

FORTUNE OR FAILURE: THE PROBLEM OF GRACE, FREE WILL AND PROVIDENCE IN PETER ABELARD

I. Introduction: Peter Abelard and the problem of medieval rationalism.

In a wonderfully lucid and compelling essay, L.M. de Rijk, the Dutch expert in medieval logic, praises Peter Abelard not just for his natural ingenuity, but more precisely for the acuity of his talent, for what is called his *acumen ingenii*. Abelard lives by logic, according to De Rijk, with logic being as much a life's passion as an art for this masterdialectician.¹ Anyone who reads this essay and has a firsthand knowledge of De Rijk himself, will not be able to suppress at least a smile at this remark, as life and work of De Rijk himself show him to be a veritable Dutch Peter Abelard, radiating a similar passion for logic and philosophy. The entire essay then, which deals with Abelard's handling of universals as well as with his ethics, demonstrates how Abelard was able to pry open some of the toughest questions facing his generation. We could put things in an even broader context perhaps by saying that these very questions had in fact been handed down since late antiquity, since the time of Augustine and Boethius. They were merely beginning to get a new treatment in the twelfth century. But De Rijk goes further in his assessment, and we should heed his carefully formulated remarks here, as he sets out to argue how for Abelard logic is indispensable. In the last instance, so he summarizes his hero's intellectual position, logic acts as the judge in every philosophical or theological discussion, not because it is theological or philosophical but because it is *discussion*.²

One would perhaps expect De Rijk to end it here, as one can hardly expect a better insight in and more praise for Abelard's logical qualities than to point to his debating skills. But De Rijk pushes things further still, as he quotes from Abelard's fourth book on *Dialectic*. In it Abelard states explicitly that divine grace has conferred knowledge

¹ See L.M. DE RIJK, *Pierre Abélard (1079-1142). Scherpzinnigheid als harts-tocht*, Akademie van Wetenschappen afd. Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks 44 no. 4 (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1980) 47pp. For a shorter re-working of this text in German, see L.M. DE RIJK, *Peter Abälard (1079-1142): Meister und Opfer des Scharfsinns*, in: R. THOMAS e.a. (ed.), *Petrus Abaelardus (1079-1142). Person, Werk und Wirkung*. Trierer Theologische Studien Bd. 38 (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag) 125-138. Where applicable, I shall refer to both versions.

² See De Rijk, "Scherpzinnigheid", p. 46, „Meister und Opfer“, p. 131.

of logic to only a few. According to De Rijk's interpretation here, while this comment is on the surface meant as a criticism of Bernard of Clairvaux and his companions, it derives its thrust from the fact that Abelard clearly sees logic as a kind of divine grace.³ It even appears as if the importance of logic in Peter Abelard for De Rijk is oddly enhanced by seeing it as divine grace. It is at least intriguing that De Rijk has chosen to end his article precisely on this point. Despite all Abelard's vital ideas, which the essay has described at great length, a divine blessing at the end, like a *nunc dimittis* at the end of mass, is deemed indispensable. If not to bring out the force of Abelard's logic, then surely to communicate the revolutionary impact it had on his medieval contemporaries. Focusing on the structure of De Rijk's article in this way helps us to shed light on what is in fact a deeper seated problem, namely the problem how to assess the Christian nature of Abelard's thought. Although De Rijk stays clear from simplified abstractions, such as the view that Abelard was a medieval Voltaire, an iconoclastic forerunner of European Enlightenment thought, he nevertheless argues with full force that logic absorbs everything for Abelard, to the point even of taking priority over Scripture. Logic qualifies humans, more especially it qualifies Abelard's fierce intellect, as it provides him with the tools to interpret nature first, only thereafter to resort to the exegesis of Scripture, which requires explanation and interpretation.⁴

Still, one may ask whether De Rijk's analysis fully supports his own contentions. As an example we may look to his point of the subserviency of Scripture. As he walks us through much of the *Ethics*, De Rijk refers his readers periodically to the various passages which Abelard draws from Scripture, as if suggesting that these are helpful to the author to underline his chosen moral position. The reason Abelard can freely quote from Scripture, however, is not simply because these biblical examples offer us such nice illustrations of his arguments, but because they provide him with a useful summation of his ethical ideas, perhaps even originating them. In other words, they lie at the heart of his ideas, containing his arguments as if compressed in a nutshell. By allowing him to peel off the shell so as to bring out their relevance in full daylight, the scriptural examples appear to play a constructive, and perhaps even constitutive, role in the conception

³ See De Rijk, "Scherpzinnigheid", p. 46, „Meister und Opfer“, pp. 130-131.

⁴ See De Rijk, "Scherpzinnigheid", p. 44.

and elaboration of his thoughts.⁵ If the above insight is correct, it may not be so easy to distinguish between Abelard's use of the tool of logic on the one hand and his choice, on the other hand, to illustrate his arguments with the help of numerous biblical references. It is likewise difficult to detect a clear priority of Nature over Scripture.⁶ This is not to claim that the order indicated here by de Rijk must be reversed. Rather, what I want to imply is that the whole concept of order in this respect may be problematic, as what we have before us here is more a continuous process of ordering, as Abelard feels himself sufficiently free to make his own arrangement of authorities and arguments (*rati-ones*) without being hampered by any preconceived notions of hierarchy.⁷

While De Rijk may have pushed too far in his enthusiasm to see Abelard as having received the gift of logic through the direct intervention of divine grace, he leaves us with an image of Bernard that is likewise not entirely convincing. For just as Abelard was able to work with Scripture in an astute manner which did not seem to countervail his proclaimed preference for Nature, so Bernard may have had more logic in him than Abelard, or De Rijk for that matter, may have ever deemed possible. For all Bernard's proclaimed preference for scriptural authority instead of rational arguments, when he finally meets his opponent, if only on paper, namely in the famed Letter 190, it seems his biblical quotations are neither as accurate nor as pertinent

⁵ It appears that in his selection of scriptural passages (e.g. about adultery in Math. 5:28), as in his general choice of examples, there lurks an autobiographical undertone in Abelard's reasoning. It is not so much my concern here to find out whether this is deliberate or not, but rather to show how such examples give his reasoning in both the *Ethics* and the various *Planctus* a particular urgency, heightening the significance of these works. Below I shall quote Abelard's *Ethics* from D.E. LUSCOMBE (ed.), *Peter Abelard's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), while the text of Abelard's *Planctus* is taken from W. MEYER, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur mittel-lateinischen Rhythmik* (1905; Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms-Verlag, 1970) 340-374.

⁶ For an analysis of the relationship between Nature and Scripture in the twelfth century as a balanced one rather than one implying hierarchy, see W. OTTEN, *Nature and Scripture: Demise of a Medieval Analogy*, in *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995) 257-284.

⁷ This idea of a continuous process of ordering aptly describes Abelard's own method of working. Aside from making the dating of his writings notoriously difficult, it brings up larger questions which the present article cannot address in depth. For a good evaluation of this problem, see C.J. MEWS, *On Dating the Works of Peter Abelard*, ADHLM 52 (1985) 73-134; repr. in C.J. MEWS, *Abelard and his Legacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variation, 2001).

as those drummed up by Abelard in his *Ethics*.⁸ What made Bernard triumph before the various ecclesiastical tribunals of his days clearly was not the weight of the evidence, neither rationally nor scripturally. Bernard's victory was due in part to his successful strategy of silencing his opponent before they could engage in outright battle, as De Rijk does not fail to point out. But it was likewise due to his clever maneuvering by which he was able to dwarf himself at every occasion in an attempt to beat his opponent precisely by pumping him up. With Bernard painting himself as a poor soul who is so inspired by love for Christ that his empathy leads to identification, Abelard is pushed into the role of an onlooker, a spectator of the suffering Christ, as the first step on the road to becoming his enemy.⁹ While Abelard may claim that Bernard lacks grace, to use De Rijk's imagery, his handling of the Abelard file demonstrates how the acuity of mind of this Cistercian abbot is as great and passionate as that of his opponent.

While this may nuance our impressions of both Abelard and Bernard, it does not make our assessment of the Christian nature of Abelard's thought any easier. Was Abelard perhaps more Christian than previously thought and Bernard less Christian? That could indeed be the direction in which one needs to go if looking for a solution that might satisfactorily inform contemporary readers. But perhaps it is advisable not to go down that road at all. Perhaps a competition in the arena of orthodoxy is simply not the right approach. Instead, we may have to content ourselves with the fact that Bernard and Abelard, while fierce opponents on the outside, were closer in many respects than has previously been assumed.¹⁰ Still, some of the

⁸ On scriptural and patristic authority in Abelard and Bernard with specific reference to Letter 190, see M.B. PRANGER, *Sic et Non: Patristic Authority Between Refusal and Acceptance: Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux*, in I. BACKUS (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West. From the Carolingians to the Maurists* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 165-193. On pp. 187-88 Pranger states: "Bernard's biblical references are no longer, or, more precisely, not yet 'Probestellen'. Their being quoted is supposed to have the reader participate in an ongoing discourse which, even if it is presented in the guise of an argument or debate, owes its continuity and consistency to the artful intentions and the manipulative skills of the writer."

⁹ See Epistola 193, in: J. LECLERCQ, H. ROCHAIS (eds.), *S. Bernardi Opera Vol. VIII. Epistolae* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1977) 44-45. In this short letter addressed to Ivo of Reims, Bernard portrays Abelard as directly attacking Christ: *Hommo est egrediens mensuram suam, in sapientia verbi evacuans virtutem crucis Christi*.

¹⁰ For a recent evaluation of their conflict set within its twelfth-century bounds, see P. GODMAN, *The Silent Masters. Latin Literature and Its Censors in the High Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 3-31.

concepts honed by De Rijk in his seminal essay can perhaps be used to shed more light on the identity and difference of logic and grace in Peter Abelard. Taking our starting-point in the concepts of logic and grace, we may then probe further into the complex set of problems that may well be seen as one of the perennial queries in Christian theology, namely the relationship between grace and free will. While this relationship, when put against the background of the history of Augustinianism, is more often than not treated as a non-relationship, with Augustine as the orthodox champion of grace and Pelagius as the dissenter trying to salvage free will, our introduction via De Rijk's essay has the advantage of offering us a more oblique, and hence a relatively fresh entry into this matter. We shall now turn, therefore, to the relationship between logic and grace.

II. Logic and grace: from Augustine to Peter Abelard.

By all available standards in Christian theology, logic and grace do not form a natural pair. Nor is their contrast one of natural opposites. Logic, or dialectic, can best be described as the art of words, the art by which one tries to achieve what may be called a verbal capturing of reality. Grace, on the other hand, especially when taken in the Augustinian sense of the word, has to do with divine intervention, often of a transcendent nature, by which one is shown that this reality is in the hand(s) of God. When extending the concept of grace to include the development of history, personal or collective, grace easily transforms into predestination. And predestination is that form of grace with which the later Augustine, under threat of the Pelagian heresy, became intensely preoccupied.¹¹ But before surrendering to such well-known stereotypes, let us look more closely to how De Rijk's Abelardian pair of logic and grace fits with its Augustinian original.

¹¹ While I am well aware that Pelagianism, when taken in a technical sense, only applies to the conflict between Augustine and his opponent Pelagius on the meaning and scope of divine grace, in the history of Christian thought the Pelagian conflict centering on the possibility of a sinless life has had a notable tendency to spill over into the conflict about predestination. The roots of this tendency can be found in Augustine himself, as he returned to the issue of predestination in the context of the second Pelagian controversy (418-430). See A. FITZGERALD O.S.A. (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages. An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) s.v. Pelagius and Pelagianism (E. TeSelle, 633-640); s.v. predestination (M. Lamberigts, 677-679, esp. 678).

When relating the concepts of logic and grace to a model that might have looked in any way familiar to Augustine, two suggestions for further reflection immediately present themselves. Taking one's starting-point in the concept of logic, one might be inclined at first sight to compare this model to the Augustinian pair of *scientia* and *sapientia*.¹² Undertaking such a comparison, one could interpret *scientia* as the equivalent of logic for Abelard, – not that they are in any way identical terms, with *scientia* pointing to Augustine's background in the encyclopedic culture of late antiquity and logic pointing ahead to the intellectual Aristotelianism that would follow Abelard –, while *sapientia* could be seen as indicating the kind of knowledge that is infused by divine grace. For Augustine, however, this meant at the same time that it was not possible that *sapientia* be fully attained in this life, as the very term was radiant with a kind of eschatological charge. Yet *sapientia* is something to which one should always aspire. There is a certain 'unearthly' ring to it, moreover, which made it especially valuable as an intellectual tool for Augustine. If one's *scientia* is not perfect, it can be compensated for by *studium sapientiae*,¹³ which is nourished after all by fides as much as by ratio. In the case of *sapientia*, however, the addition of faith to knowledge has the effect of making human knowledge more effective, through a kind of transcendent shortcut, even though wisdom never transforms into a full-blown dependence on divine grace without retaining a firm basis in humanity's natural understanding.

Taking our starting-point in the notion of grace, on the other hand, we are naturally drawn to the earlier mentioned pair of grace and free will. The difficulty with this oppositional pair, which Augustine coined and fiercely defended under the mounting pressure of Pelagius and his supporters, such as Julian of Eclanum, is that it has so shaped our view of Christianity in the West that it is hard to come out from under its spell. If we try to nuance its importance to manageable proportions by comparing it to *scientia* and *sapientia*, it appears that the emphasis in the second pair is less on knowing than on acting, with Augustine especially interested in how to make human action

¹² On this distinction in Augustine's vocabulary, see H.I. MARROU, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (1958; Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, 1983) 561-569. See also E. GILSON, *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Vrin, 1949) 149-163.

¹³ See Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, p. 567, who sees *studium sapientiae* as a kind of middle term between *scientia* and *sapientia*.

conform to divine commandment.¹⁴ With Augustine striving so radically to be in conformity with God's will, human free will becomes inevitably seen as a kind of aberration. It takes on a kind of randomness, reflecting a sort of arbitrary decision making suitable more to humanity's instincts than to its mind. Grace, on the other hand, becomes something of an actively guiding divine force, by which one is able to rein in one's instincts so as not to have these hamper the following of divine orders.

Following the above analysis, the anti-Pelagian tendency of his later thought appears to dominate the discussion on Augustine's ethical viewpoints to the point where his theology is often sketched as one in which the extreme reliance on grace tends to paralyze any creative, ethical speculation. This is reinforced by Augustine's own remarks. For the good life, so one commonly finds, is a life in which the person living it is a sojourner in this life, a pilgrim who, while travelling to his homeland, finds himself roaming in a so-called *regio dissimilitudinis*.¹⁵ There is considerable doubt whether he can ever reach the homeland in this life, that is, whether the achievement of this goal must in the final analysis not be viewed as more eschatological, or psychological in an idealistic sense, rather than ethical. The ideal of the good life thus changes imperceptibly into the distant ideal of a beatific vision for Augustine. This may explain why Augustine shows so little interest in elaborating structural answers for concrete ethical questions,¹⁶ with the single exception of the problem of lying – a problem found equally intriguing by Kant. His ultimate interest, so we

¹⁴ Despite many indications to the contrary in Augustine's work, it is important to heed Christopher Kirwan's advice that 'belief in free decision of the will is the main philosophical difference between him (scil. Augustine) and the Protestant Reformers.' See Chr. KIRWAN, *Augustine* (London: Routledge, 1989) 82.

¹⁵ See e.g. *Confessiones* VII.X.16; CC 27,103: ...et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis....

¹⁶ I forego a discussion of Augustine's sermons here, in which ethical discussion may in general be related more specifically to his juridical role as bishop. It is interesting in this regard that Martha Nussbaum sees Augustine as not particularly interested in the ethical dimension of his work. See her *Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 18, where she describes the quandary of Augustinian ethics as follows: "God has set up certain ethical standards; it is our job to do what God wants. Truth and God's grace are out there; but the ability to see ethical truth or to reach for grace is not something we can control. There is, therefore, no reliable method by which we can construct an ethical norm from the scrutiny of our deepest needs and responses and desires." See also *Augustine Through the Ages*, s.v. Ethics, pp. 320-330; s.v. *Mendacio, De/Contra mendacium*, pp. 555-557 (B. Ramsey O.P.).

are led to conclude, lies more with an 'ethics of the beyond', and to the extent that we are able to develop an insight in this matter at all, it falls under the heading of divine predestination. As a result of this development, so we already hinted above, it seems we have a picture in which human free will is increasingly confused by its own random, if not licentious behavior. The only way this confusion can be countered is by divine determinism, i.e., predestination. Anticipating the views of John Calvin more than reflecting the dynamics of Augustinian thought, in which the relationship with God is always more dialogical than hierarchical, predestination thus becomes seen as the funnel through which God dispenses divine grace on this earth in anticipation of the future life one is to enjoy in the hereafter.¹⁷

While this 'predestinarian cloud' overshadows many an analysis of medieval thought as it slowly developed from Augustine to Calvin, we should not let it conceal the fact that medieval thinkers could find numerous other ways for divine grace to manifest itself. I am thinking here of various discussions on the role of providence, especially in Gregory the Great and Boethius who, each in their own right, were perhaps as important as Augustine in contributing to what we now commonly call the medieval worldview.¹⁸ Early medieval thought harbours in fact a *plethora* of different views on the relationship between the human agent and the divine creator/protector.¹⁹ Still, in all those cases it is clear that the relationship involved is ultimately of a vertical nature, requiring an act of worship to rather than an intimate dialogue with God. The fact that this is so should not be entirely blamed on Augustine, although his influence on later de-

¹⁷ See John CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.XXI (on double predestination) and XXIV (on effectual calling), transl. by H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 202-211; 239-258.

¹⁸ On providence and free will in Boethius, see H. CHADWICK, *Boethius. The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 242-247. See also A.W. ASTELL, *Job, Boethius and Epic Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) *passim*. On the notion of constantia mentis as Gregory the Great's attempt to keep one's balance in the midst of adversity, see C. STRAW, *Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 236-256.

¹⁹ One may think here generally of the works by Johannes Scottus Eriugena (cf. *De divina praedestinatione* and *Periphyseon*) and Anselm of Canterbury (cf. *Cur Deus Homo*; *De originali peccato* and *De casu diaboli*). While the formal ties of both thinkers to Augustine have been investigated, their joint ties both to Augustine and to each other have not been structurally explored. It is my contention that this research, when done properly, would throw much needed light on the history of Augustinianism in the early Middle Ages.

bates was in many respects crucial. But it is true that the very weight of this historical development complicates any retrospective endeavor to draw a clear comparison between such categories as grace and free will in the aftermath of Augustine, as they betray a basic asymmetry. This asymmetry penetrates medieval models of providence as much as those of predestination to the point where they seem to become less suitable for theological analysis.

In my view the relevance of Abelard's ethical stance comes in precisely on the point of this endemic asymmetry. Given its medieval framework, in which the relationship between the human agent and the divine creator/protector is by definition a vertical one, – in view of later nominalist developments, one might argue, even increasingly so –²⁰ the importance of Abelard's contribution as I see it lies precisely in the fact that he undertakes a conscious attempt to try and create a level playing field for the encounter of human motivation and divine guidance, where after Augustine this balance seemed to have become lost. Thus he strives to reach a fair balance between on the one hand the need to explain and legitimate human actions and, on the other, the need to adhere to an overarching concept of justice which explicitly includes the notion of divine judgment. As De Rijk elucidates, he does so by adding a third element between the will (*voluntas*), which in the Augustinian school of his days was deemed the dominant factor in distinguishing between good and evil, and the action taken as a result of this will (*actio, executio*). This third element is the so-called *consensus*, the human consent to carry out the act. According to De Rijk, for Abelard the defining moment is the transition from *consensus* to *actio*, and not, as is often thought, between *voluntas* and *consensus*. While Abelard remains staunchly Augustinian in the sense that he attributes a central role to the faculty of the will,²¹ his choice to play off the will against consent is merely an

²⁰ On the impact of nominalism and what he calls 'the disintegration of the medieval synthesis', see L. DUPRÉ, *Passage to Modernity. An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 174–181.

²¹ See R. BLOMME, *La doctrine du péché dans les écoles théologiques de la première moitié du XII^e siècle* (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1958) for an analysis of the respective positions of the school of Laon, the followers of Abelard and the school of St. Victor. While there are definite similarities between the Augustinian position of Abelard and that of Hugh of St. Victor, a major difference is the nuances that Abelard adds to the position of the will. See Blomme, p. 315: "Abélard parlait en effet tantôt de consensus, tantôt d'*intentio*. Hugues considère purement et simplement les vocables *consensus*, *voluntas* ou *propositum* comme des synonymes." On the same page Blomme notes also how Hugh considers the external act as having a psychological impact on human behaviour, something which Abelard denies.

auxiliary strategy to nuance the terms of the debate. The major difficulty for him is to try and make the distinction between the consenting moment and the (un)ethical act itself transparent. To that end he introduces such famous examples as that of a slave who kills his master in self-defense, as he would certainly have been killed himself had he chosen not to do so. In either case, however, a choice is involved. That Abelard's is not exactly a revolutionary ethical mind becomes clear from his famous dictum that the slave should have preferred to undergo this evil instead of inflicting it. It would have been better, so his argument goes simply and crudely, had the slave chosen to let himself be killed instead of killing his master.²²

That *consensus* is a middle term for Abelard, as De Rijk aptly demonstrates, is true in more ways than one. On the one hand, it mediates on the horizontal level between the individual's will, which generically encompasses desire as well as longing, and his or her specific actions. De Rijk keenly points out how all Abelard's examples have a definite social character, thereby indicating to us that what is at risk underneath is the stability of the social order.²³ In a move which transcends the framework of De Rijk's article, it seems legitimate to argue that *consensus* also has a mediating role to play on the vertical level for Abelard. For is it not so that in the last resort the thing to which one consents or not is respect for divine law? In a way, one might go so far as to state that divine law forms the explicit substrate of the social order for Abelard, as the horizontal and the vertical level must ultimately merge for him. This then is where in my view the real problems for Abelard's ethics seem to come in. This, in other words, is where Abelard truly meets Augustine, not the authoritative icon of his contemporaries but the historical bishop who, while engaged in battle with the Pelagian heresy, faced very similar problems. For what, so Abelard begins to ask reluctantly, if the horizontal and the vertical do not converge, but instead follow divergent paths?²⁴

²² See De Rijk, "Scherpzinnigheid", p. 177; „Meister und Opfer“, 136-137. Unfortunately the German version does not make this point as forcefully as the Dutch text. On the example of the master and his servant, see *Ethica*, ed. Luscombe, 8: 8-12: ...nequaquam uoluntas ista tamquam mala est improbanda, per quam ille, ut dicis, mortem euadere, non dominum uoluit occidere, et tamen deliquit consentiendo, quomuis coactus timore mortis, iniustae interfectioni quam eum potius ferre quam inferre oportuit.

²³ For this horizontal sense of justice Abelard, interestingly enough, uses the terms *ratio providentiae* and *dispensatio*. See *Ethica*, ed. Luscombe, 44:11-12 and De Rijk, "Scherpzinnigheid", p. 186.

²⁴ When explaining how God is the prover of the hearts and the reins (*probator*

To solve this problem, Abelard does not feel at liberty simply to return to the concepts of grace and free will which he inherited from Augustine, as he will gradually come to develop his own alternatives. More remarkably perhaps, given that Abelard was a Benedictine monk for a good part of his life, he neither appears content to employ a concept of justice which embraces the human and the divine in one sweep, i.e., the sweep of monastic penitence. This was the model favoured by Anselm of Canterbury, whose monastic approach allowed him to settle adequately all problems of morality, at least *in nuce*, by rooting his theological explanation in the historical God-Man. From his *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm's arguments flow out naturally and inseparably into both *De conceptu virginali* and *De originali peccato*, strengthening the divine as well as the human aspect of his overall approach to justice. While Abelard repeatedly calls on the Christ of the Gospel, as is the case in his various *Theologies*, he does so primarily to confer a kind of divine blessing on his own trinitarian experiments rather than seeing these experiments themselves as flowing forth naturally from the nature of the divine. Intellectually this means that he cannot employ the concept of divine grace as a kind of fall-back position, invoking Christ's redemption merely as a shortcut which helps to explain away difficult ethical problems. But can we infer from the fact that he does not do so that logic for Abelard has absorbed all the qualities that we normally associate with divine grace? To put it even more sharply, is logic really to be considered the Abelardian equivalent of divine grace, as De Rijk seems to suggest?

This seems to me to be a solution which by all medieval standards pushes things too far. And as much as De Rijk is right in seeing Abelard's *Ethica* as a theological work, in contrasting logic and grace he appears to slip in an anachronistic concept of theology. Consequently, what he sees as the ultimate conflict between Abelard and Bernard, namely the fact that Bernard relies explicitly on grace, while Abelard plays up the importance of logic with such intensity that the art itself becomes identified as a gift of grace, needs in reality not to have been the source of any conflict at all. Logic is a matter of talent and talent is a matter of grace, conferred as it is upon the individual who can make use of it for the praise of God. In that res-

cordis et renum, cf. Jer. 20:12), Abelard hints at the divergence of human jurisprudence and true divine justice. See *Ethica*, ed. Luscombe, 40:15-19: Vnde sepe per errorem uel per legis, ut diximus, coactionem innocentes punimus uel noxios absoluiamus. Probator et cognitor cordis et renum dicitur Deus, hoc est, quarumlibet intentionum ex affectione animae uel infirmitate seu delectatione carnis prouenientium.

pect, Bernard would not disagree much with the principles of Abelard's *Ethics*. But where Abelard wants to use the art of logic to solve ethical matters, Bernard prefers to stay within the stable Augustinian framework of grace and free will and, so one may assume, of that of traditional predestination. Abelard, meanwhile, begins to use his logical insights to make progress in the field of ethics, which can be shown especially from his constructive analysis of *consensus*. What should not be forgotten, however, is that in doing so Abelard also conjures up a new set of problems. For if it is true, as Abelard seems to hold, that human justice is by definition fallible, since only God who judges the *puritatem aequitatis* can be trusted to scrutinize the hearts and minds of sinners adequately, how can he be so confident that he can offer us a reliable insight in the structure of divine providence? What's more, how does he think he can do so by pushing the bounds of what is, in the last resort, merely the human art of logic?

III. Providence in Abelard:

In his *Ethics* Abelard is concerned to make the dynamics that go into the notion of human consent transparent. He is apparently content with this approach even though he knows that the human justice system, including the ecclesiastical courts, will never be flawless. But just as God knows and, in the end, will dispense true justice, so humans in their heart will truly know whether they are guilty or innocent. At least, this is how his reasoning seems to go. For that reason his *Ethics* has an alternative title pointing to the importance of self-knowledge: *Scito teipsum*. To understand this title, we may point here to the long tradition of introspection that has come down to us from antiquity.²⁵ In that respect we should not forget that the twelfth century is also the era of the discovery of the individual,²⁶ which gives Abelard's notion of self-knowledge a specific autobiographical twist. But with regard to the topic of this article, the question arises whether we can also see his title as referring to the interiorisation of sin and guilt which has become such a staple of anti-Pelagian Augustinianism. I shall come back to this point when drawing some conclusions at the end.

²⁵ See P. COURCELLE, *Connais-toi toi-même: de Socrate à Saint Bernard* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1974-75) for an expansive treatment of this topic in the history of philosophical and theological thought.

²⁶ See C. MORRIS, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (1972; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

For now let us concentrate first on what clues Abelard's reflections on providence may give us. The point that will interest us most is whether he can guarantee, and if so then how, that ultimately there is indeed a convergence of horizontal and vertical justice to be found, both in the created and the social order? Even if Abelard does not employ a concept of justice that is intrinsically anchored in the concept of the God-Man, as in the case of Anselm of Canterbury, it is nevertheless true that his notion of providence has ties with the second person of the Trinity. In *Theol. Christ.* I 20, with reference to a quotation about the prologue to St. John's Gospel from Gregory the Great, we find him stating:

*Verbum itaque dicit conceptum mentis et quamdam intelligentiae locutionem, quae in mente formatur, ad cuius similitudinem Unigenitus Dei dicitur et quasi quaedam eius intellectualis ac perpetua locutio, in cuius providentia omnium ab aeterno praefixa consistit operatio atque ordinatio.*²⁷

What is clear from this passage, and is restated by him frequently elsewhere, is that providence is a property of the Divine Word, as in it the working of all (created) things has been pre-established. Providence has the connotation of care here, as elsewhere it is combined with *tutela* in a quotation from Macrobius.²⁸ It carries the further sense of stability, as Abelard calls it a permanent word, contrasting it with audible and transitory words. Here we sense the background of Augustine's Neoplatonism, as he quotes from *De civitate Dei* XVI, saying that *divina locutio est ipsa Dei dispositio*.²⁹ But the Platonic tradition could reach Abelard also along different channels, namely through Cicero and Macrobius. In the spirit of thought of these authors Abelard relates its importance closely to the role of the Holy Spirit, whom he equates with the World Soul, calling it 'the life of the

²⁷ References are to E.M. BUYTAERT O.F.M. and C.J. MEWS (eds.), *Petri Abaelardi Opera Theologica*, CCCM XI-XIII (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969-1987) according to chapter and pagenumber. For this passage, see *Theol. Christ.* I 20, ed. Buytaert, CCCM 12, 79-80.

²⁸ See *Theol. Christ.* II.85, ed. Buytaert, 169: Hoc quoque addidit (scil. Plato) nos esse in dominio Dei cuius tutela et providentia gubernamur. This passage is part of a long quotation from Macrobius' *In Somnium Scipionis* I.13.

²⁹ This is the Augustine text as Abelard quoted it in the first and second redaction of the *Theol. Christ.* He amended it in the third to match *De civitate Dei* 16.6; CCL 48,506s. more precisely.

universe', and to whom we can likewise attribute both the role of providence and the fullness of divine science.³⁰

It is true that Abelard's position betrays a kind of imbalance here. This imbalance may derive in part from his desire not to follow a strict Augustinian position here, as he clearly wants to salvage the role of human free will. For that he finds the Aristotelian argument convincing (cf. *rectae rationes*)³¹ that in a case of the strictest notion of divine providence, there would be no point in *consiliari aut negotiari*.³² Going from Abelard's *Theologies* to his *Ethics*, one way of approaching Abelard's definition of *consensus* is to see it precisely as an attempt to fence off the little maneuvering space humans have in their lives to engage at all in counseling and negotiating. Given the ecclesiastical reforms in the twelfth century and its ever growing and more invasive bureaucracy, this was no unimportant achievement.³³

But if humans have indeed some room to maneuver before they get down to consent (*consensus*), so does God. The noted imbalance in Abelard's sense of providence cannot fail to affect also the role of the divine, at least potentially. It is at this point that the notion of grace comes in for Abelard. In *Theol. Christ.* V.26, a position which he repeats in *Theol. Schol.* III.24, Abelard states that one can speak about God's will (*velle*) in two ways:

*Velle itaque Deus duobus modis dicitur, aut secundum uidelicet prouidentiae suae ordinationem, secundum quod scilicet aliquid disponit apud se ac deliberat statuitque in sua prouidentia, ut sic postmodum compleat; aut secundum consilii sui adhortationem uel approbationem qua unumquemque ad hoc admonet, quod per gratiam suam remunerare paratus esset.*³⁴

³⁰ See *Theol. Christ.* I.95, ed. Buytaert, 111-112: (Speaking about Plato again, from the *Timaeus*, having quoted a.o. Cicero, Pythagoras, Vergil and Macrobius) De cuius quidem summae rationis ordinatione, cum subditur quod haec ipsa, mundi uidelicet anima, 'causas omnium quae proueniunt prouidet', diuinam ei omnium naturarum prouidentiam assignat et diuinae plenitudinem scientiae; ex quo ipsa etiam Deus innuitur.

³¹ See *Theol. Christ.* III.5, ed. Buytaert, 196: Scimus quidem a Peripateticis, quos nunc dialecticos appellamus, nonnullas et maximas haereses tam Stoicorum quam Epicureorum rectis rationibus esse repressas, e.g., Stoic fate... non tamen ideo cuncta ex necessitate proueniunt, ut scilicet humani pereat libertas arbitrii.

³² See *Theol. Christ.* III.5, ed. Buytaert, 196 with reference to Aristotle, *Periermenias* 9, 18b in Boethius' translation.

³³ At the same time it may offer us a better explanation of his *Ethics* than a narrowly biographical reading by which Abelard is put in a position of conflict with the Church's penitential code.

³⁴ See *Theol. Christ.* V.26, ed. Buytaert, 357-58 and *Theol. Schol.* III.24, ed. Mews, CCCM 13, 510.

The first sense in which he takes the divine will, equating it with providence, is remarkably similar to the interpretation of consent which he **elaborates** in his *Ethics*: God deliberates and then consents, after which he executes his plan. The second notion is much weaker, however, as all we have here is merely a kind of divine admonishment to lead the good life. Apparently, counseling and negotiating is not just for humans. In Abelard's theological view, God is also in the business of advising and adhorting humans to do his will, after which he then is ready or prepared (*paratus*) to remunerate them through his grace. God's readiness to reward humans through his grace might sway them to do his will. Depending on how one interprets the little phrase *per gratiam suam*, Abelard may seem to come awfully close to the Pelagian heresy here, for is grace not almost seen here as a reward for human merit? And yet, as his works frequently show, Abelard clearly wants to stay far from that. What then may be the point of his position?

One way to explain what Abelard seems to be involved in here is to see this distinction between two kinds of divine will as a kind of acknowledgement of the possibility that the horizontal and vertical concepts of justice may indeed follow diverging paths without sacrificing completely his trust in divine providence. Just as in his *Ethics* the divine order precedes and underlies the social one, so here God's general providence underlies his weaker will to offer people salvation at least as an option. But does Abelard truly see it as a viable one? Far from offering a kind of Pelagian picture, as if he was primarily interested in coming out from under a strict sense of divine providence in order to plead for a merit-based ethics, the converse seems altogether more plausible. After all, it is clear that Abelard has little trust in human free will, however much he is willing to defend it, and he is not at all ready to give up on the guidance of divine providence. Thus there may be more arguments in favour of seeing the distinction between God's two wills as his precaution against despair rather than his advocacy of a merit-based ethics. That Abelard is interested in offering a precaution against despair becomes clear from his example in *Theol. Schol.* III.102 about the case of a doomed man (*dampnandus*).³⁵ In Abelard's view God's providence equals foreknowledge here, meaning that from eternity God sees the doomed man do those things that will get him doomed. What Abelard clearly tries to avoid

³⁵ For the entire passage, see *Theol. Schol.* III.102, ed. Mews, 541-542. See esp. p. 542: Verbi gratia, prouidit ab eterno, id est presciuit, hunc qui dampnandus est facere per que dampnetur.

here in his interpretation of providence is to interpret such instances of divine foreknowledge as cases of causal determinism. This he would consider fatal, not because such an interpretation undermines the divine freedom of will, as would be the later Scotist position, but because it excludes the possibility of human self-improvement. Instead of Pelagius' attempt to have human merit count towards salvation, we have in Abelard an essential fear not that God's omnipotence and providence will rule out luck and coincidence – that they do not, as he makes clear based on philosophical arguments – but that they will close off any and all possibility for human self-improvement.³⁶

That this is indeed Abelard's position is brought out even more clearly from an example he uses a little further on in *Theol. Schol.* III.107.³⁷ Here he discusses the meaning of predestination, that charged Augustinian term implying such a firm divine control of history, much more so than mere providence, that it potentially rules out all human free will. For Abelard predestination is different from providence because it is directly tied to salvation. Thus predestination goes to the heart of the convergence of horizontal and vertical justice in a way that providence does not. His examples all have a soteriological purpose, in that he wants to leave open the possibility of human salvation, even when simultaneously trying to safeguard God's free will. Thus Abelard argues that, while it is indeed necessary for God to save every one predestined, it is not thereby necessary that God save this or that man. As he states:

Non enim si recipiamus quia predestinatum omnem necesse est saluari, ideo de singulis predestinatis concedere cogimur ut tam hunc hominem quam illum dicamus quia necesse est saluari. Sublato quippe nomine predestinatorum, in quo est uis necessitatis sicut in apposita determinatione, non ita recipimus quia hunc uel illum necesse est saluari. Hinc in quodam sensu recipimus quod predestinatum necesse est saluari, hoc est eum qui talis est, cum sit predestinatus, saluari necesse est.³⁸

....*Eum qui talis est, cum sit predestinatus, saluari necesse est...*

The meaning of the phrase 'that it is necessary that every predestined one be saved' is rendered by Abelard as 'that it is necessary that he

³⁶ While Abelard's *Ethics* is mostly analyzed on the point of how he defines human sin and guilt, it should not be forgotten that the consequence of his intentional ethics is that there arises more room for moral self-improvement. In this sense, Abelard's position foreshadows the virtue ethics of Thomas Aquinas.

³⁷ See *Theol. Schol.* III.107, ed. Mews, 543-44.

³⁸ See *Theol. Schol.* III.107, ed. Mews, 544.

who is such that he is predestined, be saved.' This is indeed a solution on the level of logic. For here the concept of necessity is upheld without solidifying into a kind of rigid causal determinism. But soteriologically it opens up an abyss, as divine protection flattens out into a pattern of simultaneous instantiation. This becomes clear from Abelard's subsequent examples. At one point he even goes so far as to say that there is not more of a connection between God's ability to foresee events and their actual unfolding than between the ability of humans to witness events and the events witnessed. Thus we are equally justified in stating: I see that this person writes or that person commits adultery, as we are in stating alternatively that God foresees such occurrences. In both cases it is necessary that, when I see the person write or commit adultery, or when God does so through foreknowledge, he or she is actually in the process of writing or committing adultery. But even when we admit that the connection between the knowledge of an occurrence and the occurrence itself is no longer of a causal nature, it does not thereby gain soteriological validity. In other words, the end of causal determinism does not usher in a new era of theological redemption. Sin, as the ill-fated consequence of human free will and a conditioning aspect of what it means to be human for Abelard, remains with us during the course of our lives. As is made clear by the context of his argument, the modal term 'necessary' here does not imply that actions like adultery cannot be stopped or avoided. It simply means that humans can never shun the yoke of their responsibility. This is true, so one could infer from the example of the dampnandus, both in the case of divine providence as in the unforeseen case of divine forgiveness. As Abelard stipulates: *...omne peccatum magis uoluntarium quam necessarium sit et ex libero procedens arbitrio, non ex aliqua coactione naturae, vel diuinæ prouidentiae compulsione.*

...Eum qui talis est, cum sit predestinatus, saluari necesse est ... omne peccatum magis uoluntarium quam necessarium sit... The problem of logic is solved but it turns now into what is both a larger and a deeper problem, namely how to get insight in what seems in the end to be a matter of divine discretion. For how do you know whether you are predestined, or how do you know whether in the end your sins qualify more as necessary than as voluntary, so that to that extent you can feel absolved from guilt? For all the success of Abelard's attempts in his *Ethics* to try and make human consent the defining ethical moment, so as to put the blame where the guilt is, he is clearly aware that underneath all this there lurks a deeper problem to which, for lack of a better word, we may still refer as the problem of grace. To this we shall now turn to formulate some conclusions.

IV. Grace and the Self in Abelard:

... *Eum qui talis est, cum sit predestinatus, saluari necesse est.*

If anyone in the twelfth century had reason to worry about being saved, it was Peter Abelard. Overflowing with talent, well-positioned to have a magnificent career, he broke the rules of the clerical trade and made a disgrace of himself.³⁹ Little wonder then that for him getting access to grace was of the utmost importance. This may explain his fascination with questions pertaining to the problem of salvation, which seem indeed to have always been in the front of his thinking, as they are quite literally strewn throughout his theological works. As the above analysis has shown, however, for all Abelard's fascination with debate and discussion, the art of logic may have been a great help to him in finetuning the definition of the problem, including the problem of morality, but it could not offer a solution, insofar as he was well aware that salvation was not to be achieved through logical advances alone. Nor through theological ones, for that matter.⁴⁰ At the end of the day, therefore, it appeared Abelard found himself quite literally left to his own devices.

This may in itself be a very valuable conclusion. For if this is really true, as I indeed have come to believe, then Abelard's remarkable interest in self-knowledge and introspection, much as it reflects the discovery of the individual as an important aspect of twelfth century literary production, is at the same time and, perhaps more deeply so, an attempt to find out whether he was ...*talis, cum sit predestinatus*, whether he himself belonged to the number of the predestined. On a more structural level, then, what Abelard teaches us is that the instrument of self-knowledge may be more suited to make ethical than psychological progress, with ethics being seen as the art best suited to anticipate eschatological justice. The relevance of his introspective works would thus go beyond the help they afford in uncovering the details of his lifestory, even if they never quite lead us into the labyrinthine halls of the inner self, which Augustine's *Confessions* have done so memorably.⁴¹ But how is it that they serve

³⁹ For a recent study of Abelard's entire dossier, see M.T. CLANCHY, *Abelard. A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

⁴⁰ Still, it remains true that salvation is the point of doing theology for Abelard. See *Theol. Schol.* I.1, ed. Mews, 318: *Tria sunt, ut arbitror, in quibus humanae salutis summa consistit, fides uidelicet, caritas et sacramenta.*

⁴¹ See W. OTTEN, *The Bible and the Self in Medieval Autobiography: Otloh of St. Emmeram (1010-1070) and Peter Abelard (1079-1142)*, in: D.E. AUNE and J. MAC-CARTHY (eds.), *The Whole and Divided Self. The Bible and Theological Anthropology* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 130-157.

progress in ethical thinking? Here the bringing in of the Pelagian problem is relevant indeed. For by mapping out how the self responds to tragedy, not just in his *Historia calamitatum* but also in his various *Planctus*, what Abelard seems to be doing is in fact designing a counter-morality,⁴² one in which the perspective of tragic loss retrospectively opens up new possibilities for human agency, leaving the dilemma of grace *versus* free will behind.

As I have tried to show in the above analysis, it is clear that Abelard in his (theo)logical works wants to stay firmly within the bounds of Christian thought. Yet we should seriously ask whether the morality found in his more creative writing involving self-knowledge and/or introspection is in fact not meant to be an alternative to, rather than a correction or precision of, the traditional Christian dichotomy of grace *versus* free will. And if so, we should go further and evaluate the implications of his alternative. What to think, for example, of the famous *planctus* about Dinah and Sichem (Gen. 34)? In it we find him retelling the story of Dinah being raped by Sichem, son of the Hivite ruler, in lyrical form. In order not to bring dishonour to her family, he decides to marry her and he and the male members of his family get circumcised. But Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi, Jacob's sons, decide to kill the house of Sichem nonetheless, since they allegedly could not accept their sister being treated as a whore. In Dinah's lament, however, far from dwelling on the rape as the conspicuous cause for a series of unforgivable but unavoidable events, Abelard recreates instead what was fatally destroyed, the budding relationship between Dinah and Sichem. Moreover, he eulogizes it as a possible and positive choice, one seen as all the more vital because it never was to be.⁴³

Obviously this is a rather radical reinterpretation of Abelard's ethical project, the contours of which would need to be much more

⁴² My approach in the final section of this article is influenced by Martha Nussbaum, who holds that in order to understand Greek ethics, one should not only peruse the volumes of Greek philosophy but also mine the riches of literature, especially Greek tragedy. See M.C. NUSSBAUM, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986; rev. ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 1-21.

⁴³ For the text of this *planctus*, see W. MEYER, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur mittellateinischen Rhythmik* (1905; Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms-Verlag, 1970) 366-367.

firmly drawn.⁴⁴ But if true, it could also be of enormous help in solving some problems of twelfth century mentality which have puzzled generations of scholars, one of them being the question whether the renaissance of that age was informed chiefly by Christian or by pagan motifs. As an answer to De Rijk's idea that Abelard considered logic the gift of grace, and an attempt to refine the Pelagian problem beyond its Augustinian parameters of sin and guilt,⁴⁵ it may well be Abelard's specific legacy to have made an earnest beginning with the design of a new morality, one suited more adequately to a post-monastic, urban, individualized and intellectual environment, in short, the environment of the schools rather than the cloister. Distinguishing characteristic of his morality seems to be the feature that grace is seen as that space afforded by the divine to the human order in which the self does not merely consent to goodness, but can actively bring it about through a dialogical, rather than dialectical, interplay of literary creation and moral re-creation. Abelard's logic of predestination, then, may in the end have been more about logic than about predestination. After all, the crucial motive for him was not to uphold the necessity that God save this or that person, but to make clear that the very concept of salvation must inevitably give rise to its own necessity.

Willemien OTTEN

⁴⁴ For a recent study of Abelard's Ethics, see J. MARENBNON, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 213-331. In his segment on 'Ethics in Practice' (pp.316-323) Marenbon makes insightful comments along the line of inquiry which I have set out here about Abelard's homilies and his *planctus*, yet he does not explore the structural ties to Abelard's formal ethical theory.

⁴⁵ If my theory holds water, it would seem to undermine De Rijk's idea that Abelard is refining the Augustinian position after all. Despite his Augustinian influence, he may just not be, interested as he is in designing an individualized and post-monastic morality which is all his own.