

# On Changing the Past<sup>1</sup>

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RECEIVED: 05-04-2013 • ACCEPTED: 02-05-2013

**ABSTRACT:** We confront two seemingly incompatible positions in regard to the past. One, the modal status of a proposition is unchangeable; and two, that omnipotence is trumped only by necessity.

**KEYWORDS:** Change – modal status – necessity – omnipotence – past.

The view that the past could have turned out differently and yet is unchangeable appears to challenge at least one of two ingrained beliefs; one, that the modal status of a proposition is not changeable;<sup>2</sup> and two, that omnipotence is trumped only by necessity. And yet the past is unchangeable.

We accept both beliefs. The contingency of the propositions that make up the past remain contingent. For what makes a true or false proposition contingent is that the proposition could have been false or true. Consequently the proposition that the house once built will be painted within a week is contingent and remains contingent even after the house is built

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<sup>1</sup> I'm deeply grateful to Yehuda Gellman for stimulating the paper and for his insightful comments on the subject. I also want to thank Peter Genco, Laurence Goldstein, Charlotte Katzoff and David Widerker for the very helpful discussions. I also wish to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of the editors.

<sup>2</sup> That is, the truths that make up the past, if ever contingent, remain contingent.

and painted; for it remains true that the house could have been built and never painted.<sup>3</sup> But if it is true that the house was built and painted within a week it cannot also be false that the house was built and painted within a week.<sup>4</sup>

The impossibility of changing the past that thus emerges stems from the impossibility of a proposition being both true and false. Hence the changelessness of the past is necessary and thus it supersedes omnipotence.

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<sup>3</sup> Or, if you like, it does not become true in every possible world.

<sup>4</sup> But could it not have been the case that it was true that the house was built at time *t* and painted within a week and then became false that the house was built at time *t* and painted within a week. No. For then the house could have been both built and painted within a week at time *t* and not be both built and painted within a week at the same time *t*. Couldn't the past be erased, as though it never happened? But it did happen.