the high and later Middle Ages.

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3. *Commentaria in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos* (= *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*) This is Abelard's most important work of biblical exegesis and contains an extensive discussion of the nature of human sinfulness and the Christian doctrine of the Atonement. It is also important for understanding his condemnation at Sens, since several of the nineteen heretical propositions or *capitula* that were imputed to him at this Council derive from claims that Abelard defends in this work.¹¹

Abelard's work in philosophical theology, especially as it emerges from the writings just mentioned, has been a topic of scholarly inquiry for some time, not only among philosophers but also among historians and theologians. Since Abelard is most notorious for his views about the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Atonement, and his general approach to philosophical theology can be illustrated by a study of these two doctrines, a separate chapter of the volume is devoted to each.

In chapter 7, Jeffrey Brower examines Abelard's treatment of the Trinity. In particular, he assesses Abelard's attempt to reconcile the view that God is an absolutely simple being with the view that God exists in three really distinct Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. According to Brower, the key to Abelard's solution lies in his defense of a form of numerical sameness without identity – a relation that Abelard argues must be invoked to explain not only the Trinity, but also familiar cases of material constitution.

In chapter 8, Thomas Williams examines Abelard's view of the Atonement. Williams argues that the common interpretation of Abelard's views concerning the purpose of Christ's life and death – namely, that they were intended as nothing more than an inspiring example – is mistaken. Williams's argument is important, not only because the common interpretation is part of what led to Abelard's condemnation at Sens, but also because Williams's argument locates Abelard's views on atonement in the broader context of Abelard's understanding of both original sin and divine grace.

Ethics

The third and final category (besides dialectic and philosophical theology) into which Abelard's philosophical writings can be divided