

Peter Abelard and Reconciling Epicurean Philosophy with Christianity through Dialogue

Post by “Charles” of March 12, 2021 at 1:16 PM

Written in circa 1136-1139 by Peter Abelard, an extremely influential and pioneering theologian and Christian philosopher in the Middle Ages. His work led to the adoption of Aristotelian principles into the many aspects of Christian metaphysics and theology, to the extent that he paved the way for Aquinas. Nevertheless, his popularity ensured that some of his written works have survived to this day. While on the forums here the first mention of Abelard and his student John of Salisbury were first mentioned in [this thread](#), there's been little mentioned about them. A couple of notes and citations are in [Joshua's thread](#) about obscure references to EP in art and literature throughout history.

Dialogue Between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian. Which centers around Abelard recalling the conversation within a dream, has the three nameless eponymous characters engage in a high level intellectual discussion about the various natures of philosophy, ethics, religion, law's and Natural Law, and philosophical history. The three go back and forth with Abelard as the spectator and (nearly) an interlocutor by speaking to the trio and to the reader.

The significance of this dialogue is that it appears to be the oldest yet reference to Epicurean Philosophy within the Middle ages, preceding the glimpses of Epicureanism surrounding the life of Dante Alighieri in Florence by a century. In addition to being the first proposed reconciliation between the two philosophies. Abelard, within his dialogue through the character of the Philosopher in debate with the Christian, posits the exact nature of blessedness and so mistakes Epicurus' thoughts on the soul to then liken the Kingdom of Heaven to pleasure as the end of life as detailed by Epicurus.

I'll input the sections below and include a pdf attachment for the rest of the dialogue.

(178) THE PHILOSOPHER: “As a great many of your own people

have remarked, they have defined the ultimate good or final good —

that is, its summation or completion — as ‘what makes anyone who

has arrived at it blessed,' just as conversely the ultimate evil is that the attaining of which makes one wretched. We earn either one of these by our morals. Now it is certain that virtues or the vices contrary to them are called 'morals.' But as Augustine remarks in Book Eight of On the City of God, some of our own people have said that virtue itself is the ultimate good, others that pleasure is."

(179) THE CHRISTIAN: "So what, please, did they understand by pleasure?"

(180) THE PHILOSOPHER: "Not the dishonorable and shameful delight of carnal allurements, as many people suppose, but rather a kind of inner tranquillity of the soul whereby it remains calm and content with its own goods in disasters and good fortune alike, while no sense of sin consumes it. Far be it from philosophers, those greatest despisers of earthly happiness, those distinguished flesh-tamers, to set up the ultimate good in this life's shamefulnesses! Many people attribute this to Epicurus and his followers (that is, the Epicureans) out of ignorance, not really understanding, as we said, what the latter would call pleasure. Otherwise, as we said, if Epicurus had departed as far as is said from the path of soberness and respectability, then Seneca, that greatest morals-builder, who lived a most self-restrained life as you yourselves acknowledge, would hardly have brought in Epicurus' views so often for moral instruction, as if they were his own master's."

(181) THE CHRISTIAN: "Be it as you suppose. But please answer this: Do those who understand pleasure in this way disagree in meaning too, as they do in words, with those who call the ultimate good 'virtue'?"

(182) THE PHILOSOPHER: "There's little or no distance between them, as far as their overall view is concerned. Indeed, to be strong in

virtues is itself to have this tranquillity of the soul, and conversely.”

(183) THE CHRISTIAN: “So there is one view for both of them about the ultimate good, but the nomenclature is different. And so the two apparent views about the ultimate good are reduced to one.”

(184) THE PHILOSOPHER: “So I think.”

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(207) THE PHILOSOPHER: “To tell the truth, I’m learning now that you’re a first-class philosopher, and it’s wrong to resist shamelessly such a plain argument. But according to the argument you’ve set out, a human being’s ultimate good is to be looked for there rather than here. Perhaps this was Epicurus’ view when he said the ultimate good is pleasure. For the soul’s tranquillity is so great that bodily affliction doesn’t disturb it from outside, and neither does any sense of sin disturb the mind nor vice get in its way from inside. Thus its best will is entirely fulfilled.

(208) “On the other hand, as long as something opposes our will or is lacking to it, there’s no true blessedness at all. Surely this is always occurring as long as one is alive here, and the soul, weighed down by its earthly body’s mass and confined in it as though in a jail, doesn’t enjoy true freedom. For who doesn’t sometimes want heat when it’s too cold, or conversely, good weather when he’s tired of rain, or often want more food or clothes than he has? And unless we resist the plain truth, there are countless other things that are pressed upon us against our will or are denied when we want them. Now if as the argument stands the future life’s good is to be regarded as ultimate for us, then I think the virtues we are furnished with here are the way to get there.

We'll have to discuss them more carefully later on [(253)-(295)]."

(209) THE CHRISTIAN: "See, our disputation has brought us to the point of maintaining that a human being's ultimate good, or 'final good' as it was called [(178)], is the future life's blessedness, and virtues are the way to get there.

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(213) THE PHILOSOPHER: "It certainly did seem that way to our forebears, as Cicero describes rather fully in his Rhetoric. But surely when it is said that virtue is to be aspired after for its own sake, not for the sake of something else, reward for merits isn't being ruled out entirely; rather the inclination to earthly advantages is taken away. Otherwise we wouldn't have correctly set up blessedness as the virtues' goal — that is, their final cause — as your Boethius remarks in Book

Two of his Topics, following Themistius. In fact, while giving an example there of the topic 'from the goal,' he says 'If to be blessed is

good, justice is good too.' For here, he says, justice's goal is such that if someone lives in accordance with justice, he is led to blessedness.

Look, he plainly shows here that blessedness is awarded as payment for a just life, and that our purpose in living justly is that we might reach it. Epicurus I think calls this blessedness 'pleasure'; your Christ calls it 'the kingdom of heaven.'

(214) "But what difference does it make what name it is called by, provided that the thing stays the same, the blessedness is different, and

no other purpose for living justly is proposed for philosophers than for Christians? For we, like you, arrange to live justly here that we may be glorified there. We fight against vices here that we may be crowned there with virtues' merits, receiving the ultimate good as our reward."

(215) THE CHRISTIAN: "On the contrary. As far as I can tell, our purpose and merits are quite different from yours, and we disagree quite a bit too about the ultimate good itself."

(216) THE PHILOSOPHER: "Please explain that, if you can."

(217) THE CHRISTIAN: "No one correctly calls that than which something greater is found the 'ultimate good.' For what is below or less than something cannot by any means be called 'supreme' or 'ultimate.' But it is agreed that every human blessedness or glory is far and inexpressibly exceeded by the divine one. Therefore, none besides it is to be called 'ultimate.' Nothing besides it is justly said to be the 'ultimate good.'"

(218) THE PHILOSOPHER: "In this context we do not mean the ultimate good absolutely, but the ultimate human good."

(219) THE CHRISTIAN: "But neither do we correctly call 'ultimate human good' that than which some greater human good is found."

(220) THE PHILOSOPHER: "That's plain, certainly."

[AbelardDialoguePJC.pdf](#)