

John Marenbon

Abelard in Four Dimensions: A Twelfth-Century Philosopher in His Context and Ours.

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Marenbon's recent offering, *Abelard in Four Dimensions* is, as he notes, accessible to all but clearly intended for those committed to the history of medieval philosophy. Marenbon approaches Abelard from a variety of perspectives. As he notes, "For historians of philosophy, time should have four dimensions. Three of them relate just to the philosophers who are being studied... The fourth dimension lies in the relation between the past thinkers and philosophy today..." (1). Marenbon seeks to understand Abelard in these contexts, while also relating Abelard to our present time and present philosophical discourse. His book is partitioned into three parts, each dealing with some aspect of these four dimensions.

As a historical work, this book is accessible to everyone. "Although it is not a general book on Abelard and his thought... it is written so as to be comprehensible to readers who are approaching him for the first time" (3). However, the material is esoteric, so although it might be comprehensible, it may not be engaging or of interest to a more general audience. This book is not a survey of the work of Peter Abelard. Instead, it is an attempt to understand Abelard within his intellectual context: his intellectual indebtedness to his past, his debates with his contemporaries, and how he was taken up by others. This context is situated in relation to his most controversial thesis, that God cannot do otherwise than he does. Or as Marenbon denotes the argument, "'No alternatives for God' or NAG for short" (45). The question: "Can God do otherwise than he does?" and Abelard's controversial answer: "No" are the focus of a great deal of this work, although there are meanderings along the way. Accordingly, I'd like to walk the reader through Marenbon's book part by part.

This book is ultimately a collection of essays and nowhere does that seem more evident than in the first chapter. The first part of the book is dedicated to Abelard's present, and so Marenbon spends a significant amount of time defending a particular chronology of Abelard's works. Although this effort is clearly important for a historian, chapter one is incredibly dense and non-specialists will find it close to impenetrable. This chapter, in this respect, reads very much as an isolated essay with very little conceptual connection to the rest of the work. However, once Marenbon has vindicated his chronology, he begins with Abelard, the thinker, and chapter two sets the tenor for most of the rest of the book. It is in this chapter that he lays out Abelard's "unpopular" argument that God cannot do otherwise than he does. Marenbon thus situates Abelard against the voluntarists of his time such as Hugh of St. Victor. Marenbon provides detailed analyses of Abelard's arguments for NAG as well as its implications for the redemption of the *damnundus*, God's ability to save the damned man, and presages his discussion of the origin of much of Abelard's thinking in earlier scholastics, such as St. Anselm. He thus provides the context from which one must begin in order to understand Abelard. But in order to fully appreciate Abelard's present one must understand his connection to the past, and his reception by his future. So Marenbon moves to Part II.

Part II deals with Abelard's past and future. Chapter three looks to St. Anselm's influence on Abelard, and chapter four deals with the reception and subsequent (mis)interpretation of Abelard up to and including Leibniz.

With respect to Anselm, Marenbon spends a chapter tracing Abelard's indebtedness to him, with specific regard to Anselm's contentious satisfaction theory of the crucifixion and his attendant understanding of redemption (100). A great deal of time is spent tracing the connection between Anselm and Abelard in terms of this line of argument as well as their ethics in general, both being seen ultimately as "forerunners" to Kant (108). Yet Part II is seen to develop out of Part I insofar as Anselm and Abelard's theory of redemption, specifically the salvation of the *damnundus*, seems to contradict NAG. Much ink is spilt demonstrating the consistency of NAG and the possibility of personal salvation. Here we are treated to a wonderful exercise in the history of philosophy, the explication of an argument with reference to a historical genealogy, textual analysis, and ultimately a furtherance of our appreciation of the complexity of Abelard's thought. This is a complexity lost to history, as chapter four demonstrates.

In chapter four, Marenbon traces the misunderstanding of Abelard's position on NAG through the history of philosophy. This discussion culminates with Leibniz's mischaracterization of Abelard as a determinist with respect to the condemned man, the *damnandus*. This mischaracterization is made possible since "Leibniz is blind to his real argument" (144), because he has received Abelard through the distortions of Bayle and late medieval scholarship. It is this failed legacy that Marenbon is correcting through his detailed and laborious effort to present Abelard in terms of his past and present, so that his future might be redeemed.

In the final part of his book, Marenbon brings Abelard into conversation with contemporary philosophers of language and metaphysicians. This is another place where the fact that the book is a collection of essays, as opposed to a unified study, becomes apparent. First, Abelard is brought into contact with Kripke and Putnam, his philosophy of language being brought into congruence with the "new theory of meaning," though the ultimate relation is unclear since it is not determined whether for Kripke, Putnam, and Abelard essentialism stems from semantics or guarantees its rigidity (165). Although for some this type of philosophical discussion may prove invigorating, this chapter, as well as the next, seems to be more Marenbon's opportunity to present his own pet theories on Abelard in contradistinction to those of Peter King, in an attempt to claim the title of authoritative interpreter of Peter Abelard. Although the seasoned scholar aware of the nuanced debates within the scholastic community may find something to relish here, the general reader will be left wondering what relevance it has to the previous chapters' discussions.

In chapter six, Abelard is brought into contact with contemporary metaphysics, specifically the trope theory of D. C. Williams (181). As in chapter five, the pattern seems to be to draw out similarities between Abelard and contemporary theories, while also critiquing Peter King's interpretation of Abelard. As with chapter five, although the scholastics among the readership may find this interesting, it is esoteric and its importance is not clearly communicated to the reader.

Marenbon concludes with a brief statement of what he thinks he has accomplished, highlighting his presentation of Abelard in context as well as emphasizing how a historian ought to go about studying historical figures (200). He explains the merit of this approach as genuine and valuable philosophy in its own right (203), and this reader agrees wholeheartedly. I am sympathetic, and as one who routinely teaches courses in medieval philosophy, communicating the continued relevance and importance of that period of thought is near and dear to my heart. But even though this reader is sympathetic to Marenbon as a historian of philosophy, and would not wish to detract from the work he has done in *Abelard in Four Dimensions*, at times this book seems to be straining too hard to be a book. We see this too often in academic philosophy: a collection of essays either recent or written over a period of years is cobbled together as a single volume. But what is lost in

that process is cohesion, each part drawing its value and meaning from the context of the whole, an enterprise with a singular vision. Instead, we are treated to good work to be sure, but work that fails to grab hold the reader and carry her along a singular narrative. Thus the reader's impressions are like the essays of which the book is constructed, so many disparate thoughts, the connections among which are lost. Kudos to Marenbon for doing the history of philosophy well, and kudos for continuing to further our understanding of Peter Abelard, even if in so doing he meanders a bit.

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