

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 shamefulneses! 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](#)

Post by "Cassius" of March 12, 2021 at 2:06 PM

Thank you for posting that, Charles.

One of many aspects I find interesting is the part you included:

Quote

(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.'

This calls to my mind how important it is to some people to have a convincing argument on this question -- as to whether a thing can qualify as the "ultimate good" if something can be added to it to make it better (or supreme / ultimate).

This is why I think it's critical to see PD3 as a response to this argument rather than an endorsement of "absence of pain" as a code-word for something other than pleasure.

Lots of these people were focused on the argument of what is BEST, and if they can't conclude that their goal is BEST, and that nothing is higher, then they dismiss it as their goal. From an abstract logical point of view I can see their point, and I firmly believe that that's what Epicurus decided to address with his absence of pain argument. From a logical point of view, pure pleasure with no mixture of pain cannot be made better, and that's the "limit of the quantity of pleasure" that defines the Epicurean goal of life.

It is so perverse to mutate "pure pleasure" with no mixture of pain into something that is not pleasure at all!

But that's what these "reconcilers" apparently including Abelarde were trying to do, and continue to try to do today. They are trying to reconcile death with life, food with poison, and no one should be surprised that the melding of the two does not make any sense.

I have no doubt that Epicurus was very clear to keep these perspectives separate and we would see this stated explicitly if we had more texts. It's clear enough as it is if you realize the context that Plato and Seneca and others had been arguing (that the best cannot be excelled) but today that just strikes us as a word game that's hardly worthy of a response.

Post by "Godfrey" of April 4, 2021 at 3:53 PM

From today's paper, an op-ed about how Christians came to believe in an immortal soul, from a professor of religious studies. (Spoiler alert: it has roots in Plato's deception and trickery....) Personally, I was unaware of how late it came about.

<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/...eaven-hell-soul>

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1915-peter-abelard-and-reconciling-epicurean-philosophy-with-christianity-through-dia/>

Post by “Don” of April 4, 2021 at 4:13 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/...eaven-hell-soul>

Oh! It's by Bart Ehrman! I have great respect for his work. His books are very readable and still scholarly. He has a wonderful informal delivery in his talks as well. Looking forward to reading the article!!

Post by “Cassius” of April 4, 2021 at 4:28 PM

Thanks for the link Godfrey. I'm afraid Don is going to be a little disappointed though, if he thinks there's going to be a lot on Plato. 😊

I would also quibble with this statement:

Jesus urged people to repent in preparation. Some did. Most did not. Jesus' enemies considered his teachings of coming destruction a threat to the existing social order. They had him arrested. The Roman authorities executed him for declaring that God would destroy the world that they themselves ruled.

Not sure exactly whether I would praise or blame Pontius Pilate and the Romans for their role in what happened, but this sentence seems to me to place the onus of the motivation on them, when that's not how I read the history - seems like it was an internal power struggle between sects of the Jews with which the Romans have very little taste for being in the middle of, rather than taking the lead to suppress insurrection.

However I do agree with the main thrust of the article. I've commented on this before, but one of the more interesting pursuits of this that I've run across is in a short book/long article by Thomas Cooper MD, one of the intellectuals of the American founding period and friend of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote "[The Scripture Doctrine of Materialism.](#)" My post at that link contains Jefferson's comment on the book, and I find the book itself to be highly useful in arguing with Christian friends that (like Ehrman says) the idea that the soul is immaterial and lives forever in the clouds is NOT part of what Jesus himself was teaching.

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1915-peter-abelard-and-reconciling-epicurean-philosophy-with-christianity-through-dia/>

Post by “Don” of April 4, 2021 at 5:27 PM

Oh

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I'm afraid Don is going to be a little disappointed though, if he thinks there's going to be a lot on Plato.



it's okay, I didn't expect Plato. I'm a fan of Bart's from way back.

I find the parallels between the original Jewish teaching and Epicurus's philosophy somewhat surprising. I was just reading the Lucretius text for next week's podcast, and he speaks about the soul and mind not being able to exist outside the body. That seems to be what Ehrman is saying about Jesus's beliefs. Now, Epicurus didn't believe in any possibility of a resurrection, but that whole "the soul ceases to exist after death" is reminiscent of Epicurus.

We have to be careful about the Jewish and Roman responsibility for Jesus's execution. The Romans became increasingly "exonerated" when it became increasingly necessary to court Roman favor or at least tolerance of Christians. The Jewish Sanhedrin would have had no power to execute. And the Romans had no interest in intra-religious doctrinal squabbles. Rome was all-powerful. Jesus appears to have been, in their eyes, a rabble-rouser and, and if the episode with the money changers in the temple and his entrance into Jerusalem can be believed, a danger to the social order. He got arrested - probably for sedition and disturbing the peace, got tortured and whipped as per Roman custom, and got summarily executed and left to rot on the cross as an example to others. "Don't be going around talking about the coming destruction of the world - OUR Roman world, by the way - and expect us to look the other way. This is how you'll end up! Got it?!"

Post by “Cassius” of April 4, 2021 at 6:29 PM

Don: You are certainly right that the Biblical version is entitled to no more credibility than the rest of their assertions. This part of the conversation called to mind another source that would be difficult to believe, the Jewish version, in which the Romans were not involved at all. But I give this version credit for being a lot more colorful, with magic words, flying contests, etc: <https://archive.org/details/Schonf...up?view=theater>

Post by “Don” of April 5, 2021 at 11:18 PM

Speaking of Dr. Bart Ehrman, I found this interesting:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/is-ame...heaven-and-hell>

Quote

[Ehrman] maintains as well that he has fewer problems with non-existence than he once had, in part because he has internalized the teachings of Epicurus and Lucretius.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 6, 2021 at 1:17 AM

[Don](#) would you consider Ehrman some sort of Epicurean? Maybe of the Gassendi variety? He seems to have adopted Epicurus' physics to some extent, but I'm curious what his ethical ideas are like.... He does sound quite interesting.

Post by “Cassius” of April 6, 2021 at 6:00 AM

Godfrey I wonder if that statement means that he internalized Epicurean physics, or simply internalized the conclusion of no life after death.

It looks like Erhman has devoted a lot of effort to unwinding Christian / Jewish thought on the afterlife, kind of like Thomas Cooper does in going through his "Scripture doctrine of materialism."

In this context, I think there are a lot of related issues that stem from really understanding the Jewish attitude toward some of these issues (especially on the nature of the soul, afterlife if any). I think a lot of mainline Christians think that their ideas of an eternal soul, afterlife in Heaven, and maybe even in some way rising from the dead to a new life with real bodies, are shared with Judaism, but I gather that that is not true. I have made some effort in the past to get to the bottom of the jewish viewpoint on that by discussing it with the real Jews of my acquaintance without much success.

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Once again, this particular effort and mixed result has confirmed in my mind the imperative to explore these issues as did Epicurus, and be very clear about one's conclusions. You're about to get me started on a tangent that I need to write a separate post about, but I am ready to double down on the viewpoint that there is nothing more important, or even in the neighborhood, of being clear about the nature of the soul being mortal and not subject to supernatural creation or control (the issue really may be "supernatural relation" rather than "supernatural control"). In relation to those issues, the issue of pleasure and Epicurean ethics are strictly secondary, because the propriety of them is entirely dependent on the mortality / supernaturality issues. Anyone who is focused on "pleasure" as the fundamental issue of Epicurean philosophy - I am afraid to say but have to - has missed the boat, the train, the plane, and whole reason for the journey in the first place.

Post by “Don” of April 6, 2021 at 6:35 AM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

[Don](#) would you consider Ehrman some sort of Epicurean? Maybe of the Gassendi variety? He seems to have adopted Epicurus' physics to some extent, but I'm curious what his ethical ideas are like.... He does sound quite interesting.

I think he's "Epicurious" in that he's accepted a material worldview and doesn't believe in an eternal, supernatural life after death. He started out Christian fundamentalist and now considers himself agnostic I believe. This is the first time I've seen him explicitly use Epicurus and Lucretius by name although I was explicitly doing a Google search for that this time.

His professional work has been on the history of Christianity and specifically on the textual history of the Bible. All his books are both scholarly and highly readable.

Post by “Godfrey” of April 6, 2021 at 3:59 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

...there is nothing more important, or even in the neighborhood, of being clear about the nature of the soul being mortal and not subject to supernatural creation or control (the issue really may be "supernatural relation" rather than "supernatural control").

This is actually what prompted me to ask the question. Once someone has reached this conclusion it doesn't necessarily lead to the same ethical conclusions as Epicurus, but since he mentioned him by name I'm curious where Ehrman's thinking led him.

Post by “Matt” of April 9, 2021 at 7:57 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

From today's paper, an op-ed about how Christians came to believe in an immortal soul, from a professor of religious studies. (Spoiler alert: it has roots in Plato's deception and trickery....) Personally, I was unaware of how late it came about.

<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/...eaven-hell-soul>

Interesting article! One thing I've always found interesting is that certain ancient Indo-European cultures held a doctrine of the transmigration of the soul. The best known being the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists but second to them the ancient Celts, specifically the Gauls as reported by Caesar and Alexander Polyhistor. They called it the “Pythagorean” doctrine. That the Celtic druids believed in a sort of reincarnation. I've always believed there is a very deep connection between Vedic and Celtic culture that extends waaaay back in time. But this idea of transmigration of a disembodied soul is unique to the Celts and Hindus. Perhaps the Greeks adopted this from the Indian philosophers.

To what extent the Celts believed it we will probably never know...but perhaps to the same degree as the Indians.

Post by “Matt” of April 9, 2021 at 8:07 PM

Caesar's commentary on the Gauls belief in the soul:

“With regard to their actual course of studies, the main object of all education is, in their opinion, to imbue their scholars with a firm belief in the indestructibility of the human soul, which, according to their belief, merely passes at death from one tenement to another; for by such doctrine alone, they say, which robs death of all its terrors, can the highest form of human courage be developed. Subsidiary to the teachings of this main principle, they hold various lectures and discussions on the stars and their movement, on the extent and geographical

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distribution of the earth, on the different branches of natural philosophy, and on many problems connected with religion.

— *Julius Caesar, De Bello Gallico, VI, 14*

Post by “Cassius” of April 10, 2021 at 4:15 AM

Very interesting that Caesar links it to development of courage, rather than, for example, that they teach it because they were convinced by a prophet that it was true.

Post by “Don” of April 10, 2021 at 5:00 AM

[Quote from Matt](#)

for by such doctrine alone, they say, which robs death of all its terrors, can the highest form of human courage be developed.

It's not Epicurean by any means (you mention "Pythagorean" in fact), but it's their way of saying "[Death is nothing to us!](#)" For a people that were known to have gone into battle naked with slicked-back spiky hair accompanied by the bellowing sounds of the carnyx war-horns, they had to convince themselves that death held no sting. I've always had a soft spot for the Celts and the druids and thought it a shame we had to rely on Roman and Greek textual sources. But as I understand the druids were distrustful of writing and demanded their students memorize their vast corpus of oral texts. Not unlike Epicurus encouraging his students to memorize texts to have them close at hand when needed.

Post by “Matt” of April 10, 2021 at 5:55 AM

Absolutely!

And that “memorization” of oral texts by the Druid class, very, very similar to how the Hindu Brahmins memorize the Vedic lore via chants.

Caesar also observed that there were “classes” or a caste system in ancient Gaul...the Druids and the “Equites” which he based on his own Roman understanding. In my mind this is similar to the Brahmin priestly caste and the Kshatriya warrior class of the Hindus. There may have been more division of societal classes that Caesar did not observe.

Post by “Matt” of April 10, 2021 at 5:57 AM

I’ve always found the Druids fascinating.

Post by “Don” of April 10, 2021 at 7:41 AM

[Quote from Matt](#)

I’ve always found the Druids fascinating.

For even Julius Caesar to give them grudging respect means they must have been badass! It certainly appears their knowledge was vast.

Post by “Don” of April 10, 2021 at 10:35 AM

[Quote from Matt](#)

There may have been more division of societal classes that Caesar did not observe.

Do I remember the scholarly class having Bards, Ovates, and Druids?

Post by “Matt” of April 10, 2021 at 10:55 AM

Yes! I found the source:

Strabo, Geographica IV.4.4-5

- the poets and singers known as *bardoi*,
 - the diviners and specialists in the natural world known as *o'vateis*, and
 - those who studied "moral philosophy", the *druidai*.
-

Post by “Matt” of April 10, 2021 at 11:01 AM

Also this antiquarian source is pretty interesting in describing the differences between the Druids in Ireland and those in Gaul:

<https://www.libraryireland.com/SocialHistoryA...TXmjUhTXgIgpSu>

Post by “Don” of April 11, 2021 at 12:46 PM

To round this discussion of the Druids back to Latin, here's a video of someone discussing the topic and reading Caesar all in Latin

<https://youtu.be/ipcD7rU0Nbk>