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# The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love



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offspring to be loved, yet no lust to cause shame. But there is now no example with which to illustrate how this could have been effected. Nevertheless, that is no reason why it should seem incredible that the will, which is now obeyed by so many members, might also have been obeyed in the absence of this lust by that one part as well. Consider how, when we choose, we set our hands and feet in motion to do the things that are theirs to do, how we manage this without any conflict and with all the facility that we see both in our own case and in that of others, especially among workers in all kinds of physical tasks, where a natural capacity that is too weak and slow is fitted for its employment by the application of greater dexterity and effort. May we not similarly believe that those organs of procreation could, like the others, have served mankind by obedience to the decision of the will for the generation of children even if there had been no lust inflicted as punishment for the sin of disobedience?

Certain human beings too, as we know, have natural endowments that are quite different from those of others and remarkable for their very rarity. They can at will do with their bodies some things that others find utterly impossible to imitate and scarcely credible to hear. For some people can actually move their ears, either one at a time or both together. Other people, without moving their head, can bring all the scalp that is covered with hair to the forefront and then draw it back again at will. . . . From my own experience I know of a man who used to perspire at will. Certain people are known to weep at will and to shed a flood of tears.

The body then, as we have seen, even now remarkably serves certain people beyond the ordinary limits of nature in many kinds of movement and feeling although they are living our present wretched life in perishable flesh. That being so, what is there to keep us from believing that human members may have served the human will without lust for the procreation of offspring before the sin of disobedience and the consequent punishment of deterioration? Man therefore was handed over to himself because he forsook God in his self-satisfaction, and since he did not obey God, he could not obey even himself. From this springs the more obvious wretchedness whereby man does not live as he chooses. For if he lived as he chose, he would deem himself happy; but yet he would not be happy even so if he lived an indecent life.

## Heloise and Abelard

### Letters

*Heloise (whose parentage still remains disputed) was the abbess of the convent at Paraclete and one of the most learned persons of the twelfth-century Renaissance. Her husband, Peter Abelard, was born into a minor aristocratic family but renounced his noble rights and became the keenest and most influential scholar-theologian of his day. He was already renowned as a brilliant thinker and lecturer in Paris when he was brought into the house of Heloise's "uncle," Fulbert (surmised by some to be her father), to be the young girl's tutor. The relationship soon grew beyond its pedagogical bounds, and Heloise and Abelard became lovers, indeed, two of the most famous lovers in the Western tradition. But their love became famous first of all through a brutal tragedy. Fulbert would not tolerate the dangerous liaison between his ward and her tutor—even their secret marriage and their baby would not stem his jealousy—and he had Abelard attacked and emasculated. Heloise went off to the convent, and Abelard retreated to the Abbey of St. Denis, where he continued his theological disputations and wrote a history of their calamitous affair.*

*For the remainder of their lives, they kept up a passionate correspondence in which they explored, as deeply and with as much pathos as any lovers in history, the meaning of love and its place in life. In their letters, the split between sexual eros and philosophy implicit in Socrates and manifest in the Christian teachings of Saint Paul and Augustine turns into moral turmoil. In most of her letters, Heloise adopts a classical rather than a Christian perspective on love, but it is a Socratic perspective in which "disinterested" (sublimated) friendship is the ideal, "virtue joined to love, disengaged from the senses." To such a love, warmed by the memories of their passionate physical union, Heloise devotes her life. Abelard, on the other hand, seems to have a harder time with his passion and his humiliation. He sees both his love and his physical condition as antithetical to his philosophy; whereas Heloise sees her love as freedom, Abelard seems to feel his idealized philosophical freedom compromised by his. It is worth noting that, despite their marriage, both Heloise and Abelard praise love and dis-*

*play contempt for marriage, which they describe as the mere legalization of the weakness of the flesh. True love is essentially secret rather than public, and Heloise famously insists that she would rather be Abelard's mistress, even in such frustrating circumstances, than an empress. Through their tragedy, their celebration of secret love outside marriage, and their enduring love through letters, they become a prototype of the emerging institution of "courtly love." From their letters, we can sense that they managed to keep alive lifelong the lost joy of their brief but tragic affair. The following is a brief selection from those letters.*

### Letter II. Heloise to Abelard.

Let me always meditate on your calamities; let me publish them through all the world, if possible, to shame an age that has not known how to value you. I will spare no one, since no one would interest himself to protect you, and your enemies are never weary of oppressing your innocence. Alas; my memory is perpetually filled with bitter remembrances of past evils, and there more to be feared still? Shall my Abelard never be mentioned without tears? Shall the dear name be never mentioned without sighs? Observe, I beseech you, to what a wretched condition you have reduced me; sad, afflicted, without any possible comfort, unless it proceed from you. Be not, then unkind, nor deny me, I beg of you, that little relief which you only can give. Let me have a faithful account of all that concerns you. I would know everything, be it ever so unfortunate. Perhaps, by mingling my sighs with yours, I make your sufferings less; if that observation be true, that all sorrows divided are made lighter.

Tell me not, by way of excuse, you will spare our tears; the tears of women shut up in a melancholy place, and devoted to penitence, are not to be spared and if you wait for an opportunity to write pleasant and agreeable things to us, you will delay writing too long: Prosperity seldom chooses the side of the virtuous; and Fortune is so blind, that in a crowd, in which there is perhaps but one wise and brave man, it is not to be expected she should single him out. Write to me, then immediately, and wait not for miracles. . . . By a peculiar power, love can make [your picture] seem life itself, which, as soon as the loved object returns, is nothing but a little canvas and dead colours. I have your picture in my room. I never pass by it without stopping to look at it; and yet when you were present with me, I scarce ever cast my eyes upon it. If a picture which is but a mute representation of an object, can give such pleasure, what cannot letters inspire? They have souls, they can speak, they have in them all that force which ex-

presses the transports of the heart; they have all the fire of our passions, they can raise them as much as if the persons themselves were present; they have all the softness and delicacy of speech, and sometimes a boldness of expression even beyond it.

We may write to each other, so innocent a pleasure is not forbidden us. Let us not lose, through negligence, the only happiness which is left us, and the only one perhaps which the malice of our enemies can never ravish from us. I shall read that you are my husband, and you shall see me address you as a wife. In spite of all your misfortunes, you may be what you please in your letters. Letters were first invented for comforting such solitary wretches as myself. Having lost the substantial pleasures of seeing and possessing you, I shall in some measure compensate this loss by the satisfaction I shall find in your writing. There I shall read your most secret thoughts; I shall carry them always about me. I shall kiss them every moment; if you can be capable of any jealousy, let it be for the fond caresses I shall bestow on your letters, and envy only the happiness of those rivals. That writing may be no trouble to you, write always to me carelessly, and without study: I had rather read the dictates of the heart than of the brain. I cannot live, if you do not tell me you always love me: but that language ought to be so natural to you, that I believe you cannot speak otherwise to me without great violence to yourself; and since by that melancholy relation to your friend you have awakened all my sorrows, it is but reasonable you should allay them by some marks of an inviolable love. . . .

You cannot but remember (for what do not lovers remember?) with what pleasure I have passed whole days in hearing your discourse. How when you were absent I shut myself from every one to write to you; how uneasy I was till my letter had come into your hands; what artful management it required to engage confidants: this detail perhaps surprises you and you are in pain for what will follow. But I am no longer ashamed that my passion has had no bounds for you, for I have done more than all this. I have hated myself that I might love you; I came hither to ruin myself in a perpetual imprisonment, that I might make you live quiet and easy. Nothing but virtue, joined to a love perfectly disengaged from the commerce of the senses, could have produced such effects. Vice never inspires any thing like this, it is too much enslaven to the body. . . . If formerly my affection for you was not so pure, if in those days the mind and the body shared in the pleasure of loving you, I often told you even then, that I was more pleased with possessing your heart, than with any other happiness, and the man was the thing I least valued in you.

You cannot but be entirely persuaded of this by the extreme unwillingness I showed to marry you; though I knew that the name of wife was honourable in the world, and holy in religion, yet the name of your mistress had greater charms, because it was more free. The bonds of matrimony, however honourable, still bear with them a necessary engagement, and I was very unwilling to be necessitated to love always a man who perhaps would not always love me. I despised the name of wife that I might live happy with that of mistress. . . . Riches and pomp are not the charms of love. True tenderness makes us separate the lover from all that is external to him; and setting aside his quality, fortune, and employments, consider him singly by himself.

It is not love, but the desire of riches and honour which makes women run into the embraces of an indolent husband. Ambition, not affection, forms such marriages. I believe, indeed, they may be followed by some honours and advantages, but I can never think that this is the way to enjoy the pleasures of an affectionate union, nor to feel those secret and charming emotions of hearts that have long strove to be united. . . . Their interested vows occasion regret, and regret produces hatred. They soon part, or always desire it. This restless and tormenting passion punishes them for aiming at other advantages by love than love itself.

If there be any thing which may properly be called happiness here below, I am persuaded it is in the union of two persons who love each other with perfect liberty, who are united by a secret inclination, and satisfied with each other's merit: their hearts are full, and leave no vacancy for any other passion; they enjoy perpetual tranquility, because they enjoy content.

If I could believe you as truly persuaded of my merit as I am of yours, I might say there has been a time when we were such a pair. Alas! how was it possible I should not be certain of your merit? If I could ever have doubted it, the universal esteem would have made me determine in your favour. What country, what city has not desired your presence? Could you ever retire, but you drew the eyes and hearts of all after you? . . .

But tell me whence proceeds your neglect of me since my being professed? You know nothing moved me to it but your disgrace, nor did I give any consent but yours. Let me hear what is the occasion of your coldness, or give me leave to tell you now my opinion. Was it not the sole view of pleasure which engaged you to me? and has not my tenderness, by leaving you nothing to wish for, extinguished your desires? Wretched Heloise! you could please when you wished to avoid it: you merited incense when you could remove to a distance the hand that offered it. But since your heart has been

softened and has yielded; since you have devoted and sacrificed yourself you are deserted and forgotten, I am convinced, by a sad experience, that it is natural to avoid those to whom we have been too much obliged; and that uncommon generosity produces neglect rather than acknowledgment. My heart surrendered too soon to gain the esteem of the conqueror; you took it without difficulty, and gave it up as easily. But ungrateful as you are, I will never consent to it. And though in this place I ought not to retain a wish of my own, yet I have ever secretly preserved the desire of being beloved by you. When I pronounced my sad vow, I then had about me your last letters, in which you protested you would be wholly mine, and would never live but to love me. It is to you, therefore, I have offered myself; you had my heart; and I had yours; do not demand any thing back; you must bear with my passion as a thing which of right belongs to you, and from which you can no way be disengaged. . . .

Since you have forsaken me I glory in being wedded to Heaven. My heart adores that title, and disdains any other. Tell me how this divine love is nourished, how it operates, and purifies itself. When we were tossed in the ocean of the world we could hear of nothing but your verses, which published every where our joys and our pleasures. Now we are in the haven of grace, is it not fit you should discourse to me of this happiness, and teach me every thing which might improve and heighten it? Shew me the same complaisance in my present condition as you did when we were in the world. Without changing the ardour of our affections, let us change their object; let us leave our songs, and sing hymns; let us lift up our hearts to God, and have no transports but for his glory.

I expect this from you as a thing you cannot refuse me. God has a peculiar right over hearts of great men, which he has created. When he pleases to touch them, he ravishes, and suffers them not to speak or breathe but for his glory. Till that moment of grace arrives, oh! think of me; do not forget me; remember my love, my fidelity, my constancy; love me as your mistress, cherish me as your child, your sister, your wife. Consider that I still love you, and yet strive to avoid loving you. What a word, what a design is this! I shake with horror, and my heart revolts against what I say. I shall blot all my paper with tears. I end my long letter, wishing you, if you can desire it (would to Heaven I could), for ever adieu.

## Letter II. Abelard to Heloise.

Could I have imagined that a letter not written to yourself could have fallen into your hands, I had been more cautious not to have inserted any thing in

it which might awaken the memory of our past misfortunes. I described with boldness the series of my disgraces to a friend, in order to make him less sensible of a loss he had sustained. If by this well-meaning artifice I have disturbed you, I purpose here to dry up those tears which the sad description occasioned you to shed: I intended to mix my grief with yours, and pour out my heart before you; in short, to lay open before your eyes all my trouble, and the secret of my soul, which my vanity has hitherto made me conceal from the rest of the world, and which you now force from me, in spite of my resolutions to the contrary.

It is true, that in a sense of the afflictions which had befallen us, and observing that no change of our condition was to be expected; that those prosperous days which had seduced us were now past, and there remained nothing but to erase out of our minds, by painful endeavours, all marks and remembrance of them. I had wished to find in philosophy and religion a remedy for my disgrace; I searched out an asylum to secure me from love. I was come to the sad experiment of making vows to harden my heart. But what have I gained by this? If my passion has been put under a restraint, my ideas yet remain. I promise myself that I will forget you, and yet cannot think of it without loving you; and am pleased with that thought. My love is not at all weakened by those reflections I make in order to free myself. The silence I am surrounded with makes me more sensible to its impressions; and while I am unemployed with any other things; this makes itself the business of my whole vocation; till, after a multitude of useless endeavours, I begin to persuade myself that it is a superfluous trouble to strive to free myself, and that it is wisdom sufficient if I can conceal from every one but you my confusion and weakness.

I remove to a distance from your person, with an intention of avoiding you as an enemy; and yet I incessantly seek for you in my mind; I recall your image in my memory, and in such different inquietudes I betray and contradict myself. I hate you; I love you; shame presses me on all sides; I am at this moment afraid lest I should seem more indifferent than you are, and yet I am ashamed to discover my trouble. How weak are we in ourselves, if we do not support ourselves on the cross of Christ. Shall we have so little courage, and shall that uncertainty your heart labours with, of serving two masters, affect mine too? You see the confusion I am in, what I blame myself for, and what I suffer. Religion commands me to pursue virtue since I have nothing to hope for from love; but love still preserves its dominion in my fancy, and entertains itself with past pleasures. Memory supplies the place of a mistress. Piety and duty are not always the fruits of

retirement; even in deserts, when the dew of Heaven falls not on us, we love what we ought no longer to love. The passions, stirred up by solitude, fill those regions of death and silence; and it is very seldom that what ought to be is followed there, and that God only is loved and served. Had I always had such notions as these, I had instructed you better. . . .

I find myself much more guilty in my thoughts of you, even amidst my tears, than in possessing yourself when I was in full liberty. I continually think of you, I continually call to mind that day when you bestowed on me the first marks of your tenderness. In this condition, O Lord, if I run to prostrate myself before thy altars, if I beseech thee to pity me, why does not the pure flame of thy spirit consume the sacrifice that is offered to thee? Cannot this habit of penitence which I wear interest Heaven to treat me more favourably? But that is still inexorable because my passion still lives in me; the fire is only covered with deceitful ashes, and cannot be extinguished but by extraordinary grace. We deceive men, but nothing is hid from God. . . .

What a troublesome employment is love! and how valuable is virtue even upon consideration of our own case! Recollect your extravagancies of passion, guess at my distractions; number up our cares, if possible, our griefs, and our inquietudes; throw these things out of the account, and let love have all its remaining softness and pleasure. Are we so weak our whole lives that we cannot now help writing to each other, covered as we are with sackcloth and ashes: how much happier should we be, if by our humiliation and tears we could make our repentance sure. The love of pleasure is not eradicated out of the soul but by extraordinary efforts; it has so powerful a party in our breasts that we find it difficult to condemn it ourselves. What abhorrence can I be said to have of my sins, if the objects of them are always amiable to me? How can I separate from the person I love, the passion I must detest? Will the tears I shed be sufficient to render it odious to me? I know not how it happens, there is always a pleasure in weeping for a beloved object. It is difficult in our sorrow to distinguish penitence from love. The memory of the crime, and the memory of the object which has charmed us, are too nearly related to be immediately separated. And the love of God in its beginning does not wholly annihilate the love of the creature.