

The Value of Suffering and Struggle in Peter Abelard's *Ethics*

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It seems to be the case that, if we accept Peter Abelard's *Ethics*, God must be pitied, since God lacks what it takes to be truly good. Abelard favorably quotes Solomon who says, "The long-suffering man is better than the mighty man." (5) This suggests that for God to be better still, God must be longer-suffering than any mere moral and be enduring greater suffering and temptation as well. And when Abelard wrote, "The Apostle says, 'No one will be crowned unless he struggles according to the Law,'" (6) in a way that endorsed this view, we are drawn to conclude that God either must struggle according to the Law or deserves no crown.

But, of course, this is an absurdity, for the goodness of God exists even though He does not struggle at all. Abelard would never accept those implications.

We can try to escape this trap by noting that God is not a man. However, we are still left to wonder how a person who is most like God in that he has his virtues naturally and does not struggle cannot hope to be counted as good as the person who struggles the most in his victory against the strongest vices. It is as if one should hope for a vice to struggle against.

I wish to argue that it is a mistake to attribute to Abelard the belief that suffering and struggle makes one a better person. Instead, the better person is the person who suffers less and does not sin, with God being best in that He neither struggles nor sins. In the space available, I will not attempt to prove that this is the correct interpretation of Abelard's *Ethics*. However, I do hope to remove a potential barrier by arguing that the quotes above do not rule out this interpretation.

The basic argument is that the good person is good before the contest brings. He brings his goodness into the battle and, because of this goodness, wins the battle and earns the crown or trophy. The suffering and struggle does not make him a better person, it is just what a good people must go through to claim his prize.

The vices just happen.

In spite of the fact that the crown goes to the person who struggles against vice and wins, the vices are not to be chosen. That is to say, it does not follow that a person is to pursue this crown by acquiring such a vice. Instead, the vice that provides this material for a fight simply happens.

The relevant vices are those that Abelard calls “mental vice relevant to morals” (3). These belong in the same family as physical vices such as lameness and blindness, and as mental vices that are irrelevant to morals such as forgetfulness and ignorance.

We can say of lameness and blindness that these, too, provide an agent with an opportunity to show his quality by struggling against them. Yet, the fact that they give a person an opportunity to do battle against a handicap – to show what he can do with the cards stacked against him – there is no argument that lameness and blindness are to be sought for the sake of demonstrating this quality. It is consistent with the view that the person without these disabilities is in better health, and better health is to be preferred over illness. The status of a vice relevant to morals is like that of an illness. As Abelard says, “[Vice] shouldn’t itself be called a ‘sin’ but a kind of illness that is now necessary.” (10)

Note that Abelard says that these vices exist out of necessity; they are not a matter of choice. On the vice of lust, he wrote, “For he who says, ‘Do not pursue your lusts, and turn away from your will,’ commanded us not to satisfy our lusts, but not to do without them altogether. For satisfying them is wicked, but going without them is impossible in our feeble state.” (27). On the issue of gluttony, he wrote, “So he desires to eat the other person’s fruit, and he doesn’t doubt there is pleasure in eating it. Indeed he is driven by the very nature of his feeble state to desire what he may not take without its owner’s knowledge and permission. He curbs his desire; he doesn’t destroy it.” (28) Going without lust is impossible, and the desire to eat when starving a part of nature.

In addition to saying that these vices are necessary, Abelard might be interpreted as saying that we should keep these vices. He speaks against doing without them or destroying them. However, this simply restates the fact that we cannot get rid of them; they are necessary. Because we cannot be rid of them, it is not the case that we ought to be rid of them. This is consistent with Abelard’s claim that there is no sin in having these vices, only in consenting to them – agreeing to perform the wrong action that the vice suggests or, at least, that the vice suggests in these circumstances. Abelard wrote, “Therefore, if having sex with one’s wife or eating delicious food has been permitted to us from the first day of our creation, which was lived without sin in paradise, who will argue that we have sinned if we don’t go beyond the bounds of permission?” (39)

If vice cannot be chosen, then the opportunity to struggle against vice cannot be chosen. It appears. When it appears, it pushes us to do something that ought not to be done. We get no blame or credit for this. What we get blame or credit for is consenting or refusing to perform the action this vice

recommends when it recommends something that ought not to be done. This is the one thing we can choose. “There are surely many things we are prevented from doing, but we always have will and consent within our power of choosing.” (51)

Refusing the recommendations of a vice may cause suffering and struggle. This is the suffering and struggle that earns the crown. Our question is whether suffering and struggle makes one a better person. I wish to argue that the quality of the person is prior to any struggle or suffering, and they add nothing to that quality.

Awards are for qualities displayed

What if the fastest runner in your community never ran in a race? Obviously, he would never win any trophies. However, winning no trophies does not imply that he could not be the fastest runner. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to argue that the runner who did win the trophy is, by that fact, the fastest runner. In other words, we must distinguish between who gets the trophy, and who is the fastest runner.

When Abelard writes about the person who struggles and suffers against temptation, he typically uses language suggesting the awarding of a trophy. “No one will be crowned unless he struggles according to the Law,” (6) and “when a bad will is curbed without being extinguished, it wins the palm-branch of victory for those resisting it and provides the material for a fight and a crown of glory.” (10) As shown in the previous paragraph, this language is consistent with saying that a better person will get no trophy – precisely because he has not been tested.

It may be the case, as Abelard says, “that the vices’ attack against us is more dangerous the more it is repeated, and victory is more glorious the more difficult it is.” (6) This may even imply that it takes a better person to win such a glorious victory – and we know his quality because of this victory. However, this does not imply that he is a better person than the person who is never challenged – the person who never had an opportunity to win such a trophy.

It is also not the case that the runner who wins the race becomes a better runner simply because he won the race. Certainly, the struggle of running the race may condition him to run faster in the future, but it is not what it means to win the trophy. He enters the race already being the fastest runner and, by running the race, he reveals what was true before the race started.

This still leaves the question of what Abelard's awards are for. What counts as being the moral equivalent of "fastest runner" or, at least, "the fastest among those that were tested"?

We have a problem answering this question since Abelard meant to produce two books, but we only have one. The first book concerned recognizing sin so that it could be avoided, and the second with doing good so that it can be pursued. It is the first of these books that we have available. Consequently, we know more about what Abelard would condemn than we do about what he would praise.

What we have on the side of condemnation is "consent to evil or in scorn for God" (8). These are substantially the same thing since what counts as evil is that which God wills not to be done, and to consent to what God wills not to be done is to scorn God. For clarification, I would like to note that what God wills not to be done is not the same as what God forbids, since God can sometimes forbid what he wills to be done (60) and command what ought not to be done (62).

So, while goodness consists, at least in part, in refraining from doing what God wills not to be done, the crown or the trophy goes to those who were tested in this resolve and passed the test. The harder the test, the greater the trophy or award that one earns by passing it. But the virtue exists regardless of whether it is tested. Abelard claims that short-temperedness can exist even when one is not angry, and lameness can exist "in him even when he isn't limping around," (4) so virtue would not need to be tested to be present.

The trophy itself is not to be sought.

It does not strictly follow from the fact that suffering and struggle is good that it ought to be sought – or that a person should seek such a test in order to become a better person.

When Abelard discusses penitence, he makes a strong point that there is a difference between seeking penitence for the sake of avoiding punishment and seeking penitence from a sincere sense that one's actions were wrong. Of those who seek penitence out of fear of punishment, he says, "they also continue to be immoral, since the immorality of their fault doesn't bother them as much as the penalty's just severity does." (152). Indeed, the sin is compounded, because the person who is penitent in order to escape a just punishment is guilty not only of the previous wrong, but of a new wrong of opposing a fair and just punishment. (152).

A fruitful penitence, according to Abelard, is one that returns the individual to a proper love of God. Consequently, Abelard argues that a person is unable to repent one sin but not another, since as long as

one sin remains, the agent is still showing scorn for God (168). Only by returning to a state of love of God can one avoid punishment. In this, the avoidance of punishment is a (welcome) side effect. It cannot be the goal.

We can apply the same description to the seeking of the “crown” or trophy that one may claim from resisting temptation and avoiding sin. This implies that the only proper motive for this decision is love of God. That is to say, one wins the struggle because of one’s devotion to God, not because of a love of trophies. The trophy is a welcome side effect, but it should not be the reason for one’s action. It is not to be the goal. If one is not to seek the trophy for its own sake, then one is certainly not to seek the temptation that would allow one to win this crown.

In other words, the winning of a trophy is not what makes the agent good. The goodness is found in the love of God, not the agent’s suffering and struggle.

Human punishments are governed by utility; divine punishment on desert.

If we take this crown to be a reward or trophy, we should be able to infer some things about how Abelard would handle the awarding of this trophy from what he says about punishment.

Abelard distinguishes divine punishment from human punishment. Divine punishment, “doesn’t think about the things that are done but rather in what mind they are done.” (57). In contrast, when humans inflict punishment we cannot consider the mind of the person punished because we cannot know it. We only know of the act. As Abelard writes, “For human beings don’t judge about what is hidden but about what is plain. They don’t think so much of the guilt belonging to the fault as of the performance of the deed.” (82) Abelard further writes, “in punishing sin [God] doesn’t pay attention to the deed but to the mind, just as conversely we don’t pay attention to the mind that we don’t see but to the deed we know.” (83)

Abelard has a strongly utilitarian conception of punishment. When considering punishment for the act, we are to consider the consequences of the punishment more than the guilt of the accused. For example, when a mother who, in trying to keep her infant warm, ends up smothering the infant, “atonement, a heavy penalty is exacted from her, not for a fault she committed but to make her or other women more careful about anticipating such dangers.” (58) Whereas divine punishment is more deontological – depending on actual guilt.

Since God evaluates the quality of the mind, we should ask whether the person who struggles and suffers has a higher quality of mind than one who does not. The quality of the mind is measured by the quality of one's love of God, not on the length and severity of one's suffering. It is true that the stronger love can endure longer and more severe suffering. In this sense, the person who can endure such suffering is better than the one who cannot. However, this is consistent with saying that his goodness is that which allows him to endure this suffering, not because of the suffering.

In commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, God put Abraham to a test. However, Abraham's quality was not determined by passing the test. The words Abelard put into God's mouth are, "What you have shown yourself prepared to do, this I commanded of you, so that I might make others know what I myself had known about you before the ages." (62). We may say that Abraham received a crown or trophy for his devotion. The opportunity that provided the struggle and suffering demonstrated a quality already present. It did not create that quality.

It is not better to master the harder sins.

A final piece of evidence can be drawn from Abelard's discussion of the question, "Is it better to refrain from lighter faults than from more serious ones?" (139-149). Here, he confronts the view that "it is more perfect, and so better, to look out for venial sins than for criminal ones, insofar as it seems harder and requires the care of a greater effort."

Here, Abelard denies that the amount of effort determines the value of the act. He writes, "I answer them first according to Cicero, 'If it is hard work, it is not for that reason glorious.' Otherwise, those who bore the Law's heavy yoke would have more merit before the Lord than do the people who serve in evangelical freedom. (139) Abelard appears to endorse the proposition that the better soul does not struggle when he adds, "Surely nothing is hard for one who loves, especially since the non-carnal, spiritual love of God is stronger the truer it is." (141).

Here, we see a denial of the claim that hard work means having more merit. This may be seen as a contradiction of the statements quoted at the start of this paper. However, here Abelard is not talking about the awarding of a crown. He is talking about "merit before the Lord", which looks at an agent's actual quality.

Conclusion

It is a mistake to interpret Abelard as saying that suffering and struggling are part of what makes humans good. If one is tested with a strong temptation, the better person will suffer and struggle as he denies his consent to sin. But the struggle and suffering are not what makes him good. He brings his goodness with him into the battle. The temptation gives him the opportunity to display that goodness, it does not create the goodness. If he wins the battle, he has earned a crown or a trophy. But this crown or trophy is much like that given to a runner who wins a race. It is because he has demonstrated a quality he already had before the race even began that he earns the trophy, not for a quality he acquired by racing.

As for Abelard's claim that, "The long-suffering man is better than the mighty man," (5) we must note that Abelard is comparing the trophy awarded as a result of struggles against temptation to the trophy awarded in victory over physical obstacles. This is an assertion that it is better to win a battle against temptation, than it is to win a battle against an enemy soldier or army. "The one who rules his mind [is better than] the capturer of cities." (5) This no more implies that struggle and suffering is good than it implies that war is good. But we honor the general that defeats a threatening army. Furthermore, the greater the struggle, the greater the honor we give to such a general. Similarly, we should honor the individual that defeats sin and temptation, with the victory over the more challenging foe earning the greater honors.

It would take more to argue that the better person is the person who suffers less and does not sin. However, I hope I have demonstrated that the quotes given at the start of this chapter are not a barrier to that interpretation. The general who serves in times of peace and never gets tested in battle may well be the best general that ever lived. But he earns no crown – earns no honors – because he never actually had the opportunity to fight a battle. Similarly, the person whose love of God is so great, and who is so fortunate not to have been tested, may still be the better person. He simply lacked the material for a fight that would have displayed this quality.