

Incommensurable Conceptions of Goodness: Abailard confronts the Stoics

Julie A. Allen

Peter Abailard, whose life and works span from 1079 to 1142, is probably the most notorious figure of that period. His contributions to twelfth-century logic and metaphysics have long been recognised. In many quarters he is heralded as the first moderate realist on the question of universals. In others, given his resolute commitment to determinism, he is proclaimed as the last of the Stoics. More recently, Abailard has attracted attention as the medieval champion of a distinctive kind of moral philosophy, one which, like Stoic and Kantian ethics, focuses upon an agent's conceptualisation of her action.¹ Abailard famously dismisses the value of works. No action is per se permissible or impermissible. The moral value of an act is entirely derived from the moral value of the intention of the agent in performing the act. While ethics is the underlying concern in the majority of Abailard's writings, this topic receives explicit philosophical analysis in only two of his major works: *Ethica*² and *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum*.³

The *Dialogus* is a mature work, yet it remains one of Abailard's least-known texts. Its precise dating is a disputed matter though general consensus places it after 1135.⁴ The text has received limited attention and, until recently, virtually no philosophical exegesis.⁵ As Pierre Payer well noted two decades ago, the work is not a shining example of the literary form promised by its title. The text features a series of very protracted speeches instead of the terse and snappy tempo one might expect to encounter in a dialogue. Further, Abailard testifies to the breadth and depth of his knowledge by including numerous and lengthy textual citations. Despite these literary flaws the text warrants close study. In this work Abailard characteristically applies logic to important human issues and he does so with some surprising results.

The *Dialogus*' discussion divides into two parts. In the first collatio the Philosopher and the Jew discuss the nature and role of the Law.⁶ The second collatio, which is a discussion between the Philosopher and the Christian, focuses on the *summum hominis bonum*. Herein, Abailard works out a forceful and innovative account of goodness. This paper focuses on a small portion of his account and uncovers a significant disparity between early medieval views of "goodness" and the conceptions of their predecessors by way of examining the confrontation between Christian and pagan conceptions of "goodness." The Christian conception is Abailard's and he confronts the Stoics. My analysis provides an account of Abailard's attack on the Stoic position and I expose the underlying motives of the attack.⁷ More importantly, I argue that Abailard's main argument fails and that this failure points to a rivalry between two distinct conceptions of "goodness": the absolute and the relative.

Degrees of Happiness

Abailard's doctrine on the supreme good is presented in his *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum*. The question, "Does happiness admit of degrees?" is raised by the Christian about halfway through the debate between himself and the Philosopher. If happiness is a reward, then does every good man obtain the same reward, or does the reward vary according to merit? Prior to this point, the Christian and Philosopher have agreed to a number of incontrovertible principles. First, they have agreed that a distinction must be drawn between the supreme good in itself and the supreme good of man.⁸ Second, the supreme good of man is defined as that which makes one blessed; both maintain that it is to be found in the future life.⁹ Finally, virtue and the supreme good are not identical, and if they are at all related, then the supreme good must be the reward for virtue. The issue which arises next in the text is a dilemma concerning degrees of beatitude. Assuming that men are not equally virtuous, must it not follow that there is a corresponding diversity of rewards?¹⁰ The horns of the problem are these: If there is not a diversity and each receives the same reward, then some people will receive greater reward than they deserve, and others will receive substantially less than they deserve. On the other hand, if there is a diversity of reward, then there must be degrees of beatitude. Yet, something can only be called the supreme good if nothing greater than it can be found.¹¹ So, it follows that only the highest degree of happiness can properly be called the supreme good of man. In this case, only the best person will obtain the supreme good.¹²

The paradox has the following explicit rendering:

Primary Assumption:

There is a diversity of blessedness in heaven corresponding to the diversity of virtue on earth.

Secondary Assumption:

“X” cannot be called the supreme good of man if some good, “Y,” can be found, and the goodness of “Y” is greater than that of “X.”

Disjunctive Conclusion:

Either every good man, regardless of the extent of his merit, obtains the supreme good, or only the man who has no one more blessed than he obtains the supreme good.

Taken together these suppositions entail a contradiction. The problem is clearest if we reconstruct it in terms of a particular case. Imagine two human beings, John and Paul, about whom these facts are granted:

Supposition 1 John is virtuous and therefore has merit.

Supposition 2 Paul is virtuous and therefore has merit.

Supposition 3 John is more virtuous than Paul.

From this it follows that,

4 John has greater merit than Paul.

But, from 4 and the **Primary Assumption** it follows that,

Sub-conclusion 5 John will be more blessed than Paul.

From 5 it follows that,

6 The beatitude of John is a greater good than the beatitude of Paul.

From **6** and the **Secondary Assumption**, it follows that,

7 The beatitude of Paul cannot be called the supreme good.

Principle A

8 The supreme good is that which, when attained, makes one blessed.

From **7** and **8** it follows that,

9 Paul will not be blessed.

On the other hand,

Principle B

10 The supreme good is the reward for merit.

From **2** and **10** it follows that,

11 Paul will obtain the supreme good.

However, from **8** and **11** it follows that,

Conclusion 12 Paul will be blessed.

But **12** contradicts **9**.

There are two straightforward ways to avoid this contradiction. One alternative is to reject the primary assumption. With this option, either diversity of merit among good men must be denied, or the conclusion that all good men attain the supreme good and are equally blessed despite differing merit must be accepted. The other alternative is to avoid the implication that only the best human being will be blessed by rejecting the secondary assumption. Abailard pursues his own way. He tries to escape the predicament without rejecting either of the relevant assumptions. He contends both that,

1 There is a diversity of reward corresponding to the diversity of merit.

and that

2 All good men obtain the supreme good.

At this point in the *Dialogus*' debate, Abailard's Philosopher pursues one of the straightforward alternatives. The Philosopher denies the claim that there is a diversity of merit. According to a variety of classical positions, all the virtues are present at the same time in all good men. The strategy is to argue that all good men are equally blessed because all good men are equally virtuous.¹³

The Equality or Inequality of Good Men

Support for the claim that all good men are equally virtuous is drawn from authority and scripture. Cicero introduces the view that all the virtues are present at the same time in all good men.¹⁴ The Philosopher claims that Cicero reports that all philosophers agree, "he who has one virtue has them all," and further, "he even equates evil men in sins so that he adds that all sins are equal."¹⁵ Additional support is derived from Christian authorities. Abailard's Philosopher appeals to Augustine, who said, "Where charity is, what can be lacking? Where it is absent, what can possibly be profitable?"¹⁶ Furthermore, according to the Apostle, "love is the fulfilment of the law including all goods within it while excluding all evils."¹⁷ Finally, there is Christ's proclamation, "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."¹⁸ Together, these points are evidence for the general argument that if Charity contains everything in itself and carries everything with itself and if whatever contains everything in itself does not admit of degrees, then it follows that Charity does not admit of degrees. The argument concludes, "If no one is superior to another in charity, he is certainly not so in virtue of merits since charity includes every virtue."¹⁹ If good men are equally good, then there is no need to suppose that happens to establish that there is a diversity of merit. Consequently, the Christian is challenged to establish that there is a diversity of merit.

This issue is of vital importance to Abailard. In an extensive monologue, the Christian character presents seven distinct arguments.²⁰ For my purposes, it will suffice to consider, in detail, only the most crucial of these arguments. It is nonetheless necessary to position this argument within the underlying strategy. Abailard distinguishes two senses of the term "virtue." The first and general sense is defined as that "which obtains merit with God." In this sense, only charity counts as a virtue. The second and specific sense (which is also the traditional usage) defines "virtue" as "that which makes a person just or strong or temperate."²¹ "Virtue" is the term

which applies to those individual habits of mind, which, when present in humans, lead them to exhibit the corresponding quality. Abailard is keen to make this distinction so that in one sense it is true that all good men are equally virtuous and in a different sense it is true that all virtuous men are **not** equally virtuous.

The general sense of “virtue” requires the presence of each species of virtue for correct application. A virtuous human must be just, temperate, strong, and wise. According to this view, it is the specific virtues, such as temperance or justice, that admit of degrees or diversity. In short, Abailard is prepared to grant the classical principle that a person cannot properly be said to possess any one of the virtues unless she possesses them all. However, he will insist that one particular person may be more just and less charitable than another, while yet another is more prudent but less honourable than either of those—the degree to which any person is called upon to exhibit such qualities and the fervour with which she answers this calling will vary with circumstances. In other words, from the proposition,

A all the virtues (however many particular qualities one wishes to include) are present at the same time in all good men.

It **does not** follow that,

B every virtue is in all good men to the same degree, or in some good man to the same degree all of the time.

If this claim can be justified, then all good men need not be equally virtuous. Only good men will be saved, but good men need not be perfectly virtuous. However, this distinction between two senses of “virtue” requires the assumption that one person’s justice, or temperance, can be greater or less than that of another. This involves a conception of virtue which substantially differs from Platonic, Neoplatonic, Epicurean and especially Stoic doctrine.

The most substantial and convoluted argument in the series cuts to the very heart of Stoic moral doctrine. Abailard cites Cicero’s *Paradoxa stoicorum* according to which,

All good men are equally good for no one is better than a good man. Similarly, no one is more temperate than a temperate man.²²

In order to counter the claim that all good men are equally good, Abailard focuses on the logic of the typically Stoic assertion, “no one is better than a good man.”²³ As one might expect from his reputation, Abailard’s solution requires the acceptance of some rather subtle distinctions. Cicero’s phrase, “No one is better than a good man” is equivalent to Abailard’s first formulation,

1 There is no one better than a good man.²⁴

Abailard wants to assert,

2 Someone is better than a good man.²⁵

The first proposition is a direct contradiction of the second, yet, Abailard will claim that the two are compatible provided one interprets the latter correctly.²⁶ Abailard is not claiming that “just any old person” is better or happier than a good man. He is arguing for the consistency of **1** and **2** in order to affirm that a good man may be better than a good man.

Abailard’s attempt at conciliation should be analysed in two stages. In the first stage, he distinguishes between,

A Someone is better than a (every) good man.²⁷

and **B** Someone is better than a (some particular) good man.

In the second, he distinguishes between **B** and,

C Someone is better than some particular good man is good.

Throughout, Abailard focuses on the relation, “x is better than a good man.” In the first stage, the meaning of “x is better than a good man” is considered. Suppose that, “x is better than a good man” means “x is better than every good man.” If we were to take the person **Bob**, then on this interpretation, “Bob is better than a good man” means,

Bob is a man and Bob is good and for all y, if y is a man and y is good, **Bob** is better than y.

However, a problem immediately arises. Since Bob is a man and Bob is good, Bob can be substituted for y, and it follows that Bob is better than Bob. But this is absurd.

Something cannot be better than itself. Thus, the supposition that “x is better than a good man” means “x is better than every good man” must be rejected. Abailard thinks he has hereby identified the source of absurdity within the sophism, “All good men are equally good for no one is better than a good man.”²⁸

For the sake of contrast, if we take the special case of God’s goodness we are not faced with a similar problem. “God is better than a good man” simply means “God is better than all men.” Literally, “God is good and for all y, if y is a man and y is good, then God is better than y.” **God** cannot be substituted for y, since God is not a man, and we are therefore not led to an absurd result.²⁹

When we speak of human goodness, on the other hand, if we take “a good man” as a universal, the sophism implies that, if Paul is a good man, then no one is better than Paul, which further implies that Paul, like God, is above all men. However, if John is also a good man, then **no one is better than John**. But if Paul is above **all men**, Paul must be above John. However, if Paul is above John, then John is not as good as Paul, in which case, **someone is better than John**, namely Paul. Therefore, it will either be impossible to claim concurrently that both men are good, or it must be granted that if both men are good, they must be equally good. Neither of these options will suit Abailard. He wants to be able to attribute goodness to more than one person while nonetheless maintaining that good people are not equally good. Thus, Abailard introduces a further distinction, one between saying that,

B Someone is better than some good man.

and

C Someone is better than some good man is good.³⁰

The former contradicts the statement, “No one is better than a (some) good man,” while the latter does not. The first relation is a relation between individuals. If particular good men are substituted for the existential quantifier, then the relation has the form, “A is better than B.” The second relation does not compare individuals. Rather, it compares the attributes of individuals who possess an attribute. This relation has the form, “A’s x-ness is greater than (less than /equal to) B’s x-ness.” If the distinction is granted, then it can be true that Paul is not better than a good man, and nonetheless also true that Paul is better than another good man is good. Abailard thinks the distinction allows for the consistency of the following proposition,

There is an x , such that x is a man and x is good, and there is a y , such that y is a man and y is good and the goodness of x is greater than the goodness of y .

The sophism, Abailard thinks, involves a fundamental mistake. He assumes the Stoics try to prove that all good men are equally good along the following lines:

If it is true that,

1 No good man is better than a good man,

then it is false that,

2 Some good man is better than a good man.

If 2 is false, then

3 Each good man is equally good.

On Abailard's account, the truth of 1 does not entail the falsity of

4 The goodness of some good man is greater than the goodness of a good man.

If his distinction is granted, Abailard can insist that the goodness of good men need not be equal.³¹ But what is the basis for these distinctions? Abailard's first point concerning the ambiguity of "a good man" is not problematic. Typically, context must determine whether "a man" means "some man" or "every man." However, it is fair to ask, which does the context of Stoic moral doctrine demand, and what sense can be made of Abailard's second distinction?

The Stoic Conception

What does it mean to say, "the goodness of Paul is greater than the goodness of John"? Abailard's distinction between **B** and **C** makes "goodness" the subject of comparison and this assumes that "goodness" can be quantified and that one agent can have a greater measure of it than another. Thus, Abailard would have us transform a claim such as "Alfred is good and Bob is good" into "the goodness of Alfred and the goodness of Bob" before undertaking any comparison. However, it is not clear that "the goodness of Alfred is greater than the goodness of Bob" could be meaningful within a Stoic context. In the *Paradoxa stoicorum*, which Abailard explicitly cites, Cicero

accurately outlines the intent of the Stoic position. Cicero points out that “transgressions are not to be measured by their results but by the vices of the persons transgressing.” The Stoics would reject the claim that one evil man differs from another because he effects more harm through his action than the other. The relevance of varied circumstances is also denied,

...the act of transgressing is itself one, whichever way you twist it. Whether the helmsman capsizes a ship with a cargo of bullion or a barge loaded with chaff makes some little difference in the result, but none in respect of the helmsman’s incompetence....since to transgress is to cross over the lines, which once done, an offence has been committed; how much further you go when once you have crossed the line has no effect in increasing the offence. It is unquestionable that transgression is not allowed to anybody; but what is not allowed depends only upon the single point of being proved not to be allowed; if this fact of not being allowed cannot ever become greater or smaller, since the action’s being a transgression consists in its not having been allowed, the transgressions springing from the fact of non-allowance must necessarily be equal.³²

By this view any act which is a transgression is so designated because it has been forbidden. If adultery is a sin, then, on the Stoic view, it matters little whether one adulterer commits the transgression with greater fervour than another. Both have committed the same act regardless of the circumstances, results, or effects of the offence, since both have done what is forbidden.

The claim that virtues are equal is supported in a similar manner. Immediately following the lines cited by Abailard,³³ it is asked,

Will you call a man who pays back ten pounds of gold when as the money had been entrusted to him without a witness he could easily have pocketed it without punishment, if he fails to do the same in the case of a sum of ten thousand pounds? or temperate who restrains himself in one sort of excess but lets himself go in another? Virtue in harmony with reason and unbroken constancy is one—nothing can be added to it to make it virtue in a greater degree and nothing can be taken away from it and yet the name of virtue be left to it.³⁴

Cicero attributes this view to Socrates. It is especially typical of the Stoic conceptual framework. The argument advanced by Abailard contradicts this position, but it does

nothing to undermine it. Abailard does not directly address any of the principles which serve to ground such a view of virtue. By the classical view, virtue is a kind of perfection. A temperate man is so called on account of his perfect temperance. If Paul and John are temperate men, then they are equally temperate; for no one could achieve a greater degree of perfection than that which makes these men temperate. Perfection is not a function of degrees. Abailard's interpretation of the proposition, "No one is better than a good man," jettisons this conception of goodness. Abailard imagines that it makes sense to say that Paul is more temperate than John is temperate. But if temperance requires perfect moderation, then how can John be less than perfectly moderate yet nonetheless be considered temperate?³⁵ The notions of harmony, order, perfection and consistency which figures such as Socrates, Chrysippus, Seneca, and Boethius associate with virtue and consequently with the term "good" are ones which preclude the notion of degrees. If virtue is a kind of perfection which may be approached but not exceeded, then a human being is not properly called virtuous until she has attained this limit.³⁶ Abailard's arguments are surprisingly weak given the importance of the issue. This failure to confront the traditional position raises important questions: Is Abailard's argument simply a failure?—just another instance of philosophers begging the question? Or, is the Stoic's conception of goodness fundamentally different, and therefore incommensurable with Abailard's? Is Abailard's failure simply a failure to fully appreciate an alternative conceptual framework?

Absolute and Relative Attributes

According to the Stoic picture, "goodness" is an absolute attribute. Something is either good or not good. Consequently, the Stoics could not accommodate comparisons of the kind Abailard has in mind. One Stoic sage is not "better" than another Stoic sage. For the Stoics, Nature is good, and persons are good in the same sense, that is to say, the same "thing" is attributed to both the rational principle which governs the universe and to the Sage. On the other hand, Abailard treats goodness as a relative attribute. For Christians, only God can be perfectly good and man's goodness is always of a lesser degree than God's. Others certainly shared Abailard's conviction on this point. Henry Chadwick points out that Clement of Alexandria "rejects the Stoic doctrine that goodness and virtue in God do not transcend the goodness and virtue of the perfect wise man."³⁷ If the goodness of God does transcend the goodness of human beings, as Abailard and Clement think, comparative degrees of goodness emerge. If divine goodness and human goodness are not different in kind but only in degree, then goodness must be quantifiable.

What does the difference between Abailard's conception and that of the Stoics amount to? The difference, I think, becomes clearest if we reflect upon absolute and relative concepts generally. Examples of absolute notions include "full," "complete," "consistent," "unchanging," "developed," and their opposites "empty," "inconsistent," and so on. These notions are closely associated with those conceptions of goodness most likely to be characterised as absolutist. If "goodness" is absolute, then it will share the conceptual features of notions such as "being full" or "being consistent." Examples of relative notions include "tall," "heavy," "old," "strong," "large" and their opposites. If "goodness" is a relative notion, then it should be conceptually similar to other relative notions.

Absolute attributes are absolute in the sense that their underlying standards are not subject to change over time or according to circumstances. The notion of "being full" involves an absolute standard. A cask of wine is full if and only if no more wine can be added to the cask. This kind of standard sets a ceiling above which there is no greater degree. Comparative and superlative degrees fall below the absolute standard. A wine cask may be more full than it is empty, but this means the cask is neither full nor empty. It does not mean that it is full or that it is full to some degree. For absolutists "goodness" is absolute just as "being full" is absolute.³⁸ Ethicists who regard "goodness" as an unchanging ideal often express this in terms of perfection, the full and harmonious development of human faculties, a thing's expression of its excellence or the full and complete development of certain capacities. If a capacity is fully developed, it cannot be developed to any greater degree.

Furthermore, given their absolute character, absolute attributes eliminate certain kinds of comparisons. If we decide that Cask A is full of wine and that Cask B is also full, then strictly speaking, we could not also suggest that Cask A is more full than Cask B. Such a comparison is incompatible with the meaning of "full." Each cask is either full or it is not full. We can, however, compare casks which are not full. We can meaningfully assert that one cask is "just about full" while the other is "nowhere near full." However, this does not entail that the first is "more full" or full to a greater degree than the second. Such a claim leads to the impression that the casks are being directly compared and are "not equally-full." In fact, the casks can only be indirectly compared. Each cask must be measured against an absolute standard. In terms of such an absolute standard the casks are "equally not-full."³⁹

Once a full cask of perfect wine has been produced, this cask cannot be distinguished, in these respects, from a second full cask of perfect wine. If "good" means

full, complete, and perfect, and both casks of wine are full, complete and perfect, then both casks of wine are good.⁴⁰ Since one cannot be more or less full, complete or perfect than the other, both casks are equally good. Thus, no wine is better than a good wine. It is in this sense that the Stoics maintain that good men are equally good—as they must be if goodness is absolute.⁴¹ Abailard's rejection of the view that good men are equally good requires relinquishing this conception of "virtue" and "goodness." Therefore, there is a substantially different conception at work within Abailard's doctrine.

"Being tall" and "being full" are different kinds of attributes. Qualities such as "tall" and "strong" and their opposites "short" and "weak" are "relative" in a number of senses. First, "being tall" is relative to kind. What is tall for a human being is not tall for an oak tree. Also, "being tall" is relative within a kind. Comparative and superlative degrees of relative notions fall both above and below the standard. If, these days, anyone who is at least six foot counts as a tall human being, then John, who is 6'2", is tall and he is also **taller** than Paul, who is 6'1". Furthermore, Mary, who is 5'6", is **not tall** but she is nonetheless taller than Peter who is 5'5". Finally, the standard itself is relative.⁴² What counts as "tall" in one context may not count as "tall" in another. Comparisons among individual things in terms of relative attributes make sense. John is tall, but Paul is taller, while Peter is tallest. Relativists understand "being good" in the way we understand "being tall."

If we recognise this difference between relative and absolute attributes and couple it with Abailard's distinction between "being better than a good man" and "being better than some good man is good" we see that Abailard is a relativist about "goodness." Just as we think that, among tall men some tall men are taller than others, Abailard thinks that among good men, some good men are better than others.⁴³ But this is not the Stoic's conception of goodness. The Stoics are absolutists about "goodness" and this fact underlies their claim that "no one is better than a good man," just as a distinction between "being fuller than a full wine cask" and "being fuller than some full wine cask is full" is not intelligible within an absolutist conceptual scheme. Thus Abailard side-steps rather than confronts the Stoic position. Abailard's objection assumes that goodness, like tallness, admits of degrees. But this is exactly what the Stoics would deny. Thus, Abailard begs the question.

Whether "being good" is defined in absolute or in relative terms makes a substantial amount of difference. As noted, this issue clearly mattered to Abailard. His

interest in these qualifications may, in part, derive from Aristotle's remarks in the *Categories*.⁴⁴ Aristotle asserts that qualities, generally, admit of degrees,

Things qualified as of a certain kind do admit of degree. One thing is said to be more or less white or more or less just than another; and a particular thing may acquire more of a quality—a thing that is white can become still whiter. This is not true of all qualities, but of most of them (*Categories* 8).

Aristotle conceives of most qualities as being relative in the sense I have described. However, Aristotle contrasts qualities such as being white, literate or just with attributes such as being circular. The latter are absolute in the sense I have described.

But “triangular” and “square” do not seem to admit of degree, nor indeed do any of the other shapes. For, although things that admit of the definition of “triangle” or “circle” are all triangles or circles respectively, none of the things that do not admit of them can be said to be more or less “triangular” or “circular” than any other. A square is no more of a circle than an oblong is, since neither of them admits of the definition of circle. And in general, if neither of two things admits the definition of what is under consideration, neither of them will be described as having its character more than the other; so that not all things that are qualified as of a particular kind admit of degree (*Categories* 8).

Aristotle provides an effective test for distinguishing absolute and relative qualification. Can we say of something which does **not** admit of the **definition** of an attribute, that it nonetheless has the **character** of the attribute to some degree or other? If we cannot, then the qualification is absolute. If we can, then the qualification is relative. Whether or not the qualification is absolute or relative will depend entirely upon the attribute's definition. More significantly, this definition will be driven by some overriding conceptual scheme. The difficulty Abailard faced in confronting the Stoics becomes evident if we try to apply Aristotle's test. Let us apply this test to the case of moral goodness. For example, let us suppose that neither John nor Paul is a good man according to some definition of goodness. If being good is defined in absolute terms such as “being logically consistent,” then we cannot describe John as good to a greater extent than Paul. This feature of absolute attributes is quite plain. However, if being good is defined in relative rather than absolute terms, then we will be able to describe John as good to a greater extent than Paul even though neither is good, strictly speaking. The test will tell us, given some definition of an attribute, whether a given

qualification is absolute or relative. However, it will not tell us whether the qualification **should be** absolute or relative, nor will it tell us how to define a particular attribute. Abailard's dispute with the Stoics is a dispute over the definition of goodness itself. Since their respective definitions belong to different conceptual schemes, there could be no victor and our inheritance is the spoils.

Within the context of the *Dialogus*, the Christian seemingly forces the Philosopher to admit that there is a diversity of merit among good men. This, coupled with the symmetrical relation between merit and reward, requires that there be a corresponding diversity of reward. According to this interpretation beatitude will admit of degrees and those who are saved will not be equally blessed.⁴⁵ The *Dialogus* proceeds onward from here. But we will stop and reflect upon the fact that Abailard's failure causes us to recognise two very different conceptions of goodness—conceptions which are incommensurable. The impasse encountered by Abailard has implications which extend beyond the confines of Abailard's *Dialogus*. The relative conception of “goodness” found in Abailard's twelfth-century doctrine is not the conception which dominates classical moral theory. Nonetheless, the relative conception has dominated post-medieval ethical theory and it has become the common, everyday conception of goodness.

For many of us, the absolute conception of goodness is an affront to common sense and consequently we are inclined to think that the burden of proof falls to the Stoics (absolutists). Indeed, our unreflective intuitions favour the relative conception, and the Stoic conception initially strikes us as highly restrictive—to a fault. By the Stoic analysis, “a good man” is a very rare commodity. Socrates was reportedly the only candidate, to the Stoics, for the title of “Sage” and opinion seems to have been divided even about him. We, on the other hand, frequently do compare individuals in terms of their “goodness” or “virtuous qualities” and we often believe that one person is a better human being than another. We say that both people are good but neither is perfect.

In contrast, when we reflect upon our intuitions concerning a virtue such as “honesty” the clear waters of relativity quickly become muddied. “Being honest” seems more like “being logically consistent” than like “being tall.” “Being honest” and “being consistent” both invoke the notion of “truth.” Most of us would not grant that someone who tells the truth some of the time is an honest man. We would not grant this for the same reason that we would not grant that a set of sentences, some of which are true and some of which are false, is a consistent set of sentences. If

we can trust a friend only under some sets of circumstances, we would not say that she is trustworthy. By the measure of public sentiment, a good politician is presumably one who keeps all promises, not just a favoured few. Good politicians are also a rare commodity and opinions do not seem to be divided about that. In other words there are, perhaps despite ourselves, some clearly “absolutist” intuitions mingled together with our otherwise “relativist” convictions. In my view, contemporary discourse on matters of “goodness” often runs these two distinct conceptions together. This, it seems, is a direct consequence of the complexities of our double inheritance.

Our study of Abailard’s attack on the Stoics indicates that at some point in the history of ideas, two competing conceptions of “goodness” did battle. The relative conception appears to have won the day, yet there are no grounds for thinking that the absolute conception actually lost the war. These two incommensurable conceptions continue to do battle and sometimes generate theoretical chaos. At the very least, it is important to recognise the roots underlying common sense views of “goodness.” Better yet, we ought to refrain from using different conceptions interchangeably and, if possible, decide which of the two conceptions is the better one. Success in this venture promises the elimination of some prevailing confusions and contradictions and the expectation that future value theory can be good value theory.

McGill University

Notes

1 Peter King, “Abelard’s Intentional Ethics” *The Modern Schoolman: A Quarterly Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1995): 213-231. Other relatively recent studies of Abailard’s moral philosophy include: J. Allen, “A Commentary;” Edward John Helbig, “The Notion of Intention;” John Marenbon, *Philosophy of Peter Abelard*; Calvin Normore, “Peter Abelard on whether the Road to Hell is paved with Good Intentions;” Paul Williams, *Moral Philosophy of Peter Abelard*.

2 Abailard, *Petri Abaelardi abbatis Rugensis opera omnia*; see *Petri Abaelardi opera*, ed. Victor Cousin, and *Peter Abelard’s Ethics* ed. Luscombe. Abailard’s *Ethics* is known by two titles, *Ethica* and *Scito Teipsum*.

3 Abailard, *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum*, ed. Thomas, henceforth, *Dialogus*. Unless otherwise noted all Latin citations are from this edition. Abailard, *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian* trans. Payer, henceforth,

Dialogue. Unless otherwise noted, translations are Payer's. Paul Spade has recently published new translations of both the *Dialogus* and the *Ethica*.

4 There have been two traditional sides to the debate. These have fallen on either side of the Council of Sens, 2 June 1140. The older tradition, following G. Robert, and including J. Jolivet and R. Thomas, identifies the *Dialogus* as Abailard's last work, allegedly written at Cluny just prior to his death in 1142. This tradition holds that the *Dialogus* was composed after the *Ethics*. See Jolivet, "Abélard et le philosophe," pp. 181-9, and Thomas, "Die Persönlichkeit Peter Abaelards," pp. 256-60. According to Mews, Robert's dating is accepted by a number of scholars, including Sikes, *Peter Abailard*, pp. 267-268; D. Van Den Eynde, "La chronologie," pp. 467-80; Geyer and Ueberweg, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie II*, p. 216; Gilson, *La philosophie au moyen âge*, p. 292; R. Oursel, "La dispute et la grâce," p. 82; H. Liebeschütz, "The Significance of Judaism in Peter Abelard's *Dialogus*," pp. 1-18. For a complete list, see Mews, "On Dating the Works of Peter Abelard," pp. 73-134. Contrary to Robert, Buytaert has argued that the *Dialogus* ought to be dated earlier and he pinpoints 1136 as the most likely time period. Buytaert argues that Abailard's reference to being persecuted is a reference to the council of Soissons rather than to the council of Sens and Buytaert further maintains that Abailard would have felt too defeated after the council of Sens to have written the self-congratulatory claims presented in the preface to the *Dialogus*. See Buytaert, "Abelard's Collationes," pp. 33-38 and his "Abelard's *Expositio in Hexaemeron*." More recently, Mews has argued that both the *Dialectica* and the *Dialogus* should be dated much earlier in Abailard's life than has hitherto been thought. Mews maintains that Abailard composed the *Dialogus* around 1125 while he was teaching at the Paraclete. Luscombe argues that the *Ethica* and the *Dialogus* were written concurrently between 1134 and 1139. On the basis of Luscombe's work it has been generally accepted that the *Dialogus* was issued prior to the *Ethica* relatively late in Abailard's life; see Luscombe, "Introduction," *Peter Abelard's Ethics*, p. xxx.

5 On the basis of a philosophical analysis of the plot of the *Dialogue*, I have argued against Mews' supposition that this text should be dated as early as 1125. For the details of this argument, see J. Allen, "On the Dating of Abailard's *Dialogus*," pp. 135-151.

6 References to "the Philosopher" and "the Christian" are to Abailard's characters in the *Dialogue*.

7 Abailard's attack against a stoic conception of "goodness" may puzzle scholars familiar with the important respects in which Abailard's views were influenced by

various pagan philosophies and especially by stoic metaphysics and moral theory. However, as a Christian, Abailard must part company with his stoic comrades on this issue for two reasons. First, within the context of the Christian tradition, God's goodness transcends the goodness of human beings. Only God is good in an absolute sense. Second, Abailard's own experiences must have convinced him that people are sinful or pure to a varying extent.

8 *Dialogus* 98-105, *Dialogue* 88-96. Also see Cicero, *De Inventione* 157-8. The supreme good in itself is God, while the supreme good of man is distinct from God, and must be defined in terms of man's relation to God.

9 The philosopher Abailard presents in the *Dialogue* is a good ancient philosopher. He believes in God's existence, the immortality of the soul, and the promise of a determinate afterlife.

10 Quero igitur, an in illa beatitudine alius alio beatior sit, sicut hic alternum alio iustior vel sanctior esse contingit, ut videlicet secundum diversitatem meritorum sit et remuneratio diversa. *Dialogus* 106-107, *Dialogue* 98.

11 Earlier the Christian insisted that, "It is not the case that something is the supreme good if something greater can be found." *Nemo recte summum bonum dicit, quo maius aliquod invenitur. Dialogus* 106, *Dialogue* 98. As Payer notes, this echoes Anselm's formula, "that than which none greater can be conceived." Anselm, "Proslogion," 1-4. Thomas has compared Abelard and Anselm in *Der philosophisch-theologische Erkenntnisweg*, pp. 215-220.

12 Immo, quia ita est, oportet, concedas alium ibi hominem alio beatiorum effici nec per hoc eius hominis beatitudinem, que minor est, nequaquam summum hominis bonum esse nuncupandum. Unde nec illum, qui minus alio beatus est, iam beatum dici convenit. Summum quippe bonum id diffinisti, quo cum quisque pervenerit beatus est; aut igitur illum, qui alio ibi minor est, summum bonum adeptum esse concesseris, aut eum minime beatum esse concesseris, sed eum tantummodo, quo nemo ibi sit beatior. Si enim id, quod adeptus est, eum beatum efficit, profecto iuxta suprapositam diffinitionem summum bonum illud dici convenit. *Dialogus* 107, *Dialogue* 99.

13 Multis namque philosophorum visum est / omnibus bonis hominibus omnes simul inesse virtutes nec eum ullatenus bonum censi, cui virtus aliqua desit, ac per hoc omnium bonorum hominum nec in meritis vite nec in beatitudinis remuneratione ullam esse distantiam. Quod si forte ita sit, eadem omnibus beatitudo retribuitur, et omnes equaliter summum bonum adepti pariter fiunt

beati. *Dialogus* 108, *Dialogue* 100. The explicit argument runs:

1 If all good men are equally virtuous, there is not a diversity of merit.

2 If there is not a diversity of merit, then each good man obtains the same reward.

3 If each good man obtains the same reward, then all good men attain the supreme good.

4 If all good men attain the supreme good, all good men are equally blessed.

14 Abailard has the Stoic position clearly in mind here. He cites Cicero's *De Officiis* and *Paradoxa Stoicorum* as his source. In the *Paradoxa Stoicorum* Cicero sympathetically explores some of the most extraordinary ethical views of the Stoic school. *Paradoxa Stoicorum*. Elsewhere, Cicero rejects these doctrines; see *De Finibus* 4.74.

15 *qui unam habet, omnes habere virtutes and qui etiam in Paradoxis non solum in virtutibus bonos verum etiam in peccatis ita equat malos, ut omnia peccata paria / esse astruat* *Dialogus* 108, *Dialogue* 100-01. Cicero writes:

Atqui quoniam pares virtutes sunt, recte facta quando a virtutibus proficiscuntur paria esse debent, itemque peccata quoniam ex vitiis manant sint aequalia necesse est. 'A philosophis,' inquis, 'ista sumis.'" *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 3.23.

16 Ubi est caritas, quid est, quod possit deesse? Ubi vero non est, quid est, quod possit prodesse? I Cor. 13; *Dialogus* 109, *Dialogue* 101.

17 'Plenitudo quippe legis est dilectio.' (Rom. 13:10). Quam ipse, qui hoc dicit, Apostolus plenitudinem prosequens et tam mala inde removens, quam ibi bona comprehendens ait: 'Karitas patiens est, benigna est. Karitas non emulatur, non agit perperam et cetera.' *Dialogus* 109, *Dialogue* 102.

18 ut autem Xpistus meminit: / 'Maiorem hac dilectionem nemo habet, ut animam suam ponat quis pro amicis suis.' (Jn 15:13) *Dialogus* 109, *Dialogue* 102.

19 Quod si caritate nemo alium transcendit, utique nec in virtutibus aut meritis, cum omnem, ut dicis, caritas complectatur virtutem. *Dialogus* 110, *Dialogue* 101.

20 *Dialogus* 110-13, *Dialogue* 101-06.

21 Reveram, si proprie virtus intelligatur, que videlicet meritum apud Deum optinet, sola caritas virtus appellanda est. Que quidem pro eo, quod iustum efficit vel fortem seu temperantem, iustitia recte dicitur vel fortitudo sive temperantia. *Dialogus* 110, *Dialogue* 102.

22 Cicero writes: "atqui pares esse virtutes nec bono viro meliorem nec temperante temperantiorum nec forti fortiorum nec sapiente sapientiorum posse

fieri facillime potest perspicui. *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 3.21, quoted by Abailard at *Dialogus* 110, *Dialogue* 103.

23 *Dialogus* 110-111, *Dialogue* 102-103. Although Abailard focuses on the logic of the claim the real issue is whether “goodness” (in its nature) admits of degrees. Derek Parfit discusses a parallel example in “Later Selves and Moral Principles”:

There is a sense in which all our relatives are equally our relatives. We can use the phrase “related to” so that what it means has no degrees; on this use, parents and remote cousins are as much relatives. It is obvious, though, that kinship has degrees. This is shown in the phrase, “closely related to”: remote cousins are, as relatives, less close. I shall summarise such remarks in the following way. On the above use, the fact of being someone’s relative has in its logic no degrees. But in its nature—in what it involves—it does have degrees. So the fact’s logic hides its nature. Hence the triviality of the claim that all our relatives are equally our relatives.

The corresponding claim that all good men are equally good is not trivial from Abailard’s point of view. He will argue that “goodness” has degrees in its logic and its nature. See Derek Parfit, “Later Selves and Moral Principles,” p. 477.

24 Also equivalent, “It is false that someone is better than a good man.” *Etsi enim bono viro non sit aliquis melior. Dialogus* 110-11.

25 *tamen aliquo bono viro melior est. Ibid.*

26 It is worth pointing out that each of 1 and 2 can be interpreted in two ways; the first may mean,

1a It is not the case that there is an x, such that x is a man and for all y, if y is a man and y is good, then x is better than y.

or it may mean,

1b It is not the case that there is an x, such that x is a man and x *is good* and for all y, if y is a man and y *is good*, then x is better than y.

The second may be interpreted as,

2a There is an x, such that x is a man and A is a man and A is good and x is better than A.

or it may mean,

2b There is an x, such that x is a man and x *is good* and A is a man and A is good and x is better than A.

The term “better” creates a second ambiguity. If “better” means “more good,” then 1b says, “all good men are equally good.” If “better” means “happier” or “having greater well being,” then 1a says, “no one is happier or better off than a good man.”

The latter is commonly claimed by ancient moral theorists, including Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Epicurus and the Stoics. The former is characteristic of the Stoic position.

27 I owe recognition of the first stage of the argument and the clarity of my understanding of this passage to Paul Spade. I concur with Spade's diagnosis of the pertinent issue in relation to what I identify as only the first stage of Abailard's argument. Spade notes: "The sentence doesn't mean there is a big difference between the two formulations used there. Instead it means there's a big difference between either of those two formulations (in both of which one is compared to some particular good man) and the more general formulation discussed earlier (where one is compared to good men at large). Syntactically, the discussion rests on whether the expression describing what one is compared to contains a particular (that is existential) quantifier." Peter Abelard, *Ethical Writings*, p. 108 n45. Spade does not recognise the second stage in the argument.

28 Cicero, *Paradoxa stoicorum* 3.21; *Dialogus* 110, *Dialogue* 103.

29 Given that Christ is man and God is Christ, it might be thought that God can be substituted for y. However, Abailard's analysis of the attribution of predicates to Christ suggests that he would have rejected such a substitution. According to Nielsen, Abailard distinguishes between predications which are literal or proprie and those which are merely figurative or improprie. By Abailard's analysis "Christ is both the substance God and the substance man....However, the proposition, *Deus est homo* can never be literal, as God's nature is not man's, for which reason he describes it as figurative or improprie....If we say, therefore, that God is man, according to Abailard this merely means that God is united, *unitus*, with man in the one person of Christ" (Nielsen, *Theology and Philosophy*, pp. 220-21). Also see Abailard, *Dialectica*, pp. 132/3-5 and Abailard, *Opera omnia*, col. 624D, 1107AB, 1273D-1274A.

30 Etsi enim bono viro non sit aliquis melior, tamen aliquo bono viro melior est. Quid est enim aliud dicere de aliquo, quod sit melior bono, nisi quod sit melior quam bonus vir, quicumque ille sit. Non enim, cum Deum homine dicimus meliorem, aliter intelligimus, nisi quod omnes transcendat homines. Sic etiam cum tamen aliquem bonum dicimus virum bono viro meliorem, id est quam bonus vir sit vel quam sit aliquis vir bonus, non aliter accipiendum videtur, nisi generaliter omnibus bonis viris ille preponatur. Quod omnino falsum est, cum ipse etiam sit aliquis bonorum virorum. Si enim melior sit quam bonus vir vel quam sit aliquis bonus vir, consequens videtur, ut neque bonus vir neque aliquis bonus vir sit adeo bonus, sed si quis bonus sit, eo minus sit bonus. Multum itaque

referre videtur, si quis dicatur melior aliquo bono viro et melior, quam sit aliquis bonus vir. *Dialogus* 111, *Dialogue* 103.

31 He can also maintain that, “No one is better than a good man” in the sense that “No one is happier or better off than any good man.” The distinction seems to allow Abailard to have it both ways.

32 Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 3.20-21.

33 That is, “No one is better than a good man, no one more temperate than a temperate man, no one braver than a brave man, nor anyone wiser than a wise man.”

34 Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 3.21-23.

35 *Ibid.* 3.26. Cicero draws the following conclusion concerning transgressions or vice: “How could they appear smaller in size, when every transgression is a transgression caused by the dislocation of system and order, but when system and order have once been dislocated nothing further can be added to make a greater degree of transgression appear possible?”

36 It should be noted that some Stoics admit of the possibility of making moral progress. This factor may have muddied the waters for Abailard and adversely affected his understanding of the Stoic’s conception of virtue.

37 Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, p. 46. The relevant Clement texts are *Stromateis*, ii.135.3; vi.114.5; vii.88.5. See Clement of Alexandria, “Stromata,” *Fathers of the second century* and *Stromata*, Liber 1-3.

38 The adverbial forms of absolutes combine well with other absolutes, but they do not combine well with relative notions. Phrases such as “completely full” or “fully developed” make sense. Phrases such as “absolutely tall” or “completely strong” do not make sense.

39 If this treatment of the term “full” seems idiosyncratic, consider the term “complete” in a variety of contexts. Ordinary language abuses both terms. In certain contexts it seems valid to draw comparisons according to which one thing is said to be more or less complete than another. However, consider a complete English sentence or a complete symbolic sentence. Here, “complete” is clearly absolute. Given two incomplete phrases or symbolic formula, it is not the case that one is more “complete” than the other or that one is more a sentence than the other. If attributes such as “full,” “complete,” “perfect” have an absolute sense (even if they do not always have an absolute sense), then it is reasonable to suppose that “good” also has an absolute sense

within certain contexts. If “good” has both an absolute and a relative sense, then it is crucial to determine which sense is intended within a particular context.

40 In his *Physics*, Aristotle defines excellence in terms of perfection. “When anything acquires its excellence, it is then called perfect, for then it is most natural—as a circle is perfect when it becomes most a circle, when it is best.” *Physics*, 246a 13-16. In the *Metaphysics*, we are told that a thing’s excellence is a kind of fulfilment of the thing in relation to its end. According to Aristotle, “Excellence is a completion; for each thing is complete and every substance is complete, when in respect of the form of its proper excellence it lacks no part of its natural magnitude. The things which have attained their end, this being good, are called complete; for things are complete in virtue of having attained their end.” *Metaphysics*, 1021b, 20-21.

41 Seneca defines man’s telos as perfect reason: “perfect reason is man’s peculiar good....Therefore every thing, when it has perfected its own good, is praiseworthy and has reached the end of its own nature, and man’s own good is reason, if he has perfected reason, he is praiseworthy and has attained the end of his nature. This perfect reason is called virtue and it is identical to rectitude.” Seneca, *Ad Lucilium epistolae morales*, 76.9-10. Also see, “Letters,” 1:63D, p. 63. According to the report of Diogenes Laertius, “Another particular definition of the good which they (the Stoics) give is ‘the natural perfection of a rational being qua rational’” (*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 2.8, pp. 95-96).

42 What constitutes a tall human being today in North America differs substantially from what constituted a tall human being among the inhabitants of Jonathan Swift’s imagined Lilliput.

43 There is a different sense in which attributes such as tall are “relative.” If Paul is six feet, then Paul is tall for a man but is short for a tree. If John is strong, then he is strong compared to other men but weak compared to an ox. I am not claiming that what I have called “absolute attributes” cannot be “relative” in this second sense. What is good for a human being may not be good for a horse. Nor does my use of the term “absolute” imply that such an attribute cannot be lost. The cask of wine may be full today, but with any luck it won’t be full tomorrow. Similarly, good may be qualified of something under certain conditions and not in others. However, if a thing is good, in the absolute sense, then it is not the case that it could be better.

44 See *Dialogus* 101, 102, 115 and 117; *Dialogue* 92, 93, 109, 111.

45 The requirement that beatitude admit of degrees exerts an extraordinary pressure on Abailard’s definition of the supreme good and evil for human beings.

Instead of defining the supreme good as a final, joyful state, Abailard defines it as love of God and he defines the supreme evil as hatred of God. This leads to a number of further puzzles which force Abailard to conceive of the supreme good as “unlimited.” Marilyn McCord Adams has wonderfully captured the essence of Abailard’s conception of the two post death states with her phrases, “a gracious spiral of ever-increasing love and bliss” and “a vicious spiral of hatred and torment.” Adams, “Introduction,” Peter Abelard, *Ethical Writings*, p. xviii.

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