MY purpose in this paper is to show some aspects of Peter Abelard’s ethics which are still relevant for ethical debate today. Therefore I have titled my paper: “Modern Aspects of Peter Abelard’s Philosophical Ethics.” I want to carry out my intention in three steps. First I have to answer the question of whether or not we are allowed to speak of a philosophical ethics in the original meaning of the word “philosophy.” In asking this question I know that I presuppose a way of looking at a problem which would not have been true for the twelfth century. Nevertheless I suppose that we can find clues about Abelard’s position in that question. Secondly I shall give you a short summary of the philosophical elements in Peter Abelard’s ethics. Doing this I refer to one of the last texts of Abelard, i.e., his *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum et Christianum.* Thirdly I want to present the modern aspects of Abelard’s philosophical ethics. In comparison with Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason,* we are able to demonstrate the relevance of Peter Abelard, who with good reason has been called by Marie Dominique Chenu “le premier homme moderne.”

1.

In a letter to Heloise, Abelard describes his subjective relationship to a concept or an idea of philosophy which is in conflict with the tradition of religious belief and its explanation by theology. We can read there the following: “I will never be a philosopher, if this is to speak against St. Paul; I would not be an Aristode, if this is were to separate me from Christ. . . . I have set my conscience on the corner-stone on which Christ has build his church. . . . If the tempest rises, I am not shaken; if the winds rave I am not fearful. . . . I rest upon the rock that cannot be moved.”

Abelard anticipates with these words the possibility of a concept of philosophy which he doesn’t pursue. That isn’t surprising, since the topics and problems of philosophy in the time of Abelard were still methodologically integrated in a system of theological wisdom. That is why ethical problems are discussed in the works of Peter Abelard in close connection with theological considerations. This is obviously the case in Abelard’s *Commentary on the epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* and also in his work *Know Thyself* (Scito Te Ipsum) which is called by Luscombe, the editor of the critical edition, Abelard’s *Ethics.* Both texts were written in the year 1135 or soon thereafter, a time when
Abelard has just begun his last period of teaching in Paris. In these works Abelard is dealing with the classical issues of the appropriate behaviour of a Christian. In the centre of the discussion we can find the important questions such as sin and repentance, satisfaction and good works. For these reasons we have to answer the question whether we are allowed to speak of a “philosophical ethics” in the work of Peter Abelard.

This question is important against the background that there are some medievalists who maintain that there is no conception of a specifically philosophical ethics in the Middle Ages prior to the introduction of the practical philosophy of Aristotle. As we know today parts of the specifically Aristotelian ethics were not read by Latin speaking scholastics before the end of the twelfth century. The translation of the *Nicomachian Ethics* of Aristotle had not been completed by Robert Grosseteste until 1246–47. On these grounds, Georg Wieland, for instance, assumes that a philosophical ethics didn’t exist as a separate discipline in the twelfth century.⁴

There can be no doubt that the rediscovery of the Aristotelian philosophy, especially of the *Metaphysics*, the *Physics* and the *Posterior Analytics*, marks a new and important stage of reflection upon the autonomy of human insight and the relationship between human reason and religious belief. Insofar as Wieland’s thesis refers to ethics as a separate discipline, his argument is convincing. One of the important consequences of the Aristotelian distinction between *theoria* and *praxis* is the establishment of ethics as a separate philosophical discipline. But the twelfth century had not recognized ethics as a separate discipline.” However, it may be asked: Does that fact mean that we can’t find any independent ethical reflection in medieval thought before the reception of the whole work of Aristotle?

According to Georg Wieland we can find ethical considerations in the twelfth century only in the context of grammar or theology. Both states of

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¹²Ibid., 91, 1341 ff.; cf. the English translation in: Peter Abelard, *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian*, ed. and transl. by P. J. Payer, Toronto 1979, 79: “We do not accede to their (i.e. the prophets) authority in such a manner that we refuse to submit their words to rational scrutin before we give our assent. Otherwise we would stop philosophizing if, for instance, neglecting the examination of reasons, we are to make greater use of arguments from authority.”

reflection “deny,” according to Wieland, “the autonomy of ethics” and to this extent its philosophical habitus. My supposition is that Wieland confuses the philosophical characteristics of the ethical debate in the twelfth century with the “existence of a separate discipline” in the strict Aristotelian sense. In order to give reasons for my position, I want to use Wieland’s own arguments. In one of his articles, he gives two criteria which should be able to describe the new state of the ethics after the reception of the Nicomachian Ethics in the thirteenth century: “a) happiness and human perfection are legitimate objects of philosophical concern; b) virtue, or good human character, can be discussed rationally without recourse to theology.” Just these two criteria are applying to the task of philosophy in the text of Peter Abelard’s Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Christian and a Jew. According to Eligius Buytaert, Abelard has written his Dialogue in the last years of his stay in Paris, between 1136 and 1139. According to Rudolf Thomas, the editor of the critical edition of the Dialogue, the text was written between the time of Abelard’s condemnation by the synod of Sens and his death, i.e., between 1140 and 1142. Whatever the exact date, we may suppose that this text has been finished by Abelard after his Scito Te Ipsum (Know thyself). Like this latter work, Dialogue remained incomplete. In the second part of this text, we find of a debate between two persons: one representing philosophy and called “philosopher,” the other representing theology and named a “Christian.” The name “Christian” is right, insofar as theology is defined by its obligation to give rational arguments for the Biblical faith. These two persons debate issues of classical moral philosophy, such as human virtues and happiness, as well as those of philosophical and theological perfection as the consummation of ethics.

At the beginning of the Dialogue, Abelard lets them describe the method of the debate as a rational one, committed only to arguments by reason, not arguments by authority. With the following words the philosopher explains his approach: “Nec eorum (i.e. Prophetarum) auctoritati ita concedimus, ut dicta ipsorum ratione non discutiamus, antequam approbemus. Alioquin philosophari desisteremus, si videlicet rationum inquisitione postposita locis auctoritatis.” The type of rationality characterizing philosophy is defined in the Dialogue as the method of rational debate. The kind of philosophy encountered here is not yet that defined by the Aristotelian concept of science or of practical knowledge. But the idea of a necessary independence of “philosophizing” is obviously present in the call for the “examination of reasons” by the dialectical method. Abelard quotes Augustine to underline the special task of the “dialectics”: Disciplinam disciplinarum, quam dialecticos vocant. Hec docet docere, hec docet discere. In hac se ipsa ratio demonstrat, quid sit, quid velit, scit sola.

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"Scientes facere non solum vult, etiam potest."

But it is not only the philosopher who argues in favour of giving a positive and independent role to such a rational procedure. The Christian himself suggests to the philosopher that he should examine the quality of the New Testament, to determine whether it is a perfect example of the virtues, "an example more excellent" than all other ethics of the ancient philosophies. In suggesting such a rational comparison, the Christian has already accepted the position of the philosopher that there is no other basis of reflection than a theory of human virtues grounded in a rational discourse, even in respect of his own theological purposes. His discourse establishes the idea of an independent philosophy. In the dialogue, it is the goal of the Christian to give arguments for the perfection of moral thinking through the New Testament, especially through its virtue of love. But this goal doesn't limit the claimed rationality of the debate. On the contrary it binds the intentions of a Christian moral-teaching to the results of the dialectical proceeding. It is a proof only if the Christian theory is such that the philosopher could be convinced by means of rational arguments.

We are allowed to conclude that even the Christian accepts the independence of an original insight of philosophy concerning to the questions of moral action. Therefore the Christian is able to speak explicitly of the philosophical ethics as "a true ethics." Nothing other than the truth of that philosophical ethics has been brought to the state of perfection or consummation by the message of Jesus Christ: "Et statim per singula nove legis habundantiam prosecutus, que morali de er ant perfectioni, diligenter expressit et veram ethicam consummavit." The truth of the philosophical ethics, i.e. the evidence of the best proofed arguments in the independent "philosophical debate,” can be called a necessary, but not yet a sufficient, condition for theological ethics and its claim of validity. The independence of philosophy is present in our dialogue in the form of ancient theories of ethics, for instance, that of Plato — the philosopher quotes Socrates — Epicurus and especially the philosophers of the Stoic tradition, such as Seneca.

As we have seen, Wieland maintains the discovery of the concept of the autonomous state of philosophical ethics comes only with the reception of

\[\text{Ibid., 88, 1248 f.: "quasi perfectum ibi et omnibus aliis excellentius non habaeas documentum virtutum."} \]
\[\text{Ibid., 88, 1254.} \]
\[\text{Ibid., 88 f., 1265 ff.; cf. the English translation, 76: "what you call ethics, that is moral discipline, we are accustomed to call divinity. Clearly, our name arises from what it is aimed at comprehending, that is, God, yours from those beings through which you call virtues." Here the English translator is wrong, because according to Abelard "mores bonae" are just not "actiones morales" or "moral actions"; cf. Abelard, Scito Te Ipsum, 2 ff.} \]
\[\text{Cf., 98 f., 1519–1541.} \]
\[\text{Ibid.: "Summum bonum sive finem boni, hoc est consummationem vel perfectionem eius, diffinierunt . . . quo quisque cum pervenerit beatus est.} \]
\[\text{Cf. Ibid., 115, 1986: "Virtus . . . est habitus animi optimus"; see as well Abelard, Scito Te Ipsum, ed Luscombe, p. 129: "Virtue is a habit of the well constituted mind."} \]
\[\text{Cf. Ibid., 100, 1554 f.} \]
Aristotle. His argument is right insofar as it concerns the special conception of the ethics within the Aristotelian philosophy. But it is an exaggeration when he concludes that we can’t find a philosophical, i.e., rational discussion of virtue, of human perfection, and even of human happiness or beatitude in the twelfth century. The *Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Christian* of Peter Abelard is an excellent example of the acceptance of the concept of an independent practical philosophy even in the twelfth century.

2.

In Abelard’s *Dialogue* the ethical discourse is divided into different subjects and responsibilities corresponding to the different purposes of the persons. The philosopher claims the virtues as the area of his primary competence, while the Christian has as his original jurisdiction the ultimate goals of moral acting. Each of them is required to cooperate with the other to complete his own moral insight. The idea of a dialectical division of labour is expressed through different names: the philosophical part of the discourse is termed “ethics” and the theological part “divinity.” Therefore he explains: “Quam quidem vos ethicam id est moralem, nos divinitatem nominare consuevimus. Nos illam videlicet ex eo, ad quod comprehendendum tenditur, id est Deum, sic nuncupantes vos ex illis, per que illuc pervenire, hoc est moribus bonis, quas virtutes vocatis.” When we now begin to reconstruct the main issues of the dialogue we have to take into consideration the different competences and responsibilities of the philosopher and of the Christian, who stands, as we see, for the theological tradition.

The main topics of the discussion are the concept of *summum bonum* (“highest good”), the right understanding of *virtus* and *vitum* (virtue and vice), and the central question of all ethics: what makes man *felix* or *beatus* (happy or blessed)? The philosopher introduces his doctrine to the Christian in defining the “supreme good,” which is understood as its consummation or perfection, as for example “that which, when attained, makes one blessed.” Opposite to the supreme good is the supreme evil, “whose possession makes one wretched.” According to the philosopher, we merit either of them not through ”moral action” (as the English edition of the text translates), but by “mores,” that is, by *virtus* (virtue) or by *vitium* (vice). Abelard understands virtue in the tradition of Aristotle and Boethius as “an excellent habit of the mind.” According to the philosopher in the *Dialogue*, virtue is a result of the good will of man who continually is studying “the moral literature” and is exercising “control over the flesh.” The philosopher now takes the Stoic view that the participation in

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the supreme good, which here means being happy or blessed, is given to man by the possession of virtues. So we can read in the text: "Beatum quasi bene aptum dicunt, hoc est in omnibus bene et facile se agentem, ut idem sit scilicet beatum esse, quod bonis moribus, id est virtutibus, pollere."\(^{18}\)

This statement makes clear that the philosopher’s doctrine follows the Stoic tradition. Seneca for instance is explicitly mentioned. It is interesting to see that Abelard understands the ethical position of the Stoics to be close to the “original” intention of Epicurus. According to Abelard’s philosopher, both doctrines look for “a certain interior peace of soul” by which the human soul “remains at rest and content with its own goods in the midst of adversity and prosperity, while no consciousness of sin gnaws at it.”\(^{19}\) According to Abelard’s philosopher, Seneca agreed with Epicurus that the ultimate goal of all human endeavours, i.e., the interior peace of soul (*ataraxia*), could be reached by following right rules. I quote the philosopher again: “Therefore, they both have the same opinion regarding the supreme good, but the terminology is different; and so what appeared to be two opinions regarding the supreme good are reduced to one.”\(^{20}\)

The goal and the route of moral endeavour of both the Stoic and Epicurean traditions coincide. That position is heavy criticized by the Christian. In preparing his attack on the doctrine of the coincidence of goal and way (*finis* and *via*) he asks the philosopher whether he is willing to accept the philosophical as well as the religious opinion on the immortality of the human soul and the expectation of the beatitude of a future life appropriate the human merits. In contrast to the ancient traditions of Stoicism and Epicureanism, the philosopher in Abelard’s *Dialogue* doesn’t reject these partly Christian partly Platonist doctrines. But for the moment he doesn’t agree that his acceptance of a future life necessitates changing his opinion about the unity of the goal and the route. He declares that even people who unjustly suffer are more blessed if they have been able to increase their virtue in suffering. Therefore he asks the Christian: “Finally, did your own Christ by suffering diminish his beatitude, or by rising increase it? Therefore, you should not think that we will be more blessed in that

\(^{18}\)Cf., ibid.
\(^{22}\)Cf. Engl. transl., 95; cf. Abelard.
\(^{23}\)Cf. *Scito Te Ipsum*, 28–33, 40–47.
\(^{24}\)Cf. *Dialogus*, 105, 1701 f.: "Virtus prop­ter se ipsam, non propter alid expetenda."
\(^{26}\)Cf. Engl. transl., 97; in order to explain the proper sense of *causa finalis* in the context of the topic discussion, I quote the whole argument of Boethius which is mentioned here by Abelard’s philosopher in the translation of Eleonore Stump, *Boethius’ De Topicis Dif­ferentiis*, Ithaca/London 1978, 53: “Again, from the end. Suppose this is put forth: is justice good? There might be an argumentation of this sort. If it is good to be happy, then justice is also good; for it is the end of justice that he who lives according to justice be brought to happiness. The maximal proposition: that whose end is good is itself also good. The topic: from the end."
In his response to the philosopher, the Christian quotes the Aristotelian *Categories* and the *Topics* of Cicero in order to confirm that not only Christian theologians, such as Augustine, but also the ancient philosophers who rejected the theory of the irrelevance of “poverty, sickness or death” to the question of human happiness. To see the reality of human tragedy, pain and suffering helps — according to the Christian — to reveal the illusion of the Stoic doctrine that supposes that all men become happy in this world only in seeking after virtue. Finally, the philosopher acknowledges the Christian’s suggestion that neither the assumption of a future life nor that of the possibility of a better life may be denied philosophically. Therefore the philosopher accepts the doctrine that the goal and the route are different; in other words: that the goal of human efforts, the supreme good, is to be located “in the blessedness of a future life, and the route thereto in the virtues.” If the “goal” and the “way to the goal,” if the “beatitude” and the “virtue” must be distinguished, then the question must be asked: How are these terms related? In answering this question, the philosopher supports a revised version of the Stoic concept of virtue. We may call his position an ethics of a modified Stoicism — modified by three additional assumptions: (1) the Platonic as well as Jewish-Christian belief in the transcendent state of the supreme good and in a future life after death, (2) the Aristotelian concept of habit as an acquired disposition of human mind, and (3) a new concept of the identity of man as a “person.” This altered understanding of man as a “person” is one of the consequences of the acceptance of biblical tradition in the western society. It allowed Abelard’s philosopher to emphasize the importance of “intention.” The discovery of the “intention” in Abelard’s somewhat older text *Scito Te Ipsum* not only improved the analysis of human will and action, it also provided a revolutionary insight for moral theory. The concept of intention, introduced by Peter Abelard, had never been recognized in the ethical tradition before. It is still an important element of modern philosophy, including, for instance, Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Abelard’s philosopher continues the tradition of the Stoic idea of virtue. In quoting Cicero again he declares that virtue “is to be sought for its own sake and not for the sake of something else.” That means: morality is grounded on itself and the intrinsic value of the virtues, yet it is an instrument or a way to earn merits or to become blessed. According to Cicero and to Abelard’s philosopher, “the reward of merits is not completely excluded, but reference to earthly benefits is removed.” And the philosopher adds in explanation: “Otherwise we would not have properly established beatitude as the goal of the virtues (finis virtutum), that is, as the final cause (causa finalis) — as Boethius says in the

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second Book of his *Topics.*" The philosopher in Abelard’s *Dialogue* now concludes “that beatitude is given in recompense for a just life and we must have the intention of living justly in order to attain it.”

According to the philosopher, the idea of an eternal beatitude is philosophically legitimate only as a reward for a life which itself is not primarily orientated towards that recompense, but to the virtues in this life for the sake of themselves. Virtue possesses, as it were, a characteristic of ‘intrinsic obligation’ or ‘self-commitment’ for the human being. As we have seen, Abelard presupposes a concept of virtue not as a natural disposition, founded in the “cosmic order” of the ancient Stoics, but as an acquired disposition, acquired by reason, exercising free consent. As a result of this concept of habit, being virtuous doesn’t mean acting rightly in accordance with objective rules or natural laws. According to Abelard, all human actions (actiones) ethically viewed are indifferent in themselves. They are said “to be good or evil on account of the intention from which they proceed.” The judgement that something is “good” or “evil” in itself is according to Abelard’s philosopher only possible in the case of the virtues or the vices. “*Quedam et enim bona vel mala ex seipsis propriet quasi substantialiter dicuntur utpote virtutes ipse vel vitia; quedam vero per accidens et per aliud. Veluti operum nostrorum actiones, cum in se sint indifferentes, exintentione tamen, ex qua procedunt, bone dicuntur aut male.*”

In this part of the *Dialogue* the philosopher repeats the doctrine of “intention” which Abelard had first given in *Scito Te Ipsum.* Here we see that Abelard distinguishes the following: the natural desires of man (voluntates), the habits of mind like virtues and vices (virtutes and vitia), the interior consent of a person to his or her natural desires or will (consensus), and the (actio) as a consequence of his or her consent. The moral characteristic of a “sin” depends on nothing else than the interior consent to “what is not fitting.” It is a

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28Ibid., 117, 2023–2027.

29Cf. *Scito Te Ipsum,* 4: “Vitium itaque est quo ad peccandum proni efficimur, hoc est, inclinamur ad consentiendum ei quod non convenit, ut illud scilicet faciamus aut dimitiamus. Hunc vero consensus propriie peccatum nominamus, hoc est, culpam animae . . . .”

30Ibid., 15; cf. ibid, 16 f.: “nos dicere operationem peccati nihil addere ad reatum vel ad damnationem apud deum.”

31Cf. ibid., 22 f.: “Nihil ergo ad augmentum peccati pertinet qualscumque operum executio, et nihil animam nisi quod ipsius est coinquiati, hoc est consensus quem solummodo peccatum esse diximus, non voluntatem eum precedentem vel actionem operis subseuentem.”

32Cf. ibid., 52; cf. the English translation, 53: “In fact we say that an intention is good, that is, right in itself, but that an action does not bear anything good in itself but proceeds from a good intention.”

33Cf. ibid., 52–56.

34Cf. ibid., 54: “Quod peccatum non est nisi contra conscientiam.”

35Ibid., 55.
consequence of this distinction that "the addition of the performance of the deed adds nothing to increase the sin." According to Abelard's analysis of action in his *Scito Te Ipsum*, it is "the consent which alone" is called "sin," not the will which precedes it nor the doing of the deed which follows. Because the acting is interpreted as an execution of consent, it is that consent which must be seen as the locus of the morality of decision. In turn, it is the intention which determines consent and its execution be good or bad. If one wants to call an action good or bad, one must determine the quality of the intention which directs the consent. From that Abelard is able to conclude: "Bonam quippe intentionem hoc est, rectam in se dicimus, operationem vero non quod aliquid in se suscipiat, sed quod ex bona intentione procedat." Abelard makes clear that the discovery of intention as the core of human orientation towards practical questions doesn't imply arbitrariness or "subjectivism." Abelard is convinced that there are objective rules for distinguishing between "good" and "bad" intentions: these rules are given by God and recognized by reason and conscience. Therefore Abelard is able to conclude "that there is no sin unless it is against conscience." But according to Abelard "an intention should not be called good, because it seems to be good but because in addition it is just as it is thought to be, that is, when, believing that one's objective is pleasing to God, one is in no way deceived in one's own estimation." If sin is defined by the free and conscious consent of a person to an external temptation or an internal will (*voluntas*), it is ethically decisive that we can, first, control our natural desire, second, examine our intentions to see whether they really are in accord with the postulates of the conscience and, third, make certain that our intentions are in reality "good" in respect of the intentions of God and his law.

With these proposals Abelard has opened something like an "interior court of moral attitude." His discovery of "consent" and "intention" and their consequences for philosophical ethics permit us to recognize Abelard's reflections on moral theory to be important and significant even today. In concluding this paper I would like to show the relevance of Abelard's philosophical ethics by comparing it with Kant. In doing so, it is decisive to see that Kant's ethics is part of a philosophical system which is unique in being based on a transcendental concept of reason. But in spite of this systematically important difference between Abelard and Kant, we can find some interesting analogies. Let me explain what I mean by three items:

1. As we could see it has been Abelard who first recognized the important function of "intention" in assessing human action. "Good" or "bad" intentions

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are decisive if we want to decide whether an action is good or not. There is no
judge who could definitely decide this question other than the acting person
himself or God. The ethical quality of acts and of acting people becomes more
and more a question of man’s conscience. By his theory Abelard helped to
develop the modern foundation of ethics in the human mind and the self-
experience of man as a free person. Thus, we are allowed to say that Abelard has
begun the “Copernican turn” in respect of the problem of the foundation of
ethics. In the modern philosophical tradition, it has been nobody other than
Kant who completed this task. In his Critique of Practical Reason, published
(in 1788) about 650 years after Abelard’s death, Kant declares that there is only
one concept which is appropriate in order to lay the foundations for a critical
philosophical ethics, namely, the concept of freedom. “Freedom, however,
among all the ideas of speculative reason is the only one whose possibility we
know a priori. We do not understand it, but we know it as the condition of the
moral law which we do know. The ideas of God and immortality are, on the
contrary, not conditions of the moral law, but only conditions of the necessary
object of a will which is determined by this law.”It is Kant’s purpose to build
up this ethics on the idea of the autonomy of human will. Kant’s concept of will
is no longer the “will” of the ancient philosophers (boulesis). It is an attitude of
human mind which has brought Abelard’s concept of intention to its own task.

2. Abelard’s philosopher claims that obligations derive from the virtues of
man. To this extent, he is following the Stoic tradition. I think we are allowed to
speak of a modified Stoicism in the ethical intuitions of Abelard’s philosopher.
This marks, by the way, a decisive difference between the ethics of Abelard’s
philosopher and that of Aristotelian tradition on the doctrine of the virtues.
Nevertheless, it is precisely Abelard’s reception of the Aristotelian concept of
habit — quoted by him in the context not of the Nicomachian Ethics but the
Categories — which allowed Abelard to think of the self-obligation of man
through virtues. As we have seen, Abelard defines virtues as an excellence of
habit of mind. To this extent, virtue is a quality of the human attitude of mind
acknowledged by reason, insight and assent. As we know Kant’s ethics rejects
the traditional concept of virtue. But in this question Kant is arguing against the
Aristotelian version of virtue, more than the Stoic one. For Kant, the concept
of obligation is the alternative to that of the Aristotelian tradition. Kant himself
calls virtue “the worthiness to be happy” appropriate to the willingness of man
to satisfy his moral obligations. And insofar as we could see that Abelard’s
concept of virtue itself calls for a kind of rational self-commitment, we may
recognize an analogy even in this respect.

3. In the center of the debate between the philosopher and the Christian,

37Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, Engl.
38Ibid., 114.
39Cf. ibid., 149–151.
we find among other questions the problem of whether it is possible for the moral philosopher to define a kind of connection or at least correlation between the obligation of man to fulfill his duties (in Abelard: to perfect his virtues) and the hope to become blessed in a future world. These problems of moral philosophy are the main subject too in the Second Part of Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason, the so-called “Dialectics” of practical reason. In this part Kant is discussing a problem he calls “the antimony of the practical reason,” which is generated from the concept of the “highest good”: “the concept of the ‘highest’ contains an ambiguity which, if not attended to, can occasion unnecessary disputes. The ‘highest’ can mean the ‘supreme’ (supremum) or the ‘perfect’ (consummatum). The former is the unconditional condition; i.e., the condition which is subordinte to no other (originarium); the latter is that whole which is no part of a yet larger whole of the same kind (perfectissimum).” The antimony of practical reason which Kant is debating in the whole dialectic of the second Critique consists of the unanswered question how to define the relationship between virtue (understood as self-obligation of man by reason and conscience) and beatitude or happiness. It’s not my purpose to reconstruct Kant’s arguments at the end of my paper, but it is interesting to see that Kant’s answer to this problem is given by his proof: first that the human soul exists even after death, and, second, that God exists. Both proofs have been and still are the subject of philosophical controversy. Whatever are the results of these discussions, we may conclude that the debate between the philosopher and the Christian in Abelard’s Dialogue must be recognized as a discussion on ethical problems in philosophy which is able to make its own contribution to these relevant debates in philosophy today.

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