



Boethius

The Consolation of Philosophy

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius was born in Rome to a wealthy, politically prominent Christian family in 480. The Anicii family had been early converts to Christianity, and Boethius could point to both an emperor and a pope in his lineage. His father died while he was still a child, and he was adopted into the family of one of Rome's leading political figures, Memmius Symmachus. Receiving an education usually reserved for the privileged, he showed himself to be an exceptionally bright student with a particularly strong interest in philosophy, an interest he hoped to realize in the translations he planned to do of the works of Aristotle and Plato. He married Symmachus' daughter, Rusticana, with whom he had two sons. His early political career was as successful as his family and natural gifts had promised. As a young man, he was chosen sole consul—a title more honorific than real—under King Theoderic. He was given an even greater honor twelve years later when his two sons were made joint consuls. The following year, he was appointed to the powerful position of Master of Offices at the court in Ravenna. In 523 the Roman senator Albinus was accused of treason against Theoderic; when Boethius came to his defense, he too was charged. He was imprisoned without trial and executed in 524.

It is almost impossible to appreciate Boethius' situation without understanding something of the historical circumstances in which he lived, especially the tensions between state and church, between Rome and a growing Christian religion. Boethius is one of the more important transitional figures between the Early Middle Ages and the late Middle Ages. During his time, great changes were taking place in Rome. In the 4th century Germanic tribes began pushing at the borders of Rome. In 378, the Visigoths defeated the Roman army and were made friends of the Empire through Theodosius. At Theodosius's death, the Empire was divided between his sons; but intrigues between them weakened the Empire. The Visigoths under Alaric took advantage of these intrigues and in 410 they sacked Rome. The Vandals, another Germanic tribe, moved through Gaul to Spain and eventually into northern Africa. In virtual control of the Mediterranean, in 455 they too sacked Rome, and in 476 when Augustulus was deposed, the Roman Empire as it had been known in the ancient world came to an end.

Diocletian, who came to the throne in 285, practiced a systematic persecution of the Christian Church. In 311, one of his successors, Galerius, issued an edict granting toleration to Christians. Constantine invaded Italy in 312 and defeated the armies of Maxentius, Galerius' successor. According to legend, just before the battle at the Tiber across from Rome, Constantine

had a vision and had his men mark their shields with the *Chi* and *Rho*, symbols for Christ, and after his victory, Christianity became the favored religion of the Empire. In the centuries after the sack of Rome the role of the papacy in temporal affairs was profoundly modified by the vacuum created in imperial authority. But long before this period, papal sovereignty in central Italy had already become well established. In 451, when the Huns threatened Rome, it was Pope Leo, not the imperial official, who rode out to negotiate a settlement on behalf of the people. By the time of Gregory I (590-604), the Pope was clearly the *de facto* ruler of the city. This state of affairs would remain in effect until it was confirmed again in the 9th century. On Christmas day, 800 A.D., Pope Leo III crowned Pepin's son, Charlemagne, Emperor of the West. That precedent, of the Pope bestowing authority on the Emperor, established beyond any doubt the sovereignty of the Church over the state. Sometime between 750-800, the "Donation" of Constantine surfaced. Allegedly a forgery, it was a charter giving the Pope legal rule over Rome and its possessions when Constantine withdrew to his new eastern capital of Constantinople. Boethius was writing at a time when all of this was only beginning, when Rome was in collapse and Christianity was coming into its own. His writings would play a seminal role in shaping the new Rome.

CONTEXT

Boethius was a successful public figure both in Rome and in the court at Ravenna under the Ostrogothic king Theoderic, but his real love was philosophy. As a young man, he announced his plan to translate into Latin and write commentaries on all of the philosophic works of both Aristotle and Plato and then show that they did not disagree in the most important matters. Although he did not complete this ambitious plan, the translations he did do helped preserve the works of Aristotle for future generations.

The dominant philosophy at the time was Neoplatonism as articulated by Plotinus. Like Augustine, Boethius worked to reconcile this philosophy with his Christian beliefs. His religious tracts covered a variety of religious topics—one of them rejecting the heresy of Nestorius; two others, *De Fide Catholica* and *De Trinitate*, were among the most influential works of the late medieval period up to the time of Chaucer. In all of them, Boethius' clear, often stated intention was to reconcile faith and reason.

Historians of late antiquity identify Boethius as one of the great "transmitters" of ancient wisdom to the Middle Ages. Other transmitters were Cassiodorus (480-575, student of Boethius), Martianus Capella (400-439), and Isidore of Seville (560-636). By his commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, an introduction to Aristotle's logical book, entitled *The Categories*, Boethius transmitted some knowledge of Aristotle's thought to the Middle Ages. Furthermore, his commentary set up the famous "controversy over universals" during the time of the medieval universities. His influence on education appears in the distinction he makes between the fundamental liberal arts, the *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic, and the *quadrivium* (so coined by Boethius himself), arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. While his influence reaches beyond the *Consolation of Philosophy*, this book is the most effective way to disclose the central principles of Boethius' thought.

SUMMARY

Book I: The *Consolation* opens with Boethius in prison, lamenting his downfall and the loss of everything he valued and had worked so hard to attain. The poetic muses who are with him encourage his grief. An unknown lady, dressed in a noble ancestral gown that had become torn from neglect and violence, appears to him, and chasing off the muses, she rebukes him for lamenting and offers healing instead. He suddenly recognizes her as the nurse of his youth, Lady

Philosophy, and unburdens his heart of all the injustices that have repaid his faithful public service. She listens with indifference, asks him some questions, and diagnoses his illness as stemming from his having forgotten his true identity. She assures him that a return to health is still possible and offers to help him with a gentle cure.

Book II: Lady Philosophy denies that Fortune has mistreated Boethius. Speaking in the name of Fortune, she tells him that her inconsistency is consistent in all things. She then goes on to remind him of all the advantages Fortune bestowed on him. When he replies that the memory of all those gifts only make the present misery worse, she reminds him that even in his present state he has reason to be grateful in the continuing health of his father-in-law, the virtues of his wife, and the success and promise of his two sons. Book 2 ends with her rejection of those things that men look to as the source of happiness—wealth, fame, and power: Lady Philosophy makes it clear that struggles and adversity often help men more than good fortune.

Book III: Having demolished all of the arguments behind Boethius' grieving, Philosophy now takes up the question of what constitutes true happiness. Philosophy tells Boethius that it is in the nature of man to desire happiness, and that perfect happiness cannot consist in wealth, popularity, power, fame, bodily pleasures, or even true nobility because these are transitory. Man must mortify himself of the desire for these goods if his happiness is to be more than just passing. True happiness can only be realized in the possession of the supreme good. In Chapter 9, Philosophy shifts from the false images of happiness to the nature of true happiness. True happiness can only be found in a Good that is complete or perfect, sufficient in itself and everlasting; that Good is God.

Book IV: Lady Philosophy now turns to the question of how God, as the True Good, distributes justice in the world. Boethius complains that unjust men flourish while the virtuous suffer. He wonders how a good God can allow evil men to benefit. But philosophy replies that good men are always rewarded and bad men punished simply by virtue of who they are and what they do: the good attain the end that all men seek in the happiness found in the Good, while the wicked, by virtue of the chains their desires weave around them, become weak, less than human and actually deserving of pity. Moreover, the souls become what they do eternally because the soul is immortal. Philosophy goes on to distinguish between Providence—the divine reason that exists in an unchanging heaven—and Fate—the working out of Providence in our world of change and multiplicity. The order, simplicity, and purpose of the divine, she says, is only confused, fragmented, and chaotic to those who see too much from the perspective of time. As in a wheel, the closer we get to the center, the less motion and confusion there is. That we think the good suffer wrongly and the unjust are rewarded is only a sign of not seeing the Good directing men's lives. We do not always know the good from the bad and we do not always see how what appears to be the evil men do may be working to make them better. Misfortune and adversity often make good men better and good fortune often serves to help bad men correct themselves. She concludes, "It lies in your own hands to fashion for yourselves the kind of fortune you please" (IV, 7).

Book V: Book 4 has left Boethius perplexed and wondering: if God is good and watches out for his creatures, and He sees everything, how can there be any room for chance or free will in the actions of men? If the outcomes of human events depend upon free will and choice, they must be uncertain and unnecessary; but if they are, how can God know them in advance? And if he knows them, how can they not be predetermined? Here, as in Book 4, Philosophy offers two different lines of reasoning to his questions. The first has to do with the nature of knowledge itself; the second with the distinction between perpetuity and eternity. Concerning the first, Philosophy

answers Boethius' difficulty by recalling the difference between ways of knowing. Remember, she says, there are four ways of knowing an object:

senses: according to the sense, a man knows another man as a corporeal shape;

imagination: according to the imagination, he knows him as shape without matter;

reason: according to *ratio*, he knows him as a concept, a species, or in part;

intelligence: according to *intellectus*, the power of grasping wholes, he knows him wholly.

The distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* is crucial here. *Intellectus* is the simple grasping of an intelligible truth all at once and whole, whereas *ratio* or reasoning is the progression towards this truth step by step--the seeing of each part, one by one, building on the others instead of all at once. Philosophy says of this hierarchy, "the superior manner of knowledge includes the inferior, but it is quite impossible for the inferior to rise to the superior." The resolution of what appears to be a conflict between God's foreknowledge and predestination and between Providence and Fate or Destiny is found in removing God from the confines of time as we experience it. God is outside of time, always in the present; man's free will takes place from within time and remains uncompromised within time. "It is impossible for ... the rising of the sun and the man walking—not to be happening when they do happen; and yet it was necessary for one of them to happen before it did happen, but not so for the other. And so, those things which are present to God will without doubt happen; but some of them result from the necessity of things, and some of them from the power of those who do them. We are not wrong, therefore, to say that if these things are considered with reference to divine foreknowledge, they are necessary. But if they are considered by themselves, they are free of the bonds of necessity; just as everything that the senses perceive is universal if considered with reference to the reason but individual if considered in itself" (V, 6). The fact that God sees a man about to sit down is no more a cause of that man sitting than that he is sitting because he's a man. Strictly speaking, God never foresees; He is in eternity seeing always in an eternal present and with a power corresponding, by analogy, to man's *intellectus*. Philosophy ends on a note of hope: "God has foreknowledge and rests a spectator from on high...and as the ever present eternity of his vision dispenses reward to the good and punishment to the bad, it adapts itself to the future quality of our actions. Hope is not placed in God in vain and prayers are not made in vain...Avoid vice, therefore, and cultivate virtue; lift up your mind to the right kind of hope, and put forth humble prayers on high. A great necessity is laid upon you, if you will be honest with yourself, a great necessity to be good, since you live in the sight of a judge who sees all things" (V, 6).



Things to Think About

1. Consider the Platonic and Aristotelian influences in the *Consolation*. Can you sort them out or distinguish them? And if you can, can you see any ways in which they have been transformed, baptized, by Christianity?
2. Notice the ascent of Boethius over the course of the dialogue. Are there any parallels to the descent and ascent Socrates makes with his friends in the *Republic*? Is Boethius'

attitude towards the body and towards poetry the same as, or different from, Plato's in the *Republic*?

3. Consider Boethius' treatment of necessity, causes, knowledge and foreknowledge, and the distinction he makes between *ratio* and *intellectus*. How do these compare with Aristotle's treatment of the same subjects in his *Metaphysics*? Is his approach to these the same as or different from Plato's?
4. Boethius employs a method called prosimeter, his presenting the dialogue in alternating forms of prose and poetry. How does this represent a change from Plato and his dialogues and why do you suppose Boethius used this method?
5. If God exists eternally, he is outside of time? How can a being exist outside of time?
6. If God is omniscient and perfect, he knows everything, including all future events, and cannot err. Therefore, everything he knows that will happen must happen (otherwise God's mind would be in error). But if everything must happen, are not our lives predestined? How, then, can one reconcile God's omniscience with human freedom? How does Boethius' philosophy of God help us solve this problem?
7. For Boethius, the ideal human person would be a Christian Socrates? Why?



Study Questions

1. In defense of himself in his grief, Boethius presents himself as practicing virtue for its own sake, not for recognition or for motives of wanting to be admired (I, 4). What is the irony here?
2. When Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that his exile is of his own making (I, 5), what exile is she speaking of?
3. In response to Boethius' denial that material wealth had ever had any attraction for him, Lady Philosophy points to the temptations of fame and glory. What argument does she use to demonstrate the foolishness of the desire for fame and glory (II, 7)?
4. In Book III, 11, Philosophy speaks of the urge for unity in all creation as part of their instinct for survival. What does she say about the unity of the Good?
5. Indirectly, Philosophy's argument against making temporal things the object of man's happiness is an argument against any form of pantheism or dualism. How?
6. The end of the verse that closes Book III refers to the loss of Eurydice when Orpheus looks back as they are leaving Hades? What do you think is the point of this reference?
7. In discussing the effects of punishment on the wicked (4: 4), Lady Philosophy echoes an argument Socrates makes in the *Gorgias*. What is that argument?
8. In Book IV, Boethius says his greatest sadness is caused by this thought: "since there is a good governor of all things, how can there be evil and how can it go unpunished?" He asks Philosophy, if God exists and He is good, how can He allow evil to exist and go unpunished? Philosophy replies, "you will discover, if you look closely, that the contrary is true: that the good are always powerful and evil weak and futile, that vice is always punished and virtue rewarded, and that the good prosper and evil suffer misfortune." What is her argument?
9. Philosophy's argument that the ultimate Good is complete and self-sufficient has as its corollary the argument that evil is a privation, a lack of good. She says, following the above argument, that evil men share less or participate less in their own existence. They

- have less *existence*, are present less in *being* than men who are good. What is her argument (IV, 2)?
10. What conclusions and deductions can we make about the Supreme Good based on the arguments of Book IV?
 11. One of the most important arguments of Book IV has to do with the difference between Providence and Fate or Destiny. What is the difference between these two perspectives or the actions they make clear, according to Philosophy?
 12. From the arguments of Book IV, Philosophy concludes, nothing is left to chance, and what appears as evil is often misperceived. We don't always recognize evil in men who seem good--those we think we trust--and too often we take what is apparently harmful as evil without seeing the good God is bringing out of it. The difficulty, then, is one of sight, the way we see or rather don't see. Philosophy has now come to the highest plateau of her work. Nearly all of the questions gathering up to Book V are resolved around the question of sight, God's and ours: how the mind knows and what it knows. What are the four levels of knowing peculiar to man and how does the difference between *ratio* and *intellectus* help explain the difference between Providence and Fate, freewill and God's foresight?
 13. Boethius focuses on the consolation of philosophy that is, of "right reason" or reason used rightly. What do Boethius' arguments demonstrate about the nature or use of reason, quite apart from faith, that are "consoling"?
 14. What dimension of consolation would Christianity add to Boethius' use of "right reason"?



Questions on Language and Form

1. Boethius used a prosimetric form in writing the *Consolation* (alternating prose with poetry). Why do you suppose he used this form when the dialogue was so consciously modeled on Plato's own dialogues and when Plato had himself given his strictures against poetry? One cannot imagine Plato approving of prosimeter. How does the "pleasure" from the poetry affect the way we feel about the dramatic situation, Boethius' plight and his possible execution, and the rigor of Lady Philosophy's arguments?
2. In the opening scene of Book I, there is a dramatic confrontation between Lady Philosophy and the poetic muses whom she rebukes and sends away. Her rebuke echoes Plato's condemnation of poetry in the *Republic*. How do you explain not only the continuing presence of poetry in the *Consolation of Philosophy* but Lady Philosophy's use of it herself? How is Boethius' attitude towards poetry and the body different from Plato's?
3. At the end of Book III, Chapter 9, Lady Philosophy sings a hymn to the Father of all things. What is the literary function of her hymn?

Reflection Question

What is, finally, the consolation of philosophy?