

*Abelard argues that the performance of the deed adds nothing at all to the moral value of the intention. State and evaluate his argument for this (strong) thesis.*

In contrast to other philosophers we have studied, Abelard believes only the intention has moral value. Other things (such as action, will, desire, character) do not have the value to be judged as sinful or meritorious. Specifically, Abelard makes the very strong claim that performing the deed doesn't have anything to the intention's moral value. In this paper, I will explain Abelard's strong argument and evaluate how, by nature of non-universal circumstances and the nature of desire and intention, it falls short in certain situations.

Abelard believes that the intention is the only thing in our complete control, and, therefore, is the only thing that we can be praised/blamed for. Other things like character can be subject to constraints out of our control, or, as Abelard puts it, moral luck. For example, some people are more prone to anger than others are, so it would be unfair to say those people are sinful for being angry the same way that others are. Will is also not always in our control since, if someone asks you for money at gun-point, you are not willing to give money, but, rather, to avoid death.

While Abelard believes “performance” of the deed, or doing something sinful/meritorious, doesn't add anything of moral value, one might object there is pleasure that increases sin when one performs a deed. For example, when one eats out of gluttony and bodily pleasure, then that is sinful because of the pleasure one obtains from doing the act. However, Abelard argues that, if the pleasure were sinful, then anyone who would find this pleasure would be committing a sin. Abelard argues that this is absurd because one should not avoid enjoyment of delicious foods simply to avoid pleasure. However, Abelard's objection that pleasure is, in general, not sinful does not mean that the pleasure of performing a deed is not sinful under specific circumstances. Generality does not imply universality, and evaluating the enjoyment of pleasurable things in general is not the same as evaluating the pleasure in every circumstance. It is possible to qualify that the pleasure of performing a deed, under specific circumstances, is sinful while pleasure, in other circumstances, is not. If someone chooses to have sex outside of marriage, then one could argue that pleasure would be sinful, but pleasure of sex within marriage is not sinful.

Abelard continues that pleasure is a “natural” necessity that we have no control over, while we have control over our intentions. Therefore, whatever pleasure one experiences in performing a deed should not affect the moral value of a person's intention. He raises the example of a monk experiencing physical sensation against his will:

“For example, if someone forces someone in religious orders, bound by chains, to lie among women, and he is led into pleasure—bed not into consent—by the bed's softness and the touch of the women around him, who can venture to call this pleasure nature has made necessary a “sin”?” (*Ethics* 42)

In this way, Abelard says pleasure is this physical sensation that is unavoidable regardless of anything else, even if someone is having sex against his or her will. Abelard claims that this is not intention we consent to, because it is part of desire, therefore, it should not be judged. He elaborates that, if one experiences desire to have sex with someone else's wife, “It isn't a sin to lust after someone else's wife, or to have sex with her; the sin is rather to consent to this lust or action” (*Ethics* 49). However, in certain circumstances, our intentions are not completely separable from our desires. If they were, we would have to justify certain behaviors such as suicide due to mental illness. A person who is suffering from severe depression may intend to kill him/herself as a result of experience negative desire of depression. And, due to the person's mental illness, those intentions can, in turn influence more negative desires. This way, intention is inseparable from desire. Similar to a person having sex

involuntarily, if one experiences desire to kill him/herself, then it is only sinful to consent to the desire. But, in the case of a depressed person, the intentions of wanting to killing oneself would still influence desire to do so. This “nuanced” view of desire and intention is more appropriate because we can't exhaustively claim all pleasure/desire is a “natural”, involuntary thing to which we consent. Sometimes, that desire is inextricably tied into our intentions.

Abelard's arguments, while very strong, fall short of explaining how performing a deed cannot have moral value by not taking into account the nuances of pleasure under specific circumstances and how desires are inseparable from intentions. Abelard's strong claims rely on the similarities between generalizations and specific instances, but, upon further inspection, it is clear those similarities fall apart.