



Ethic of Intention in Héloïse (1090–1164)

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Modern scholars have associated the “ethic of intention” with the twelfth-century philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard and his *Ethica* (or *Scito te ipsum*; Ilgner). Evidence would suggest, however, that Héloïse had a significant impact on the way Abelard eventually structured his views. The ethic of intention was a radical departure in twelfth-century theology, since it argued that sin arises not from what is actually said or done, but only from the intention with which it is said or done. Thus God does not punish outer works and their consequences, but looks rather to the disposition (“affectus”) of the interior person. This concept appears explicitly in Héloïse’s Eps 2, 4, and 6 to Abelard, which were most likely written prior to Abelard’s *Ethica*. Here Héloïse argues that “It is not the outcome of a deed but the disposition of the doer that creates a sin” (“Non enim rei effectus sed efficientis affectus in crimine est”), since “justice takes heed not of the things that were done, but the intention (or state of mind) with which they were done” (“Nec que fiunt sed quo animo fiunt equitas pensat”, Luscombe 2013: Ep. 2, § 13). She employs almost exactly the same wording in her Ep. 6 (§ 25), where she also points out that whatever is done exteriorly in the body (“quicquid exterius agatur in corpore”) cannot be a sin unless the mind is first corrupted by an evil will (“prius prava uoluntate animus corrumpatur”, Ep. 6, § 24). Héloïse applies this logic to her own history: through her marriage, the devil made her the instrument of Abelard’s downfall, but although this was the outcome (“ex effectu”), it was not her intention (“ex consensu”, Ep. 4, § 11). This ethic of intention articulated by Héloïse and Abelard anticipates Thomas Aquinas’s “Doctrine of Double Effect” which is still applied in medical ethics today.

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