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KARL JASPERS, COMMENTATOR OF PETER DAMIAN

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Abstract

Karl Jaspers was one of the most important contemporary philosophers, who had a significant contribution to developing modern philosophy and theology in the Western cultural space, together with his co-nationals Martin Heidegger and Paul Tillich. In his book, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, Karl Jaspers considers the well-known treaty by Peter Damian called “On Divine Omnipotence”, and the present article aims at evincing the manner in which the German-Swiss philosopher deals with this topic of omnipotent divinity, as well as the perspective he has on the doctrine of the famous Benedictine monk and cardinal of the 11th century; last but not least, the article focuses on highlighting the importance of this topic in the past and present philosophical-theological debates. This article approaches the topic of divine omnipotence in a wider context, thus reviewing the nuanced answers given by the most remarkable thinkers of the Western Antiquity and Middle Ages to questions about the manner in which the divinity interacts with the order of the created world. It is certain that Peter Damian has an innovative view on time, history and natural necessity. To Peter Damian the past does not escape divine omnipotence, it is not merely history, it is not consumed, exhausted and fixed once and forever, but instead it is dependent on divine omnipotence. Consequently, the present article attempts to show the logical consequences that this novel point of view has at the beginning of the 2nd Christian millennium.

Keywords: Karl Jaspers; Peter Damian; Jerome; divine omnipotence; philosophy; theology;

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of divine omnipotence has been one of maximum importance in the philosophical and theological literature of the two Christian millennia, both in the Western and Eastern European cultural spaces. The Bible repeatedly states that God is almighty: the first book of the Old Testament claims that nothing is “hard for the Lord” (Genesis 18, 14); Job (42, 2) admits that God “can do all things” and that nothing can oppose to His purpose; the Archangel Gabriel confesses that “no word from God will ever fall” (Luke 1, 37), and Jesus Christ Himself asserts at some point that “what is impossible with man is possible with God” (Luke 18, 27). Starting from this last verse, one could be inclined to believe that impossibility as such only exists for men, and not for God. However, what exactly means that

everything is possible for God, how wide is the area of divine omnipotence? How could these verses from the Old and the New Testament be correctly construed? Is our world completely dependent on a God who can choose to do anything? Isn't the divine omnipotence a topic for reflection that rather conceals than reveals? (Oppy 2005)

This topic and the way in which it has been approached throughout history, generally speaking, undoubtedly targets the human condition and the significance of human life, the domain of human liberty, as it foregrounds the matter of the creation's dependence on the sovereign transcendence, underlining at the same time the contingent nature of our world and of its order. The subject is extremely complex, and this is the reason why the so-called "solutions" and "verdicts" can bear the mark of ambiguity. In our post-deontic, democratic and pluralist century (Lipovetsky 1992, Bauman 1993:20-21), in our individualist, atheist and materialist postmodern age (Bauman 1993), marked by moral relativism and dominated by the cult of efficiency and of subjective rights, by science and technology, an age that gave up on the supernatural, favouring the natural, on the sacred, favouring the profane, on the shared interest, favouring the personal one, on metaphysics, favouring physics, on altruism and generosity, favouring the personal comfort, a world in which interpretation prevails over facts (Nietzsche 1999:315), it seems slightly odd to bring the famous letter of Peter Damian back on the table. However, this short writing of the renowned medieval author is rich in ideas, and not few are the contemporary theologians and philosophers whose attention was drawn by it, as they identified relevant aspects pertaining to the relation between transcendence and immanence, between necessity with contingency, and between created and uncreated freedom in it

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is extensive philosophical and theological literature related, on the one hand, to this topic of divine omnipotence (Brink 1993), and on the other hand, to the importance of the famous letter of Peter Damian for contemporary thought. In what follows, we will outline a short review of the most important works that deal with these aspects.

It would be useful, beforehand, to mention that Peter Damian was translated in the main international languages, i.e. in English (Damian 1998: 344-386) and French (Damien 1972: 384-489), and also in the Romanian language (Damianus 2014: 54-167). The Latin text can be found in an edition of Peter Damian's letters published in Munich about three decades ago (Reindel 1989:341-384), in the French translation published in the collection *Sources chrétiennes*, as well as in the old and famous collection *Patrologia Latina* (1845:595-622).

The Middle Ages debates on divine omnipotence, the relation between *potentia Dei absoluta* and *potentia Dei ordinate* are discussed, among others, by William J. Courtenay (1985:243-284). In his work, entitled *Covenant and Causality in Medieval Thought*, he posits the question "Whether God Can Undo the Past" (Courtenay 1984: 224-256), a question in direct relation to some ideas in the present paper. Focusing on medieval thought, Heiko A. Oberman (1963) pursues a comparative analysis of the two divine powers, taking Gabriel Biel's works as point of reference.

Peter Damian's interesting view on time is considered, among others, by two authors (McArthur and Slattery 1975) who warn us that the positioning of the scholastic theologian in what concerns God's unlimited power and the uncertain nature of the past is not easy to grasp, but it could be somehow drawn graphically, mathematically. Peter Damian's doctrine on the past events, i.e. on cancelling the past, is also a concern of Irven M. Resnick (1988). Can divine omnipotence regain what has been lost as if it had never been lost? And if it can, what is the significance of such ability? Can the past be altered, can it lose its identity? Is it changeable in the presence of divine omnipotence? Is the past equally open, permeable and fluctuating as the future in the presence of God's power?

The "radical" opinions in *On Divine Omnipotence* are also considered by Peter Remnant. The past can be reduced to zero. Peter Remnant (1978: 261) makes reference to Maurice de Wulf, who believed that, if natural necessity was not an obstacle for divine omnipotence, in Peter Damian's view (Holopainen 2006:116-117), then, in what the latter was concerned, God would not depend in His actions on the principle of contradiction, and the methods of dialectic would not apply to theology.

Therefore, for Peter Damian, the past is contingent and not necessary, an idea completely surprising and striking for human logic. The claim that God can undo the past “was not popular” among medieval thinkers (Gaskin 1997:229). Openly against it were, among others, Aristotle, Augustin and Aquinas. The Greek philosopher noted in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that “For of this alone even a god is deprived: To make undone whatever things have been done” (Aristotle 2011:117). Among the supporters of this thesis are alongside Peter Damian, according to Richard Gaskin, Anselm of Canterbury, Gilbert of Poitiers, William of Auxerre, Thomas Bradwardine, Peter of Ailly and, to a lesser extent, Gregory of Rimini.

Logically speaking, in Peter Damian’s view, God’s power has a wider domain than that of God’s will – practically, God can do more than He wishes, God can do things that He does not wish to do (Ekenberg 2009:90), which draws the relation between will and physical ability. This is the variant that best puts forward the divine omnipotence. Peter Damian’s reasoning, according to Thomas Ekenberg, is as follows: “Si nichil, inquam, potest Deus eorum, quae non vult, nichil autem nisi quod vult, facit; ergo nichil omnino potest facere eorum quae non facit” (Reindel 1989: 343-344). “If God can do none of the things that he does not wish to do, he does nothing but that which he wishes; therefore, he can do none of the things at all, which he does not do” (Damian 1998:346).

Whether Peter Damian’s reasoning is valid or not, it is obvious that the author in focus has a philosophical rather than theological perspective on the divine omnipotent transcendence. This specific perspective is difficult to grasp, given the diverse contents of the letter in question (Resnick 1992: 40). Put in relation to omnipotence, time seems to alter its intimate structure – we are left with the impression that, for Peter Damian, time better highlights the extent of divine power. For Peter Damian, moral order is more important than physical order, and moral law is more powerful than the laws of nature. As Anthony Kenny (1979: 101) rightfully observes, underlining the close connection between time and morality, if a woman lost her virginity in an undignified manner and against her will, “only a change in the past can make her a virgin again”.

Therefore, for Peter Damian, the past depends on divine sovereignty as much as the future because God transcends time; for God, time is not asymmetrical and linear, the past is not irreversible (Vuillemin 1996: 96). The divergent interpretations (Genest 1992:119) of this famous text are explainable, considering that Christian philosophers and theologians almost unanimously claim that nothing is higher and more mysterious than God’s will, which cannot be reasonably explained (Trego 2010: 131). The logical criteria do not fully apply to theological problems, “in the everpresentness of His eternity, God sees past, present and future in a single glimpse” (Marenbon 1988:93), God’s power cannot be restricted by human logic (Marenbon 2007:117), the possibility of the occurrence of an event does not rest on human logic, but on God’s will (Alanen and Knuuttila 1988:22).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present paper does not aim to provide a bird-eye view over a certain problem, e.g. over Peter Damian’s view on time or divine omnipotence. Providing significant bibliographic reference, the paper stresses that one of the most important German philosophers, Karl Jaspers, a contemporary of Martin Heidegger and Paul Tillich, focused, on one particular occasion, on the famous letter by Peter Damian. Thus, in his book, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, Karl Jaspers deals with the idea of God as a *person*, asserting that this anthropomorphist formula is not, in fact, suitable, as personality is only comprehensible in the horizon of finitude, whilst divinity has nothing to do with finitude. Karl Jaspers points out that, in Christian thought, not only was God seen as personal, but also as almighty. Omnipotence suggests power that meets no obstacles, no limits. Jaspers also notes that, in Christian Antiquity, St. Jerome asserted that, although God could do anything, He could not give her virginity back to a girl who had lost it disgracefully, as the result of sexual aggression. Peter Damian, Karl Jaspers states (1973: 252) strongly and indignantly refuted this idea that jeopardized God’s unlimited power. Peter Damian argued that if God allowed that a woman who gave birth remain a virgin, He could also make a woman who lost her honour become a virgin again (Jaspers 1973: 252-3).

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Starting from the structure and ideas of Karl Jaspers' book, the present paper states that, although extensive literature on divine omnipotence is available, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers still regards Peter Damian's view as the most appropriate and truly illustrative for the domain in question, that of divine omnipotence. The German philosopher claims that the entire argumentative demarche of the medieval thinker is practically a counterpoint to dialecticians, to European rationalist philosophers living one millennium ago, who wondered whether God could make Rome truly disappear, disappear as if it had never existed! Peter Damian's answer is positive, Karl Jaspers notes (1973: 252), if God was unable to change the past as He wished, then He would not be able to change the present and the future either. And then, from such findings, would result that God would be lacking power in relation to all moments in time, which is unacceptable!

5. FINDINGS

Among other aspects, Karl Jaspers has the merit of providing a very good abstract of Peter Damian's ideas. God is not limited by either time or space, He is eternal and transcendent in relation to space and time; the moments in time only exist for us, humans, not for divinity (Jaspers 1973: 253). Man is a limited being, he places omnipotence in the horizon of temporality, and wrongly so, because divinity does not acknowledge temporality. In addition, it is wrong to insist on the power of divinity to take out from history something that exists as such in history, because God does not annihilate but creates, He does not send into nothingness that which exists, but takes out from nothingness that which does not exist, through the very act of creating the world *ex nihilo*.

6. CONCLUSION

Everything that exists in our world, the principles of logic included, is founded on divine will. The Creator is not reducible to His creation, the Heavenly King is above the order instituted by Him, the laws of nature and the entire human logic, and the miracles, as Karl Jaspers rightfully observed (1973: 254) are incontestable proof of this. Nothing in our universe can stand against God's plans, the sense of history has been drawn from the beginning, and man has no power to make it detour. This type of thinking is meant to encourage man to show humility and piety. Although he was a philosopher, and not a theologian, Karl Jaspers managed to grasp the philosophical significance of Peter Damian's letter and, to some extent, the latter's relevance for the metaphysics of our age.

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