

Boethius: Life and Works

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Anicius Severinus Manlius Boethius was born into the Roman aristocracy c. 475–7 C.E.— about the same time as the last Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed (August 476). Boethius lived most of his life under the rule of Theoderic, an Ostrogoth educated at Constantinople, who was happy to let the old families keep up their traditions in Rome, while he wielded power in Ravenna. Boethius's privileged social position ensured that he was taught Greek thoroughly and, though it is unlikely that he travelled to Athens or Alexandria, the sites of the two remaining (Platonic) philosophical schools, he was certainly acquainted with a good deal of the work which had been going on there. He was able to spend most of his life in learned leisure, pursuing his vast project of translating and commenting philosophical texts. The Roman aristocracy was, by his day, thoroughly Christianized, and Boethius also became involved in some of the ecclesiastical disputes of his time, centring mainly around a schism between the Latin and the Greek Churches which was resolved shortly before his death.

Boethius's final years are well known to anyone who has read his most popular work, the *Consolation of Philosophy*. He agreed to become Theoderic's 'Master of Offices', one of the most senior officials, but he quickly fell out with many others at court, probably because he attacked their corruption. Accused of treason and of engaging in magic, he was imprisoned and (probably in 526) executed, but not before he had the chance to write his literary masterpiece.

The *Consolation of Philosophy*, a prosimetrum (a prose work with verse interludes) which recounts, in polished literary language, an imagined dialogue between the prisoner Boethius and a lady who personifies Philosophy, contrasts with the rest of Boethius's *oeuvre*. Besides writing text-books on arithmetic and geometry, closely based on Greek models, Boethius devoted himself to translating Aristotle's logic and commenting on it; he produced a commentary on the *Categories* and two each on *On Interpretation* and on the *Isagoge* ('Introduction') by Porphyry, which had become a standard part of the logical curriculum. He also composed logical text-books on division, categorical syllogisms, and on two branches of logic which will require further explanation (see below, [Section 3](#)): hypothetical syllogisms and topical reasoning (along with a commentary on Cicero's *Topics*). In three of his four *Theological Treatises* (often known as the *Opuscula sacra*), I, II and V, Boethius uses his logical equipment to tackle problems of Christian doctrine; IV, however, is a straightforward statement of Christian doctrine, a sort of confession of faith; whilst III is a brief, not specifically Christian philosophical treatise...

Divine Prescience, Contingency and Eternity

In V.3, however, the character Boethius puts forward an argument, based on God's foreknowledge of future events, which threatens to show that even mental acts of willing are necessary and so (as Boethius the author believed) unfree. He argues that:

[7] If God foresees all things and cannot be mistaken in any way, what providence has foreseen will be, will necessarily happen. [8] So, if God foreknows from eternity not just what humans will do but also their plans and volitions, there will be no freedom of choice, for there will not be able to be any deed, or any sort of volition that infallible divine providence has not foreseen. For if volitions are capable of turning out differently from how they have been foreseen, then there will not be firm foreknowledge of the future, but rather uncertain opinion, and I judge it wicked to believe that about God.

Since it is accepted that God is omniscient, and that this implies that he *knows* what every future event—including mental events such as volitions—will be, (7) and (8) each seem to rule out any sort of freedom of the will requisite for attributing moral responsibility: a consequence the disastrous implications of which Boethius the character vividly describes.

Philosophy's answer to this difficulty is the most philosophically intricate and interesting section of the *Consolation*. It is one part of Boethius's work (perhaps the only one) which remains of interest in contemporary philosophy (of religion) and, for that reason, it has often been interpreted according to a framework provided by more recent thinking about the problem of divine prescience (see, for example, Leftow 1991, Zagzebski 1991). The following is, rather, an attempt to present the discussion as it actually proceeds in the *Consolation*.

The first point which needs to be settled is what, precisely, is the problem which Boethius the character proposes? One way of reading this discussion is that the argument here is in fact fallacious. According to this interpretation, the reasoning behind (7) seems to be of the following form:

9. God knows every event, including all future ones.
10. When someone *knows* that an event will happen, then the event will happen.
11. (10) is true as a matter of necessity, because it is impossible to know that which is not the case.
12. If someone knows an event will happen, it will happen necessarily. (10, 11)
13. Every event, including future ones, happens necessarily. (9, 12)

The pattern behind (8) will be similar, but in reverse: from a negation of (13), the negation of (9) will be seen to follow. But, as it is easy to observe, (9–13) is a fallacious argument: (10) and (11) imply, not (12), but

14. Necessarily, if someone knows an event will happen, it will happen.

The fallacy in question concerns the scope of the necessity operator. Boethius, the character, has mistakenly inferred the (narrow-scope) necessity of the consequent ('the event will happen'), when he is entitled only to infer the (wide-scope) necessity of the whole conditional ('if someone knows an event will happen, it will happen'). Boethius the character is clearly taken in by this fallacious argument, and there is no good reason to think that Boethius the author ever became aware of the fallacy (despite a passage later on which some modern commentators have interpreted in this sense). None the less, the discussion which follows does not, as the danger seems to be, address itself to a non-problem. Intuitively, Boethius sees that the threat which divine prescience poses to the contingency of future events arises not just from the claim that God's beliefs about the future constitute *knowledge*, but also from the fact that they are beliefs about the *future*. There is a real problem here, because if God knows now what I shall do tomorrow, then it seems that either what I shall do is already determined, or else that I shall have the power tomorrow to convert God's knowledge today into a false belief. Although his logical formulation does not capture this problem, the solution Boethius gives to Philosophy is clearly designed to tackle it.

It is also possible to read the way that the question is posed by Boethius the character as not involving a fallacy (Marenbon 2013). Boethius the character is, on this reading, putting forward a sort of transcendental argument. Boethius considers that when a knower knows a future event, as opposed to merely having opinion about it, the knower is judging that the event is fixed, since if it were an event that could be otherwise, it could be the object of opinion but not knowledge. If future events could be otherwise, then God, in knowing them, would in fact be holding a false belief, since he would be judging that they could not be otherwise. But God has no false beliefs, and so the world must be such that his beliefs about future events are not false, and so all future events must be fixed.

Philosophy identifies (V.4) the character Boethius's central difficulty as lying in the apparent incompatibility between an event's not having a necessary outcome and yet its being foreknown. To foresee something 'as if it were certain' when it is uncertain how it will turn out is 'foreign to the integrity of knowledge', since it involves 'judging a thing as being other than it is.' Philosophy counters these doubts with the principle that 'everything that is known is grasped, not according to its own power, but rather according to the capacity of those who know it.' Her view, as she develops it (in V.5 and V.6), is based on what might be called the Principle of Modes of Cognition: the idea that knowledge is always relativized to different levels of knowers, who have different sorts of objects of knowledge. This relativization is, however, limited. The same item is not true for one knower and false for another, but the way in which a given item is known differs according to the powers of the knower. Philosophy develops this scheme in relation to the different levels of the soul (intelligence, reason, imagination and the senses) and their different objects (pure Form, abstract universals, images, particular bodily things).

Philosophy does not at this point follow the most obvious path that the Modes of Cognition Principle would suggest and declare that it just depends on the knower whether something is known as certain or not. Perhaps she accepted that there is something intrinsically uncertain about future contingents, whoever it is that knows them. Rather, she reaches her conclusion

through a more complex twist of the argument. Philosophy argues that the temporal relation of the think known to the knower—whether it is known as a past, present or future event—depends on the nature and cognitive power of the knower. God’s way of being and knowing, she argues, is eternal, and divine eternity, she says, is not the same as just lacking a beginning and end, but it is rather (V.6) ‘the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of unbounded life.’

A being who is eternal in this way, Philosophy argues, knows all things—past, present and future—in the same way as we, who live in time and not eternity, know what is present. Since, therefore, contingent events that are future to us are present in relation to God, there is no reason why God should not know them as certain. But, if they can be known as certain, are they really contingent? The last part of Philosophy’s argument deals with this problem by accepting that, as known by God in his eternal present, events are not contingent, but necessary in a special way that does not involve any constraint or limitation of freedom. There are, she explains, two sorts of necessity: simple and conditional. Simple necessities are what would now be called physical or nomic necessities: that the sun rises, or that a man will sometime die. By contrast, it is conditionally necessary that, for instance, I am walking, *when* I am walking (or when someone sees that I am walking); but from this conditional necessity it does not follow that it is simply necessary that I am walking. Although a number of modern commentators interpret this passage as Philosophy’s way of noticing the scope-distinction fallacy in the original way Boethius the character presents the problem, she really seems to be making a rather different point. On an Aristotelian understanding of modality, which Boethius the author accepted, the present is necessary: ‘what is, necessarily is, when it is’ (*On Interpretation* 19a23). Philosophy is arguing that, since God knows all things as if they were present, future events are necessary, in relation to their being known by God, in just the way that anything which is presently the case is necessary. And this necessity of the present is an unconstraining necessity—those who accepted Aristotelian modalities did not think that because, when I am sitting, I am sitting necessarily, my freedom to stand has been at all curtailed. Indeed, as Philosophy stresses, in themselves the future events remain completely free. Philosophy is thus able to explain how, as known by God, future contingent events have the certainty which make them proper objects of knowledge, rather than opinion, whilst nevertheless retaining their indeterminacy.

It is important to add, however, that most contemporary interpreters do not read the argument of V.3–6 in quite this way. (For a balanced assessment of various interpretations, including the one offered here, see Sharples 2009). They hold that Philosophy is arguing that God is atemporal, so eliminating the problems about determinism, which arise when God’s knowing future contingents is seen as an event in the past, and therefore, fixed.

However it is interpreted, Philosophy’s argument takes a surprising turn at the very end of the book. When he gave his initial statement of the problem, Boethius the character had distinguished the problem at issue—that of divine prescience—from that of divine predetermination. He had explained (V.3) that, for the purposes of their discussion, he was assuming that God does not cause the events he foreknows: he knows them because they happen, rather than their happening because he foreknows them. He added, though, in passing, that he did not really accept this view: it is ‘back to front’ to think that ‘the outcome

of things in time should be the cause of eternal prescience.’ Philosophy now returns to this point, conceding that God’s act of knowing ‘sets the measure for all things and owes nothing to things which follow on from it.’ Although Philosophy considers that she has successfully resolved the character Boethius’s problems, the reader is left asking whether this final concession, which makes God the determiner of all events, does not ruin the elaborate defence of the contingency of human volitions she has just been mounting.

Interpreting the Consolation

One, perfectly plausible, way of reading the *Consolation* is to take it, as most philosophical works are taken, at face value. On this reading, Philosophy is recognized as a clearly authoritative figure, whose teaching should not be doubted and whose success in consoling the character Boethius must be assumed to be complete. The apparent changes of direction noted in [Section 5](#) will be taken either as stages in Boethius’s re-education or as unintended effects of the author’s wish to make this work into a compendium of a syncretistic philosophical system, and Philosophy’s own view that she has resolved the problem of prescience will be accepted as that of Boethius the author.

Yet there are a number of reasons which suggest that Boethius’s intention as an author was more complex. First, it would have been hard for his intended audience of educated Christians to ignore the fact that in this dialogue a Christian, Boethius, is being instructed by a figure who clearly represents the tradition of pagan Philosophy, and who proposes some positions (on the World Soul in III m.9, and on the sempiternity of the world in V.6) which most Christians would have found dubious. Boethius the character says nothing which is explicitly Christian, but when in III.12 Philosophy says, echoing the words of Wisdom viii, 1 that ‘it is the highest good that rules all things strongly and disposes them sweetly’, he expresses his delight not just in what she has said but much more ‘in those very words’ that she uses—a broad hint to the reader that he remembers his Christian identity even in the midst of his philosophical instruction.

Second, the genre Boethius chose for the *Consolation*, that of the prosimetrum or Menippean satire, was associated with works which ridicule the pretensions of authoritative claims to wisdom. Elements of satire on the claims of learning are present even in the vast, encyclopaedic *Marriage of Mercury and Philology* by the fifth-century author Martianus Capella, which Boethius clearly knew. Ancient authors thought carefully about genres, and it is hard to think that Boethius’s choice was not a hint that Philosophy’s authority is not to be taken as complete. And, third, in the light of these two considerations, the changes of direction, incoherencies and ultimate failure of the long argument about prescience, when the question is suddenly recast as one about predestination, all suggest themselves as intentional features, for which the interpreter must account.

Some recent interpreters, such as Joel Relihan (1993, 187–194; 2007), have gone so far as to suggest that the *Consolation* should be understood ironically as an account of the insufficiency of Philosophy (and philosophy) to provide consolation, by contrast with Christian faith. Such a view seems too extreme, because Boethius the author has clearly taken great pains with the philosophical arguments proposed in the text, and the main lines of

Philosophy's thinking fit well with the metaphysics glimpsed in the theological tractates and even, at moments, in the logical commentaries. It is plausible, however, to hold that Boethius wished, whilst acknowledging the value of philosophy—to which he had devoted his life, and for which he presented himself as being about to die—to point its limitations: limitations which Philosophy herself, who is keen to emphasize that she is not divine, accepts. Philosophy, he might be suggesting, provides arguments and solutions to problems which should be accepted and it teaches a way of living that should be followed, but it falls short of providing a coherent and comprehensive understanding of God and his relation to creatures. Boethius the character should be satisfied, but not completely satisfied, by Philosophy's argument. And if this is Boethius the author's position in the *Consolation*, then it fits closely with the theological method he pioneered in the *opuscula sacra*.

Boethius's Influence and Importance

The influence of each area of Boethius's philosophical writing was vast in the Middle Ages. Along with Augustine and Aristotle, he is *the* fundamental philosophical and theological author in the Latin tradition.

In logic, Boethius's translations of Aristotle and Porphyry (except for that of the *Posterior Analytics*, which was lost) remained standard throughout the Middle Ages. His commentaries—especially that on the *Categories*, the second commentary on the *Isagoge* and the second, more advanced commentary on *On Interpretation*—were the main instruments by which logicians from the ninth to the twelfth centuries came to understand the Aristotelian texts he had translated, and to grapple with their problems and the wider range of related philosophical issues raised by the late ancient tradition. Even twelfth-century philosophers as independently-minded as Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers were deeply indebted to these commentaries. The logical text-books were equally important. Before the *Prior Analytics* became generally available in the later twelfth century, students learned syllogistic from Boethius's monographs on it. The theory of topical argument, acquired especially from *On Topical Differentiae*, provided a framework for twelfth-century philosophers in propounding and analysing arguments, and from the combination of studying topical argument and the theory of hypothetical syllogisms as Boethius presented it, Abelard was led towards his rediscovery of propositional logic (cf. Martin (1987)). From the thirteenth century, onwards, however, both Boethius's commentaries and his treatises became less influential. *On Topical Differentiae*, and *On Division*, continued to be studied, but not the treatises on categorical and hypothetical syllogisms. Users of the commentaries were infrequent, but they include Thomas Aquinas.

The theological treatises were probably already known by the pupils of Alcuin at the court of Charlemagne around 800, and a tradition of glosses to the text probably goes back to the School of Auxerre in the later ninth century. The *opuscula sacra* provided a model for early medieval thinkers who wanted to use their logical training in thinking about Christian doctrine. Anselm was certainly aware of them, though he looked more closely to Augustine; Abelard's first theological work, the *Theologia Summi Boni*, despite its originality, is clearly inspired by Boethius's first treatise (on the Trinity). In the 1140s, Gilbert of Poitiers

expounded his metaphysics and his view of theology in a detailed exegesis of the *opuscula sacra*, which came to be the standard commentary, although the treatises were also commented on by other, more Platonically-minded twelfth-century scholars. Although the *opuscula sacra* were not formally a part of the theology curriculum in most later medieval universities, they continued to be studied, and Aquinas wrote commentaries on Treatises I and III.

Though the influence of these other works was great, the popularity and importance of the *Consolation* far exceeded it. The text already echoes in what must be one of the earliest pieces of genuinely medieval Latin philosophy, the little treatise ‘On True Philosophy’ with which Alcuin prefaced his *De grammatica*, and it remained a favourite through the later Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. Not until the time of Gibbon had it been reduced to an object of the historian’s condescending admiration. One measure of the extent and character of its readership is the translations, not merely into almost every medieval vernacular, but also into Greek and even Hebrew. Among the translators were two of the greatest vernacular writers of the whole epoch: Jean de Meun, who put the *Consolation* into Old French in the later thirteenth century, and Chaucer, who translated it into Middle English about a century later. As their involvement suggests, Boethius’s dialogue was a text which popularized philosophy outside the universities, and its literary features, as well as its arguments, inspired imitations and creative adaptations, from Alain of Lille’s *De planctu Naturae* (‘Nature’s Lament’) to, more distantly, Dante’s *Convivio* and even Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. Philosophers and theologians, too, used the work; it was part of the school syllabus from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, and although Aristotle’s treatises left no room for it in the university curriculum, it continued to be studied by students and teachers there. For example, Aquinas’s account of the highest good in his *Summa Theologiae* I-IIe builds on the *Consolation*, and the definition of eternity given by Philosophy in Book V became the starting-point for almost every later medieval discussion of God and time.

The *Consolation* had many medieval commentaries—mostly on the whole text, although some just examined Book III, m. 9. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the commentary written by Remigius of Auxerre was the most widely read (and often adapted). William of Conches’s commentary, written in the 1120s, became standard in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the commentary by the English Dominican, Nicholas Trivet, from the beginning of the fourteenth century, was the most popular in the late Middle Ages. One of the central problems which faced any commentator was the relation of the text to Christian teaching. Remigius and, in a subtler way, William both took Boethius, whom they knew to be a Christian, to be putting forward Christian doctrine without seeming to do so; Trivet’s approach is less syncretistic, although he finds nothing unacceptable for Christians in the *Consolation*.

The preceding paragraphs in this section might seem to indicate that there is no doubt about Boethius’s importance as a philosopher. Yet the very size of his medieval influence has led to an attitude, widespread among historians of philosophy (see especially Courcelle (1967)), which makes Boethius almost disappear as a figure in his own right. He is seen, rather, as a conduit through which Greek philosophical ideas were transmitted to the Latin tradition. Of

course, one aspect of Boethius's influence is indeed that he made available ideas and arguments deriving from Plato, Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Porphyry and Iamblichus. But he was also an individual thinker, with pronounced tastes and views, no less (if no more) original than his Greek contemporaries; and also, in the *Consolation*, one of the rare philosophers whose thought, like Plato's, cannot be neatly separated from the complex literary form in which it is expressed.