Intentions and Conscious Moral Choices in Peter Abelard’s *Know Yourself*

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Introduction

Peter Abelard was a remarkable twelfth-century promoter of ethical thought. Two of his works are dedicated to ethics. The earlier one is the *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*, also known as the *Collationes*, and composed some time between 1123 and 1135. The work consists of an imaginary dialogue, one in which none of the characters directly represents Abelard’s own position but through which it becomes clear that Abelard had a high appreciation of philosophical ethics.1 The later of Abelard’s works on ethics is the treatise *Scito te ipsum* or *Know Yourself*, also called the *Ethica* or *Ethics*.2 The book is undoubtedly one of the most important early medieval works in theological or philosophical ethics. In the following article my discussion on Abelard’s idea of moral action will be based on this work. Abelard wrote his *Ethics* around the year 1138, only a few years before his death in 1142. The treatise was meant to consist of two books, of which the first was to discuss morally bad acts, or sin, and the second morally good acts. Only the first book has come down to us in full; we have just the very beginning of the second. Therefore the examples available mainly deal with morally bad acts. My topic, however, focuses on the role of intention in morally relevant action and therefore takes into account both morally good and morally bad acts.3

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1 Coll., ed. and trans. Orlandi and Marenbon.
3 Abelard’s ethics is thoroughly considered in Marenbon, *The Philosophy*. I agree with Marenbon that Abelard’s ethics must be discussed on a number of levels (as he does in his work) in order to “avoid the narrow focus of a whole succession of commentators” (see ibid., 214). However, I think that it can still be meaningful to concentrate on some sector of his ethical thought (as I have done in this article), at least on the assumption that it is possible to attain a deeper understanding of the theme focused on (as I aim to do here). On Abelard’s ethics, see also the introduction in Luscombe, *Peter Abelard’s ‘Ethics,’* xiii–xxxvii; Risto
Although Abelard’s ethics can be seen as part of the Augustinian tradition, it also includes elements peculiar to Abelard himself. The use of the term ‘will’ (voluntas) to imply emotional liking serves as an example of this. The whole story is, however, somewhat more complicated, since Abelard actually uses ‘will’ both as a non-moral term and as a moral term, without clearly differentiating between them, which sometimes causes the reader trouble. Clearly, it is important to recognize the difference in order to analyse Abelard’s texts correctly. The two uses of the term are also related to the morally relevant concepts of ‘sin’ (peccatum), ‘consent’ (consensus), and ‘intention’ (intentio). Moreover, ethical issues are discussed in the work Scito te ipsum through these key concepts. I will first consider some important aspects concerning Abelard’s way of using them. Thereafter I will focus on consent as a moral act and on the role of intention as a part of consent.

The emphasis on intention, of course, was not Abelard’s invention. It plays a role already in Augustine and also appears in the thought of some of Abelard’s contemporaries. Abelard gives intention a clear role in connection with

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4 See the comments in Luscombe, Peter Abelard’s Ethics, xxxiii–xxxv. The use of the concepts of will and consent in Abelard’s ethics have their background in Augustine, although Abelard “ceases to speak of sin as an act of will” (ibid., xxxiv), and despite Abelard carrying “the principles of intention and of consent beyond Augustine’s own limits” (ibid., xxxv). On will and consent in Augustine’s philosophy of mind, see Saarinen, Weakness of the Will, 20–44; Risto Saarinen, Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19–27; and William E. Mann, “Inner-life Ethics,” in The Augustinian Tradition, ed. G. B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 140–165.

5 On acts and intentions in Abelard and in his predecessors and contemporaries, see Marenbon, The Philosophy, 251–257. On “Peter Abelard and twelfth-century ethics,” see Luscombe Peter Abelard’s Ethics, xiii–xxvii. With regard to the concept of intention, the reference to its Augustinian use is roughly limited in my article to different kinds of motivations that can direct moral action. As Bonnie Kent writes: “Augustine and Kant further agree that moral des-  

cert or merit depends less on the ability to perform one physical action or another than on the capacity for certain kinds of motivations. […] We see in Augustine, then, the beginnings of a Western tradition that treats the distinction between will and nature, which lies chiefly in motivations, as indispensable for any adequate account of moral responsibility.” See Bonnie Kent, “Augustine’s Ethics,” in The Cambridge Companion to Augustine, ed. E. Stump and N. Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 222.