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Abelard and the Contemporary Virtue Theory

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Abstract: Contemporary 'Virtue theory' emphasizes the need to return to the moral formation of the individual, following the ethical model provided by Aristotle. According to MacIntyre, an important representative of this theory, Stoicism favored the development of modern and contemporary ethics by highlighting notions such as will, consent, and natural or divine law. The development of the moral agent itself was consequently neglected. In the twelfth century Abelard presents a hybrid ethics, which maintains at the same time the Aristotelian theory of virtue and elements of Stoic morality. In the present study, we consider MacIntyre's criticism of Abelardian ethics, estimated to be at the origin of modern and contemporary moral conceptions.

Keywords: Abelard, Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotle, Stoicism, Virtue Theory, Consent.

I. Introduction

Aristotelian ethics gained new life, from the second half of the twentieth century, with the so-called 'Virtue theory'. Its defenders present a severe criticism of the modern and contemporary ethical conceptions prevailing in the last five centuries. The return to Aristotle allows, among other things, to emphasize the importance of the moral formation of the individual, who has desires, interests and needs, and not just duties and obligations.

According to MacIntyre, one of the most important representatives of this contemporary Virtue theory, the philosopher Peter Abelard has a certain precursor role in the development of modern ethics, by highlighting notions such as will, intention, and consent, especially in his explanation of moral fault. In this way, the author of the Middle Ages would neglect, to some extent, the traditional Aristotelian theory of virtue and, consequently, the character (ἦθος) of the individual in moral action. According to MacIntyre, the source to which Abelard and his celebrated inspirer, Augustine, refer is Stoicism, which not only links the essentials of the inner moral life to an external natural or divine Law, but also diminishes the relevance of virtue, placing it on an unattainable level.

In this paper, we intend to investigate the correctness of this information provided by MacIntyre about Abelard's ethics. In other words, our purpose is to show to what extent Abelard constitutes both a precursor of modern ethics and a partial renouncer of Aristotelian virtue theory. To achieve this objective, we first examine Abelard's own conception of moral fault. In this way, we will see the importance given by our medieval author to the notions of will and consent, besides highlighting the main sources that influenced him on these themes. Afterwards, we consider what this contemporary virtue theory basically consists of and who its main representatives are. This investigation then leads us to MacIntyre's own analysis of Abelard's contribution to the history of ethics and, more specifically, his contribution or otherwise to virtue theory. Despite presenting a very serious and pertinent study of the situation of Abelardian morality, MacIntyre conceals or neglects some decisive elements of this ethics in order to be able to reach, in our view, a definitive conclusion. Finally, we indicate what seems to us to be the main contribution of Abelard's ethics, which proves to be even more contemporary than MacIntyre estimates.

II.I. Moral Fault and Consent in Abelard

At the end of the eleventh century, Pope Urban II writes: "Many acts appear evil without actually being so, because they do not proceed from a bad intention." (Jolivet, 1994, p. 99).[1] It is in this historical context that Abelard tries to give, in his *Ethics or Know Yourself* (*Ethica sive Scito teipsum*) (Abaelardus, 1971, 2001) – called, from now on, *Ethica* –, an adequate explanation of the true cause of moral fault (*peccatum*). In other words, what must the penitent confess? The bad action? The evil desire? The bad will? Or, perhaps, his own vicious nature? Urban already warns that one should not evaluate only the acts that may, at first sight, seem to us reprehensible. The penalty resulting from the lack of morality has to be proportional to the wickedness committed. It cannot be solely dependent on visible acts or the repertories, famous at the time, that enumerate lists of sins and corresponding punishments to be fulfilled, such as the *Instituta canonum* or the *Instituta sanctorum patrum* (Abaelardus, 1971, pp. xxxii-xxxiii, 104-105, 108-109; Cross & Levingstone, 1974, pp. 1059-1060). In the present part, we examine the answer given by Abelard in his *Ethica* to the following question: what is to be condemned? This investigation allows us to distinguish, at first, the main notions related to the question of moral fault. Next, we try to identify the sources to which Abelard refers in this question.

[1] "Beaucoup d'actes paraissent mauvais sans l'être en réalité, parce qu'ils ne procèdent pas d'une intention mauvaise (...)."

In the treatise *Ethica*, Abelard clearly states that moral fault does not result from bad action, neither from bad will nor perverse desire, not even from vice, but rather from the inner act of consent. Let us see what he says about it:

> "So it is vice that makes us disposed to sin – that is, we are inclined to consent (*ad consenciendum*) to what is inappropriate, so that we do it or renounce it. This consent (*consensum*) is what we properly call "sin", the fault of the soul whereby it merits damnation or is held guilty before God. For what is this consent but scorn (*contemptus*) for God and an affront against him?" (*Abaelardus*, 1995, p. 2-3; *Abaelardus*, 2001, p. 3).[2]

In this passage, Abelard emphasizes what moral fault consists of. It is not about vice, even if it predisposes us to eventually commit it. Being the main sting to incite bad action, the vicious character of an individual constitutes an element of fundamental importance for any ancient ethics, notably Aristotelian, but vice does not in itself constitute a moral fault for Abelard. What makes us guilty is consenting to offend the divine Will. This conduct towards God immediately excludes both the external action that follows consent and the evil desire or bad will that precedes it in the sinful sphere. According to Abelard, the external act in no way increases the fault or the will, as he says in this passage:

> "Therefore, any kind of carrying out of deeds (*operum exsecucio*) is irrelevant to increasing a sin. Nothing taints the soul but what belongs to it, namely the consent (*consensus*) that we've said is alone the sin, not the will preceding it or the subsequent doing of the deed." (*Abaelardus*, 1995, p. 10; *Abaelardus*, 2001, p. 15).[3]

Abelard's words are clear with regard to the nature of moral fault. However, it is necessary to clarify what he means by will in this context since the reality to which this term refers is liable to lead to confusion. Abelard seems to consider that the word *voluntas* is too imprecise to be used to identify moral fault. In his work, both ethical and theological, *voluntas* concerns in general the desire or concupiscence that precedes, as we have seen, consent.[4] There are some exceptions to this usage, as can be seen in the treatise entitled *Commentaria in Epistolam Pavli ad Romanos*, in which the author states: "(…) properly speaking, <sin concerns> the very guilt of the soul and the contempt of God, i.e., our perverse will by which we stand guilty before God (…)." (Abaelardus, 1969, p. 164).[5] In this last precise case, Abelard claims that he takes up what is said about sin from the Scriptures. In any case, Abelard tries in the *Ethica* to specify his vocabulary employing, most of the time, *voluntas* in the more restricted sense of desire, which certainly does not correspond to the Aristotelian *boulêsis* (βούλησις) as a rationalized appetite[6], nor always to

[2] "Vicium itaque est, quo ad peccandum proni efficimur, hoc est inclinamur ad consenciendum ei, quod non conuenit, ut illud scilicet faciamus aut dimittamus. Hunc uero consensum proprie peccatum nominamus, hoc est culpam anime, qua dampnacionem meretur, uel apud deum rea statuitur. Quid est enim hic consensus nisi dei contemptus et offensa illius?"

[3] "Nichil igitur ad augmentum peccati pertinet qualiscumque operum exsecucio, et nichil animam, nisi quod ipsius est, inquinat, hoc est consensus, quem solummodo esse peccatum diximus, non uoluntatem eum precedentem uel actionem operis subsequentem."

[4] Abelard seems to agree with the thesis that sin cannot be a substance, which would be created by God, that is, it cannot be something positive, as Augustine claimed. But our author is contrary, with few exceptions, to the idea according to which it would rather be a bad will, as it was defended at the time of Abelard by representatives of the School of Anselm of Laon. Cf. (Blomme, 1958, pp. 10-12; Abaelardus, 1971, p. 8, footnote 2)

[5] This sentence is taken from a passage in which Abelard points out that there are in Scripture various ways of calling sin: "Pluribus autem modis peccati nomen Scriptura sacra accipit: uno quidem modo et proprie pro ipsa animi culpa et contemptu Dei, id est praua uoluntate nostra qua rei apud Deum statuimur (...)." See (Abaelardus, *Expositio in epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, 1855, pp. 866B, 942B; 1971, p. 25, footnote 5; 2001*, p. 74; 2001, p. 16).

[6] Cf. Aristotle. *De anima* II, 3, 414a 29-34; III, 10, 433a 23-25. In this last reference, Aristotle clearly states: "(...) (ἡ γὰρ βούλησις ὄρεξις ὅταν δὲ κατὰ τὸν λογισμὸν κινῆται, καὶ κατὰ βούλησιν κινεῖται) (...)". "(...) (for will is a form of appetite, and when movement accords with calculation, it accords also with choice (κατὰ βούλησιν)) (...)" (Aristotle, 1995, p. 188). Cf. Aristotle. *Ethica Nichomachea* III, 4, 1111b 19-30; III, 6, 1113a 13-1113b 2; IX, 6, 1167b 5-16.

Augustinian *voluntas*, which is equivalent, in certain contexts, to Abelardian consent.[7] In short, Abelard does not in general consider that moral fault consist in bad will, reduced in this way to a simple natural desire, even if he agrees with the precepts of Urban II, according to which intention, rather than act, must be prioritized in the evaluation of deviation from the divine will. Despite this, Abelard was condemned, at the Council of Sens in 1140, for having taught, which he refutes: "Quod neque opus neque voluntas (...) peccatum sit." (Abaelardus, *Confessio fidei*, 1855, pp. 107-108).[8]

II. II. The Sources of the Abelardian Idea of Consent (*consensus*)

Identifying the nature of moral fault with consent is not a novelty in the history of thought, although in affirming this conception, Abelard is more explicit and consistent than his predecessors. Augustine is known to have defended the thesis that will is the principle from which we act. Thus, the moral fault comes from a bad will and not from a weak nature that desires something evil and delights in it. This concupiscence becomes sin only when the will agrees (*approbare*) to such an impulse. In this case, Augustine sometimes uses *consensus* or the equivalent, as in *De continentia*, in which he states: "(...) <the psalmist> says shortly afterwards: [9] 'Do not let my heart incline to evil words.'[10] Is this inclination of the heart something other than consent (*consensus*) itself? (...). However, if <someone> consents, <then he> has already said in his heart, even if he did not say anything through his mouth." (Augustinus, 1845, p. 350)[11]. In the treatise *Expositio ad Romanos*, Augustine is even more explicit: "Indeed, we do not sin because of our own bad desire, but rather due to our consent". (Augustinus, 1841, p. 2066).[12]

Is Augustine the inventor of this consensual notion of moral fault? Although he is the propagator par excellence in the Latin West of the idea of will as the source of acting and, in particular, of the thesis of the moral fault as consent to bad will, Augustine takes up, in this case, the old psycho-epistemological theory from the ancient Stoicism (Rohmer, 1954, pp. 491-498; Voelke, 1973, pp. 192, 199-200; O'Daly, 1987, pp. 89, 102). Without going into details, the Stoic notion of assent (συγκατάθεσις), translated into Latin as *adsensio* or *adsensus* – both terms equivalent to *consensus* –, is strictly connected to the theme of the criteria of truth[13], which constitutes the key element used to justify the empirical character of knowledge. Essentially connected with the governing and rational part of the soul (ἡγεμονικόν), the assent also plays a decisive role with respect to human conduct.

Stoic assent has a determining intermediary function between impression (φαντασία) and impulse (ὁρμή), which allows it to move naturally from the sphere of knowledge to the realm of morality (Long & Sedley, 1987, pp. 450-451). In other words, this strict link that exists between assent and impulse allows

[7] There are many texts by Augustine in which we find this idea. We cite only some of them: Augustinus. *De duabus animabus contra Manichaeos* X, XI, XII; *De continentia* II, 3; *Sermo* CLV, 1; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CXVIII, 3; *De libero arbítrio* III, X, 29. See (Blomme, 1958, pp. 103-217; Lottin, 1942, pp. 21-32, 117-118; Hamelin, 1996, pp. 192-205; Abaelardus, 1971, p. xxxiv).

[8] "Sin is neither an act nor a will." See (Abaelardus, 1971, pp. 8-9, footnote 2; Blomme, 1958, pp. 261-274).

[9] After the following passage: "(2) Deliver me, Lord, from the wicked; preserve me from the violent, (3) from those who plan evil in their hearts, who stir up conflicts every day, (4) who sharpen their tongues like serpents, venom of asps upon their lips." (New American Bible. *Psalm* 140, 2-4.)

[10] *Psalm* 141, 4. In a contemporary version we find: "Do not let my love incline to evil, or yield to any sin." (New American Bible).

[11] "(...) continuo subdidit: "Ne declines cor meum in verba maligna." (PS CXLI, 4) Declinatio cordis quid est nisi consensio? (...) Si autem consensit, iam corde dixit, etiamsi ore non sonuit."

[12] "Non enim in ipso desiderio pravo, sed in nostra consensione peccamus." Cf. Augustinus. *Sermo* III, VI; *De sermone in monte* I, 12, 34; *Enarratio in Psalmum* 3, 118.

[13] We give our assent to reliable impressions, which respect precise criteria; they must be caused by real objects with clarity, accuracy, etc. See: Long & Sedley, 1987, pp. 241-253; Hamelin, 2010, pp. 180-183.

us to trust both truth and desire in relation to the state of affairs, which constitutes the content of an impression since we have the capacity to agree to act or not to act. (Long & Sedley, 1987, pp. 236-237).

III. The Contemporary Virtue Ethics

In the second half of the twentieth century, a new interest emerged in ancient and medieval virtue theory, notably that of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.[14] Inspired and initiated by thinkers such as Elizabeth Anscombe (1957, 1958), Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), Philippa Foot (1967, 1978), and others (Horton & Mendus, 1994)[15], this current of thought basically emphasizes the following aspect: the question raised from modern ethics "What should I do?" is perhaps inadequate. According to some of the authors mentioned: "(...) it seems impossible to decipher the enigmatic meaning of "moral duty" (Ph. Foot) (...)." (Silva Santos, 2001, p. 338) We should rather ask: "What kind of person should I be?" (Pence, 1991, p. 249). In other words, as Marcia Baron says in a reference article on the subject: "I use "ethics of virtue" to refer to all those views which deny that it is a necessary condition of perfectly moral personhood that one be governed by a concept of duty (i.e., of what we morally ought to do (...))." (1985, p. 47).

At first, contemporary "virtue theory" presented itself as a severe criticism of the prevailing ethical conceptions of its time, such as those of the Enlightenment and Kantian traditions, of utilitarianism and emotivism, which leave aside the theme of virtue and character (ἦθος) of the moral agent, who also has interests and desires. The approach of these ethical theories is reduced, as Bento Silva Santos says, to a specific topic: "(...) the ethical question as a problem of determining the just or correct action and its rules, and as a problem of justifying the duty or obligation to perform just actions and to follow specific rules." (2001, p. 328)

In a second moment, this "virtue theory" tries to recover the ethical conception of pre-moderns, emphasizing above all the fact that it is necessary to return to the historical context[16], in which this ethics was developed, in order to understand the exact meaning of notions perfected at the time, such as those of virtue, character, intention, and finality, among others.[17] As Greg Pence states: "Alasdair MacIntyre agreed with Anscombe and carried her analysis further. In his view, modern societies have inherited no single ethical tradition from the past, but fragments of conflicting traditions: we are Platonic perfectionists in saluting gold autonomy. No wonder that intuitions conflict in moral philosophy. No wonder people feel confused medalists in the Olympics; utilitarians in applying the principle of triage to the wounded in war; Lockeans in affirming rights over property; Christians in idealizing charity, compassion and equal moral worth; and followers of Kant and Mill in affirming personal." (1991, p. 251). In short, Aristotelian ethics would be, particularly for MacIntyre, an essential alternative to modern ethics.

[14] "Aristotelian ethics is, for A. MacIntyre, the paradigmatic expression of the morality of virtue, from which he outlines the historical vicissitudes in the heroic societies, in Athens from the V-VI centuries BC until the Middle Ages, to verify afterward to which radical metamorphosis the concept of virtue is submitted in modern ethics." (Silva Santos, 2001, p. 336).

[15] A good summary of the question in Portuguese can be found in (Silva Santos, 2001).

[16] In comparison with the incongruity of the language in natural science in a fictional world described by MacIntyre, the language of contemporary morality also seems to be disconnected from the ancient reality to which it refers: "The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. (...) For a prerequisite for understanding the present disordered state of the imaginary world was to understand its history (...)" (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 2-3).

[17] "We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality. (...) the language and the appearances of morality persist even though the integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed." (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 2, 5).

Contemporary virtue theory is now a well-established conception that continues to strengthen, especially in taking advantage of the valuable criticism leveled by representatives of modern and contemporary ethics, who were under attack (Silva Santos, 2001, pp. 347-357). In any case, Abelardian ethics is analyzed in the great historical synthesis of Alasdair MacIntyre's book, *After virtue*, in the section devoted to the Middle Ages entitled "Medieval Aspects and Occasions" (1984, pp. 165-180). Actually the chapter is quite eclectic and deals as much with elements of the philosophy of Aristotle, the Stoics, and others ancient thinkers as with the thought of medieval authors. But even so, important aspects of Abelardian ethics are examined in detail. In the next part, we want to present what exactly MacIntyre says about the place held by Abelard in the history of virtue theory.

IV. MacIntyre's Criticism of the Abelardian Ethics.

First of all, it must be pointed out that the medieval world found the entire work of Aristotle relatively late, which implies that the authors of the Middle Ages before the second half of the twelfth century, who had only a limited part of this production, could hardly develop a moral conception based entirely on Aristotelian ethics. This is what MacIntyre states in the beginning of his chapter on the Middle Ages when he says that even Thomas Aquinas knew Aristotle only in versions and translations.[18] In any event, the author points out that there was in the twelfth century what some call a "Medieval Renaissance" (Paré, Brunet & Tremblay, 1933; Gandillac & Jeauneau, 1968; Benson, Constable & Lanhan, 1982; MacIntyre, 1984, p. 167; Wetherbee, 1988, pp. 21-53), with the rediscovery of classical texts, such as the ones from Macrobius, Virgil, Cicero, and others, which gave access to the moral thought of the ancients, especially Aristotle. This is the case of Abelard, who not only took advantage of this arrival of new literary and philosophical works, but also benefited, as remarkable logician, from the *logica uetus* and Boethius' commentaries on this corpus of treatises.

MacIntyre states subsequently that Abelard tries to distinguish in his *Ethica* vice from sin or moral fault, as we have seen, from the Aristotelian definition of virtue.[19] In fact, there is, in the second part of that treatise, an incomplete description of virtue transmitted by Boethius in Aristotelian terms. On the one hand, it should not be forgotten that Abelard reconstituted the essentials of the ontology of Aristotelian virtue from the *Categories*, a treatise that was available at the time. On the other hand, MacIntyre continues, Abelard defines, this time in the *Dialogus*, the cardinal virtues and their respective main subspecies in the style of Cicero, and not of Aristotle (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168). Moreover, MacIntyre adds, Abelard criticizes, through the Christian, the Philosopher of the *Dialogus*[20] for presenting a pagan conception of the supreme Good and for emphasizing the relation of human will to good and evil (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168). Where is MacIntyre going with these remarks? Let us continue a little further our examination of his evaluation of Abelardian ethics before answering that question.

[18] "(...) the medieval world encountered Aristotle relatively late and even Aquinas encountered him only in translation; and when it did encounter him, what he provided was at best a partial solution to a medieval problem which had already been stated time and again." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 165).

[19] "In Abelard's *Ethics*, written about 1138, the key distinction (...) is that between a vice and a sin. What Abelard took to be Aristotle's definition of virtue, transmitted to him by Boethius, is put to use to provide a corresponding definition of a vice." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168). MacIntyre exaggerates here what is essential in this Abelardian treatise. Even if there is an important distinction between vice and sin, Abelard tries above all to show in this work that sin consists in consenting to evil, which is to despise God: "Vt ergo breui conclusione supradicta colligam (...) ipsum peccatum, quod in consensu mali uel contemptu dei statuimus (...)." (Abaelardus, 2001, p. 21).

[20] The full title of the work is: *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum*, also known as *Collationes*. Therefore, the Christian and the Philosopher in question are, with the Jew, the main characters of this treatise. On the different titles of this work, see (Abaelardus, 2001*, pp. xxiii-xxv).

In contrast to Aristotelian ethics, the notion of will becomes, according to MacIntyre, the cornerstone of Abelard's morality, which leaves in the background the theory of virtue and its opposite, vice (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168). In his analysis of moral fault or sin, the medieval author implicitly lets it be understood that even a vicious person does not necessarily act in a wrong way, since, as MacIntyre says: "Everything turns on the character of the interior act of will." (1984, p. 168). Indeed, the wicked man has a tendency to act badly, but he commits no fault if he does not consent to act out of his vicious nature.

MacIntyre's analysis seems so far accurate and corresponds to our explanation, in the first part of this paper, of the identification of moral fault with consent in Abelard's ethics. The virtuous or vicious nature of the moral agent becomes simply an extrinsic element to the will, like the external act. It is, however, necessary to correct the use of the word 'will' in MacIntyre's explanation, who uses the term in the Augustinian sense, as we have seen before. This is a detail of some importance, since Abelard avoids *voluntas* because of its inaccuracy.

Afterward, MacIntyre convincingly shows that an ethical theory which prioritizes the interiority of the will over other external principles originates not only from some New Testament texts, but above all from the philosophy of the ancient Stoics (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168).[21] According to the Stoa School, good actions depend on the agent who has 'good will', an expression equivalent to 'right reasoning' approved by consent (συγκατάθεσις) (Hamelin, 2010). Virtue practically no longer intervenes in the ethical process since only the sage (σόφος) can achieve it as the unique good. On the same occasion, the notion of finality (τέλος), as expounded by Aristotle, is abandoned, insofar as this Stoic will must conform to the Law of Nature or λόγος. This accordance with the Universal Law is opposed to the world of particular and social circumstances. The result of this transformation is that the end of the individual lies outside of him and to live well means from now on to follow the Cosmic Order, and no longer his own desires and goals (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 168-170). In MacIntyre's own terms: "If I am right then, Stoicism is a response to one particular type of social and moral development, a type of development which strikingly anticipates some aspects of modernity. (...) Indeed whenever the virtues begin to lose their central place, Stoic patterns of thought and action at once reappear." (I984, p. 170).

We have seen that the main source of the Abelardian notion of *consensus* is Augustine. In the continuation of the same chapter, MacIntyre explains the importance of this author in the conception according to which human nature becomes bad because of the consent given by the will to evil. This evil is of such an essence that the will can take pleasure in it. On the one hand, says MacIntyre, Augustine defends, like Abelard, the idea that evil is a disrespect for the divine law; to consent to evil is precisely willing to offend this law (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 175). On the other hand, virtues make it possible to combat this evil, as conceived by Augustine and other medieval thinkers, but these same virtues, adapted by Christians to their way of thinking, no longer correspond to Aristotle's ethical theory (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 175-176). According to the latter, virtue can overcome human adversity to a certain extent, but great misfortunes prevent us from attaining happiness. On the contrary, no one is excluded from good in the Christian historical view; any evil that may happen to someone does not make it impossible for him to approach that good. At the height of the Middle Ages, the same difference in the conception of virtue can be observed in Thomas Aquinas, as MacIntyre states:

> "(...) Aquinas cannot of course mean by the Latin names of the cardinal virtues entirely what Aristotle meant by their Greek equivalents, since one or more of the cardinal virtues must contain within itself both patience and another biblical virtue which Aquinas explicitly acknowledges, namely humility. Yet in the only place in Aristotle's account of the virtues where anything resembling humility is mentioned, it is as a vice, and patience is not mentioned at all by Aristotle." (*MacIntyre*, 1984, p. 177)

[21] Charles H. Kahn defends a similar thesis. See (Kahn, 1988).

From this brief analysis, we can infer the essentials of what MacIntyre highlights about the Abelardian moral conception regarding virtue. From now on, the primacy of Abelard's ethics concerns the notions of choice and decision, called *consensus*, which refer to the inner mental act corresponding, if any, to moral fault, but also to individual freedom and human responsibility. In some ways virtues were left in the background or, at least, their nature was partially changed. There was an inversion of values in relation to Aristotelian ethics, especially in the Augustinian tradition, to which Abelard largely belongs. It is not, however, an alteration of the dimension produced by modern philosophy, since virtues continue to have their importance in the Christian conception, but they are transformed to the extent of losing a part of their essence. But even so, the return to the original theory of virtue still remains indispensable and valuable, since only this quality makes it possible to convert the will into something good and, consequently, the consent and the corresponding external action to something good as well.

V. Conclusion: Criticism of MacIntyre's Evaluation of Abelard's Ethics

Before reacting directly to MacIntyre's analysis of Abelard's ethics, we would like initially to emphasize the relevance and pertinence of his general investigation of virtue theory throughout the history of philosophy and his criticism of modern ethics. We agree, however, with the observation put forward by Long regarding, this time, MacIntyre's examination of Aristotelian ethics, according to which it sometimes lacks the fine precision necessary to understand properly the Stagirite's thought. But this difficulty does not prevent, the commentator adds, appreciating the importance of the general thesis defended in *After Virtue*.[22] A similar criticism can be made in relation to the study produced by MacIntyre of Abelard's ethics, insofar as some adjustments are necessary to properly understand Abelardian virtue theory itself. Once this exercise is carried out, it may be inevitable, at the end, to adapt some conclusions to which MacIntyre arrives.

Let us say at the outset that Abelard does not abandon the Aristotelian theory of virtue, despite emphasizing, in his *Ethica*, that the act of consent constitutes a moral fault. In this context, MacIntyre states that the medieval logician defines the notion of vice from what he considers to be Aristotle's conception of virtue, as transmitted by Boethius.[23] In this case, we consider that the Roman transmits, in different commentaries on Aristotle's logic, notably on the *Categories*, the exact view of the Stagirite in relation to the nature of virtue as a stable and almost permanent acquired state, i.e., as *habitus* (Boethius, *In Categorias Aristotelis* iii, 1847, p. 242B-C; *De divisione*, 1847, p. 885B; *De differentiis topicis* ii, 1847, p. 1188C).[24] Furthermore MacIntyre states that Abelard criticizes, through the Christian of the *Dialogus*, the Philosopher for having defined virtue in Ciceronian rather than Aristotelian terms, leaving aside the important relationship between human will and good or evil.[25] In a Christian context, the notion of will becomes, says MacIntyre,

[22] In a footnote from his book *Stoic Studies*, Long states, in chapter 7 entitled *Greek Ethics after MacIntyre*: "In this paper I am not concerned with precise details of MacIntyre's interpretation of Aristotle himself. Some of what he says lacks the sharp analysis necessary to any clear determination of Aristotle's ethical position (...). But MacIntyre's characterization of an 'Aristotelian tradition', not specific to Aristotle, is broadly acceptable, and necessary to the kind of contrast between ancient and modern on which he is engaged." (1996, p. 159, footnote 5).

[23] "In Abelard's *Ethics*, (...), the key distinction which is put to the service of answering this question (How is the practice of the four cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and courage to be related to that of the theological virtues – faith, hope and charity?) is that between a vice and a sin. What Abelard took to be Aristotle's definition of virtue, transmitted to him by Boethius, is put to use to provide a corresponding definition of a vice." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168)

[24] See (Abaelardus, 2001, p. 86; 1971, p. 128, footnote 3; Hamelin, 2015, pp. 75-94).

[25] "Elsewhere (outside the *Ethica*), in Abelard's *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew and a Christian*, the Philosopher, who is the voice of the ancient world, lists and defines the cardinal virtues in Cicero's, not Aristotle's terms. Abelard's accusation against the philosopher is not only or even principally one of positive error; what he stresses are the errors of omission in the pagan moral view, the incompleteness of the pagan account of the virtues, even in its best representatives. This incompleteness is ascribed to the inadequacy both of the Philosopher's conception of the supreme good and of the Philosopher's beliefs about the relationship of the human will to good and evil." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168).

a priority since the virtuous or vicious character of an individual certainly influences his actions, but does not determine it; what causes his external action is the will, which consents or not to act according to divine law.[26] The author of *After Virtue* concludes that: "This interiorization of the moral life with its stress on will and law looks back not only to certain New Testament texts, but also to Stoicism." (1984, p. 168).

In his two main ethical treatises, Abelard focuses precisely on the inner aspect of moral fault not only in the *Dialogus*, but also in the *Ethica*. If MacIntyre wants to give the impression that Abelard's tendency is to move away, even more in his *Dialogus*, from the Aristotelian conception of virtue in order to approach the volitional view of the Stoics in general, and of Augustine in particular, then he is confronted with a problem almost insolvable. To this day, specialists cannot say with certainty the exact dating of these two works, which does not allow us to follow a possible evolution of Abelard's thought in these moral questions.[27] The result is that one cannot maintain that Abelard distances himself even further in the *Dialogus* from the Aristotelian conception of virtue in order to favor the Stoic Christian thesis of volition. As we said above, in both the *Dialogus* and the *Ethica*, Abelard emphasizes the notions of will and consent without abandoning or leaving in the background the Aristotelian theory of virtue.

It is true that Abelard tends to internalize moral life in his two treatises under study, as MacIntyre claims, especially in the *Ethica*, in which the focus is certainly more on the notion of consent than will. This distinction is important for Abelard, who wants, as a logician, to clearly differentiate the two realities. Nevertheless, MacIntyre states without hesitation that the inner act of decision to do something or not, i.e., to sin or not to sin, is an act of will,[28] which is not unanimous among specialists.[29] Moreover, this act of will constitutes, for the Christian, the only essential element of moral life, in such a way that MacIntyre concludes: "The true arena of morality is that of the will and of the will alone." (1984, p. 168).

While moral fault is apparently caused, for Augustine, by a volitional act, Abelard seems rather to defend that it is an act of reason, which would bring him closer to the Aristotelian thought once again. In the same way that the Stagirite distinguishes the will (βούλησις), which rationally aims at an object, from the rational act of decision (προαίρεσις), which chooses, after deliberation (βούλευσις), the best option to reach that same object, Abelard differentiates the will (*voluntas*), which desires something, from the consent (*consensus*), which decides, after the evaluation of prudence (*prudentia*),[30] to comply or not with that desire. In this case, the Aristotelian virtue favors not only the choice of a good object, but allows above all the making of insightful decisions through prudence (φρόνησις) to obtain this good. Therefore, in emphasizing the importance of acquiring the various stable and almost permanent moral virtues, as well as of conquering the firm intellectual virtue of prudence, it seems clear to us that Abelard follows closely the footsteps of

[26] "What Christianity requires is a conception not merely of defects of character, or vices, but of breaches of divine law, of sins. An individual's character may at any given time be a compound of virtues and vices, and these dispositions will preempt the will to move in one direction or another. But it is always open to the will to assent to or dissent from these promptings." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168).

[27] For a relatively complete clarification of the question of the dating of these two treatises, see (Abaelardus, 2001*, pp. xxvii-xxxii; Mews, 1985, pp. 104-126).

[28] "But it is always open to the will to assent to or dissent from these promptings. (...) Everything turns on the character of the interior act of will. Character therefore, the arena of the virtues and vices, simply becomes one more circumstance, external to will." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168).

[29] The literature on this subject is vast and the opinions are divided. See (Blomme, 1957, 1958, pp. 113-219; Siano, 1971; Gandillac, 1975, pp. 585-610; Marenbon, 1997, *passim*; Hamelin, 2010*, pp. 23-39).

[30] There is a passage in the *Ethica* in which the term *prudentia* is not found, but a synonym, *provide* (with foresight), with which the notion of reason is clearly associated: "Si ergo non tam pro honore sibi conseruando quam pro hac communi erubescencia ecclesiae confiteri distulit, prouide hoc, non superbe fecit. Timor quoque in causa racionabilis fuit de dampno ecclesie magis quam de proprie detrimento fame." (Abaelardus, 2001, p. 68).

Aristotle.[31] In this way, he irremediably departs from the unitary conception of Stoic virtue. In short, the will makes it possible to choose an object, and prudence to deliberate with discernment before consent. It should not be forgotten in this kind of analysis that Abelard does not defend, as it will be the case in the thirteenth century with Thomas Aquinas, the existence of a distinct faculty of will.

It is not necessary to accept Long's more specific thesis, according to which the ethical system proper to the Aristotelian tradition essentially approximates that of the Stoics in order to evaluate MacIntyre's general interpretation of Aberlardian morality.[32] It may be accurate that Abelard defines vice, in the *Ethica*, from the description of virtue as transmitted by Boethius (Abaelardus, 1971, pp. 2-4, 32, 40, 128; 2001, pp. 1-3, 21, 27, 85-86), but the point of reference in that case is undoubtedly Aristotle's theory and not that of the Stoics. Despite apparently referring to the unfinished second book of the *Ethica*,[33] MacIntyre seems to forget that Abelard treats virtue there in distinctly Aristotelian terms. In fact, Abelard had access, among other things, to the *Categories*, translated and commented by Boethius, in which the author defines, in the category of quality, the nature of virtue (ἀρετή) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) as *habitus*, i.e., a stable and almost permanent state (ἕξις) acquired by practice – in the case of virtue – and by study – in the case of science or knowledge. The diversity of this acquired quality profoundly transforms the character (ἦθος) of the individual, who will eventually consent to act well thanks to prudence or more properly to discernment (*prudentia*).

In the *Dialogus*, we also find a description of the nature of virtue in terms similar to those of the *Ethica*. Once again Abelard refers on this occasion to Aristotle and Boethius through the Philosopher of the dialogue.[34] In fact, Abelard alludes to Cicero only to describe the four cardinal virtues (Abaelardus, 2001*, pp. 130-138[35]) – which are attributed to Socrates[36] – since he preserves, as we have seen, the important Aristotelian idea about the essence of virtue. Moreover, Abelard directly criticizes the Stoic conception of virtue through this time the Christian[37], especially the so-called theory of the 'unity of virtue', which

[31] Besides the moral virtues, the intellectual virtue of prudence is particularly important for Abelard in his two main treatises on ethics. See (Abaelardus, 2001, p. 85; 2001*, pp. 130-134).

[32] "MacIntyre appears to regard Stoicism as a different kind of moral system from the 'Aristotelian tradition' and this, I shall argue, is a mistake." (Long, 1996, p. 157).

[33] "What Abelard took to be (in the *Ethics*) Aristotle's definition of virtue, transmitted to him by Boethius, is put to use to provide a corresponding definition of a vice." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 168)

[34] "Virtus, inquiunt, est habitus animi optimus; sic e contrario uitium arbitror esse habitum animi pessimum. Habitum uero hunc dicimus, quem Aristoteles in *Categoriis* distinxit, cum in habitu et dispositione primam qualitatis speciem comprehendit. Est igitur habitus qualitas rei non naturaliter insita, sed studio ac deliberatione conquisita et difficile mobilis. (...) Hic etiam, uirtutem omnem difficile mobilem esse asserens, cum in predicto *Qualitatis* tractatu Aristotilem exponeret scientias et virtutes inter habitus collocantem, "Virtus enim", inquit, "nisi difficile mutabilis non est. Neque enim qui semel iuste iudicat iustus est, neque qui semel adulterium facit est adulter, sed cum ista uoluntas cogitatioque permanserit." (...) Vnde Aristotiles, a uirtutibus scientias distinguens, cum in predicto *Qualitatis* tractatu de habitu exempla subiceret, "Tales", inquit, "sunt scientie uel uirtutes." Quem quidem locum Boetius exponens ait: "Aristotiles enim uirtutes non putat scientias ut Socrates."" (Abaelardus, 2001*, pp. 128-132)

[35] In his presentation of the subspecies of the cardinal virtues, Abelard also uses the descriptions presented by Cicero in his treatises *De inuentione* and *De officiis*, by Ambrose also in his *De officiis*, and finally by Macrobius in his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. See (Abaelardus, 2001*, pp. 138 ff, mainly p. 139, footnote 128).

[36] "Socrates quidem, per quem primum uel maxime moralis discipline studium conualuit, quatuor uirtutis species distinguit: prudentiam scilicet, iustitiam, fortitudinem, temperantiam." (Abaelardus, 2001*, p. 130).

[37] Over the past few decades, Abelard specialists have examined in detail the following question: which character in the *Dialogus* defends Abelard's own thought. In most cases, the Christian seems to present his own ideas, even if the Philosopher also occasionally states his positions, especially in the first part of the dialogue with the Jew. On this subject, Marenbon states: "In elaborating these doctrines (of Christianity) in a characteristically Abelardian way, as he does in the Christian's contributions, is Abelard not simply writing on his own behalf? The exact correspondence between the Christian's views and Abelard's own, on almost every occasion where a parallel allows the comparison to be made, seems to confirm this point." (Abaelardus, 2001*, p. liv) See (Jolivet, 1963, pp. 181-189; Marenbon, 1992, pp. 302 ff.).

reduces to one the diversity of virtues.[38] This single Stoic good is after all conquered only by the Stoic sage (σόφος), an enigmatic and, above all, nonhuman character, who is the only one to reason infallibly and to act always according to Nature and universal Reason (λόγος) (Hamelin, 2010**).

In brief, emphasizing the intention and free decision or consent of the moral agent in the evaluation of his actions, it is true that Abelard can be seen as one of the precursors of modern ethics. In this case, the same observation also refers to Augustine, who was influenced by the Stoics on this issue. It is also true that Abelard defends, with rigor worthy of a logician, the Stoic theory of the indifference of external acts, and takes up, through the Augustinian filter, the Stoic idea of consent. However, Abelard never abandoned the complex Aristotelian theory of virtue and its importance in the moral formation of the individual and in his making of practical decisions; the human being is not reduced to a pure will, without desire or passion, or to a mere reason. Virtue remains paramount to achieving the ultimate objective. Finally, it would be perhaps more accurate to say that Abelard is not truly a predecessor of modern ethics, but rather the precursor of the most recent synthesis, seen today in contemporary ethics, of virtue theory with the so-called moral theory of values (Silva Santos, 2001, pp. 327-357).

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[38] "Philosophus: Qui (Cicero) etiam in *Paradoxis* non solum in uirtutibus bonos, uerum etiam in peccatis ita equat malos, ut omnia peccata paria esse astruat. Christianus: Nunc primo te importunum impudenter fieri et corrixari magis quam philosophari uideo: quippe, ne ad confessionem manifete ueritatis cogi uidearis, ad patentissime falsitatis insaniam te conuertis, ut omnes uidelicet bonos equaliter bonos, omnes reos equaliter reos, et omnes pariter eadem gloria uel pena censeas dignos. Philosophus: (...) Quod si in caritate nemo alium transcendit, utique nec in uirtutibus aut meritis, cum omnem, ut dicis, caritas complectatur uirtutem. Christianus: (...) Et quamuis secundum specierum distinctionem omnes uirtutes aliquibus inesse concedamus, cum uidelicet unusquisque illorum sit iustus et fortis et temperans, non omnino tamen in uirtutibus aut meritis eos esse pares annuimus, cum alium alio iustiorem uel fortiorem seu modestiorem esse contigat." (Abaelardus, 2001*, pp. 116-120) See (Abaelardus, 1971, p. 74; 2001, p. 49).

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