**Space and the Morality of Sadness in Abelard and Montaigne**

The reflective and philosophical human creature in history is a special breed. He is rarely unveiled, because his element of knowledge is his own news. This is especially the case for the reflective Stoic self, a creature whose knowledge of his own mental states is bent towards its initial state. In fact, we are in something of a 'chicken and egg' situation where the differences between perceptual knowledge (that is, knowledge of the world and the senses) and introspective knowledge are not clear-cut. The definition of self-knowledge obviously depends on how one conceives of the distinction between mental and physical properties, but also on one's conception of the differences between perceptual and introspective knowledge. Introspective knowledge enjoys a range of philosophical privileges which perceptual knowledge lacks. It is this 'chicken and egg' situation of the philosophical self that can be described as the frailties and fallibility of knowledge of the world. The now hot and I think very compelling philosopher Quassim Cassam, professor at Warwick, the problem of the introspective self and the perceptual knowledge lies in the concept of the so-called embodied self. He attempts to answer the metaphysical question about the relation between the materiality of the body and the self, the phenomenological question about the nature of our awareness of our own body, and the epistemological question of whether anything is special about the knowledge we have of our own bodies. Cassam especially considers arguments in favor and against the claim *that the person is identical with body*. He also evaluates whether bodily awareness is a form of self-awareness. A rare philosopher of its kind, able to bridge continental and Anglo-Saxon traditions in philosophy, Quassim Cassam fills a major gap in the history of philosophy when it comes to way the ancient tradition of self-knowledge, rooted in the Stoic tradition, should in fact be placed back into the body. Inspired by some philosophically technical notions Cassam has put forward about discussions of the self and the body, I would like to explore the question whether the fact that we have a body that functions in space and time is part of self-knowledge and that this very fact is, nothing more and nothing less, essentially dealing with a body within the contingent *conditio humana* of the world. What I would like to discuss today is part of my book project on *Abelard and the Varieties of the Self.*

So I will address the following question: how can the stability and self-contained shape of Stoicism account for the accident, or the event in the human condition? This question not only preoccupied Peter Abelard, but also Michel de Montaigne and in the attempt to define, indirectly, the problem of modernism I thought it might be useful to mirror the two thinkers in order to clarify some similarities. As will become clear in my paper, the two thinkers are completely idiosyncratic and pioneers in the way they gave a new shape to *philosophy as a performance*. To be sure, their idiosyncrasy should remain untouched, cannot be compared, not even in the fact that they are idiosyncratic, but within their idiosyncrasy they had similar philosophical concerns, which they shaped in similar intellectual speculations. Both break with their heritage and therefore carry an aura of modernity, they are often associated with the rise of individuality, but are they *modern*? Their philosophical position and the *form* in which this philosophical position is *embodied*, as it where, constitute a fundamental rejection of the claim of autonomous reasoning. This embodiment has in the work of Abelard the shape of dialectics, in order to express his method of doubt, while Montaigne invented the essay, which he describes as a '*fluidité gaye et ingénieuse*' thanks to the '*diversité des formes*' (228c). His seems to be an *écriture* without an origin, a fragment of a discourse. Both philosophical shapes - the dialectic shape of Abelard's thought and the essay of Montaigne -- absorb *and* reject all possibility of a fixed interpretation. This means, in essence, that the philosophical position of both Abelard and Montaigne embody a *retroactive* *reading of the events*. I will come back to this. Before laying bare the structures of their different philosophical shapes it should be emphasized that both thinkers considered their work as a tribute to Socrates and his philosophical question of 'Know Thyself'. Hopefully my concern for the -- seemingly -- immovable shape of stoicism as adopted by the two thinkers and the notion of space and morality becomes now more apparent. I think, tentatively, that it is precisely this spot that causes intellectual historians to think both philosophers as 'modern', and I think that they are misled. I think that the notion of 'improvised morality' - both in the essay of Montaigne and the dialectic shape of Abelard's thinking - is a double *trompe l'oeil*. Not only are we misled by the suggestion of the claire-obscure character of dialectics or the haphazard structure of the essays we are mislead by the notion of the *accidental*. Reversely, as soon as we think that both types of philosophical structures are to be placed within the fixed frame of ancient traditions - in both Abelard and Montaigne the influence of Seneca's *Letters* is without any doubt crucial - we are already taking a position that is much too fixed and determined to do justice to the philosophy of either Abelard, or Montaigne. This is the biggest challenge of both thinkers: despite the very tangibility of their writings, all answers to human life have to remain open. Sure, this openness is perhaps the very enterprise of skeptical thinking in itself, so what is new in what I just said? Because in my reading of these sources, which might be considered as an anthropological method since it takes into account the *Weltanschauung* of the authors, the skeptical mode in both Abelard and Montaigne is a moment of openness to the possible rather than a *suspension* of judgment. This insight is crucial, for the moment of openness (which is dialectic in Montaigne too) is improvised. The moment of openness to the possible allows both thinkers to find the strange in the familiar. The familiarity is for Montaigne the War of Religions, the context of a civil war. But it is also the life of a man whose life was dedicated to a great friendship: that of Etienne de la Boétie, whose library he inherited, and therefore Montaigne's life was also one of profound solitude and letters. Abelard's familiarity, on the other hand, was to be found the world of schools and training in logic. A world of social possibilities and impossibilities, one thinks of Heloise, but his was also a monastic way of life, again, one of profound solitude and letters.

Another aspect should be mentioned in this respect, and that is the notion of the skeptical, Christian Stoic. With vivid descriptions of accidents (*calamitaties*), both Abelard and Montaigne describe the vulnerability of being human within the, often comic, terms of their bodies. They are concerned by their errors and thus of their human condition that they share in common with all other humans, the most ignorant and the most non-stoic. In contrast with the self-contained Stoic, then, their philosophy that aligns with the shape in which the philosophical method is poured, the accident serves to create a new philosophy that is non-authoritative and purely human.

For the sake of our conference on notions of morality and materiality it is important to stress the outline of such an 'accidental' philosophy. There are three things. First, the accident implies that truth is prephilosophical and prereflective: the truth that is discovered is the truth that was already there. Second, the accident serves the Stoic to understand that it is circular dialectic: thoughts move from the common and familiar to the rare and strange, then return to find the rare in the common and the strange in the familiar. Third, the accident serves the philosopher to get beyond -what Montaigne would call - 'the appearance of the first sense'. Those who stop at the first sense remain in error. The dialectic movement helps to understand a deeper sense and the struggle with error that is implicit in the dialectic suggests the temptation to get a meaning of life that is dynamic and part of a radically contingent, created world.

The unique combination of the human and the dialectic -- by placing the struggle with error at center stage -- complex metaphysical categories are lowered down, so to speak, the abstract becomes part of the bodily experience of being human. Human nature truly becomes a human *condition*. Nature is not opposed to culture, but nature is opposed to learning. Even if Nature has a distinctly different meaning for the humanist Montaigne than for the twelfth-century Abelard, for both premodern thinkers Nature is what is here and how, hence the search for truth or self-knowledge is not an Aristotelian quest for causes and effects.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rather, the search for truth is the presentation of the individual human condition: 'each man bears the entire form of the human condition', says Montaigne.[[2]](#footnote-2) The image (*imago*) of Nature, or what is natural, can be seen as allegorical, the naturalness of thinking is what constitutes human nature. If the shape and form of Montaigne's *Essais* is inseparable from the *intention* of the work, that is, to philosophize, the incidents (*tumultus*, *troubles*) are like all other human experiences a reason to check the precision, the truth and the trustworthiness of the judgment itself. The independent movement of this process of checks and balances is what is indispensable of a judgment and the notion of errors and doubt is what makes a judgment, in a sense, a form of improvising. Since there is no skeptic postponement of the judgment, this improvised and accident prone way of philosophizing is all there is, or to put it more optimistically, fortunately, being human means being able to cope with change.

Now it is time to discuss some examples. I will start with Montaigne since he is closer to our worldview than Abelard. And I will need Montaigne to be able to explain the impact of Abelard's weird and complex theory of intention. The very idea of improvising the self is clearly present in the work of Montaigne:

**[First fragment (on Cicero)]**

My focus is still on the Stoic heritage in the history of self knowledge: both Abelard and Montaigne describe a Stoic self in the middle of ruins, realizing that life is more than ruins. The moment where the Stoic breaks, as Montaigne says in his *essai* on Solitude:

**[Book I, Chapter xxxviii: On Solitude]**

Before saying a few things about the dialectic movement within Montaigne's thinking that causes the Stoic to break in the middle of his ruins, I would like to make a remark on the notion of irony which can be clearly found in the last sentence of this passage, and this ironic tone is present throughout his "project". One never knows when Montaigne is serious and when he is pulling us a leg. The trompe l'oeil of human nature is presented as if human being were molded by Nature herself -- a fixed reality with a fixed morality -- while in fact representing more an allegory of man's own capricious and playful nature. This is also what I meant to say when Montaigne is downplaying philosophy and ethics. Humor and irony -- and distance too -- is part of his philosophical project.

Some say that humor or irony is the most difficult feature of human culture to grasp, for it is time-bound and should be understood within specific cultural parameters. Some say that one culture has more humor than another. Whatever the case, I'd now like to suggest that Abelard has a profound sense of irony too, an aspect of his work that has never been taken seriously, perhaps because if *this* were humor, it is a very wry one.

**[Passage of M.]**

A study of letters in the guise of an *alter ego* - in terms of shape La Boétie signifies for Montaigne what Heloise means to Abelard - show that the protection or the sustainability of the Stoic self do not suffice anymore. The letter, the alter ego, shows how the chaos of Nature can turn into a *claire-obscure* dialectic shape of the art of letters. The *alter ego* who judges the self is like Narcissus who permanently judges and is being judged.

We now turn to Abelard and his theory of intention; Abelard draws the moral consequences of this human mirror landscape of judging and being judged even further.

**[Fragment]**

What does this mean? One of the most important differences between a causal interpretation of events, a world where a killer is going to trial and passions are without consequences, and the Stoic world is that the Stoic wants us to be unmoved by both. What Abelard really meant with his theory of intention we will never know, since the work is not finished. The conclusion -- probably one third of the intended book -- is lacking. But what we do know from this work as well as from all his other work, is that Abelard proposes the logical consequences of what it is to know oneself and its ethical implications, namely, the self is the thing we already knew. There is something circular in his thought -- as is the case in Montaigne's -- the morality carries him back to his first belief and knowledge begins from what we already know. In order to begin at all, we must assume what we already know. But Abelard's and Montaigne's shape and movement of thinking, the dialectic movement and the essay, trial and error, always come back to what was initially assumed. It is what I have called in another paper I presented this Spring in Chicago 'the naturalistic style' where human reasoning is always embedded in the human nature. Nor the Abelard or the Montaigne being is a Cartesian mind of "subjectivity". In these authors we find no self-satisfied understanding but a consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence. There is something extraordinary fresh in this mindset that is without origin, a permanent landscape without ruins. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book on Montaigne has captured what is going on:

"Regaining nature, naïveté, and ignorance means regaining the grace of our first certainties in the doubt that rings them round and makes them visible".[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Com. Aristotle's four causes: final, formal, efficient, and reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hartle, p. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Merleau-Ponty, *Reading* *Montaigne*, p. 206 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)