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. 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 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

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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

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