

Rethinking Abelard

A Collection of Critical Essays

Edited by

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Divine Omnipotence and the Liberal Arts in Peter Damian and Peter Abelard

Julian Yolles

Summary

Any attempt to study Peter Abelard's scholarly identity vis-à-vis the liberal arts is fraught with difficulty due to the complexity of his thought, the intricate ways in which he reworks existing ideas and reacts against others, and the haphazard survival of the works of his forbears and contemporaries.¹ One way to circumvent these issues is to take a particularly well-documented line of argument in one of Abelard's works and to compare his methodology with that of an intellectual before him. One such opportunity presents itself par excellence in the analysis of what is called 'divine omnipotence', that is the analysis by means of dialectic and patristic authority of the problem of what it means for God to be omnipotent, which takes place in the third book of Abelard's *Theologia 'scholarium'*. This subject was put on the map as a matter requiring careful analysis in an eleventh-century treatise in the form of a letter by Peter Damian. It is for this reason that Peter Damian will be the starting-point of our present discussion—but a caveat must be made in doing so, however: in comparing Peter Damian and Peter Abelard (and indeed any of the later thinkers who will be discussed), one must keep in mind that they were active in widely differing intellectual and social environs, and that the comparative discussion is in no way intended to suggest that the two are necessarily commensurable. In fact, it is the hope that the present discussion will bring out both similarities and dissimilarities alike in a nuanced way in order to get a better grip on the methodological idiosyncrasies of these intellectuals, and on the cultural and intellectual environments that shaped them. First, I intend to compare Peter Damian and Peter Abelard's approaches to the question of divine omnipotence. Second, it will be worthwhile to explore in brief the approaches of the

¹ This paper is an expanded version of a paper delivered at Leeds International Medieval Congress, 13 July 2011. I am extremely grateful to Babette Hellemans for all of her thoughtful advice and guidance, who also supervised my work: Julian Yolles, "The Rhetoric of Simplicity: Faith and Rhetoric in Peter Damian," MA thesis (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2009), which touched on similar problems dealt with in this paper.

major theologians of the twelfth century on this matter, to see whether either of the two intellectuals under discussion had a significant impact on later treatments of this topic.

Introduction

In tracing back Abelard's treatments of divine omnipotence to Peter Damian and by comparing the issue to other thinkers, we will seek to obtain a clearer view of the methods that both of these intellectuals employed, and what place they occupy within the dynamic intellectual movements of this period. Let us turn first to Peter Damian. In his famous letter about divine omnipotence, Peter Damian or Petrus Damiani (1007–1072), an eleventh-century cardinal bishop of Ostia and abbot of the hermit community at Fonte Avellana, makes the following statement about the place of the liberal arts in a theological discussion of divine omnipotence:

And assuredly on this matter the ancient authors on the liberal arts, not only the pagans but also those of the Christian faith, discoursed at length, but none of them dared to proceed into such insanity as to brand God with the mark of an impossibility, and, especially if he was a Christian, to have doubts concerning His omnipotence, but in such a way did they dispute on the consequence of necessity or impossibility in accordance with the pure virtue of the art alone, that they made no mention of God in these arguments.²

2 'De qua nimirum questione veteres liberalium artium discussores, non modo gentiles sed et fidei christianae participes prolixius tractaverunt, sed nemo illorum in hanc ausus est prosilire vesaniam, ut Deo notam impossibilitatis adscriberet, et praesertim si Christianus fuit, de illius omnipotentia dubitaret, sed ita de consequentia necessitatis vel impossibilitatis iuxta meram solius artis disputavere virtutem, ut nullam in his conflictibus Dei facerent mentionem.' Throughout, the edition used is Peter Damian, "Epistulae," in *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani*, ed. K. Reindel, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistulae, Die Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit, 4 vols. (Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1983–1993), 3, Epistula 119, 354. For the PL text with French translation and commentary, see Peter Damian, "Epistulae," in *Lettre sur la toute-puissance divine*, ed. and trans. A. Cantin, Sources Chrétiennes 191 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1972). For a recent translation with introduction, see Peter Damian, "Epistulae," in *The Letters of Peter Damian*, trans. O. J. Blum and I. M. Resnick, 6 vols. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989–2005), 4, 344–386. All translations are my own.

Although Peter Damian had been a student of both ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ knowledge, his position on the relationship between the two was complex and ambiguous.³ His hagiographer John of Lodi (d. 1106) presents Peter Damian’s life story as one of a conversion: having studied and taught the liberal arts for some years at Parma, he made a radical decision and turned to the contemplative life of a hermit.⁴ In the large extant corpus of his letters, Peter Damian utters fierce and sometimes virulent objections to the liberal arts, especially if they are applied to the study of Scripture.⁵ Yet despite his frequent and many objections to the application of the liberal arts to the study of the Scriptures,⁶ in many cases he appears to do just that: when discussing, for instance, whether a solitary hermit ought to say the *dominus vobiscum* during Mass, Peter Damian addresses the matter by referring to the laws of grammar, and uses dialectic in his argument that the liturgical formula must not be changed, regardless of the circumstance of the liturgy.⁷ The clearest example, however, of Peter Damian’s

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- 3 The matter of Damian’s relation to the liberal arts has long been a topic of debate. One of the first to treat the matter at length was J. A. Endres, *Petrus Damiani und die weltliche Wissenschaft*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters 8.3 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1910), 23–30. For a recent appraisal of the matter, see L. Montenz, “Disce deum pluraliter declinare,” in *La grammatica di Cristo di Pier Damiani: un maestro per il nostro tempo*, ed. G. Innocenzo Gargano and L. Saraceno (S. Pietro in Cariano, Verona: Gabrielli, 2009), 65–74. A. Cantin’s study on this matter remains of importance: A. Cantin, *Les sciences séculières et la foi: les deux voies de la science au jugement de S. Pierre Damien (1007–1072)* (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo, 1975).
- 4 As Damian is reticent about his past, we are largely dependent on his only contemporary biographer, John of Lodi. A modern edition of the life of Damian can be found in S. Freund, *Studien zur literarischen Wirksamkeit des Petrus Damiani* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1995), 177–265. For a useful overview and critique of biographical studies of Damian, see K. Reindel, “Neue Literatur zu Petrus Damiani,” *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung der Geschichte des Mittelalters* 32 (1976), 405–443. For the sources and manuscript tradition of John of Lodi’s *Vita*, see G. Lucchesi, “Per una Vita di San Pier Damiani,” in *San Pier Damiano. Nel IX centenario della morte (1072–1972)*, 4 vols. (Cesena: Centro studi e ricerche sulla antica provincia ecclesiastica ravennate, 1972–1978), vol. 4, 7–66, esp. 8–22.
- 5 See especially the letter known as *De sancta simplicitate*, in Peter Damian, *Die Briefe*, 3, Epistula 117, 316–329, as well as the letter *De perfectione monachi* (Damian, *Die Briefe*, 4, Epistula 153, 13–67).
- 6 Note that in the time of Damian, ‘theology’ as a university discipline was not yet in existence.
- 7 Damian, *Die Briefe*, 1, Epistula 28, 248–278. For discussions of the content of this letter, see A. Kolping, *Petrus Damiani: Das Büchlein vom Dominus vobiscum* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1949); W. Ferretti, “La comunità cristiana secondo S. Pier Damiani o l’opuscolo ‘Dominus Vobiscum,’” in *Studi su San Pier Damiano in onore del cardinale Amleto Giovanni Cicognani*, Biblioteca Cardinale Gaetano Cicognani 5 (Faenza: Venerabile Seminario Vescovile Pio XII, 1961), 49–62.

use of the liberal arts can be found in the letter that has become known as *De divina omnipotentia*, in which he frequently uses the art of dialectic when discussing the nature and extent of divine omnipotence. As we will see, some fifty years later Abelard's position vis-à-vis the use of liberal arts in theological matters would be completely different.

Peter Damian's Objections to Jerome

In early 1065 Peter Damian was a guest of Desiderius, abbot of Monte Cassino, who would later become Pope Victor III.⁸ At meal time, a passage from Jerome's letter to Eustochium in praise of virginity was read. This celebrated twenty-second letter in his collected letters was written in 384 C.E. to a Roman matron to persuade her to persist in maintaining her vow of chastity. After quoting the words of St Paul, who cries out to God to release him from the sinful bonds of his body, which maintains its inclination toward sin despite all of his self-inflicted chastisements, Jerome urges Eustochium not to relinquish her guard at any moment, since even the saintly apostle himself was faced by such fleshly temptations. Jerome presses on:

Beware, I pray, lest someday God should say about you: 'The virgin Israel has fallen: there is none who can raise her up.'⁹ I will say it boldly: although God can do all things, he cannot raise a virgin up after she has fallen. He is able to free one who has been corrupted from punishment, but he is unable to offer her the crown.¹⁰

Jerome's bold statement on God's abilities and divine omnipotence incited a discussion between Peter Damian and his host. Upon Peter Damian's objection to the church father's statement, the good abbot Desiderius attempted to explain to his guest why one need not take offense at this passage, and proceeded to offer his own interpretation of Jerome's statement. After leaving

8 See Reindel's introduction to the letter: Damian, *Die Briefe*, 3, 341. Compare Cantin, *Lettre*, 31–32, for a dating to the autumn of 1066. Cantin suggests that the occasion of Damian and Desiderius' discussion was that of the vigil of the feast of St. Jerome, at which the saint's life would have been read.

9 Amos 5:2.

10 Jerome, "Epistulae," 22.5: 'Cave, quaeso, ne quando de te dicat deus: "Virgo Israhel cecidit: non est, qui suscitet eam." Audenter loquor, cum omnia deus possit, suscitare virginem non potest post ruinam. Valet quidem liberare a poena, sed non valet coronare corruptam.'

Monte Cassino, Peter Damian felt he had not quite adequately expressed the nature of his issue with Jerome's remark, nor presented his opposing arguments sufficiently, and therefore resolved to write his celebrated letter on divine omnipotence.¹¹

Peter Damian begins his letter by recounting the circumstances that led to his debate with the monks of Monte Cassino, and, though hesitantly at first, expresses his objections to the passage that was read, arguing that, even though the author in question was the venerable Jerome, the important thing was *what* was being said, not by *whom*. He proceeds to explain that Jerome's statement was not pleasing to his ears, for it seemed dishonest to him to ascribe an impossibility to God so lightly:

This statement, said I, has never been able to be to my liking. For I do not pay attention to the person by whom it is said, but to what is being said. Indeed, it seems to me much too dishonest that to Him, who is able to do all things, an impossibility is attributed so lightly, unless it is with the sacrament of a more profound understanding. But you, on the other hand, responded that the statement (that is, that God cannot raise up a virgin after she has fallen) was fixed and had sufficient authority.¹²

After this introduction, Peter Damian paraphrases Desiderius's response to his objection:

Then, touching upon many a subject with lengthy and extended argumentations, at last you brought your conclusion to this dialectical statement, saying that God is unable to do this for no other reason than

11 For a recent discussion of this letter and a useful analysis of the problems associated with Damian's position, see M. Malaguti, "Il *De divina omnipotentia* di s. Pier Damiani. Sulla via di un' ontologia del mistero," in *Pier Damiani: L'eremita, il teologo, il riformatore (1007–2007)*, Atti del XXIX Convegno del Centro Studi e Ricerche Antica Provincia Ecclesiastica Ravennate Faenza-Ravenna, 20–23 settembre 2007, ed. M. Tagliaferri (Bologna: Centro Studi e Ricerche Antica Provincia Ecclesiastica Ravennate, 2009), 155–167. L. Moonan's discussion of this letter remains of importance for an analysis of Damian's own dialectical and rhetorical techniques: L. Moonan, "Impossibility and Peter Damian," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 12 (1980), 146–163.

12 Damian, *Epistula* 119, 343–344: 'Haec, inquam, fateor, nunquam potuit michi placere sententia. Non enim a quo dicatur, sed quid dicatur attendo. Nimis scilicet inhonestum videtur, ut illi, qui omnia potest, nisi sub altioris intellegentiae sacramento, tam leviter impossibilitas ascribatur. Tu autem e contrario respondisti ratum esse, quod dictum est et satis autenticum, Deum videlicet non posse suscitare virginem post ruinam.'

because He does not wish it. To which I said: If God is unable to do anything which He does not wish, then He does nothing except that which He wishes; therefore He is entirely unable to do that which He does not do. Consequently, therefore, to speak freely, God does not rain because He is unable to do so [...] These things and many others God does not do because He does not wish to, and because He does not wish to, He is unable to do them. It follows, therefore, that whatever God does not do, He is entirely unable to do. And that, now, seems so absurd and laughable, that this claim not only cannot apply to omnipotent God, but cannot even apply to an incapable human. For there are many things, which we do not do, and yet are able to do.¹³

After long and prolix argumentations, Desiderius finally arrives at the following dialectic statement: “God is unable to do so for no other reason than because He does not wish to.” For Peter Damian, however, this only aggravates the situation, as he demonstrates by formulating a syllogism based on Desiderius’s reasoning. The argument is clarified in three steps. Firstly, if God is incapable of doing what He does not wish and, secondly, if He does nothing except what He wishes, then thirdly, He is unable to do that which He does not do. As Irven Resnick demonstrated, Peter Damian’s syllogistic representation of Desiderius’s solution is highly misleading and bordering on sophistry, for it requires Damian to make Desiderius’s solution universally valid to make it the major premise (while in fact Desiderius could claim there are only some things which God cannot do because He does not wish to do them), and it also involves having to convert the minor premise, which is to make the minor premise (“God does nothing except what He wishes”) the major premise (“God is incapable of doing what He does not wish”) in this syllogism. All of this leads Irven Resnick to mark this as an ‘invalid syllogism.’¹⁴

13 Ibid.: ‘Deinde longis atque prolixis argumentationibus multa percurrens ad hoc tandem diffinitionis tuae clausulam perduxisti, ut diceres Deum non ob aliud hoc non posse, nisi quia non vult. Ad quod ego: Si nichil, inquam, potest Deus eorum, quae non vult, nichil autem, nisi quod vult, facit; ergo nichil omnino potest facere eorum quae non facit. Consequens est itaque, ut libere fateamur, Deum hodie idcirco non pluere, quia non potest [...] Haec et alia multa idcirco Deus non facit, quia non vult, et quia non vult, non potest. Sequitur ergo, ut quidquid Deus non facit, facere omnino non possit. Quod profecto tam videtur absurdum tamque ridiculum, ut non modo omnipotenti Deo nequeat assertio ista congruere, sed ne fragili quidem homini valeat convenire. Multa siquidem sunt, quae nos non facimus, et tamen facere possumus.’

14 Resnick, *Divine Power*, 65.

Here it may be relevant to point out that Peter Damian's misleading use of dialectic and rhetoric was not unique to him, but is in fact very similar to the deliberate misrepresentations made by Lanfranc of Bec (c. 1005–1089), a compatriot of Peter Damian who had also studied dialectic at Parma, of Berengar of Tours's arguments concerning the Eucharist. Lanfranc evinces the same method of paraphrasing and rewording his opponent's arguments in order to set up an easily trounced straw man.¹⁵ Clearly both Peter Damian and Lanfranc had been taught the subtleties of dialectic, which they were then able to marshal in order to turn their opponents' words against them.

In order to prove how ridiculous Desiderius's interpretation of Jerome is, Peter Damian offers an example and says that, according to Desiderius's reasoning, if, on a given day, it does not rain, therefore God does not wish it to, and therefore He is unable to make it rain.¹⁶ Ridiculing Desiderius's argument, Peter Damian says that it is absurd to claim that God is unable to do that which He does not do, since this is a claim that does not even apply to the most incapable humans.

Peter Damian ends this section of his letter with a number of vicious remarks about those who continue to apply the principles of dialectic to central tenets of the Christian faith, claiming that this entire discussion does in no way pertain to the discussion of divine power, but rather to the field of the art of dialectic, and to the method of constructing arguments and syllogisms—in short, a problem of the liberal arts on the human scale of things, since the liberal arts cannot hope to pierce the sacred mysteries of God. For Peter Damian, the question at hand has more to do with verbal virtuosity than with the rule of faith or honest moral conduct:

Since this matter, therefore, has been proven not to apply to the discussion of divine power, but rather to skill in the art of dialectic, and not to the virtue or the substance of things, but to the manner and fashion of speaking and to the arrangement of words, this matter, which is bandied about by secular boys in schools, does not have a place in the sacraments

15 See for a discussion T. J. Holopainen, *Dialectic and Theology in the Eleventh Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 59–67.

16 Compare Damian, *Epistula* 119, 353: 'Secundum naturalem namque variae vicissitudinis ordinem potest fieri, ut hodie pluatur, potest et fieri, ut non pluatur. Sed quantum ad consequentiam disserendi, si futurum est ut pluatur, necesse est omnino ut pluatur, ac per hoc prorsus impossibile est ut non pluatur.'

of the Church. For it does not pertain to the rule of faith or to honest moral conduct, but to effluence of speech and the sheen of eloquence.¹⁷

Let us take a brief moment to analyse the rhetorical virtuosity that Peter Damian has put into these two sentences: the *concinnitas* or structural harmony is outstanding, as the first sentence proceeds with two antithetical pairs of clauses of *non* [...] *sed*, and the number of nouns contained in the clauses slowly but steadily increases in a *gradatio* or climax (*potentiam, peritiam, virtutem vel materiam, modum et ordinem disserendi consequentiamque verborum*).¹⁸ Nearly every clause, moreover, ends with a pattern of *cursus* or rhythmical prose: *divinae potentiam (cursus tardus)*, *pertinere peritiam (cursus tardus)*, *consequentiamque verborum (cursus planus)*, *Ecclesiae sacramentis (cursus velox)*, *ventilatur in scolis (cursus planus)*, *pertinet honestatem (cursus velox)*, *verborumque nitorem (cursus planus)*.¹⁹

In the second half of the letter occur Peter Damian's famous or perhaps infamous statements concerning God's independence from and indeed absolute control over the laws of nature. Peter Damian discusses the restoration of virginity as a way of undoing the past, and considers some of the objections that have been raised by dialecticians to this argument. Granting that, concerning creation, it is true that something cannot possibly exist and not exist simultaneously (a tenet of dialectic that has become known as the principle of non-contradiction), Peter Damian stresses that we cannot simply apply this law of nature to nature's creator. To substantiate this claim, he offers several examples of biblical miracles that are clearly contrary to the laws of

17 Ibid., 355: 'Haec igitur questio quoniam non ad discutiendam maiestatis divinae potentiam, sed potius ad artis dialecticae probatur pertinere peritiam, et non ad virtutem vel materiam rerum, sed ad modum et ordinem disserendi consequentiamque verborum non habet locum in ecclesiae sacramentis, quae a secularibus pueris ventilatur in scolis. Non enim ad fidei regulam vel morum pertinet honestatem, sed ad loquendi copiam verborumque nitorem.'

18 For a similar analysis of the incongruity between Damian's invective against rhetoricians and his own rhetorical flourish, see Peter Godman, *The Silent Masters: Latin Literature and its Censors in the High Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 28–31.

19 For more on the medieval system of rhythmical prose called *cursus*, see G. Lindholm, *Studien zu mittellateinischen Prosarhythmus*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis: Studia Latina Stockholmiensia 10 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1963). For a discussion of Damian's usage of *cursus*, see T. Janson, *Prose Rhythm in Medieval Latin from the 9th to the 13th Century*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis: Studia Latina Stockholmiensia 20 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1975), 43–45.

nature, but have been effected by God nonetheless. The following passage is especially pertinent:

When one considers it, it is clear that in the beginning of the world as it came into being, the creator of things altered the laws of nature to the purpose He wished; indeed, in a way, He made nature itself, so to say, against nature. For is it not against nature that the world was created out of nothing, whence it is said by philosophers that nothing is made from nothing? That animals are created not from animals, but from lifeless elements, merely at a command? That a sleeping man loses a rib and has no pain? That from a man alone a woman is created without a woman, and that out of a single rib all the various members of the human body are formed?²⁰

More than anything, Peter Damian's denial of the applicability of the laws of dialectic to God have earned him the reputation of an anti-dialectician, and, in the past, even that of an anti-intellectual.²¹ We will return to this issue, and the passage quoted above in particular, after discussing Abelard's treatment of divine omnipotence.

Abelard's *Theologia 'Scholarium'*

Let us turn now to Peter Abelard and the work now known as the *Theologia 'scholarium'*—one of his later works, also known as the *Introductio ad theologiam*, and referred to by Abelard as simply the *Theologia*.²² Peter Abelard's

20 Damian, Epistula 119, 368: 'Consideranti plane liquido patet, quoniam ab ipso mundi nascentis exordio rerum conditor in quod voluit naturae iura mutavit, immo ipsam naturam, ut ita dixerim, quodammodo contra naturam fecit. Nunquid enim contra naturam non est mundum ex nichilo fieri, unde et a philosophis dicitur, quia ex nichilo nichil fit? Animalia non ex animalibus, sed ex stolidis elementis solo iussionis imperio creari? Dormientem hominem costam perdere, nec dolere? De solo viro feminam sine femina fieri et in una costa omnia hominis membra distingui?'

21 See for instance Holopainen, *Dialectic*, 47, and W. Hartmann, "Rhetorik und Dialektik in der Streitschriftenliteratur," in *Dialektik und Rhetorik im früheren und hohen Mittelalter: Rezeption, Überlieferung und gesellschaftliche Wirkung antiker Gelehrsamkeit vornehmlich im 9. und 12. Jahrhundert*, ed. J. Fried, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs: Kolloquien 27 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1997), 73–95, here 75 and 84.

22 In early print editions, the text was also known as *Introductio ad theologiam*. For the most recent and extensive study of the work (although the section on divine omnipotence

position on the nature of the relationship between the liberal arts and theology is perhaps less ambiguous.²³ In the preface of *ThSch*, for instance, Abelard writes:

For this purpose it is allowed to the faithful to read the texts of the secular arts and the books of the pagans, so that, having learned the different kinds of speech and eloquence and the ways of argumentation and the nature of things, we may be able to reach, through those arts, whatever pertains to an understanding and to the beauty of Sacred Scripture, either to defend its truth or to support it.²⁴

The work, begun in 1133 after Abelard had returned to teach at the school of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, sets out to offer students a summary repository of sacred knowledge to serve as an introduction to the Scriptures, and is partly an abbreviated version of his earlier work *Theologia christiana*.²⁵ The first book treats the fundamentals of the Christian faith, including the sacraments and the Trinity, ending with attestations of prophets and pagan philosophers. The second book opens with a defence of the study of pagan literature, and delves deeper into issues on the Trinity raised in the first book. The third book of *ThSch* was completed by the late 1130s and revised after Abelard's condemnation at the Council of Sens in 1141, and was therefore written some seventy years after Peter Damian's letter on divine omnipotence. The third and final book deals mainly with the extent of God's power and the correct way of discoursing about divine omnipotence, ending with a reflection on divine wisdom and goodness.²⁶

receives little attention), see I. Klitzsch, *Die 'Theologien' des Petrus Abaelardus: Genetisch-kontextuelle Analyse und theologiegeschichtliche Relektüre* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010). An excellent and up-to-date introduction, along with a German translation, can be found in Matthias Perkams, ed., *Theologia 'Scholarium': Lateinisch—Deutsch* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2010).

23 For a still useful and extensive study of Abelard's use of the *trivium* in theology, see Jean Jolivet, *Arts du langage et théologie chez Abélard*, 2nd ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1982), esp. 229–320.

24 *TSch*, 1.1: 'Ad hoc quippe fidelibus saecularium artium scripta et libros gentilium legere permissum est, ut per eas locutionum et eloquentiae generibus atque argumentationum modis aut naturis rerum praecognitis, quicquid ad intelligentiam vel decorem sacrae scripturae, sive ad defendendam sive ad astruendam veritatem eius pertinet, assequi valeamus.'

25 So remarks Abelard in the preface to *TSch*.

26 For a good analysis of Abelard's treatment of divine omnipotence, see S. P. Bonanni, *Parlare della Trinità: Lettura della Theologia scholarium di Abelardo* (Roma: Pontificia università gregoriana, 1996), 318–326.

So what is divine omnipotence according to Abelard? He begins his discussion by addressing the question of how God can be all-powerful while humans appear to be able to do many things, such as walking and speaking, which God is unable to do. It is here that Abelard introduces the concept of *dignitas*: he explains that God cannot eat or speak because this would abrogate from His *dignitas*; when discussing the extent of a being's power, one must use its *dignitas* as a starting-point. The term is difficult to interpret, but has been defined by John Marenbon as the "intrinsic value" of a thing, and by Matthias Perkams as "everything which contributes to the relative excellency of a single thing in comparison with other members of the same species of the being in question."²⁷

Abelard next dedicates a lengthy section to explaining that God is only able to act in the one way He does act. He had made this controversial statement first in the fifth book of *ThChr*, and the discussion there is replicated nearly word-for-word in *ThSch*. One of the components of Abelard's argument was the claim that God cannot act contrary to reason, an argument he found in the *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* that was falsely attributed to Augustine in the Middle Ages. In this work, the author argues against the Arians that the Son is not inferior to the Father and created by the Father, since, if this were the case, there would have been a time when Truth, which is the Son, did not exist, which is contrary to reason.²⁸ "Although God can do all things," Ps.-Augustine continues, "yet He does that which accords with reason, in order that He remain free from blame."²⁹ In the same treatise, Ps.-Augustine argues that "although God can do all things, He only does that which befits His truth and justice."³⁰

Moreover, Abelard could have found a similar position in the work of a contemporary, the influential abbot of St Heribert, Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075–1129), who wrote a short work called *De omnipotentia dei* in which he argues that any statement concerning God must be in accordance solely with what is found in Scripture—indeed, that God cannot do anything that lies outside of the truth

27 Marenbon, *The Philosophy*, 240; Matthias Perkams, "Divine Omnipotence and Moral Theory in Abelard's Theology," *Mediaeval Studies* 65 (2003), 99–116, here 106.

28 Cf. John 14:6.

29 Ps.-Augustine, *Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, ed. A. Souter, CSEL 50 (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1908), 83.6: 'Quamquam enim omnia possit deus, sed illud facit quod convenit rationi, ut inreprehensibilis perseveret.' See also *ibid.*, 116.1: 'Quamvis enim omnia possit deus, nihil tamen facit quod sit rationi absurdum.'

30 *Ibid.*, 97.1: 'Nam omnia quidem potest Deus, sed non facit nisi quod conveniat veritati eius atque iustitiae.'

of Scripture.³¹ Since God is said to be just, therefore all of His actions must be said to be just, and therefore He cannot do what is unjust. Rupert refers to the same passage in Jerome that vexed Damian so much. To claim as Jerome does, says Rupert, (namely that God cannot restore virginity) is not to detract from God's power, but to commend His justice.³²

Rupert of Deutz defends Jerome's statement with Scriptural authority and he does take a different stance than Peter Damian, but his arguments do not display the finesse of subtle dialectic and grammar that Abelard marshals in his discussion of Jerome's famous passage. After making his controversial claim that God can only do as He does, Abelard turns to Jerome:

Nor can He [i.e. God] wish or do anything contrary to what is congruent with reason. Indeed no one can wish or do reasonably that which is in discord with reason. And this Saint Jerome appears to have intended, when, exhorting the virgin Eustochium to keep observing her saintly virginity, he said: "The virgin Israel has fallen: there is none who can raise her up." I will say it boldly: although God can do all things, he cannot raise a virgin up after she has fallen.³³

Abelard therefore interprets Jerome's statement as follows: God is a rational being; it is therefore impossible for Him to will or act contrary to reason. When Jerome says that God cannot restore virginity once it has been lost, he means that this is contrary to reason, and thus contrary to God's will. Abelard then quotes at length a hagiographer of Jerome, who defends Jerome's words by stating that God's *non posse* or 'not being able' is a way of saying *non velle* or

31 Rupert of Deutz, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* ed. J.-P. Migne, Series Latina 170 (Paris: Migne, 1844–1864), col. 478C: 'Ipse, qui extra veritatem Scripturarum facere aut velle nihil potest omnipotens Deus.'

32 Ibid., col. 478A: 'Itaque cum dicit quispiam, ut ille notae et constantis fidei vir praedictus Hieronymus, cum omnia possit Deus, suscitare virginem non potest post ruinam, valet quidem liberare a poena, sed non valet coronare corruptam, nequaquam omnipotentiae derogat, sed inflexibilem iustitiam commendat.'

33 *TSch*, 3.37–3.38: 'Nec ipse quicquam [...] contra id quod rationi congruit aut velle aut agere queat. Nemo quippe quod a ratione dissidet, velle vel agere rationabiliter potest. Quod diligenter beatus Hieronymus attendere visus est, cum Eustochium virginem ad observandum sanctae virginitatis propositum adhortans ait: "Virgo Israel cecidit, et non est qui suscitaret eam. Audacter loquar. Cum omnia possit deus, virginem post ruinam suscitare non potest."'

'not wishing', and that Jerome merely formulated it in this way in order to exhort Eustochium to virginity, not in order to detract from divine omnipotence.³⁴

Peter Damian would certainly have agreed with the approach of the hagiographer quoted by Abelard of situating Jerome's remark in its context and not taking it in too much of an absolute and literal sense.³⁵ Yet simply substituting Jerome's *potest* ('God is able to') with *vult* ('God wishes'), as Desiderius had done, would not have counted on much approval with Peter Damian, nor would Abelard's generalizing statement that God can only act as He does, as discussed above. The same passage is also discussed in an earlier work of Abelard, *Sic et non*, which in turn relies heavily on Augustine's widespread *Enchiridion*, where Augustine argues that God only does good things, for it is even good that He allows evil to be in the world.³⁶ Augustine continues to argue that if God did not wish to allow evil into the world, He could easily do so, since God can just as easily do what He wishes as not allow to exist what He does not wish. With this authority, Abelard is able to claim in the *Theologia* that, since all of God's actions are good, and God is good, God can only do as He does.³⁷ To claim otherwise would be to argue that God acts contrary to His own nature, which He cannot do, and contrary to reason, which, as Abelard had already concluded from the quoted passage of Ps.-Augustine, He also cannot do.³⁸

Note here Abelard's approach of using dialectic in discussing patristic authority, and so builds on his *Sic et non*, in which various apparent contradictions among the Church Fathers are resolved by means of dialectical reasoning, and contrast this with Peter Damian's questioning of Jerome and

34 The hagiographer now known as Ps.-Sebastian of Monte Cassino, listed as number 3870 in *Bibliotheca hagiographica latina antiquae et mediae aetatis*, ed. Socii Bollandii (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1949); for the text, see Ps.-Sebastian of Monte Cassino, *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum*, ed. B. Mombrizio, 2 vols. (Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 1978 [= Paris, 1910]), vol. 2, 31–36, here 33: "non posse" dei "non velle" alio omni modo dici poterat verbo.'

35 In Peter Damian, *Epistula* 119, 344, Damian says that whenever statements such as those in Jerome are found in Scripture or in other patristic writings, one must tread carefully and be sure not to expound them too boldly and liberally according to their literal sense: 'Si quando tamen tale quid in mysticis ac allegoricis contingat nos reperire scripturis, caute potius et reverenter accipiendum est, quam iuxta litteras audacter et libere proferendum.'

36 *Sic et non*, 35, ed. Boyer and McKeon (1976–1977); Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 96, used also in *TSch*, c. 3.48.

37 *TSch*, 3.36: 'Quod si illud solum quod facit, fieri ab eo bonum est, profecto illud solum quod facit facere potest, qui nihil facere potest nisi quod ab eo fieri bonum est.'

38 As noted above, the *Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti* were considered to be an authentic work of Augustine in the Middle Ages.

his statement that Jerome's remark on God's omnipotence has always been "unpleasing to his ears."³⁹

While taking the Augustinian principle of the *Enchiridion* as his starting point, Abelard continues the discussion of the relationship between God's will and power, giving the following example:

Likewise, it is therefore very well said concerning God that, when He has wished something, He is also able to do something, so that in doing all things His wish and ability accompany each other in such a way that, what He does not wish, He is in no way whatsoever able to do, nor is He able to do something at a time when He does not wish for it to happen, just as now He cannot make it rain, when He does not wish to; and He does not wish for it to rain now, because He deems it improper to rain now, and judges this time not to be fit for rain, because of some reasonable cause, which, however, is hidden from us. Indeed, if He should be able to or wish to make it rain now, naturally He can do so and also wishes to do so at such a time, in which it does not befit God to do that which is removed from all reason.⁴⁰

Abelard's reasoning can be roughly summarized as follows: What God does not wish He is not able to do, for His will and ability are coextensive. If, for example, God wanted it to rain now, it would rain; since it does not rain, therefore He does not wish it to and therefore cannot make it rain now. In a fascinating turn of events, Abelard uses the very same example used by Peter Damian, in a similar context but with the opposite intention as Peter Damian had done. Peter Damian had used this example to refute and ridicule Desiderius's explanation of Jerome's remark, whereas Abelard uses it to support an interpretation that is very similar to that of Desiderius.⁴¹ In fact, Abelard goes on to replicate nearly word-for-word Desiderius's position as formulated by Damian, claiming that

39 Damian, Epistula 119, 343–344.

40 *TSch*, 3.45: 'Proinde itaque atque optime de deo dictum est, quod subest ei posse, cum voluerit, ut videlicet in singulis faciendis ita eius potestas et voluntas sese comitentur, ut, quod non velit, minime possit, nec possit etiam tunc facere, quando, ut fiat, non vult, veluti modo pluviam facere non potest, quando eam facere non vult; qui hoc ideo modo non vult, quia id modo fieri non convenire considerat, nec hoc tempus pluviae idoneum censet, quadam utique rationabili de causa, licet nobis occulta. Si igitur pluviam nunc facere possit aut velit, eo utique tempore id facere potest aut etiam vult in quo id deum facere non oportet quod ab omni dissonat ratione.'

41 See also the brief discussion of this passage in Resnick, *Divine Power*, 67–69, as well as that in J. Bauke-Ruegg, *Die Allmacht Gottes: Systematisch-theologische Erwägungen zwischen*

God can only do what He in fact does. After giving the rain example, however, he introduces the concept of propriety: God cannot make it rain now because He does not wish to; and He does not wish to, because He does not deem it proper to rain now because of some rational cause; and it does not befit God to do something that lacks reason.

After giving this example, Abelard turns to criticism that this detracts from God's excellence, and that even we humans are able to do many things which we do not do, to which Abelard responds by reverting to his earlier concept of *dignitas*, arguing that our abilities or inabilities should not be used as the starting-point for discussing divine power.⁴² It is possible that Abelard knew Peter Damian's letter, which, like many of his other letters, began to circulate even during Damian's life, and were not merely confined to Italy: there are several twelfth-century manuscripts extant containing *De divina omnipotentia* from northern French provenance.⁴³ Another possibility is that both Peter Damian and Abelard go back to an otherwise unknown source.⁴⁴

Although Peter Damian had represented Desiderius's solution as a new-fangled and dangerous concoction of dialectic and 'theology',⁴⁵ the idea of the coextensive nature of God's power and will is shared by the earlier hagiographer

Metaphysik, Postmoderne und Poesie (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1998), 462–464, esp. 463, n. 306.

42 *TSch*, 3.45: 'Quantum igitur estimo, cum id tantum deus facere possit quod eum facere convenit, nec eum quicquam facere convenit quod facere pretermittat, profecto id solum eum posse facere arbitror quod quandoque facit, licet hec nostra opinio paucos aut nullos habeat assentatores, et plurimum dictis sanctorum et aliquantulum a ratione dissentire videatur. Hoc quippe, inquirunt, estimare, multum divine derogat excellentie, ut videlicet id solummodo facere possit quod quandoque facit, et id solum dimittere quod dimittit, cum nos etiam ipsi, qui longe impotentiores sumus, multa etiam facere vel dimittere possumus que nequaquam facimus vel dimittimus.'

43 For the list of manuscripts containing Damian's letter on divine omnipotence, see Peter Damian, *Die Briefe*, 3, 341.

44 Concetto Martello argues that Damian's thought on divine omnipotence was mediated by Anselm of Canterbury, especially in book 2 of *Cur Deus homo* and *De potestate et impotentia*, although Anselm does not present a similar argument in his extant writings. See C. Martello, *Pietro Abelardo e la riscoperta della filosofia: Percorsi intellettuali nel XII secolo tra teologia e cosmologia* (Roma: Aracne, 2008), 80–81. For a study of the similarities between Damian's theology and that of Anselm, see A. Cantin, "Ratio et auctoritas de Pierre Damien à Anselme," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 18 (1972), 152–179.

45 See *infra* for the problems associated with using the term 'theology' in connection with Damian.

of Jerome, which possibly dates perhaps from the ninth century,⁴⁶ and ultimately goes back to Augustine's *Enchiridion*.⁴⁷

After discussing Jerome's passage and claiming that God can only do as He does, Abelard explains that in the sentence "he can be saved by God", the subject is human, and therefore the verb 'can' refers to an ability of human nature. However, in the sentence "God can save him", since God is the subject, the verb refers to divine ability, not human. Likewise, when we say that something is possible, we mean that it is not incompatible to the nature of any creation; however, when we say that something is possible for God to do, we refer to divine nature rather than that of creation. In short, Abelard uses the art of grammar to make distinctions between the meaning of the modal verb "to be able to" when it is applied to creation and to God.⁴⁸

Dignitas and Divine Power

Toward the very end of the third and final book of *ThSch*, Abelard makes an important statement on the relationship between divine omnipotence and the laws of nature, which it will be worthwhile to quote in full:

And when they say that those things, which occur through miracles, are impossible, or occur contrary to nature, as, for instance, that a virgin gives birth or that a blind man continues to see, they consider merely the usual course of nature or the primordial causes of things, and do not consider the excellence of divine power, which clearly is able, by force of its own nature, to do whatever it has decided upon, and to alter, contrary to custom, the very natures of things in any way that it wishes. But if even now He would create a man out of the earth's clay or bring forth a woman from a man's rib, just as was done with the very first parents of mankind, there would be absolutely no one who would not consider that to be done contrary to nature or beyond nature, on account of the fact that, as was said before, the arrangement of primordial causes would in no way be sufficient for this purpose, unless God imparted, contrary to custom

46 See the discussion on the issues of dating this *vita* in A. Vaccari, *Scritti di erudizione e di filologia*, 2 vols. (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1952–1958), vol. 2, 31–51, at 41–46; see also W. Berschin, *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter*, 5 vols. (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 1986–2004), vol. 3, 68, n. 169.

47 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 96. See also *De spiritu et littera*, 5.

48 *TSch*, 3.49.

and out of His own free will, a certain power to things, so that in this way it would be possible for it to happen—and with this will He also was able to create all from nothing.⁴⁹

As at the beginning of his discussion of divine omnipotence, Abelard argues that a distinction between the Creator and His creation needs to be made, between God and nature: just as the ability of a being needs to be considered differently in accordance with its inherent *dignitas*, in the same way we cannot assume that God is subject to the laws of nature which He himself created. Abelard utilizes strikingly similar biblical examples to counter precisely the line of argumentation Peter Damian had used. Making a subtle philosophical distinction between actions of creations and those of the Creator, Abelard argues that God can do things that seem to be at odds with the laws of Nature, but are nevertheless in accordance with reason, since they are in accordance with God's inherent excellence and *dignitas*. Here the brilliance of Abelard's concept of *dignitas* shines through, which he developed from the Ps.-Augustinian notion that God can only do those things that befit His justice.

Peter Abelard's teachings on divine omnipotence were to have a lasting impact. Although Abelard's views on divine omnipotence were among those condemned at the Council of Sens in 1141,⁵⁰ and disputed by William of Saint-Thierry (c. 1085–1149) in his treatise against Abelard,⁵¹ Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160) included Abelard's ideas on the proper way of discoursing about

49 Ibid., 3:94: 'Qui etiam cum ea quae per miracula fiunt, impossibilia dicunt vel contra naturam fieri profitentur, ut virginem parere vel caecum ulterius videre, profecto ad usitatum naturae cursum vel ad primordiales rerum causas respiciunt, non ad excellentiam divinae potentiae quam videlicet constat ex propria natura quicquid decreverit posse et praeter solitum ipsas rerum naturas quocumque modo voluerit permutare. Quod si nunc quoque hominem ex limo terrae formaret vel feminam de costa viri produceret, sicut in primis actum est parentibus, nemo utique esset qui contra naturam vel praeter naturam id fieri non censeret, eo, ut dictum est, quod primordialium causarum institutio ad hoc minime sufficere posset, nisi deus praeter solitum propria voluntate vim quandam rebus impertiret, ut hoc inde fieri posset qua videlicet voluntate et ex nihilo cuncta potuit creare.' Cf. *ibid.*, 3:51.

50 For the full list of charges of Abelard's heretical statements, see *Enchiridion symbolorum: Definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 31st ed., ed. H. Denzinger (Barcinone: Herder, 1957), 179–180.

51 William of St. Thierry, *Disputatio adversus Petrum Abaelardum*, in *Opuscula adversus Perum Abaelardum et de fide*, ed. Paul Verdeyen SJ, CCCM 89A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 2, 18: 'Omitto etiam quod ibi dicit, quasi ex auctoritate beati Augustini, non esse Deum omnipotentem, scilicet quia non potest nisi ea tantum quae vult: quod brevitatis causa praetermisimus.'

divine omnipotence and the concept of *dignitas* therein almost verbatim in the widely popular *Sententiae*.⁵² However, immediately afterward, Peter Lombard vehemently inveighs against Abelard's notion that God can only do as He does.⁵³ Although he does not mention Abelard by name (*quidam*, 'certain people' is the word used), the Lombard paraphrases Abelard's views on divine omnipotence in the following way: since God cannot do but what His justice requires, and since His justice requires only that which He does, God can only do as He does.⁵⁴ Peter Lombard objects to Abelard, saying that "a verb of requiring" is not properly applied to God.⁵⁵ Although the Lombard rejected Abelard's notion that God can only do as He does, it is clear that Abelard's notion of *dignitas* and the limited applicability of modal verbs to God had its influence.

For later theologians, too, Jerome's passage posed serious difficulties. Peter of Poitiers (c. 1130–1205), a former student of Peter Lombard who taught theology in Paris for numerous years, discusses Jerome's passage in his *Sententiae*, written c. 1170. He quotes Jerome in a chapter on divine omnipotence, and offers the solution of some who say that Jerome intended to place virginity above the state of being married and that, with respect to its aptitude (*habilitas*) and suitability (*idoneitas*) the state of virginity cannot be compared to the state of being married. Peter of Poitiers goes on to offer the simple solution of claiming that Jerome was merely "speaking hyperbolically, trying to commend virginity."⁵⁶ He explains that the phrase "God is not able to", which is to say "God does not wish to", is to be understood as being predicated about His justice, since His justice could not allow the states of virginity and of being married to be placed on the same level. Here again the Ps.-Augustinian notion of God's justice as the extent of His omnipotence finds favour.

We are fortunate to have a series of epistolary exchanges between the monk Peter of Celle (c. 1115–1183) and Nicholas of St Albans debating on the feast of

52 Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, in *Magistri Petri Lombardi Parisiensis episcopi Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, ed. I. Brady (Grottaferrata: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1971–1981), 1.42.

53 Ibid., 1.43: 'Invectio contra illos qui dicunt Deum nil posse nisi quod vult et facit.'

54 Ibid., 1.43, c.1: 'Non potest facere, nisi quod iustitia eius exigit; sed non exigit eius iustitia, ut faciat, nisi quod facit: non ergo potest facere, nisi quod facit.'

55 Presumably referring to *TSch*, 3.46 (cited in n. 42).

56 Peter of Poitiers, *Sententiae Petri Pictaviensis*, ed. P. S. Moore and M. DuLong, *Publications in Mediaeval Studies 7* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1943), vol. 1, book 1. Only the first two books have been edited, although the entire work can be found in PL, vol. 211, cols. 783–1280.

the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, dating to c. 1180–1181.⁵⁷ The debate was prompted by the latter's treatise on the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception, which claimed that Mary had been immune from sin. After responding that to take away the Virgin's struggle against sin is to take away her crowning victory, Peter of Celle turns to the now familiar passage in Jerome:

Concerning the question put forward: "Although God can do all things, He cannot make an unblemished virgin out of a blemished one; He is able to free her from punishment, but He cannot crown a blemished virgin." Would that I understood the force of these words, and grasped Jerome's meaning! Without doubt I would not wickedly hide it from you, nor would I be too greedy to share it with you [...] However, in Jerome's letter the statement is formulated somewhat differently: 'I will speak boldly,' he says, 'although God can do all things, he cannot raise a virgin up after she has fallen,' etc. Therefore we need to consider the subject-matter and the intention of the speaker. The discussion was about the observance of virginity and the avoidance of blemish. So he heard and fashioned his discourse into a fiery praise of virginity [...] And in order that such an excellent and unique benefice would not be disdained, he sets the gravest of conditions to it, so that, in a way, God's ability to restore such a loss is reduced, not with respect to His power but to His dispensation. If one simply regards His power, He is both able to free one from punishment and to give the crown to one who has at one point been blemished, as if to one who is unblemished. But with regard to His dispensation and constitution which is fixed and unchangeable by eternal laws, He cannot do so, since He cannot act against Himself, that is, He cannot nor ought to wish to do so. Even though God is of the simplest nature, yet when we speak about Him, we do so in accordance with our habits of speech, and improperly say that He is able or unable to do something, that He knows or does not know something, that He wishes or does not wish something.⁵⁸

57 Peter of Celle, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, ed. J. Haseldine (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), Epistulae 157–160, 572–626.

58 Ibid., Epistula 158, 594–596: "De proposita questione: "Deus cum omnia possit, non potest de corrupta virgine facere incorruptam; valet quidem liberare a pena, sed non valet coronare corruptam," utinam vim intelligerem verbi, et sensum tenerem Hieronymi; procul dubio neque maligne reconderem, neque avaro communicarem [...] In epistola tamen Hieronymi aliter dicitur: "Audenter," inquit, "loquor: cum omnia possit Deus, virginem post ruinam suscitare non potest, etc." Recurrendum proinde est ad materiam locutionis et ad intentionem loquentis. De observanda virginitate et cavenda corruptione tractabatur. Exaudivit ergo et ad preconium virginitatis eloquium suum Hieronymus

Peter of Celle's solution is to claim that Jerome was talking not about God's actual power, but about His dispensation, adding that in conversation we often use words such as 'to wish to' and 'to be able to' imprecisely and indiscriminately. This strategy was the tried-and-true method of Jerome's hagiographer, as quoted by Abelard, who proposed to understand 'God can' as 'God wishes.' Whereas Abelard took the hagiographer's words as a cue to enter into a subtle dialectic discourse that argued that God's will and ability are coextensive, and that, therefore, one implies the other, Peter of Celle makes a rather different, less scholarly point: in the context of human conversation we often use verbs such as 'to wish to' and 'to be able to' indiscriminately, even when we talk about God, and do not take His divine nature into account. This approach is much more pragmatic, and does not attempt to achieve a synthesis between Jerome, his hagiographer, and Scripture. However, Peter of Celle's concern for speaking carefully about the divine nature is reminiscent of Abelard's urgings to be careful when making propositions concerning God.⁵⁹

Lastly, to complete this brief survey of medieval views on divine omnipotence, it should be noted that Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224/5–1274), too, discussed the issue with reference to Jerome's passage. As opposed to earlier theologians, Aquinas has no qualms about declaring it to be impossible for God to remove from a blemished virgin the fact that she has been blemished; although He can remove any blemish of the mind or body, He cannot undo the fact that a blemish has been received.⁶⁰ At the heart of Aquinas's argumentation lies the claim that those things which imply a logical contradiction are not subject to divine omnipotence (such as undoing the past). After thus refuting Peter Damian's position on divine omnipotence, Aquinas turns to the question whether

inflammavit [...] Ut ergo tam egregium et singulare beneficium non negligetur, durissima conditio apponitur, ut quodammodo ad id resarciendum dampnum Deus infirmetur, non de potestate sed de dispensatione. Si enim potentia eius simpliciter attendatur, et a pena valet liberare et que fuerit aliquando corrupta tanquam incorruptam coronare. Si ad dispensationem et constitutionem eternis legibus fixam et invariabilem, non valet quia nihil contra se ipsum valet, id est velle potest vel debet. Cum enim simplicissime sit nature Deus de ipso tamen secundum usus nostre locutionis improprie loquimur dicendo eum aliquid posse vel non posse, aliquid nosse vel non nosse, aliquid velle vel nolle.'

59 It is noteworthy that Peter of Celle uses technical vocabulary borrowed from school context that was used in the so-called *accessus ad auctores* ('introductions to the authors') to summarize an author's 'subject-matter' (*materia*) and 'intention' (*intentio*), indicating that he applies common exegetical techniques used for basic school texts when interpreting Jerome's remark.

60 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Editio Leonina (Taurini: Marietti, 1932), 1, 25.4.

God can only do as He does. He paraphrases Abelard's position (though not mentioned by name) in the following way: "divine power is determined toward the current course of things because of the arrangement of divine wisdom and justice, without which God does nothing."⁶¹ Although Aquinas had, in his refutation of Peter Damian, propounded the idea that what is logically inconsistent is not subject to divine omnipotence, here he is careful to distance himself from Abelard's deterministic notion of God, claiming that God does nothing out of necessity but out of His own free will.

When discussing Abelard's claim that God can only do as is befitting and just, Aquinas brings grammar into the matter: if the words 'befitting' and 'just' are joined directly with the verb 'is', then the meaning is restricted to the present, giving the false statement that God can only do what is now befitting and just; however, if the words 'befitting' and 'just' are joined directly with the verb 'can', whose meaning extends into the future, then the present tense (in the phrase 'as is befitting and just') is signified in an unspecified and general way. The sentence would then be true if taken in the following way: God cannot do anything except that which, if He were to do it, would be befitting and just.

With Aquinas the discussion has altered significantly from the eleventh and twelfth century: both Peter Damian and Abelard's ideas are viewed as *passé* by Aquinas, although he does introduce the kind of grammatical discussion that was first introduced by Abelard. With Aquinas, however, the grammatical discussion is limited to the temporal validity of the statement in question, whereas Abelard made subtle distinctions concerning the validity of modal verbs when the subject of the verb is creation or the Creator. More importantly, however, Aquinas appears to have adopted Abelard's interpretation of Jerome's passage, who understood Jerome to mean that God cannot do that which is contradictory to reason—Aquinas, however, was careful not to use the verb 'to be able to', but instead to claim that what is logically inconsistent is not subject to God's omnipotence, which itself veers close to Abelard's notion that "it does not befit God to do that which lacks all reason."⁶²

As is clear from the careful and circumventing exegetical strategies used by later theologians to interpret Jerome's controversial remark, many medieval theologians would have been more shocked at Peter Damian's open questioning of Jerome's authority than at Desiderius's simple and rather conservative explanation. Indeed, Damian himself records Desiderius as protesting that

61 Ibid., 1, 25.5: 'Alii vero dixerunt quod potentia divina determinatur ad hunc cursum rerum propter ordinem sapientiae et iustitiae divinae, sine quo Deus nihil operatur.'

62 *TSch*, 45.

Jerome's remark is "fixed and has authority,"⁶³ and Bernold of Constance, a contemporary of Peter Damian, while commenting on the same passage of Jerome's letter, equates contradicting Jerome with subverting apostolic authority, as the former had received papal approval.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the care with which Damian uses subtle and somewhat misleading syllogisms (whether intended, or not) and other dialectic methods to disprove Desiderius's explanation, as well as his constant and virtuoso use of rhetoric to portray dialecticians applying their field to the Scriptures as specious sophists, greatly undercuts his oft-proclaimed opposition to the application of the liberal arts to the study of the Scriptures. Indeed, comparing Abelard's discussion of divine omnipotence with that of Damian, it is remarkable how little use of rhetoric is to be found in the former's rather dry discourse. If Peter Damian was indeed railing against a type of dialectic theology that was more aimed at rhetorical virtuosity than anything else, he could not have found fault on this account with later scholastic theology.

Concluding Remarks

What light does the comparison between Peter Damian and Peter Abelard on divine omnipotence shed on the latter's use of the liberal arts? Both Peter Damian and Peter Abelard see a place for the liberal arts in 'theology'; the former described them as handmaidens in the service of the sacred Scriptures,⁶⁵

63 Peter Damian, Epistula 119, 343: 'Tu autem e contrario respondisti ratum esse quod dictum est, et satis autenticum, deum videlicet non posse suscitare virginem post ruinam.'

64 Bernold of Constance, *Libellus XV: De statutis ecclesiasticis sobrie legendis*, 3 vols., ed. F. Thaner, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Libelli de lite imperatorum et pontificum (Hannover: Hahnische Buchhandlung, 1892), vol. 2, 158: 'De virgine autem sacra a proposito lapsa, quae in gradum virginitatis non putatur revocanda, non est nimis contendendum, ne ipsa hac contentione contra beatum Ieronimum venire videamur, qui dicit Deum virginem non posse post lapsum reparare. Nam scripta sancti Ieronimi a beato Gelasio in Romana synodo ex apostolica auctoritate adeo canonizata sunt, ut quicumque illis pertinaciter contradicere conatur, etiam apostolicae auctoritati contraire non dubitetur.' For a discussion of this passage, see Resnick, *Divine Power*, 47.

65 Peter Damian, Epistula 119, 354: 'Haec plane, quae ex dialecticorum vel rhetorum prodeunt argumentis, non facile divinae virtutis sunt aptanda mysteriis, et quae ad hoc inventa sunt, ut in sillogismorum instrumenta proficiant vel clausulas dictionum, absit, ut sacris se legibus pertinaciter inferant et divinae virtuti conclusionis suae necessitates opponant. Quae tamen artis humanae peritia, si quando tractandis sacris eloquiis adhibetur, non debet ius magisterii sibimet arroganter arripere, sed velut ancilla dominae quodam

whereas the latter considered them fit to be used to acquire an understanding of the Scriptures. However, although Peter Damian thought that they could be useful tools, they were ultimately not capable of penetrating the divine mysteries, which, he prescribed, should be treated with reverence. Peter Abelard, on the other hand, adopted an explanation of divine omnipotence that equates God's ability with His will, which is found both in Augustine's *Enchiridion* and in *De spiritu et littera* as well as in the anonymous life of Jerome. He uses the art of grammar in discussing the nature and validity of various modal verbs such as 'to be able to' and 'to wish to' when they are applied to God, and uses the art of dialectic in achieving a synthesis between Jerome's remark, his hagiographer's interpretation, and Scripture.

Viewing God as a being governed by *ratio* ('reason') and all of whose actions are intrinsically *rationabilis* ('reasonable'), Abelard veers close to a more deterministic conception of the divinity that caused later scholastic theologians such as Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas to vigorously oppose certain aspects of Abelard's argument. At the same time, Abelard's focus on a universal *ratio* gives him a theoretical foundation to justify his use of the liberal arts in the realm of what he himself would coin as 'theology'. Rather similar to Augustine's early intellectual optimism as expressed in *De ordine*,⁶⁶ Abelard conceives of a coherent intellectualism that is in the service of theology, of a universe in which an all-powerful but rational God imposes order on creation, and through the order and rationalism of the liberal arts it is possible to acquire genuine knowledge about the Creator.

Both Peter Damian and Peter Abelard played key roles in shaping future theological debates on the question of divine omnipotence and the methods used therein. In analysing both of these intellectuals, it may be concluded that Peter Damian was not as conservative as he would have his readers believe, and that, although their views on divine omnipotence were at variance, Peter Damian and Abelard's methods were not quite so different. Rather, they are both part of a broader intellectual movement that saw new ways of applying

famulatus obsequio subservire, ne si praecedit, oberret, et dum exteriorum verborum sequitur consequentias, intimae virtutis lumen et rectum veritatis tramitem perdat.'

66 See Augustine, *De ordine*, esp. 1.24. Cf. Augustine, *Retractationes*, ed. P. Knöll, CSEL 36 (Vienna and Leipzig: 1902), 1.3.2–1.3.5 for a critical reevaluation of his earlier views on the liberal arts and their divine nature: 'Verum et in his libris displicet mihi [...] quod multum tribui liberalibus disciplinis quas multi sancti multum nesciunt, quidam etiam sciunt et sancti non sunt.' Cf. G. L. Ellspermann, "The Attitude of the Early Christian Latin Writers Toward Pagan Literature and Learning," PhD diss. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 185–188.

the liberal arts to the study of Scripture and to the practice of theology, which ultimately would be labelled as 'Scholasticism'. For Peter Damian, a fruitful new avenue of research may well be a study that considers Peter Damian as part of a broader movement of pre-scholastic intellectuals like Lanfranc and Anselm of Canterbury (or for that matter, the lesser known Anselm of Besate), all of whom received training in dialectic at Parma.

As for Abelard, in many ways his methods and approaches to the matter of divine omnipotence are typical of his entire oeuvre: whether it was his position on the universals, exegesis, ethics, theology, or even his hymns, Abelard found new ways of approaching existing problems and of interpreting Scriptural and Patristic authority, not afraid to go against the grain of the *communis opinio* and to come up with innovative solutions that put him at the cutting edge of twelfth-century intellectualism.