

Abelard On Sin

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For Christians there are two elements for living a morally good life: (1) doing the right thing, and (2) avoiding sin. In this paper I want to examine the conception of sin: What is a sin? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for committing a sin? Christians understand sin as a transgression against God.¹ However, this notion of sin remains too aloof of individuals' concrete lives to be of any use for moral direction. What is required is a less abstract conception of sin that can provide the specificity necessary for understanding what constitutes a sin in any one particular situation. In other words, what is necessary and sufficient for a person to commit a sin? First, I present a preliminary analysis of the concept of sin. I show that sin must be based on one's intentions or will and not on whether the acts one performs are ethically right or wrong. Second, I analyze Peter Abelard's (1079-1142) notion of sin as "to consent to what is not fitting"². Abelard distinguishes between a bad will and consent, so that even with a good will one can consent to do what is ethically wrong and thus sin, and even with a bad will one can refrain from consenting to do what is ethically wrong and thus not sin. Finally, I raise various objections to Abelard's view and argue that a conception of sin must encompass three elements: (1) intentionality, such as vices, desires, and will; (2) consent; and (3) actions.

1. A Preliminary Analysis of Sin

¹ Outside a religious context, there is a parallel notion to the religious conception of sin and we can understand it as a moral wrong perpetrated by conscious and rational being. While in this paper I focus only on the religious understanding of sin, much of the arguments could be successfully applied outside a religious context.

² Peter Abelard, *Ethics*, translated with an introduction by D.E. Luscombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 5.

The study of ethics attempts to determine what acts are right and wrong based on arguments. For instance, ethics may investigate whether abortion is right or wrong, and, in doing so, it considers what arguments support the rightness or wrongness of the act of abortion. In most cases, an ethical analysis will depend on some ethical theory that purports to guide human behavior toward the good. For instance, if an ethicist were to argue that a utilitarian theory is what can best guide us toward the good, then she would resolve the abortion issue by arguing either that abortion is right because it produces the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people, or that abortion is wrong because it produces less units of happiness overall in the long run. An ethicist might adopt a deontological position and argue that taking the life of an unborn embryo or fetus is *prima facie* wrong, regardless of the consequences. The argument might state that the fetus is a person and all persons have a right to life, therefore, the fetus has a right to life. From these two examples it is evident that the major part of an ethicist's work will be devoted to constructing and defending an ethical theory that best guides human action toward the good. Note, however, that even if we could accurately determine what is right and wrong, this would not provide us with a definition of what is a sin.

A sin is a transgression that devalues a person's moral worth and thus when one sins one's moral goodness diminishes. A sin cannot be equated with ethically right behavior because neither doing an ethically right act necessarily increases one's moral goodness nor does doing an ethically wrong act necessarily diminish one's moral goodness. Traditionally ethics has distinguished between *what* one does from *why* one does it, and while ethics is concerned with the former, sin and morality is concerned with the latter. So it is possible that a person behaves ethically wrong and be morally good for

doing so, and it also possible that a person behaves ethically right and be morally bad in doing so. For instance, consider a person who is dishonest about his true feelings when an old lady asks him whether her hat looks good. While dishonesty may be considered an ethically wrong act, in this case, since it was motivated by the desire not to hurt the women's feelings, we would conclude that the person's moral goodness has increased despite (or even on account of) the wrong act. Consider Aquinas' example of a person who refuses to return the knife to its proper owner because the owner is drunk and thus may either harm himself or someone else. While refusing to return things to their proper owner is unethical, in this specific case, we would argue that the person is morally good despite his ethically wrong act because of his good will or intentions.

It can be easily shown that the opposite is also true, that is, that a person that commits an ethically right act is not necessarily a good person in virtue of doing so. For instance, consider an employee (let's call him Brian) who volunteers to help his boss move to a new home during the weekend. Brian's action of going out of his way to help his boss is a good example of what Christians would consider an ethically right act and one that deserves great moral praiseworthiness. Note, however, that performing this right act alone is not sufficient to make Brian a morally good person. To make this further determination we also need to know *why* Brian performed the act. In other words, we have to know what motivated Brian to help his boss move. If Brian's intention was to become cozy and friendly with his boss so that he could more easily accomplish his hidden ambition to move up the corporate ladder, then we would not count Brian's ethically right act as contributing anything to his moral worth. In fact, one might conclude that Brian's real intentions combined with his actions make him a morally bad

person. Therefore, it seems that moral goodness and badness are disconnected and divorced from ethically right or wrong acts. This preliminary analysis of sin, then, places the emphasis on intentions and on the reasons why someone commits an action and not on whether the act is right or wrong? But this seems paradoxical. How can morality be completely disconnected from ethically right and wrong acts?

I argue that the complete separation of the will or intentions from acts is a mistake, and that their connection is essential because one can only be a morally good person by intending to do what is ethically right. The problem in assessing this moral paradigm, however, is in trying to evaluate the degree of moral obligation one has in resolving ethical questions correctly. On the one hand, if the only thing that counts for moral goodness is one's intentions, then to be morally good it does not matter if what you think is right turns out to be terribly wrong. This view seems problematic because it undervalues the moral obligation of determining what is ethically right. On the other hand, if getting it right is necessary, then no matter how good your intentions are, if you are mistaken about what is right you merit no moral worth. This view seems too harsh since human error is ubiquitous, and thus to include perfect judgment as a criterion for moral goodness seems absurd. What this analysis shows is that while intentions are a necessary factor for determining moral goodness it is not sufficient; some degree of deliberation about what is right behavior must also be included in the criterion. Moreover, while the deliberation about what is ethically right and wrong ought to be genuine and substantial, perfect knowledge should not be expected. I will return to this

argument in the last section of the paper to elucidate the proper role of consent in a theory of sin and morality.³

According to this conception of sin there is a distinction between acts and the will or intentions, and the latter are an essential part of what determines moral worth. But what exactly is the will? What are intentions? Is the will the same as intentions? Are intentions desires? Are intentions the same as voluntary acts? Abelard's analysis of what is sin provides an answer to these questions.

2. SIN AS CONSENT

In *Ethics* Peter Abelard argues that sin can be defined as the consent to do a wrong act. What he means by (1) consent is different than what is connoted by (2) a vice, (3) a person's will, (4) a voluntary act, and (5) an act. Abelard meticulously delineates how these five concepts are distinct and why sin as consent cannot be reduced or equated with any of the others. But what exactly is consent? Abelard defines it as follows: "The time we consent to what is [morally] unlawful is in fact when we in no way draw back from its accomplishment and are inwardly ready, if given the chance, to do it."⁴ Consent, therefore, is a mental act, one that gives an agent the green light to perform a given external action. It is irrelevant whether the agent actually performs the act, for it might be that a person who has consented to carry out an act does not end up executing it because of accidental reasons such a lack of opportunity. To consent, then, is to willfully and consciously enter into a genuine disposition to act.

2.1 Consent vs. Vice

³ Cf. *infra*. p.18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15

Abelard begins by distinguishing between vices and consent. Mental vices are *natural* dispositions that incline one to sin but are not in themselves sins; they are more like mental defects. He argues that just as one can have physical defects, such as a limp, one might also have mental defects. Some mental defects, such as a bad memory or dullness of mind, are not directly related to the moral life; however, some are because they “make us prone to bad work.”⁵ These he calls vices. For instance, consider the vice of irascibility, which can make one prone to the emotion of anger and thus can cause one to sin easily if it is not offset by a contrary virtue. According to Abelard, a disposition caused by these mental defects is different from the act of consenting, and therefore vice alone does not constitute a sin. We can conclude that vice and sin are two distinct things.

Nevertheless, even though vices are not sins *per se* they play an essential role in making people sin: “And so vice (*vitium*) is that by which we are made prone to sin (*peccandum*), that is, are inclined to consent (*ad consentiendum*) to what is not fitting so that we either do it or forsake it. Now this consent we properly call sin (*Hunc uero consensum proprie peccatum nimiramur*)”⁶ It is possible, therefore, to have many vices and yet never sin. For instance, if an irascible person does not allow his anger to cause him to consent to act unethically, we do not conclude that he has sinned or that he is no longer irascible and thus has eliminated this vice. Rather, we conclude that he is morally praiseworthy for not allowing his vice to control his action. In addition, Abelard argues that the elimination of all vices would diminish the praiseworthiness of performing ethically right acts, since if there is never a disposition to act contrary to what is right, then doing the right thing would require no strenuous moral effort.

⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

This latter conclusion requires a more nuanced analysis that can take into account the method and purpose responsible for the elimination, non-existence, or weakness of vices in a person, for there is a morally relevant difference between a person who is born and matures without acquiring vices and one who has struggled and worked diligently for a long period of her adult life to diminish vices for morally appropriate reasons. Even in the former case, it is questionable whether a person should receive less moral praiseworthiness, if their acts are based on morally appropriate reasons, than a person who has to struggle to do the right thing. In the case of the person who has worked to eliminate or weaken her vices, her ability to easily perform ethically right acts, with minimum effort, should not diminish her moral praiseworthiness; for her moral efforts in extinguishing her vices have been continuous and evenly spread over a long period of time rather than exerted all at one moment in time. Abelard's view does not take into consideration the possibility that we might have moral obligations to develop and form a mind that has as few vices as possible, so that simply having vices or too many vices could be morally wrong. I will elaborate this point further in the next section of my paper.⁷

2.2. Consent vs. Will/Desires

Abelard distinguishes consent (*consentiendum*) from will (*uoluntas*) so that a person with a good will may still consent to do a wrong act and sin, and a person with a bad will may refrain from consenting to do a wrong act and not sin. First, he asks us to consider the servant who kills his master in self-defense. Abelard argues that the servant has sinned because he consented to kill his master even though he did not have a bad will since he only willed to escape death. Abelard explains:

⁷ Cf. *infra*, p.14.

For consider: there is an innocent man whose cruel lord is so burning with rage against him that with a naked sword he chases him for his life. For long that man flees and as far as he can he avoids his own murder; in the end and unwillingly he is forced to kill him lest he be killed by him. Tell me, whoever you are, what bad will he had in doing this. If he wanted to escape death, he wanted to save his own life. But surely this was not a bad will?⁸

Abelard believes that the servant has sinned because he has consented to do a wrong act, namely, to pick up the sword and take the life of his master. Yet Abelard does not believe that the servant had a bad will, since he did not desire to kill his master but only to save his own life. If Abelard's analysis is right, then he is correct to say that sinning cannot be defined by a bad will, since having a bad will is not a necessary condition for one to commit a sin.

Some may argue that in fact the servant willed to kill the master and so he consented to what he willed, showing that consent is the same as will. But Abelard argues convincingly that to attribute this sort of willing to the servant is ill-conceived. Many times we have to perform certain acts (or endure certain situations) to accomplish what we will. Now these things that are a means to an end are not the things we will as an end; rather, they are only a means to what we will. In the case of the servant, he willed to stay alive, but the only way to see this through was to kill his master, something he did not will but rather endured. Thus, Abelard argues that we should not call it "will" but rather a kind of suffering: "That he wills this on account of that is the equivalent of saying that he endures what he does not will on account of the other things which he desires."⁹

Another objection may be raised by those who argue that to kill in self-defense is not a wrong act and thus the servant's consent to kill his master does not constitute a sin. This point may be of some controversy since Abelard's view that the servant should have

⁸ Ibid., p. 7

⁹ Ibid., p. 11

undergone death himself rather than picking up the sword and using it on his master may not be a very popular one in the 21st century. Fortunately, we do not have to spend time deliberating this point since Abelard believes there are many prevalent examples that can illustrate the difference between the will and consent.

Consider the opposite case, that is, a person with a bad will who desires and wills to do a wrong act, but does not consent to perform the act. He argues that a bad will in this sense is not the same as sin. According to Abelard, this is most apparent in cases in which an agent's bad will is motivated by the pleasure to be received from performing the wrong act. He explains:

Someone sees a woman and falls into concupiscence and his mind is affected by the pleasure of the flesh, so that he is incited to the baseness of sexual intercourse. Therefore, you say, what else is this will and base desire than sin? I answer that if that will is restrained by the virtue of temperance but is not extinguished, it remains for a fight and persists in struggling and does not give up even when overcome. For where is the fight if the material for fighting is lacking? Or whence comes the great reward if what we endure is not hard? When the struggle is over, it no longer remains to fight but to receive the reward. Here, however, we strive by fighting, so that elsewhere as winners of the struggle we may receive the crown. But in order that there be a fight, it is evident that there must be an enemy who resists, not one who actually gives up. This surely is our bad will, over which we triumph when we subdue it to the divine will, but we do not really extinguish it, so that we always have it to fight against.¹⁰

According to Abelard, therefore, having this bad will is not sinful; instead it gives rise to an internal struggle. If, at the end of the struggle, one does not consent to the objective of the bad will, one has not sinned. In fact, Abelard claims that the stronger the bad will and thus the more difficult it is for one to refrain from doing the act, the more morally praiseworthy the person is in not consenting. So, according to Abelard, the greater the battle the greater the reward. Here is another example:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 13

Someone passes through another man's garden and seeing delightful fruits he falls into longing for them; however, he does not consent to his longing so as to remove something from there by theft or robbery, even though the mind has been incited to great desire by the pleasure of food. But where desire is, there undoubtedly is will. .. He represses his desire; he does not extinguish it, but because he is not drawn to consent, he does not incur sin.

Abelard's view does not necessarily equate desires with will, but it does claim that desires are a sufficient condition for willing so that whatever we desire we also will. Given such a view, the will can still be considered something distinct from desires and passions. What are desires? How are they distinct from consent and pleasure?

Natural desires may be viewed as feelings that motivate an organism toward a pleasurable object and that occur naturally as part of an organism's physiological processes and functions. There is a difference between natural desires and consent. The latter consists in a judgment that disposes an agent to accomplish, achieve, or acquire something; it is a mental construction or a resolution of the mind that disposes one to act. The former is a sensation that arises naturally and that comes with an intrinsic (i.e., built-in) disposition to accomplish, achieve, or acquire something. Pleasures are sensations that arise naturally but unlike desires do not dispose an agent to act. Pleasures, therefore, are simply sensations that are agreeable to an agent. Thus desires are more than just pleasurable feelings; they are a species of willing; but they are something less than consent. Having desires for that which is sinful, therefore, is not sinful if one does not consent to fulfill or satisfy them. Pleasurable feelings are the essence of desires and the source of desires' built-in willing, since they are the end and purpose of the disposition that arises in an agent. In short, it is because the objects of our desires are so pleasurable that we will them. Is pleasure a sin? Consider Abelard's example of the Monk:

If some compels a religious who is bound in chains to lie between woman and if he is brought to pleasure, not to consent, by the softness of the bed and through the content of the woman beside him, who may presume to call this pleasure, made necessary by nature a fault?¹¹

In summary, Abelard argues that neither a bad will (or desire) nor pleasures are the same as sin. An agent may have desires or a will toward that which is sinful and yet if he does not consent to execute the actions that seem necessary to achieve this end, he will not have sinned. In addition, pleasurable sensations are not sinful.

2.3 Consent vs. Voluntary Act

Since the reason why pleasures and desires are not sins is because they are involuntary acts, one might be tempted to conclude that consent or sin can be defined as a voluntary act. What is a voluntary act? Let me begin by stating what a voluntary act is not. A voluntary act, in this context, should not be understood as any act that is not necessary, for in this sense all sins by definition would be voluntary acts. Thus a voluntary act is not simply a free act, or an act that an agent could have refrained from performing. Moreover, a voluntary act should not be understood simply as an act that is moved by the will. What Abelard means by a voluntary act is an act that is carried out willfully to achieve a given purpose. If sins were voluntary acts, then people who sin act with the explicit purpose of sinning. Thus, a sinful act is voluntary only if the one who sins perform the act for the sake of sinning. However, Abelard argues that most people who sin do not want to sin, so that most sins are not performed for the purpose of sinning. Instead, he argues that the contrary is usually the case: many people sin involuntarily. For instance, in many cases people sin because they are “forced out of weakness of the flesh

¹¹ Ibid., p. 21.

to want what they by no means want to want.”¹² He gives the following rather vivid example of lust:

Moreover, it often happens that when we want to lie with a woman whom we know to be married and whose looks have enticed us, yet we by no means want to be adulterous with her – we would prefer that she was unmarried.

In addition, Abelard argues that no one desires to be punished and if they know that they are sinning and will be punished for it, it would make little sense that they do so voluntarily. Abelard notes that “punishment that is just is displeasing; the action which is unjust is pleasing.”¹³ Therefore, we cannot equate consent with voluntary acts.

2.4 Consent vs. Act

Abelard makes a sharp distinction between sin and wrong acts. He argues that wrong acts play no part in what constitutes a sin or in the degree of sinfulness of a sin.

Anyone who is found in this disposition [consent to sin] incurs the fullness of guilt; the addition of the performance of the deed adds nothing to increase the sin. On the contrary, before God the man who to the extent of his power endeavors to achieve this is as guilty as the man who as far as he is able does achieve it – just as if, so blessed Augustine reminds us, he too had also been caught in the act.¹⁴

Abelard’s view of sin, therefore, attributes no value whatsoever to acts so that acts neither diminish nor add to a person’s moral worth. He explains: “...he [God] considers the mind rather than the action when it comes to a reward, and an action adds nothing to merit whether it proceeds from a good or bad will...”¹⁵ He considers two objections to his view: (1) pleasure increases one’s sinfulness therefore performing the act and receiving pleasure from it increases the degree of sinfulness of the sin, and (2) the act adds to the

¹² Ibid., p. 17.

¹³ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

soul's moral degradation and therefore it is more sinful to consent and perform the act than to consent alone.

The first argument states that the enjoyment of pleasures derived from committing a sin increases its sinfulness and therefore performing the act increases the moral gravity of a sin. Abelard rebuts this objection by arguing that since pleasure in and of itself is not sinful (as discussed above), then the receiving of pleasure could not possibly add anything to the sin of consent. The pleasurable sensations produced by an act are co-extensive and accidental, and they add nothing to the morality of the act. The second argument states that the performance of a sin pollutes the soul more than consent alone. Abelard rebuts this objection by pointing out that if the conception of sin can be entirely provided by the notion of consent, then the culmination of the effects of sin on the soul also ought to be provided by the act of consent alone.

3. SIN AS INTENTIONALITY, CONSENT AND ACT

Abelard's discussion of the essence of sin is illuminating and his distinctions are helpful to continue a provocative discussion on the nature of sin. In what follows, I provide a conception of sin that works off of many Abelard's ideas, particularly the view of sin as consent, but that also radically differs from his view of sin as *only* consent.

3.1 Sin as Intentionality: Vice, Desire and Will

Abelard argues that no vice or mental defect that affect one's moral life is a sin. However, does not a moral life need to account for how one deals with one's mental defects, so that it is reasonable to hold people morally accountable for either neglecting these defects altogether or, even worse, nurturing them to become even greater defects. Abelard's view seems to assume that people are born with a natural set of mental defects

or vices, and that the on-going conditions and status of these defects are outside a person's control. He notes that even when vices are overcome at a given moment in time this does not mean that the vice is extinguished, suggesting that the vice remains unchanged in its being present in the mind and in its character. Thus, he appears to view vices as conditions that are innate in a person; and while they may be overcome or resisted, they cannot be modified. Thus, they seem to be permanent mental defects over which we have no power. According to this view, therefore, an agent can prevent a vice from affecting his actions, but he has no real power over the vice itself. Abelard's view precludes the possibility that we have moral obligations to develop and form mental dispositions that have as few vices as possible, so that having vices or too many vices could be morally blameworthy.¹⁶ But is this an accurate description of an agent's relationship to vices?

A more accurate picture is one in which an agent has some control over the existence and the intensity of vices, so that someone who is irascible and easily disposed to anger can, over time, come to tame this vice and lessen or eliminate it altogether. If we assume that the modification of vices is within an agent's control, then it is reasonable to assign culpability for either not consenting to labor toward abating vices or eliminating them. I do not want to defend the view that all vices are sins, but rather that some vices are sins. Moreover, according to my view, when a person sins because they consent to do an unethical act that springs from some vice, they sin because they consent to do the act and they also sin to the extent that they have consented to either nurture the vice in question or forego a process of lessening or eliminating it. On the other hand, people who consent to do what is morally right and who do not struggle to do it because they have

¹⁶ Cf. *supra*, p. 8.

instead struggled steadily and over a long period of time to eliminate vices and strengthen virtues, should not have any moral praiseworthiness discounted from their moral status, as Abelard's view would have us do.

If we take a closer look at Abelard's view, we will find a contradictory understanding of vices and virtues. He seems to think that we can overcome our vices if our virtues are strong enough. So, for instance, if we have a strong vice or desire to perform some sinful act, but our virtue of temperance is strong enough to overcome this vice or desire, then we will win the battle that ensues in our soul. He argues that the more difficult the battle the more glorious the reward. This view assumes that we have some control over the intensity and nature of our virtues, for if we did not, it would be difficult to understand what kind of moral praiseworthiness (or blameworthiness) could be attributed to a person no matter what the result. The final outcome of the struggle within one's soul would simply be the result of the strengths of the vices and virtues at war. But if a person has no real power over vices and virtues it seems unreasonable to assign any responsibility for the outcome of the struggle. However, if Abelard is prepared to concede that people have control over the existence and strength of virtues, wouldn't he also be forced to grant this power over vices as well?

A similar argument can be made on behalf of desires and the will. If our desires and will can be cultivated so that we have some control over the objects we desire and the things we will, then some responsibility can be attributed to a person for developing good desires and a good will. This contradicts Abelard's view, since he seems to hold desires and the will to be outside the realm of a person's control, similar to pleasures. Consider Abelard's examples: (1) "Someone sees a woman and falls into concupiscence and his

mind is affected by the pleasure of the flesh, so that he is incited to the baseness of sexual intercourse.”¹⁷ (2) “If some compels a religious who is bound in chains to lie between woman and if he is brought to pleasure, not to consent, by the softness of the bed and through the content of the woman beside him, who may presume to call this pleasure, made necessary by nature a fault?”¹⁸ He considers the desires in example (1) to be as natural and uncontrollable as the pleasures in (2). Thus, having a desire for that which is sinful is not sinful if one does not consent to fulfill or satisfy it. But are (1) and (2) the same?

I argued above that pleasurable feelings are the essence of desires and the source of desires’ built-in willing, since they are the end and purpose of the disposition that arises in an agent. However, I also argued that desires are more than just pleasurable feelings since they dispose one to act. Therefore desires are a species of willing but they are something less than consent. The question is whether having sinful desires is sinful even if one does not consent to fulfill or satisfy them? If, over a long period of our adult life, we have the power to cultivate and develop the things we desire and will, and there are some things that we ought to desire and will more than others, then it is sinful to desire and will sinful things. Why would we think that to teach someone to be morally good, it is more important to teach them to *do* the right thing than to *desire* and *will* the right things? It seems that an “ethics of intentionality” would prepare and dispose someone to be a morally good person in a more fundamental way than an “ethics of acts”. If this theory is correct, then Abelard’s conception that the greater the struggle the greater

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 11-13.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 21

the reward is misconceived; instead, harmony between one's good desires and will and one's right acts should not diminish one's moral reward.

3.2 Sin as Consent

Abelard defines sin as consent and consent as "The time ... when we in no way draw back from its [an immoral acts] accomplishment and are inwardly ready, if given the chance, to do it."¹⁹ Consent, therefore, is a mental act, one that approves and resolves to perform a given wrong external action. Above I argued that having vices, sinful desires and a bad will can also be a sin. However, it is still questionable whether the sin is the vice itself or the mental acts that helped sustain and foster the vice. The same question can be asked with respect to desires and the will. It seems that the sin is not so much in the result as it is in mental acts (or the lack of mental acts) that have led to the resulting vices, sinful desires, and bad will. We could, therefore, expand on Abelard's notion of consent to include not only external actions but also inwardly dispositions, for we either consent to try to change and modify our vices, desires and will toward that which is good, or consent to forgo this project of strengthening our virtues and weakening our vices. We can argue, therefore, that just as we are responsible for not consenting to perform wrong acts and consenting to perform right acts, we are also responsible for consenting to develop morally good dispositions and not consenting to develop morally bad disposition. There is nothing strange or extraordinary in considering thoughts and mental acts as within one's free will and under the domain of an agent's power to consent.

There is still the question, however, as to whether consent is a necessary and sufficient condition for sinning? It seems that it is necessary since without the notion of consent it is difficult to understand how one could commit a sin regardless of how wrong

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

the act may be. It also seems that consent is a sufficient condition since to resolve to do what one believes is wrong is sinful even if it is not wrong or even if one never gets the opportunity to actually do it. However, in my discussion of the relationship between intentions and act, I argued that intentions alone cannot account for someone's moral goodness. I argued that while intentions are a necessary element for determining morality it is not sufficient; in addition, some degree of deliberation about what is right behavior must also be included in the criterion. Moreover, I argued that while the deliberation about what is right and wrong ought to be genuine and substantial, perfect knowledge should not be expected.²⁰ How does this argument affect Abelard's conception of sin? Interestingly, it does not affect his conception of sin *per se*, but it does affect his view of morality and how one can avoid sin.

One may be inclined to deduce that since consent is a necessary and sufficient condition for sin, it is also a necessary and sufficient condition for moral goodness. So if one consents to do what is right, whether or not it is right, or whether or not she gets the opportunity to do it, one has performed a morally praiseworthy act. However, the argument I introduce above, contradicts this view, since I argue that in addition to consent to do what is right, one ought to have had serious and substantial deliberations about what is right. Therefore, while consent to do what one believes is wrong is always a sin, consent to do what one believes is right is not always morally good, since one could have come to a decision of what is ethically right negligently. If so then one has sinned in their lack of deliberation over what is right and that sin is carried through in the act itself. In conclusion, consent to do what one believes is right is not always enough for avoiding sin.

²⁰ Cf. *supra*, p.5.

3.3 Sin as Act

Abelard argues that wrong acts play no part in what constitutes a sin or in the degree of sinfulness of a sin. Once an agent consents to sin, whether or not he performs the act is morally irrelevant. I find Abelard's view problematic for at least three reasons: (1) consenting to perform an act at time $t1$ and sustaining consent for the act while one is performing the act, let us say $t2, t3, t4$ are (at least) two distinct acts; (2) consenting to perform act a at time $t1$, when $t1$ is not immediately before the act, and consenting to perform act a' at time $t5$, when $t5$ is immediately before the act entail two distinct kinds of act (i.e., the content of the acts are distinct); and finally, (3) equating the act of consenting with the act of acting curtails a genuine view of free will and raises other paradoxes.

3.2.1 An Act in Time

My objection to Abelard's view rests on whether one considers sin to be primarily associated with the subject matter of a sin or with the act perpetrated by an agent. Let me explain. Imagine that John has an exam tomorrow. While he is steadfastly studying the night before, at about 11:00 PM he realizes that there is just too much material for him to learn in what remains of the night. So he begins to consider the possibility of cheating on the exam. After much reflection, he consents to cheat, and he sets out to produce a cheat note that contains all the answers from the chapter. When he finishes, he goes to sleep. At about 4:00 AM, he wakes up concerned about what he has consented to do; again, he begins to ponder the possibilities, but before too much doubt ruins the night, he once again resolutely consents to cheat on the exam. The next morning John wakes up, has breakfast and heads for school. He enters the class, puts his books away and takes out

several pieces of paper and a pen. He adjusts the cheat note, which is taped to the underside of his wrist. The professor gives out the exams. Again, John begins to question whether he should go through with it. We might say that he is having second doubts and even some guilty feelings, but his perturbed conscious is appeased by a self-promise that this will be the first and last time. He, once again, regains his composure and resolutely consents to cheat as much as he again. As he begins to get answers from his cheat note and write them on the exam, he begins to experience a high degree of anxiety and distress. He also feels a sense of exuberance and exhilaration, thinking that he is going to get away with his secret mischief. Again, he has time to reflect while in the middle of his act of cheating, he considers one last time whether he should continue to go through with it, and he consents a fourth time to complete the act. The question is has John sinned once, twice, three or four times?

If we view the sin to be primarily associated with the content of John's act (i.e., to cheat on the exam), we are inclined to conclude that John has only sinned once, since all four times he has consented to commit the same sin. However, if we believe that sin is primarily associated with an agent's intended acts, then we would conclude that John has sinned four times. How does this relate to Abelard's definition of sin? If each time John consented to commit the sin was a different sin, then the sins could be different in nature. For instance, we might argue that John's consent at 11:00 PM the night before and his consent at 4:00 AM the next morning are substantially different kinds of sins than the consent that took place adjacent in time and during the act, for it is very different to consent to perform an act in the distant future and another thing to consent to perform an act in the immediate future or during the time the act is taking place. If this is the case,

then performing an act, while not adding anything to the sin of consent, *per se*, does change the nature of the consent and thus makes the performance of wrong acts morally relevant.

3.3.2 Consent as Imagination vs. Reality

My second objection calls into question the distinct nature of consent of an act in the imagination and consent of an act in reality. Using the same example above it can be argued that John's consenting to cheat at 11:00 PM, 4:00 AM, before the exam and during the exam are not only distinct instances of sin, but also distinct in kind (i.e., qualitatively distinct). In other words, the subject or the content of the sin are different, since one thing is to consent to an act as imagined in the mind and another to consent to it as it is in reality. Is the act as imagined in one's mind the same as the act when carried out in reality? If it is not, then one might argue that what Abelard would have considered to be one sin in the case of John, that is, "to cheat on the exam" is in fact at least three different sins: (1) to consent some time before the act, (2) to consent immediately prior to the act, (3) to sustain consent while performing the act.

3.3.3 Paradox

Finally, Abelard's view creates a problem for the notion of free will. According to Abelard, to consent to do act *a* is a sin if you believe act *a* is wrong. Moreover, whether you act or not does not affect the sin or even the degree of wrongness attributable to the sin. This view however has two problems. First, if one consents to act at *t1*, when *t1* is some time before the act (let us say the day before), then it seems that at the time of the act (the next day) our free will becomes irrelevant, since whether I actually do the act or not will not detract from the previous sin of consent. This also has the absurd

consequences that if one has already consented to do act *a* at some previous time, he would not receive any *net* moral praise worthiness in changing his mind. Finally, there is also the question of how one can be absolutely sure that one has genuinely consented to perform an act if they never in fact perform the act. Is it not possible that one thinks one has consented to perform an act but be mistaken about the authenticity of the consent? In addition, can there be cases in which a person consents to do act *a* at time *t* because they imagine the act without the minutiae that act *a* in reality carries with it? Let me rephrase the question: Is the act as imagined in one mind the same as the act when carried out in reality? If it is not then one might argue that performing the act is a morally relevant factor for our assessment of the conception of sin.

CONCLUSION

I have begun by presenting a preliminary analysis of sin based on a bad will. I have shown that such a view is not successful because a bad will is neither necessary nor sufficient for sinning. I have gone on to explain Abelard's conception of sin as consent, and his argument that sin as consent cannot be reduced to vice, desires, will, or actions. Finally I have argue that while Abelard's conception of sin as consent is a valuable contribution, sin should not be severed from the notions of vice, desires, will and actions. Instead, I have argued that vices, desires, will and actions are an essential aspect of sin.