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## The Changeability of the Past: Medieval and Modern

A Common Theme between Peter Damian  
and Hans Jonas

### I. INTRODUCTION

What does conventional wisdom mean by “one should not cry over spilt milk?” Why do we shrug and say “let bygones be bygones forever”, and on what grounds do we accept such common phrases as “what is done is done” or that something “is finished for good?”

In what follows, I will look at two lines of argumentation addressing the problem of an unchangeable past. The first approach is that of Hans Jonas (1903–1993), the German-born Jewish philosopher. Jonas didn’t address the problem of the changeability of the past directly, but I suggest that it is implied by two of his positions. The Benedictine Cardinal Peter Damian (c. 1007–1072/3), however, addressed the issue explicitly. The two thinkers never had anything to do with each other, but their intellectual coincidence is, despite their differences, remarkable.

Let me begin with the standard view. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle pointed out that it is a characteristic feature of the past that “nobody desires a past event.”<sup>1</sup> Nobody living in the present moment seeks to capture Troy. One cannot eat *the same* piece of cake that somebody else consumed yesterday (Anscombe 1950). Indeed, the changing of something implies its existence. What does not exist cannot change. Hence, if it were possible to change the past, it would have to exist in some way. Therefore, it would have to be part of the present, which is a contradiction.

Aristotle adds another point. Desiring and striving are about the future and the possible. The common intuition is that the past, once it has happened, cannot *not* have occurred. In other words, the past cannot unoccur; it must ever be accepted as fact. The past implies irrevocability. Therefore Aristotle can be seen to comfortably endorse the following quote from Agathon, the dramatist, who said that “even the most powerful divinity is deprived of only one thing,

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b5–13.

namely, to make events that happened in the past not to have happened.”<sup>2</sup> An impossible task cannot be performed even by an immortal will. Or, as the contemporary philosopher, Geoffrey Brown, would say “not even God has the ability to alter the past (which is admittedly senseless)” (Brown 1985. 83–86). Past and future are fundamentally asymmetric.

Besides the asymmetry, Aristotle points out a connection between the future and the past. Future and past are tied together not only in the sense that time is continuous with the present: the change in one affects the other. In the case of connected events, whatever was the case in the past, it had always been true before something was the case that it would be the case. Again, whatever is the case now, was to be the case in the future of the antecedent time. That is to say, to change the past, one would also have to change the future (in the antecedent past). I suggest that Aristotle means the following conditional:

- (1) If something was (or is) the case, then it had been (or was) the case that this event would (or will) be the case (for every instance of time before the particular event).<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, any change in an event retroactively changes its preceding past and its concomitant future. That is, a change concerning an event in the past would eventually affect all preceding and all consequent times that had been connected to it or that refer to it. As a consequence, an event of the past, by having happened, in a certain sense even becomes accidentally necessary (Freddoso 1983). “Necessary” is not to be taken here in the sense of absolute necessity since the event could have been a contingent fact before its occurrence, but even a contingent fact becomes necessary in the sense that once something is the case, it’s obtaining at that moment will remain true for all subsequent moments of time. By being permanently fixed to a particular point in time, it will become a future-in-the-past truth forever for any time before the event, and a past truth for all subsequent parts of time. Consider the case of my giving this lecture to you today. On the Aristotelian analysis, it had always been true previously that I would give a lecture today (given the fact that I am giving it now). Furthermore, it will always be true in the future that I gave a lecture today. The past event assumes a truth-value forever, in the sense of “freezing” the truth-values with respect to before and after. This bears repeating: The past becomes necessary not in the sense of absolute or essential necessity (since the event itself, that is, my lecturing, is not a necessary event – since I could have become ill, and so on), but rather in the accidental sense of its having become an element of the past. Therefore, if present and past are connected in this way, the past cannot be

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b9–11.

<sup>3</sup> Based on Aristotle *Physics* bk. VI, ch. 3.

changed, since such an attempt would mean that all preceding and consequent events would have to be supplanted.

We are left to contend with a paradox. While we accept that the past does not exist anymore, it nevertheless remains fixed forever linked to the events that did happen. Diodorus Cronus in his Master Argument meant most probably this when he referred to it as a principle that “every past is necessarily true.”<sup>4</sup> Once something becomes past, its factuality cannot change, since it will be embedded in its respective past and future.

We have spoken about the accidental necessity of the past. But the very nature of the past has not been yet clarified. And the nature of the past seems to hold a mystery. It does not exist anymore, and since it does not exist anymore, it cannot happen anymore. The past has passed away. As Elisabeth Anscombe noted, if Parmenides’s principle generally applies, in the case of the past, it yields a puzzling result. Parmenides’s principle says:

(2) “It is the same thing that can be thought and can be.”

Now the past does not exist. It neither is nor can it be. Therefore, the past cannot be thought of. However, we do think about it. Thus, conversely, since we can think of it, it must exist. But it doesn’t. The perplexity remains since any empirical evidence is principally unavailable about it. There are no sense-data possible about things or events past. They are gone as these things, and events belong to the past. But then how do we think about the past? We do have a sense for the past – how is it then possible? What is the alternative?

We are faced with the following:

(3) The past is necessary in an accidental sense,

(4) but it does not exist.

(5) Therefore, something is accidentally necessary that does not exist.

What can we make out of this perplexing situation?

In the following, I will try to present two different strategies of thinking about this problem. After considering the two analyses, I hope that an interesting affinity emerges, overarching the difference between centuries and ways of analysis, both medieval and modern.

<sup>4</sup> For Diodorus Cronus’ Master Argument see Seymour 1976.

## II. THE RECONSTRUCTED ARGUMENT OF HANS JONAS

As it was suggested above, Jonas' position is implied by two of his independently formulated views.<sup>5</sup> The first position, or idea I would like to present as a premiss, was born out from Hans Jonas' reflection on historical knowledge. Against the backdrop delineated above, Jonas claims that, while we understand that history is about the past, we do not understand the nature of that past and do not know what history is about. History claims to know about the past. Modern history, as Leopold von Ranke's program famously declared, aspires to inquire and to reach conclusions about "how things really happened." Therefore, it sets out to speak about facts in history, that is, past facts. If there cannot be (cannot exist) past facts – how does his approach help us to know the facts of the past?

The discipline of history assumes that there is something which lies there objectively. Facts are supposed to be objective, things that are "out there" waiting for being discovered. Considering, however, that the past does not exist anymore, how could one say that there are past facts? How can there be objective facts? Where can those facts be found? How is the past knowable at all?

Jonas begins his inquiry by pointing out the obvious need for the truth-conditions of (present) statements about past facts. If the historian says that an event happened in such-and-such a way, the historian claims that the sentence describing the fact is true.<sup>6</sup>

Thus we come to

(6) If a proposition about the past claims to be true, that is, it claims that an event happened in the past, then it is implied that the event must have existed at that time.

However, the event cannot exist, since the past does not exist, as we have seen. How then can the historian claim truth for his statements? Does it make any sense to state, or deny the truth about a non-existent event? To say so would be similar to making a claim about how fast Pegasus flies. Since Pegasus does not exist, it is totally moot to ask whether Pegasus flies faster or slower than the speed of sound.

This is not the case, however, with history. Jonas points out that history is not entirely fiction. Our life is based on history with its claims about past events, and they form part of our basic discourse. The present is a result of past events.

A preponderance of talk about past events is necessarily based on or associated with presently available evidence: Such things as archaeological finds, records, documents, inscriptions, charters, and objects of art, buildings or other

<sup>5</sup> The two articles are Jonas 1972a and 1972b.

<sup>6</sup> Jonas did not consider the option that history is narrative, in the sense of Hayden-White, because if the past is rhetoric, fiction, or narrative, it cannot lay claim on truth.

data. History assumes propositions about these data to be starting points, or, to put it in another way, as premises for drawing inferences. The criteria of the verifiability of historical claims, then, depending on the available data, and the methods of inference. This can be called the empiricist view of the past. However, most such talk about the past reveals principled flaws affecting historical claims made by empirical propositions. First of all, Jonas reminds us that we are not in a Laplacean universe. Laplace, the great early 19th-century physicist, famously claimed that his equations could effectively describe not only all events in the past but in the future of the universe. He went on to claim that, provided we know all the deterministic laws of nature, one can produce an effectively complete snapshot of the values of every parameter at any given moment. For him, past, present and future mutually entail each other. The present would then hold the key for the past.

This view would not do for Jonas. The assumption of absolute causal determinism is only part of the problem. Whether or not modern physics can accept this, can be set aside. The second, more significant issue is that a given event is not necessarily the result of one and only one unique set of causes. No proof has yet been offered for the strict unicity of antecedent causes for all present state of affairs. Therefore, arguing from presently available facts with the help of inferential methods is not sufficient to establish truth in history.

Third, there can be truths in history that are not approachable by the causal determinism of Laplace. In fact, some facts of history are not approachable at all.

Let us call this third problem the “problem of residual truths in history.” These are unapproachable by the sheer fact that they leave no trace, no identifiable residue that could serve as starting points for their reconstruction. There is nowhere from which to begin tracing them back to their past existence. An example of such a truth would be weather on a particular day in 500 BC. Or the price of an amphora of wine at the Megara market on that day. To be sure, there was the weather, and there was a price. However, there is no way to approach them, that is, to know the answer to these questions.

This is the reason why Jonas differentiates between historical verifiability and truth. This distinction will be of crucial importance. We may not be in the position to verify any claim made about the thoughts of Caesar when he crossed the Rubicon, but one has to assume that indeed there were thoughts in his mind at that point. We don't know the real physiognomy of the Egyptian pharaoh Echnaton, but it is not unreasonable to maintain that he had a particular physique: Stature, facial characteristics, weight, the colour of skin, and other properties. Answers to these questions may never be reached: Still, the possibility of their truth is undeniable. Caesar or Echnaton were not figments of imagination. They were not angels or ghosts. The unknowability of residual facts offers artists the freedom to portray and characterise such unknown faces, much as they do it in depicting St. George, or St. Catherine of Alexandria.

So again, the opinions we hold about the past are subject to personal perceptions and interests. Rarely do two eye-witnesses tell of an event in precisely the same way. The judge, however, ought to assume that there is a common reality behind the different testimonies, which can be concluded on the basis of evidence, even if the judgement eludes being logically indisputable. The arbitration assumes existential import: The assumption that the event did happen in a particular way. Our access to historical facts can be changed, by accident, or even intentionally, when political powers set out to alter the evidence about the past, for example by annihilating documents. However powerful these forces may be, and whatever success they may achieve in eradicating memories, or documents of the past, one thing they cannot do. None can eradicate the difference between true and false, truth and lies. Hence we find, if one maintains the need for the truth value of statements about the past, then the past ought to contain unchangeable facts. One can doubt the truth of a particular statement, but that it ought to be bivalent. This methodical principle cannot be held in doubt.

To illustrate his point, Jonas offers the case of an infamous document forgery, the Donation of Constantine.<sup>7</sup> Throughout many centuries, it was considered to be genuine; that is, its claims were held to be true. After the forgery has been revealed in the fifteenth century, it became clear that the donation never happened, and that throughout those centuries it was a falsehood. It was a falsehood, though, says Jonas, even in the period when everybody thought it was genuine. No one knew the truth – but the truth was there (Jonas 1972a. 175).

In his analysis Jonas is clearly committed, therefore, to two assumptions:

(7) The reality of time.

(8) The correspondence theory of truth with respect to past events.

If these two assumptions are granted, concludes Jonas, the past must exist in some sense. This mode of existence cannot be “real,” but they still must be guaranteed. At this point he makes a daring suggestion. The guarantee for the existence of the past truth is the existence of a great intellect, which ought to be postulated in order to retain the meaning of all statements about the past. This is an immense mind, in which all past events persevere. This mind or intellect is not like Laplace’s infinitely powerful calculator of causal chains, but rather a mind retaining all individual events of the past in his universal memory. It is neither the realm of ideal Platonic existence since events are not copies of the paradigms of this mind; nor is it the universal intellect of Plotinus, which timelessly guarantees the existence of the realm of events, that is, of the cosmos; nor

<sup>7</sup> The Donation of Constantine is a forged medieval document granting land and the imperial insignia to the bishops of Rome, that is, the Popes.

is it the absolute spirit of Hegel, in development towards realising itself – but rather a mind which guarantees the permanence of the events of the world. Thereby – says Jonas – this mind is not beyond the world, but it can participate in the world of individual events by knowing all of them.

I will come back to the idea of participation soon.

Jonas himself does not call his argument a proof for the existence of God. Justly so. One can (and many philosophers have done so) either deny the existence of time, or the correspondence theory of truth, even if there is a price to be paid for these denials. Such a price would be that any history going beyond the mere presently available facts would then become a narrative of the present, and thereby basic elements of human discourse would be forfeited.

But even if one accepts Jonas's argument, one objection could readily arise. Why is this mind necessary for securing the existence of the past? Would not something like collective human memory, sometimes referred to as cultural memory, do the same job? (By cultural memory one could mean the united memory of a social group, of a community, or the combined memory of a given society.) Unfortunately, such an assumption would not do. As we have just seen, the Donation of Constantine – or, to cite a more modern example – the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917 in St. Petersburg at the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution – were collective delusions. Societies adopt delusions, and there is no guarantee that they cannot. (In fact, one could list endless examples for such delusions.)

Jonas here stops short of explaining the nature of this supreme mind, but he devoted another article sometime earlier to his concept of God, entitled "The Concept of God after Auschwitz." What is the God of Jonas like? Jonas now speaks as a theologian. He claims that Auschwitz poses a unique difficulty for Jews, understood as the people of the covenant with God. If God is the Lord of History, then

(9) Salvation is in the world.

(10) The world is not under the heavy spell of evil.<sup>8</sup>

The special difficulty for Jonas arises from the singular tragedy of Auschwitz, which contradicts both of these essential Jewish assumptions about God. In short, according to Jonas, the evil symbolised by the "Endlösung" is beyond the scope of theological justification offered by traditional theology. In confronting this issue, Jonas looks to Maimonides for 'traditional theology' and his concept of a transcendent God. According to Jonas, the "heavy spell of evil" is mani-

<sup>8</sup> Jonas juxtaposes these two points to the Christians, for whom Salvation is from above, and the world's evils are due to the original sin. These claims are problematic but do not affect the argument.

fested in the Shoah in a way that goes beyond the tribulations that befell the biblical Job. Thereby, it cannot be explained in terms of the traditional theodicy. The Shoah, for Jonas, requires a different justification, and this difference implies the necessary revision of the traditional (Aristotelian, or Maimonidean) concept of God. In a nutshell, Jonas conceives of a God with restricted powers; a self-limiting, and suffering God who is compassionate with his creation. One could summarise Jonas' new concept of God as follows:

- (11) God exercises self-limitation when relating to the creation.<sup>9</sup>
- (12) Thereby, creation has relative independence from God.
- (13) Divine foreknowledge is limited to the possibilities inherent in the creation.
- (14) God compassionately suffers with His creation – permanently, from the moment of creation (as opposed to a temporal suffering of God in Christianity).
- (15) No atemporality, impassibility, or unchangeability apply to God. Just the opposite: God is temporal, suffering, and changeable.
- (16) Absolute goodness, absolute power (omnipotence), and comprehensibility (intelligibility) are incompatible.
- (17) Eternity is affected by temporal events.

For the informed listener, it emerges that by (15), Jonas changes the traditional assumption of the spirituality of God, together with the assumption of foreknowledge.

As Jonas sees it, God is neither transcendent nor omnipotent. He concludes that God is affected by what happens in creation, and because of his own self-limitation, God is “powerless” in the realm of the physical world. Jonas even goes as far as to claim that the three traditional divine predicates: Absolute goodness, absolute power (omnipotence), and comprehensibility (intelligibility) are incompatible. Two of them together exclude the third. Goodness and power exclude comprehensibility in the face of the evil in the creation. Comprehensibility and power exclude goodness, since if this world is designed by God as it is, He cannot be good. Finally, comprehensibility and goodness exclude power since the creation shows manifest independence. Jonas wants to maintain comprehensibility (intelligibility) because of the Torah, but then either goodness

<sup>9</sup> Here Jonas alludes to the *tzim-tzum* [withdrawal] of God in the Kabbala, which creates the space required by the creation.



or absolute power must be sacrificed. Jonas decides to sacrifice absolute power, which results in the abandoning of the traditional theistic predicates.

God, thus, exchanges the transcendence for a capability to have and utilise an eternal memory of all things temporal. God changes – which is indeed no small step away from traditional theology that maintained with Plato that the “first and most important” distinction is that between permanence and change.<sup>10</sup>

Jonas expressly formulates it against Plato, that

(18) God is changing; therefore God is “in becoming.”

Now the non-Platonic character of God ought to imply that God does not possess an eternal mind entertaining all possible events in the world. That is, God does not have eternally infinite memory, but a memory that it is constantly growing, and thereby changing. Instead of an unchangeable eternity, Jonas assumes an eternity which accumulates the “harvest of the passing time.”

And we reach, at last, the moment when Jonas’ analysis becomes relevant to our problem. If God is an intellect that is inherently changeable with respect to an awareness of the events of the world, and there is no other way that the past can exist, but to be in the divine mind, then the past is solely and only retained by the divine mind. And since the maintainer of the past is also changeable, its retention will also be changeable. If the divine mind might change, so also can the past eventually change. Conversely, if this mind is capable of growing, it might be capable of diminishing. If God is affected by events in the world, and God can affect the world (which is a triviality according to Jonas), the only guarantee against the changeability of the past is God’s will to retain it in a particular way. This changeable will, however, is not what the Late Antique and medieval authors held was the eternal will of God.

Jonas himself – to my knowledge – never connected his two arguments. Following the tenor of his considerations, however, he may have thought about this implication.

He was not alone in arriving at this startling conclusion.

### III. THE ANALYSIS OF PETER DAMIAN<sup>11</sup>

The other important attempt at the problem of the necessity or contingency of the past happened nine hundred years earlier, in 1057. In this year, at the high table of the monastery of Monte Cassino, a debate arose between abbot Deside-

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Timaus* 27d5–28a4.

<sup>11</sup> I quote according to the *Patrologia Latina*. The numbering is followed by the Cantin, 1972 edition, too. Cf. Gaskin 1997.

rius and bishop Peter Damian. The debate addressed a thorny theological problem brought up by the readings during the dinner. In the reading Jerome, the fourth-century church father, in a contemporary debate about the importance of virginity maintained that such a loss would have an incorrigible result. For substantiating his point, he took sides with Agathon and Aristotle mentioned above, claiming that while God can do everything, not even God can restore a virgin after her fall.<sup>12</sup> God may forgive her, Jerome says, but even He cannot make undone what has been done – as a winning argument to stress the importance of retaining innocence.

Bishop Peter expressed his dissatisfaction with Jerome's view, which was defended by Abbot Desiderius. Theirs must have been a pretty heated debate since Peter later recollected his views in a treatise devoted to the subject, the *Epistle on divine omnipotence*. In this treatise, he squarely rejected Jerome's position. The rejection was explained in a careful and complex argumentation.

First, Peter distinguished between the physical restoration of the „signs of virginity” and the genuine ability to restore the quality of virginity itself; that is, to undo the event of the past. All agreed and credited God's omnipotence with the capacity to be able to accomplish the first task.<sup>13</sup> It is not the first problem which deserves our attention, but the second.

Peter makes it clear that the interesting issue pertains to the logical nature of past events.

(18) If God, as you assert, is omnipotent in everything, can He act in such a way that the things that have been made were not made? He can certainly destroy all the things that have been made so that they no longer exist now, but one cannot see how He can bring it about that the things which have been made were not made. Of course, it can be brought about that Rome does not exist now and henceforth, but that she should not in ancient times have been founded – one cannot conceive how that could be brought about.<sup>14</sup>

From among the Biblical examples, the realm that existed before the flood or the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah exemplify the concept of destruction, but these events are not removals of their past being. The question is whether even their one-time occurrence, that is, their past existence can be removed from the record of the past.

<sup>12</sup> Hieronymus, *Ep ad Eustochium*, 5. PL 22: 337.

<sup>13</sup> As it happens, specialised clinics today can hardly satisfy the need for such restorations.

<sup>14</sup> Petrus Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia* PL 145. 601C tr. R. Gaskin.

The original consensus about the impossibility of this latter task was shared by important Church Fathers, Augustine among them. Peter, therefore, had to challenge two substantial authorities. Augustine argued in the following way, going a step beyond the rather simplistic statement of Jerome:

(19) Whoever says if God is omnipotent, let Him bring it about that the things which have been made were not made, does not see that he is really saying this: let Him bring it about that those things which are true are, by that very token in virtue of which they are true, false.<sup>15</sup>

Augustine doesn't argue it in detail, but he seems to assume that the annihilation of a past event implies that another event takes over the role of the original past event. The truth of the original past event, however, will remain in effect in the form that the opposite of the new situation was the case before the change in the past occurred. Therefore, the truth of the changed event will have to remain forever, together with the truth of the supplanting event. To restate: The annihilation of a past event would simultaneously create the opposite truth value, and both will remain standing. But not so fast, says Augustine. In considering the principle of non-contradiction, this can not hold. The principle of non-contradiction holds universally; hence it can be safely assumed that not even God can bring about a contradiction. It is impossible even in theology that the same thing would both exist and not exist, or, in other words, they would be both true and false at the same time.

Jerome's and Augustine's joint position seems to have decided the issue. In discussions about divine omnipotence, essentially the same line of thought as that of Augustine will be retained by Thomas Aquinas and many other leading theologians of the period.

Peter Damien, however, was not satisfied either with the common-sense solution or with Augustine's stricture. But his respect for the tradition he was confronting is evident by the unusually subtle formulations he would devise in advancing his argument.

He seems to have realised that, for Augustine, there remains a problem in that his solution does not imply the annihilation of the past, but merely creates an alternative past next to the former one.

Augustine's argument depends on the contradiction implied by simultaneously assumed opposite truths, along with the validity of the principle of non-contradiction. It is by these assumptions that Augustine can exclude the possibility that the very same event both was and was not. To reject the principle of non-contradiction, and to allow such a case of simultaneous contradictory pasts would have been viable for Peter, except it would then have left him with

<sup>15</sup> Augustinus, *Contra Faustum* 26. PL 42. 481. Tr. R. Gaskin.

the implication of a redoubled past (that is, allowing the coexistence of alternative pasts). However, *praeterita non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitate*, the past should not be multiplied without necessity.

A question surfaces: Does the annihilation of the past really imply such a contradiction?

It is here that Peter adopted a strategy that departed from Augustine's. He observed that the necessity of a past event is conditional on its occurrence. That is if something occurred in the past, and thereby something becomes a past event, only then does it become (accidentally) necessarily true. It is not simply necessary, however, that the event occurs at all. Past necessity is contingent on the occurrence of the event (in fact, this is why it is called accidental necessity) – as in fact Aristotle's logical formulation above clearly pointed this out.<sup>16</sup> Then, if an event in the past is changed to its opposite, the new one will be *the event* which becomes conditionally necessarily true, by virtue of being a past event.

Peter, in this way, finds a solution to Augustine's problem. God does not create an alternative past but replaces it entirely.

In modern parlance, Augustine's interpretation of changing the past would imply that changing the past would bring God to the impossible situation that  $\neg p$ , while it was the case that  $p$ . (' $p$ ' here is a proposition variable, describing a past event.)

(20)  $\neg p$  AND  $p$

(Of course, at a given time  $t$ .) This would be a trivial contradiction, indeed. To avoid this problem, Peter Damiani offers a different solution. To avoid the trap of the simple contradiction, he is coming up with a very different suggestion:

(21)  $\neg p$  INSTEAD OF  $p$ , for every occurrence of  $p$ .

The difference Peter Damiani suggests is that instead of the conjunction operator, he introduces the "instead of" monadic replacement operator. This is not an object-language operator, like the conjunction, but it belongs to the metalanguage. The replacement operator changes the original proposition, or event by replacing it with another proposition, or event.

The original event ceased to exist, since – let us remember – there is no ontological box in which it could be shelved. The meta-level device does not allow

<sup>16</sup> Historians could object that Peter did not have access to the *Nicomachean Ethics* mentioned above. True, but he did have access to the *Perihermenias*, which was a basic textbook in the education of the period, and Peter seems to have been a very accomplished thinker who could discover the problem on his own.

the joining of the two propositions about the past but replaces the alternative altogether, and in all places. There remains no room for a contradiction.

It does not matter whether *p* is indeed only a singular proposition, or an abbreviation for the original event and its branchings. That is, to use the example of Peter, if God chooses to change the past with respect to the foundation of Rome, the whole history affected by this event, meaning its consequences or branchings will be annihilated.

By taking this tack, Peter deftly disentangles himself from Augustine's problem. The danger of the infringement on the principle of non-contradiction is neutralised by the „replacement operator.”

How could our ideas about God accommodate this possibility? Jonas suggested that divine immutability should be given up. Peter turns to the analysis of the divine will instead. For him divine unchangeability can also offer an opportunity for the divine capacity to change the past.

Peter's approach is based on Boethius, who in the 6th century offered a famous solution for the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and providence in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, a standard textbook in the Latin West. Boethius' solution is the following, cast in simplified formulae. God has simultaneous knowledge of all things past, present and future: but He has this all-embracing simultaneous knowledge instantaneously and at the same time. The simplicity of all-embracing and instantaneous knowledge, however, excludes the ordinary sequencing of past, present and future. The normal temporal ordering, indeed, any kind of ordering of the events is excluded. The normal sequence of events, which is coterminous with time, loses its validity: God's knowledge is a knowledge of all sequences of all events all at once. This way of knowing, therefore, precludes temporality. For God, there is no 'before' and 'after'; therefore, everything exists in simultaneity.

(22) For the divine perception runs ahead over every *future* event and turns it back and recalls it to the *present* of its own knowledge, and does not alternate, [...] fore-knowing now this, now that, but itself remaining still anticipates and embraces [...] changes at one stroke. [My emphasis.]<sup>17</sup>

In this text, Boethius speaks about foreknowledge; therefore, there is no need for him to mention the past, but the missing bit can be easily supplemented. It is his definition, after all, that eternity is the “the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Boëthius, *De consolatione Philosophiae* V, prose 6. 37–40; see Boëthius 1973. 433. H. Stewart, E. Rand, and S. Tester. Loeb Cl. Lib.

<sup>18</sup> Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio. *De Consolatione Philosophiae* V. prose 6. ll. 9-11; see Boëthius 1973. 423.

On the power of His timeless eternity, God can intervene in the temporal world in a way that is only temporally describable for human beings. Natural language cannot be trusted to describe this intervention of God since verbs are tensed, conforming to the worldly events that are ordered in sequence. Peter continues:

(23) God *is* able in His invariable and ever-constant eternity [to bring it about] that what had been made, according to our transience, was not made; so that we may indeed say: God *can now* act in such a way that Rome, which was founded in ancient times, was not founded.<sup>19</sup>

The present tense used throughout is important: The correct way of saying is the use of „can” (*potest*) all the time since there is no past capacity or future capacity for God.

(24) “As regards His eternity, whatever God was able [to do], He is also able [to do], because His presence is never turned into past.”<sup>20</sup>

The first past tensed phrase (“was able [to do]”) is the human language, while the second phrase (“is also able [to do]”) is the correct description of the situation. Peter, therefore, feels entitled to say that God’s power over the past is a power which he enjoys in every moment, yes, in the present moment, too.

Peter’s (and Boethius’) analysis of time can be represented with a geometrical analogy. Events can be laid out like a series of points on a line. Keeping to this image, God could be now represented as a point external to the line, to which all points can be connected. On this geometrical image God’s eternity can be coordinated, or associated with the sequence of all points, allowing the use of a temporal language in the world, but at the same time excluding temporal language in His case. Again, this solution saves the problem of unchangeability, too: If there is no separation of events, and no sequencing or ordering, there is trivially no possibility for a difference of states, which is a prerequisite for change.

In historical terms, while some theologians, including Anselm of Canterbury, Gilbert of Poitiers, William of Auxerre, or Alain of Lille in the 12th century, the majority of theologians, especially during the 13th century rejected his views, most notably among them Thomas Aquinas. However, then, a revival of the issue emerged in the middle of the 14th century. Thomas Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini and Peter of Ailly not only accepted the divine changeability of the past but developed Peter Damian’s ideas even further (Gaskin 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Damien 619A.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Damien 619B.

One of the most interesting continuations of the argument was formulated by Cardinal Peter of Ailly (following suggestions by Gregory of Rimini).

Peter of Ailly analysed the status of prophetic statements. Prophecies are sent by God, and they are, by definition, about the future. Now propositions about the future do not yet have a definite truth value as future contingents, by a standard assumption. The prophet, therefore, using a temporal language, speaks about a contingent future event. But then a problem arises: The prophet's condition implies a prophetic statement, which is, logically speaking, a future contingent proposition. In God's knowledge, however, the statement has a definite truth value. Therefore it must be the case that either God cheats the prophet in the sense that He does not tell the prophet that instead of a *future contingent* statement He is saying something which *is already true* – or God has to retroactively change the status of the prophecy from contingent to necessary, once it will have become true. And, as can easily be guessed, if confronted with such a dilemma, it looked better for many to rather accept the changeability of the past, than to allow for the untruthfulness of God.

#### IV. SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

I tried to present two ways of approaching the problem of the changeability of the past, a seemingly awkward issue leading to fundamental metaphysical and theological issues.

First, the two reasonable premises (7 and 8) lead Hans Jonas to the assumption of the existence of a universal mind, which retains in a way past states of affairs, or past events.<sup>21</sup> Peter Damien does not explicitly speak about these premises, but he clearly implies them. The retention of the past in a mind is another common point for both Jonas and Peter. Their ideas about the character of this mind, however, is different.

Jonas is motivated by an extraordinary problem of theodicy, which is not considered by Peter. Jonas concludes that the divine mind ought to have a changeable character. While Peter retains the unchangeability, he does leave open a changeability of the divine mind in terms of its *content*. Events present to the divine mind can be changeable. Peter Damien, after charting the limits of divine omnipotence, concluded the possibility of changing the past should remain open. Both, therefore, allow for the contingency of the past.

What about the differences in their approaches? First of all, Jonas does not speak explicitly about changing the past, the way that Peter does. But then,

<sup>21</sup> The assumption of the existence of the past is common also in modern discussions about the possibility of time travel, even though this latter implies a crude form of existential import.

Peter does not explicitly discuss the ontological issues of the past, as Jonas does. Peter assumes the existence of a divine mind, while this is an open task Jonas sets for himself to establish to his satisfaction.

Again, certainly for Jonas, the three concepts of absolute goodness, absolute power (omnipotence), and comprehensibility (intelligibility) are taken to be inconsistent. Consequently, for Jonas, God is not transcendent. An immanent deity implies changeability. God, for Jonas, is in fact, suffering and is not omnipotent.

One would think that Peter represents a diametrically opposite picture since divine unchangeability and omnipotence are his starting points. Yet, this is not exactly the case. Peter certainly assumes an opposite position about divine omnipotence, which is emphasised even at the expense of the laws of logic, since these laws are also created by God. Again, Peter was a Christian who believed in the Word incarnate, including the total transcendence of God the Father. He also maintained at the same time God's immanence, limitation and suffering in the Christ. And finally, for Peter, it was precisely the transcendence of the divine mind that allowed him to assume the changing of the past, that is, the direct involvement of God in the affairs of the world.

I would like to highlight one explicit, and important common point: Both Jonas and Peter staunchly maintain divine and human freedom of action, at the expense of metaphysical necessity.

These theological points are not side issues, since they show that the positions of Jonas and Peter are much less far apart in the metaphysical sense than it would seem from the historical and denominational point of view. The structural similarity points to the fact that the idea that the past is not necessary, and that it can be changed under certain specific conditions, requires ultimately a theological context. Without the theological context, the past would have to remain untouched: If there is no God, there can be no meaningful agency which would have a chance or an interest in affecting the non-existent past.

It seems that the whole question of the changeability of the past can only emerge if there is an appropriate external agent who is credited with the capacity of extending over past events. This is why, I suspect, neither Aristotle nor Agathon could imagine such a situation. As a test case, one could also look at recent articles investigating the possibility of changing the past, like the article of Peter Vranas in 2005 (see Vranas 2005). Now all these analyses assume (without further analysis) the existence either of "time-travellers," or "time-machines" – which I take, are the functional (albeit limited) equivalents to the medieval assumptions of God.

In closing, let me add two more remarks. The idea of the changeability of the past, obscure and obnoxious it may seem at first sight, has some interesting areas of application.



The first case where such a retroactive intervention is justified, once again in a theological context, is the remission of sins. The idea of the remission of sins (*aphienai tas hamartias* in the New Testament language) implies that a certain event in the past ceases to exist. It ought to discontinue, since the forgiving of sins cannot just mean that some sin ceases to be attributed to somebody, while it continues to remain in existence as a past event. If a sin is not expunged from existence, it will retain its sinful character, even if the punishment or the satisfaction has been absolved. In legal terms: A crime may become unpunishable because of a lapse of a statute of limitations or may be pardoned, but the fact of the crime remains. 'He was pardoned for his crime' is the way to phrase this scenario. Remission, however, if I understand it correctly, is not lapse of a statute of limitations or pardon. The difference is precisely this: In the case of the lapse of a statute of limitations or pardon, the fact of the crime remains, while it only loses its liability for legal action. It is only the legal action which is cancelled. Personal remorse may – and probably even should – survive. It seems to me that theologically speaking about the individual remission of sins implies that the sin itself discontinues existing, even in the individual conscience. I take it that there is no other chance for maintaining with the Scriptures that only God can 'forgive sin,' that is, expunge it from existence, and not any human tribunal.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, the contingency of the past allows for a different take on the notion of history. As Peter's example about the foundation of Rome shows, the facts of the past depend on the divine intellect. Not to say that Peter had adopted an anti-realist stance about past events. He does not speak about it explicitly, but past events do not become subjective for him. Even if states of affairs are conditional on divine providence and will, what is brought about, whether as a result of subsequent changes, exists as the past in its given form. But if history is directed by providence, and past events can be annihilated by God, the course of history becomes contingent on the divine mind. Independent of ordinary epistemological scepticism, there remains the possibility that objective events will disappear or emerge, so to say, due to theological reasons. It is probably not an accident that for Peter, and his fellow theologians, Christians or Jews, history is something that must be remembered. This remembrance is not the result of the discovery of objective facts but is normative, based on the Commandments. Both are constituted by theologically grounded concepts of the past. The past is normative as part of the Covenant. Again, I think it is not a mere accident that in Talmudic Jewish thought, it is the Torah that is immutable and not the past. Similarly, Christians can also point to Isaiah 40:8 "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever."

<sup>22</sup> Mt 9,6: "the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins." Clearly a divine attribute.

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