

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY BOETHIUS



EDITED BY DOUGLAS C. LANGSTON

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

The Consolation of Philosophy is one of the most influential texts to come out of the late Middle Ages; it occupies a central place in the history of Western thought. Its author, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. 476–526 C.E.), was a Roman philosopher, scholar, and statesman who wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while in prison awaiting his execution on dubious political charges. The text of this Norton Critical Edition is based on the translation by Richard H. Green. It is accompanied by the editor's preface and introduction, the translator's preface, and explanatory annotations.

"Contexts" reprints selections from the texts that Boethius drew upon for his own work. These include excerpts from two of Plato's *Dialogues* (*Gorgias* and *Timaeus*), from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and from Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*.

"Criticism" collects five seminal essays by major scholars of Boethius. Henry Chadwick presents a general introduction to Boethius's life and works. Nelson Pike offers a clear and insightful interpretation of what Boethius means by writing that God is eternal. The final three essays—by William Bark, Edmund Reiss, and John Marenbon—all depart from traditional readings of *The Consolation of Philosophy* in significant ways and are sure to stimulate classroom discussion.

A Chronology of Boethius's life and works, and a Chronology of Boethius's philosophy are also included.

ABOUT THE SERIES: Each Norton Critical Edition includes the authoritative text, contextual and supplementary materials—translations, commentary, and annotations—from contemporary scholars, as well as a bibliography and, in many cases, a chronology of the author's life and work.

COVER ILLUSTRATION: Ms Hunter 374 f.4r, Boethius with Students in Prison, from *De Consolatione Philosophiae cum Commento*, 1385 (vellum), by Italian School (14th century). © Glasgow University Library, Scotland / The Bridgeman Art Library.

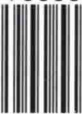
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Boethius
THE CONSOLATION
OF PHILOSOPHY



AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Edited by
DOUGLAS C. LANGSTON

NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA



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Preface

I have spent most of my scholarly career working on the late Middle Ages, especially the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. While I have taught Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* (mainly Book 5) in my survey course on the philosophy and religious thought of the Middle Ages, I had never really focused much scholarly energy on it. The opportunity to produce this edition of the work for Norton has given me a chance to study the work intensely and read wide-ranging scholarship on it. I have been struck by both the unity of Boethius's work and the striking ambiguities in it. I have tried to capture my double reaction in my introduction to the text as well as in the secondary sources I have chosen for the volume.

My thanks go out to Jeff Stout, who originally suggested me as an editor for this volume. Carol Bemis of Norton has acted as the general editor for the project, and her assistant, Rivka Genesen, has been the specific liaison for it. I particularly wish to thank John Marenbon for his generous contribution to this volume as well as his outstanding scholarship on Boethius in general. I also want to thank James Stock at Wipf and Stock Publishers for his generosity in allowing the reprinting of chapter one from Nelson Pike's *God and Timelessness*. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the material support New College of Florida has given me in completing this project.

Introduction

Boethius (Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius) was born around 476 C.E. into the noble Roman family Anicii. At the death of his father during his childhood, he was adopted by Symmachus, whose own family was even more esteemed than the Anicii. With this background, it is no surprise that Boethius was afforded an excellent education in Greek and Roman literature and philosophy. At a time when knowledge of Greek was becoming rarer in the Western Roman Empire, Boethius set himself the task of translating the works of both Plato and Aristotle into Latin. He did, in fact, translate Aristotle's logical works but none of Plato's *Dialogues*. While he may never have finished the ambitious task of translating the works of both men, his decision to enter into public service certainly impeded his translation task. His service as Consul in 510 allowed him considerable leisure to continue his studies in Rome since the post had become more or less ceremonial. In 522, during the consulship of his two sons, he became the "Master of Offices" for Theoderic the Ostrogoth and moved to the administrative capital of the Western Roman Empire in Ravenna.

Since 395, there had been two Roman Emperors administering the Roman Empire: one in the West and one in the East. While the Eastern Emperor enjoyed considerable power, the Western Emperor had to rely increasingly on paid barbarian armies to support his reign. In 476, Romulus Augustulus, a Roman, was deposed by the barbarian general Odoacer. While Odoacer became the Western Emperor, the situation was extremely complex. Odoacer controlled and administered the Western Empire and was regarded as king by the dominant barbarian armies. But the Roman citizens of the Western Empire saw themselves as citizens of the Roman Empire and, in principle, subject to the Roman Eastern Emperor. Obviously, various tensions arose between the administering court of Odoacer and the Roman citizenry. The Roman Senate continued to exercise what it saw as its prerogatives, even though it had little actual power. These tensions persisted after Odoacer was overthrown by Theoderic the Ostrogoth. Moreover, since Roman Christians were Catholic, there was religious tension with the Arian Ostrogoths. It was the job of the Master of Offices to coordinate between the Ostrogothic emperor and the other officials at

the court and to mediate between the Roman citizenry and Senate and the Ostrogothic administration. The position was fraught with difficulties and Boethius was imprisoned and accused of various offenses. Ironically, his imprisonment saved him from the demands of his office and gave him time to compose his most famous work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. His execution around 526, as well as the subsequent execution of Symmachus, was perceived as a low point in Theoderic's reign, which came to an end in 532 when the Eastern emperor, Justin, fulfilled Theoderic's fears by trying to reconquer the Western Empire in what has been called the Gothic Wars.

Intellectually, Boethius draws much of his thought from classical sources. *The Consolation of Philosophy* contains many references to the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other classical writers. As we shall see, the work is a major source for medieval references to various Greek and Roman legends and myths. Although Boethius is a product of classical thought, he is, like Augustine, regarded as a medieval thinker since his influence on the period is so profound.

Boethius wrote works on arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music—which he termed the “quadrivium” since they are four mathematical paths to objects of intelligence—as well as translations and commentaries on various logical works by Aristotle, Cicero, and Porphyry. While only the works on arithmetic and music (incomplete) survive from his quadrivium studies, his logical works were highly valued in the Middle Ages and provided much of what was known of Aristotelian logic in Europe until the twelfth century. Boethius also wrote very influential works on logic and rhetorical reasoning. He was particularly influenced by Cicero's work, *Topics*, and his own work seemed to be aimed at giving practical advice about reasoning that could benefit anyone interested in argument—whether philosopher or lawyer.

In part as a response to contemporary disputes about theological issues, Boethius composed five treatises on a variety of theological issues: the nature of the trinity, the hypostatic union, competing notions of what a nature is, the nature of evil, and the content of Christian doctrine. As he did in his more philosophical works, Boethius combined the insights of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought with the logical method and distinctions of Aristotle. Using terminology from Aristotle's *Categories* and syllogistic logic, Boethius in one of the treatises defends the orthodox Chalcedonian definition of Christ as one person with two natures against the heresies of Nestorius and Eutyches. While some have questioned the unity of these treatises and their philosophical (in contrast to theological) nature, they are indicative of the line of reasoning Boethius follows in *The Consolation of Philosophy*: pursuing basic Christian doctrines by examining closely related philosophical doctrines that capture the Christian point of view while moving it beyond a purely Christian perspective.

The five books of *The Consolation of Philosophy* can be divided into three closely related parts: Books 1–3; Book 4; Book 5. The main topics of the first part (Books 1–3) are the nature of goods and

what the ultimate good is. The second part (Book 4) moves from the identification of the ultimate good as God, established in the first part, to ask about the role of evil as well as divine planning in the world. The third part (Book 5) builds on the views about Providence and Fate in the second part to address the issue of the relationship between God's knowledge and human freedom. The discussion of the third part introduces notions not seen before but is rooted deeply in the answers to Boethius's complaints in the first part and the view of God's Providence presented in the second part. Thus the work is a carefully crafted whole that stresses different issues in its different parts. If one isolates Boethius's discussion of God's knowledge and his postulation of God's timelessness from the rest of the text (as many contemporary thinkers do), one does a disservice to Boethius and runs the risk of misunderstanding his views.

Part One (Books 1–3)

The first part of the text begins with a poem of lament spoken by Boethius himself. He is miserable for reasons he will soon elaborate. His sole comfort seems to be the Muse of Poetry and it is fitting that he initially expresses himself in poetry, for he thinks it provides comfort. (It is important to note, however, that this is one of the few times Boethius himself speaks poetically in the text. For the most part, it is Lady Philosophy who speaks in poetry and Boethius who speaks in prose.)

Lady Philosophy suddenly appears to Boethius. Her appearance is both fantastical and metaphorical. She is old and young, bright and dark, of ordinary height and yet her head touches the heavens. Her garments are torn and neglected and the Greek letter Θ appears at the top of her robe and the Greek letter Π appears at the bottom. This is an unusual appearance, to say the least, but Boethius is trying to communicate several things in Lady Philosophy's appearance. In the first place, he is acknowledging that there are various philosophical schools with competing doctrines. So, philosophy will have various forms. Yet, the torn garments indicate an abuse of philosophy, and Boethius wants to maintain that many of these schools of philosophy are really misuses of philosophy. As we shall see, in the *The Consolation of Philosophy* itself, Boethius regards a Platonic-Aristotelian line of thinking as true philosophy and, while drawing from other schools of philosophy, he sees such schools as Stoicism and Epicureanism as misguided philosophy.

Almost immediately, Lady Philosophy dismisses the Muses of Poetry. This is a symbolic move on her part because the dismissal signifies the falsity of the comfort poetry offers to Boethius and this first part of the text is concerned with separating false, earthly goods from true, ultimate goods. As it turns out, only when Boethius is able to see the difference between temporary goods and permanent goods can he be truly comforted. Lady Philosophy's elaborate proof of this to Boethius combines philosophical reasoning from Plato and Aristotle with basic Christian doctrine.

Boethius needs comfort because he has lost what he cherishes: his office, his wealth, his honor, his freedom. And he has lost these not for any wrongdoing on his part. On the contrary, we learn that he had been punished for doing his job well. He has discharged his duties fairly and compassionately; but in doing so he has run afoul of evil men who have falsely accused him of magic and conspiring to undermine the court of Theoderic. Of course, he is not the first honest man to be falsely accused. In his conversations with Lady Philosophy in this first part, he provides various examples of upright men who have been persecuted unfairly by various Roman emperors. He is but the latest example of unjust persecution. Yet, this does not give him comfort, for seeing that injustice has happened to other just men does not explain why there is injustice at all, why just men suffer the loss of their possessions, honors, and lives. And Lady Philosophy understands this. To answer Boethius's complaints of unfairness, she asks the question: what is truly worthwhile?

After listening to Boethius's recounting of his unjust treatment in Book 1 and emphasizing in Book 2 that Fortune (the events that happen to one in the world) constantly changes, Lady Philosophy in Book 3, Prose 2 looks at what goods human beings pursue: riches, honor, power, fame, and pleasure. Reflecting arguments from Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*, and the first book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Lady Philosophy argues that none of these goods is truly good. Riches do not eliminate the needs of hunger and thirst. On the contrary, they create the avarice to have even more riches and never provide satisfaction. Honor seems to cover over weakness and wickedness rather than cure them. Moreover, it deteriorates over time and can never provide blessedness. Power frightens those who have it and traps them into trying to preserve it or expand it. It cannot rid a person of anxieties and, in fact, increases them. Fame is often given by the masses to those who are completely unworthy. It does not improve the person but leaves the person unchanged. Bodily pleasures only end in misery since appetites can never be fulfilled. At the root of these so-called goods is the fact that they are pursued not for themselves but for what they might bring: happiness. They are instrumental goods that are sought to the extent that they bring the highest good. This highest good, which is happiness, must be perfect. As perfect it must be self-sufficient and one. Moreover, all the imperfect goods must be good to the extent that they participate in the perfect good. Given all of these characteristics, it is clear that the highest good can only be God since only God is a perfect, self-sufficient unity that is the cause of all goodness. Happiness must then be connected with God: it is participating in God's divinity. To be with God is the good that human beings strive for as the highest good attainable for them. All other goods must be judged in relation to how they lead to this greatest good. Losing imperfect goods is not really a loss so long as one is able to attain the highest good. To mourn over the loss of imperfect goods is to lose sight of one's real goal.

So at the end of the first part of *The Consolation of Philosophy* Lady Philosophy has answered Boethius's laments by philosophical reasoning and shown him that what he is lamenting is not worth lamenting. On the contrary, he needs to view his life in relation to the pursuit of the highest good and take comfort in his progress towards it even if he has lost imperfect, temporal goods. Boethius seems satisfied with the reasoning she provides. But he does wonder if there is the divine order Lady Philosophy points to. Would there be the evil we see if God is directing everything toward the good? Would there be the seeming misfortunes if God is directing all? The existence of a final happiness answers his laments, but aren't there reasons to question whether there is the order leading to a final happiness?

Part Two (Book 4)

In the second part of the work, consisting of Book 4, Boethius addresses the doubts he has raised: the problem of evil and the seeming disorder of the world. As he presents it at the beginning of Book 4, the problem of evil is the puzzle why, if God is all-knowing and all-powerful and desires only good, there is evil and evil goes unpunished. His answer, although somewhat difficult to trace in the text, is fairly simple. Evil never goes unpunished. Either the evildoer harms himself by his pursuit of evil and is punished or, if the evildoer avoids punishment in this life, he is punished by God in the next. In explaining her answer, Lady Philosophy shows how the evil persons are actually weak because they desire the good but their actions do not lead them to what is truly good. Since we consider a person who is able to get what he wants as stronger than a person who does not get what he wants, the evildoer is weaker than the good person. If the evildoer is not punished in this life, the evildoer is not corrected in his path away from the ultimate good. When the next life comes, the unpunished evildoer finds himself cut off from the ultimate good and suffers. So the issue of evil not being punished is not a problem since evil is always punished and good is always rewarded.

But why should there be evil at all? Boethius's answer is a fairly traditional one (it can be found in the Book of Job, for example). Since human beings do not comprehend the ways of God, we do not know the purposes that evil serves. Sometimes evil strengthens the good person. The supposed success of evildoers reinforces for the good the lesson that temporal goods are not the ultimate good. Human beings can only accept the fact that since there is a good God the plan God has for everything is good and so for every case of evil there must be a reason God has that leads to the eventual rewarding of the good and the punishing of the evil.

In elaborating on this last point, Lady Philosophy draws a distinction between Providence and Fate. Providence is the plan for everything that God has in his mind. Fate is the execution of God's plan in time. It is quite clear that God's Providence brings about Fate since Fate is

nothing but God's plan in time. But since God is good, God's plan is good. It then follows that Fate must also be good. That is to say, since the events in the world are nothing but the execution of God's plan, which is good, the order of events in time must be good and lead to the reward of the good and the punishment of the evil. Thus, at the end of Book 4, Lady Philosophy has reaffirmed for Boethius the answer to his laments that she provided in the first part of the text (Books 1–3). Yet, the reaffirmation has opened up the question of how human beings operate in an order that an all-knowing God has set up. The final part of *The Consolation of Philosophy* aims to discuss this issue.

Part Three (Book 5)

Book 5 of *The Consolation of Philosophy* presents one of the most influential discussions of the relationship between God's knowledge and human freedom in medieval thought. Boethius seems to dissolve the problem of determination through the relationship by stressing that God is eternal and from eternity sees all that occurs as if it were present. Since knowledge of an activity when it occurs is clearly non-deterministic, God's knowledge in eternity has no deterministic implications for human activity.

It is important, however, to contextualize Boethius's discussion in Book 5. At the end of Book 4, in Prose 6, Boethius distinguishes between Providence and Fate:

The generation of all things, and the whole course of mutable natures and of whatever is in any way subject to change, take their causes, order, and forms from the unchanging mind of God. This divine mind established the manifold rules by which all things are governed while it remained in the secure castle of its own simplicity. When this government is regarded as belonging to the purity of the divine mind, it is called Providence; but when it is considered with reference to the things which it moves and governs, it has from very early times been called Fate. It is easy to see that Providence and Fate are different if we consider the power of each. Providence is the divine reason itself which belongs to the most high ruler of all things and which governs all things. Fate, however, belongs to all mutable things and is the disposition by which Providence joins all things in their own order.

Boethius clearly thinks that God's Providence brings about the order of causes in the world. As we learn at the beginning of Book 5, there is no chance in the world, if chance is understood as "an event produced by random motion and without any sequence of causes." On the contrary, as Aristotle points out in *Physics*, Book 2, chapter 4, "Whenever anything is done for one reason, but something other than what was intended happens on account of other reasons, it is called chance." There are clear causes for whatever takes place and these causes are brought about through God's Providence.

Having established that Fate operates in the world, Boethius immediately asks in Book 5, Prose 2: "But, within this series of connected causes, does our will have any freedom, or are the motions of human souls also bound by the fatal chain?" Boethius states unequivocally that there is free will. Interestingly, his main support for this affirmation is that there could not be a reasoning nature without free will, for a reasoning being must be able to distinguish between objects to be shunned and objects to be desired. Moreover, he also claims that human beings are more free to the degree that they maintain themselves in the contemplation of the divine mind and less free to the degree that they turn from this contemplation. Boethius does not here link freedom or free will with the ability to do otherwise.

When Boethius proposes to Lady Philosophy the problem of the relationship between God's knowledge and human freedom at the beginning of Book 5, Prose 3, he explicitly rejects a possible solution he has encountered:

I cannot agree with the argument by which some people believe that they can solve this problem. They say that things do not happen because Providence foresees that they will happen, but, on the contrary, that Providence foresees what is to come because it will happen, and in this way they find the necessity to be in things, not in Providence.

Boethius says that the difficulty with this argument is that it grants that what happens in the world happens of necessity, even if the necessity does not come from God's knowledge. As he states a few paragraphs later, the problem with this necessity is that it renders in vain all rewards and punishments for good and bad actions since it eliminates the "free and voluntary" actions that would warrant praise and blame. Thus it is clear that Boethius will only accept a solution to the problem of the relationship between God's knowledge and human freedom that does not render human actions necessary. But what is meant by "necessity" in Boethius's discussion?

At the beginning of Book 5, Prose 4, Lady Philosophy wonders why Boethius found the solution he discusses in Prose III inadequate. She suggests that the reason Boethius thinks that future things are necessary is because he thinks they are rendered necessary by divine foreknowledge:

First, let me ask why you regard as inconclusive the reasoning of those who think that foreknowledge is no hindrance to free will because it is not the cause of the necessity of future things. For do you have any argument for the necessity of future events other than the principle that things which are known beforehand must happen? If, as you have just now conceded, foreknowledge does not impose necessity on future events, why must the voluntary outcome of things be bound to predetermined results?

Lady Philosophy then suggests a thought experiment. Assume that there is no foreknowledge. Any thought Boethius has that events resulting

from free will are necessary would be eliminated. Assume further that foreknowledge exists but imposes no necessity on things. Then freedom of will continues to exist and is not infringed by necessity.

What emerges from this exchange between Boethius and Lady Philosophy is that Lady Philosophy believes Boethius should not think that future human actions are necessary in a sense that infringes upon human freedom. To solidify her point, Lady Philosophy suggests to Boethius that he think of God's foreknowledge as a sign of future events. This is important, for a sign merely indicates what is the case and does not bring it about. So if there is necessity associated with divine foreknowledge about future human acts, it must be a reflection of the necessity found in the events themselves. But are the human acts necessary? Lady Philosophy suggests that we think about the status of those things we know that are immediately in front of us. She says that we are certain of them (since we see them immediately) but our certitude does not render them necessary since our certitude does not compel them. So Lady Philosophy has linked the necessity that infringes on human freedom with compulsion and she stresses that knowledge that is contemporaneous with what is known does not compel what is known.

Obviously, this line of reasoning by Lady Philosophy is important for the dissolution of the problem of God's foreknowledge that Boethius offers. Since God's knowledge in the eternal now is as if present to what is known, God's knowledge does not compel what is known and render it necessary in a way inconsistent with human freedom. Indeed, Lady Philosophy stresses at the end of Book 5, Prose 4 and in Proses 5 and 6 that the mode of being of an agent determines its mode of knowing. Temporal beings know objects sequentially in time. An eternal being, who completely possesses an endless life enjoyed as one simultaneous whole, knows all of time—past, present, and future—as if it were taking place in the present. Such present knowledge does not necessitate what is known but leaves its nature unaffected:

Therefore, this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and properties of things; it simply sees things present before it as they will later turn out to be in what we regard as the future. His judgment is not confused; with a single intuition of his mind He knows all things that are to come, whether necessarily or not. Just as, when you happen to see simultaneously a man walking on the street and the sun shining in the sky, even though you see both at once, you can distinguish between them and realize that one action is voluntary, the other necessary; so the divine mind, looking down on all things, does not disturb the nature of the things which are present before it but are future with respect to time.

This last quotation is particularly interesting. Boethius draws a contrast between necessary natural agents (for example, the sun) and voluntary agents (human beings and other rational agents) to explain how God's knowledge does not conflict with human freedom. As we

saw in Book 5, Prose 2, Boethius assumes that all rational agents are free agents. These agents are not subject to a necessity that infringes on their freedom. In the present passage, Boethius links the relevant freedom from necessitation to being a voluntary agent. Once again he does not explicitly link freedom with an ability to do otherwise.

At the end of Book 5, Prose 6, Boethius returns to the solution to the problem of God's knowledge that he had rejected in Book 5, Prose 3:

God has this present comprehension and immediate vision of all things not from the outcome of future events, but from the simplicity of his own nature. In this way, the problem you raised a moment ago is settled. You observed that it would be unworthy of God if our future acts were said to be the cause of divine knowledge.

Lady Philosophy's reply is that "Now you see that this power of divine knowledge, comprehending all things as present before it, itself constitutes the measure of all things and is in no way dependent on things that happen later." This response suggests both that God's knowledge is unchanging (since it is eternal) as well as that God's knowledge determines each thing's mode of existence. This echoes Boethius's comments in Book 4, Prose 6, that Providence creates Fate in the world. God's providence (his providing knowledge) creates the system of causes (including the activities of rational agents in the world) that is inconsistent with chance defined as the lack of causes. Such a view is difficult to reconcile with a view of freedom that equates freedom with an agent's ability to act otherwise than he does. It is far easier to reconcile with a view that links freedom of rational agents with their being voluntary agents. In short, Boethius's dissolution of the problem of God's knowledge seems closely connected with seeing freedom in terms of voluntary action.

The Message of the Text

Many have puzzled over the philosophical nature of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. It does not seem particularly Christian since it never mentions Christ. But the work is profoundly Christian, although it uses philosophy and Classical literature to deliver its Christian message. Although Boethius cites various Greek and Roman legends and uses examples of non-Christians to lament the injustices that Roman emperors have caused to just men, Boethius strongly affirms in Book 3, Poem 6 that the Christian God is the source of all things and must be seen as the ultimate author behind all the non-Christian stories:

The whole race of men on this earth springs from one stock. There is one Father of all things; One alone provides for all. He gave Phoebus his rays, the moon its horns. To the earth He gave men, to the sky the stars. He clothed with bodies the souls He brought from heaven.