

*The
Cambridge Companion
to*
BOETHIUS



EDITED BY
JOHN MARENBN

The Cambridge Companion to Boethius

Each volume of this series of companions to major philosophers contains specially commissioned essays by an international team of scholars, together with a substantial bibliography, and will serve as a reference work for students and non-specialists. One aim of the series is to dispel the intimidation such readers often feel when faced with the work of a difficult and challenging thinker.

Boethius (c.480–c.525/6), though a Christian, worked in the tradition of the Neoplatonic schools, with their strong interest in Aristotelian logic and Platonic metaphysics. He is best known for his *Consolation of Philosophy*, which he wrote in prison while awaiting execution, and which was a favourite source for medieval philosophers and poets like Dante and Chaucer. His works also include a long series of logical translations, commentaries and monographs and some short but densely argued theological treatises, all of which were enormously influential on medieval thought. But Boethius was more than a writer who passed on important ancient ideas to the Middle Ages. The essays here, by leading specialists, which cover all the main aspects of his writing and its influence, show that he was a distinctive thinker, whose arguments repay careful analysis and who used his literary talents in conjunction with his philosophical abilities to present a complex view of the world.

New readers will find this the most convenient, accessible guide to Boethius currently available. Advanced students and specialists will find a conspectus of recent developments in the interpretation of Boethius.

JOHN MARENBON is a Senior Research Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. His publications include *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (1997, 1999) and *Boethius* (2003).

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Abbreviations of Boethius' works

C	<i>Consolation of Philosophy</i> (<i>De consolazione Philosophiae</i>)	Moreschini: Boethius (2005); *Moreschini: Boethius (2000)
CAT	Commentary on <i>Categories</i>	Migne: Boethius (1847)
D	<i>On Division</i> (<i>De divisione</i>)	Magee: Boethius (1998)
ISC	<i>Introduction to Categorical Syllogisms</i> (<i>Introductio ad syllogismos categoricos</i>)	Thörnqvist: Boethius (2008b); *Migne: Boethius (1847)
OS	Theological treatises (<i>Opuscula sacra</i>)	Moreschini: Boethius (2005); *Moreschini: Boethius (2000)
SC	<i>On the Categorical Syllogism</i> (<i>De syllogismo categorico</i>)	Thörnqvist: Boethius (2008a); *Migne: Boethius (1847)
SH	<i>On Hypothetical Syllogisms</i> (<i>De hypotheticis syllogismis</i>)	Obertello: Boethius (1969)
TC	Commentary on Cicero's <i>Topics</i>	Orelli: Cicero (1833); *Migne Boethius (1847)
TD	<i>On Topical Differentiae</i> (<i>De topicis differentiis</i>)	Nikitas: Boethius (1990) 1–92; *Migne: Boethius (1847)
1IN, 2IN	Commentaries on <i>On Interpretation</i> 1 and 2	Meiser: Boethius (1877), (1880)
1IS, 2IS	Commentaries on <i>Isagoge</i> 1 and 2	Brandt: Boethius (1906)

Abbreviations

Abbreviations of ancient authors and works follow the standard practice as found in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

AL

Aristoteles Latinus, ed. L. Minio-Paluello *et al.*, Bruges and Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, later Leiden: Brill, 1961–75.

CAG

Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca edita consilio et auctoritate Academiae Regiae Borussicae, 23 vols., Berlin, 1882–1907.

CCSL/CM

Corpus Christianorum (Series Latina)/(Continuatio Mediaevalis)

CIMAGL

Cahiers de l'Institut du moyen-âge grec et latin.

CLCAG

Corpus Latinum Commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum, Leuven 1957–.

FHS&G

W. W. Fortenbaugh, P. M. Huby, R. W. Sharples (Greek and Latin) and D. Gutas (Arabic), eds., *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for his Life, Writings, Thought and Influence*, Leiden: Brill, [1992](#).

LS

A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers

A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser., translated into English with prolegomena and explanatory notes, under the editorial supervision of P. Schaff and H. Wace, New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900.

PL

Patrologia Latina, ed. J. -P. Migne, Paris, 1844–65.

MGH (AA)

Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Auctores Antiquissimi).

SVF

H. von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–24.

Introduction: reading Boethius whole

John Marenbon

‘And who will be the readership for this *Companion*?’, asked one of my contributors. ‘Not, I imagine, the philosophers, as for the Ockham and Scotus companions,’ he went on. ‘No, it will be people interested in medieval literature. But of course they will just skip the chapters on logic and theology and move straight to the *Consolation*’, he concluded, sadly – his own chapter was one of those on logic. I take a more sanguine view and think that philosophers, or at least those interested in antiquity and the Middle Ages, will be among our readers, but the chapters they want to read will be exactly those the literature specialists skip. So it will be as if this were two books bound in the same covers, about two Boethiuses who just happen to have been the same person. But that, as I shall explain, would be a great pity. This introduction is a plea to read this *Companion*, but more important, to read Boethius, whole.¹

Boethius is not usually read whole for two main reasons.² The first, to which I shall return briefly at the end, has nothing in especial to do with Boethius, but is a pervasive feature of intellectual life today: the specialization that divides philosophers, theologians, literary scholars and historians and makes them each seek in figures from the past only what relates to their own discipline. The second, by contrast, is directly related to how Boethius is usually perceived. On the one hand, he is seen as an almost entirely unoriginal thinker: the textbooks on music and arithmetic with which he began his writing career, and the logical commentaries and monographs which occupied most of it, are considered to be little more than translations; the short theological treatises (*Opuscula sacra*) and his most famous composition, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, the philosophical dialogue he wrote while awaiting execution, are envisaged primarily in terms of the various sorts of Neoplatonic material which inform them. On the other hand, the interest and value of Boethius is found in the use medieval authors made of him. As a result, he is turned into a sort of a conduit by which ancient ideas were transmitted to the Middle Ages, a bit like a one-man equivalent of the eighth- and ninth-century translation movement that saw large parts of Greek thought made available to Arabic philosophers. Boethius himself disappears almost entirely from this view of intellectual history. Not only is he not read whole: his texts may be read, but *Boethius* is not really read at all.

The view of Boethius as a conduit is adequate for many purposes in intellectual history and the history of philosophy, but it also obscures a good deal of what is most important about this strange thinker and his effect on medieval readers. Nor is it a view that ought to be retained, since its two foundations are a questionable characterization of Boethius’ work as unoriginal and an over-narrow way of thinking about influence. Boethius does not lack originality, though he is original in a complex rather than a simple

sense – he is a markedly individual thinker, who owes many of his ideas to others; and in order to think about influence adequately, it is not enough to see how general positions and arguments were transmitted – we must ask about how each particular thinker and his or her outlook affected future generations. In a book I wrote a few years ago (Marenbon [2003a](#)), I tried to combat the conduit view of Boethius. The authors of the various chapters in this *Companion* each have their own approaches to Boethius, which may be different from, or even opposed to, mine. None the less, their work provides the material both to understand what is special about Boethius' thinking and writing, and to gauge the particularity of his influence – to continue the project I tried to begin. Let me describe briefly how, because doing so gives the opportunity for a preview of the following chapters, and it will also allow me to explain the value of reading the whole Boethius.

Boethius spent most of his life writing and thinking, but by reason of his birth and his adoptive parents he was a leader of his community, the Roman aristocracy, who, though real power lay in the hands of Theoderic and his Ostrogothic army, continued with the outward forms of Roman civility, such as the Senate and the consulship. In his late middle age, Boethius chose to enter serious politics, becoming what was in effect Theoderic's prime minister. As is well known, the decision proved literally fatal: he was quickly removed from power, imprisoned and executed. The social milieu into which Boethius was born and where he played a prominent role moulded his peculiar combination of interests, attitudes and ambitions, whilst the outcome of his disastrous venture into politics provided the stimulus and the setting for the *Consolation of Philosophy*. John Moorhead's chapter sketches out this background, and at the same time provides an introduction for non-specialists to some of the basic ideas of late ancient philosophy.

The following three chapters look at Boethius as a logician. Even his most extreme advocate could not pretend that in the majority of his logical writings he was expressing his own ideas. Boethius, like his Greek contemporary Ammonius, was working within a scholastic tradition, where a commentator's job was mainly to pass on some of the various existing views about how to interpret each passage of Aristotle and choose which he thought best. One recent scholar, James Shiel, went further, suggesting that Boethius did no more than translate an already existing selection of material into Latin. In his chapter, Sten Ebbesen looks in detail at Boethius' task as an Aristotelian commentator and how he performed it. He shows that Shiel's view is unlikely and suggests that, most probably, Boethius chose Porphyry as the main basis for his comments, but also added material from other sources. The decision to make Porphyry his main source was a very important one, which shows that Boethius had a distinctive approach to philosophy – that he was exercising an originality in deciding whose ideas to follow. By contrast with the tendency of some of the exegesis of Boethius' own time and immediately before, Porphyry tried mostly to follow an Aristotelian line in his approach to logic and the metaphysical questions linked to it, looking back especially to the Peripatetic philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias.³

Another important decision Boethius made – easy to overlook because it is so clearly

in front of our eyes – was to devote himself so thoroughly to logic. In the middle of his career, he announced that he intended to translate and provide commentaries on all the works of Plato and Aristotle that he could find.⁴ Although it is true that his plans for a lifetime's work were cut short by his entry into politics, imprisonment and execution, even before these unexpected events Boethius had in practice decided to concentrate on logic in a way that would make completion of the whole plan very unlikely: he decided to write double commentaries on the main texts, and he went on to produce textbooks and a commentary on branches of logic that Aristotle had not fully developed. The decision to follow Porphyry and so Aristotle, and the choice to spend so much time on logic, fit together. They show Boethius as someone for whom, despite his partiality for Neoplatonic metaphysics, a different way of thinking, based on Aristotle, in which metaphysical problems are closely linked to questions about argument, language and cognition had its own validity and special interest. The philosophical subtlety and breadth of this mixture of what we would now describe as philosophy of language, philosophy of mind and metaphysics is brought out in Margaret Cameron's chapter, which shows the rewards to be gained by accepting that Boethius may have found many of his ideas elsewhere (usually Porphyry), and then taking what he writes seriously as philosophy.

In the latest logical texts he wrote, Boethius had moved to areas where he could not simply exercise his distinctive choice of source and follow it. One group of them was devoted to the theory of topical argument, a branch of logic that derived from, but had much altered since, Aristotle's *Topics*. Boethius had at his disposal Cicero's untheoretical and legally-oriented treatise and material (now lost) by the fourth-century Peripatetic Themistius. He had, at the least, to compare and combine their different systems in his *On Topical Differentiae*, whilst in his long commentary on Cicero's *Topics* he had to think independently about the text he was discussing, using his knowledge both of legal history and the history of logic. Christopher Martin discusses these writings, but his chapter concentrates especially on the strangest of all Boethius' logical works, his treatise on hypothetical syllogisms. Here Boethius claims that he is, for the most part, reasoning independently of any sources, and there is no good reason to question his claim. Martin's analysis brings out some of the peculiarities of Boethius' approach and so the limits to his capacities as a logical innovator. Even so (see below) this ponderous textbook is of immense importance in the history of logic.

In his short theological treatises, Boethius was concerned to tackle problems about Christian doctrine which were troubling the Church of his day and causing division among Christians. This aspect of the *Opuscula sacra* is treated in David Bradshaw's chapter, in which developments and issues in Greek theology at the time are used to throw light on Boethius' approach. But the *Opuscula sacra* contain substantive philosophical discussion. Traditionally, scholars have concentrated on the third treatise (called *De hebdomadibus* in the Middle Ages) and especially the Neoplatonic metaphysics implied by the axioms placed at its beginning. Interesting as this aspect of the texts may be, it tends to lead to the sort of speculation about sources which dissolves Boethius' own philosophical identity.⁵ Instead, here Andrew Arlig concentrates on the

analysis of individuality which is central to the doctrinally orientated *opuscula* I, III and V. His chapter provides more evidence of the rewards of looking seriously at Boethius' arguments, showing how on this topic Boethius 'define[s] the problems that will inspire generations of philosophers' and 'gestures towards' the solutions many of them will offer.

The distinctiveness and artistry of the *Consolation* does not need special pleading. In her chapter, however, Danuta Shanzer is able to bring out with especial detail and precision the delicacy and complexity of Boethius' relationship to a long literary as well as philosophical tradition, and indicate her reservations about some of the interpretations advanced by those (myself included) who are less well versed than she in the Greek and Latin literary background. By contrast, the fact that Books II, III and IV contain a tight series of arguments about the nature of the Good is often passed over too quickly, or treated vaguely in terms of Stoic and Neoplatonic sources. John Magee's chapter examines the argument about the Good in detail, paying especial attention to the way that Boethius' means of presentation deepen the philosophical position he is proposing. The discussion of divine prescience and human free will in Book V has received close philosophical scrutiny since the Middle Ages. Here the danger is rather that Boethius' arguments will not be appreciated accurately because they are taken to be addressing the problem in terms of the debate today (or even in the later Middle Ages), rather than in his own terms. Robert Sharples's chapter helps to replace Boethius' discussion within the ancient debate whilst paying critical attention to the whole range of contemporary interpretations.

Boethius, then, emerges from these discussions of different parts of his work as a highly individual thinker. His influence reflects this particularity. The chapters by Cameron and Martin on language and logic each contain brief but highly suggestive treatments of how Boethius influenced medieval logic. Cameron's section is short, not because there is too little, but rather because there is too much, to say. For the logicians of the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, Boethius' commentaries (and monographs) were the starting points for most of their thinking. As Cameron shows, the best thinkers were far from being servile imitators of Boethius: setting out from his writings, and sometimes giving special prominence to incidental remarks he made, the twelfth-century thinkers developed new positions, such as Abelard's nominalism. Still, the very fact that almost all these twelfth-century thinkers were engaged in developing a metaphysics and semantics on a mainly Aristotelian basis, within the framework of logic (in the broad sense defined by the ancient tradition), is the direct result of Boethius' decision to concentrate on logic and to make Porphyry his favourite among the commentators. Christopher Martin ends his chapter by showing how, from Boethius' attempts to calculate the different varieties of hypothetical syllogisms, Abelard managed to arrive at what Boethius never grasped: an understanding of propositional logic. It may be tempting to see here a simple illustration of Abelard's brilliance as a logician and Boethius' comparative lack of insight. But Abelard was not so much an alchemist, transforming base matter, as a prospector who found a vein of gold in Boethius previously hidden from everyone, including Boethius himself.

Given the vast influence of Boethius on pre-thirteenth-century logic, and the immense popularity of the *Consolation*, it is easy to forget that the *Opuscula sacra* were also foundational texts for medieval thought, hardly less important for twelfth-century theology than the commentaries and monographs for the logic of the time, and with a lesser, but still important, bearing on thirteenth-century doctrinal discussion. Christophe Erismann's chapter explores the whole range of this influence as well as studying how certain of Boethius' philosophical themes (especially the theory of individuation, analysed in detail by Arlig) were developed by medieval philosophers. Especially important for understanding the role of Boethius in the Middle Ages is his explanation of how the *Opuscula* provided 'a method for rational theology'. Without the *Opuscula*, the philosophically powerful analyses of the Trinity by Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers are hardly thinkable, and with them the whole direction of thirteenth-century theology towards more and more sophisticated treatments of the basic metaphysics needed for discussing Christian doctrine. Thomas Aquinas himself developed some of his most important thoughts about the nature of theology, and also about individuation, in commenting on Boethius' *On the Trinity*.

The influence of the *Consolation* is of a scale and complexity different in order to that of Boethius' other works, despite their great importance for medieval thinkers. Unlike his logic or theology, the *Consolation* remained a central text from the turn of the ninth century through to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, and it was the only philosophical text which consistently was read not just by students in the schools and later universities, but by a wider public, in vernacular translation. Translations of the text into Anglo-Saxon and Old High German were made in the ninth and tenth centuries, and from the thirteenth century onwards the versions in many different languages (even Hebrew) are so many that they make cataloguing them and their relationships a vast enterprise. Commentaries, too, became by the late Middle Ages no longer the preserve of the learned: information from them was incorporated into translations (Geoffrey Chaucer, for instance, makes use of Nicholas Trevet's commentary in his translation), and vernacular commentaries were also written. The chapters on the influence of the *Consolation* are divided between a study of the commentaries by Lodi Nauta and a discussion of literary uses of the text by Winthrop Wetherbee. Both contributors are able, within a short space, to give an impression of the range of the material and to move between Latin and vernacular, learned and more popular, uses. They also – especially in the treatment of the commentaries – show how Boethius continued to be used well into what is often too sharply separated off from the Middle Ages as the Renaissance and Early Modern Period.

But is there any single feature that characterizes how the *Consolation* affected medieval thought and writing, besides the very diversity and pervasiveness of its influence? Arguably there is – and it is also the feature which draws together all the diverse aspects of Boethius' writing and its effects on generations of medieval readers.

Faced by an author who spent much of his life translating and writing on logic and mathematics, yet also composed treatises on contested points of Christian doctrine, and

who, preparing for death, produced a philosophical treatise remarkable for its lack of explicit Christian content, scholars have been in the habit of asking questions such as ‘Was Boethius really a Christian?’ or ‘Did Boethius give up Christianity at the end of his life?’ They rarely ask such questions nowadays, however, because almost everyone is, rightly, convinced that Boethius was and remained fully a Christian and the historian’s task is to explain the relationship he drew in his intellectual life and writings between a philosophical culture rooted in the pagan past and his adherence to the Church and its teachings. While many of the nuances in this relationship remain to be better understood, its broad features are clear. Unlike even the most philosophically inclined Church Fathers, who infused their religious thinking with ideas from the Platonic tradition (or, as in the case of Augustine, entered into a complicated dialectic with Platonism), Boethius respected the philosophical tradition in its own integrity, not as a competitor with Christianity, but as an irreplaceable accompaniment, which leads a long way towards the same goals. It was this attitude that makes sense of his life’s work: years spent with the minutiae of mathematical subjects and logic (where, even within the philosophical tradition, Boethius respected the integrity of different approaches, developing an Aristotelian metaphysics and semantics, despite his own ultimately Platonic loyalties); an approach to theology which involves developing physical and metaphysical distinctions that apply to the ordinary world and then examining to what extent they apply to God, and at what point they break down when applied to him; and, finally, providing his fictional self and generations of readers of the *Consolation* with a philosophical path to salvation which, clearly, he regarded as inadequate to some extent, but none the less as treasure.

This attitude made it possible for medieval writers themselves to relate to the ancient pagan world and its philosophical culture in a way that, probably, would not otherwise have been easily open to them. To take just two examples of how the logical works and theological treatises enabled striking developments in medieval thought, consider the philosophical system Abelard developed in its own terms, hardly related to Christian doctrine, within his logical works, or how, although the only work of Gilbert of Poitiers which survives is a theological commentary, because the works he commented on are Boethius’ *opuscula*, he develops within it a rationally justifiable, philosophically fascinating metaphysics. The *Consolation* too opened up possibilities, and to a far wider range of writers than in the case of Boethius’ other works, but in a more complex way. The fact, recognized from the start, that the *Consolation* is a work by a Christian author written in purely philosophical terms gave a warrant both for reading pagan philosophical texts as hiding Christian truths, and for Christian authors to write works which, like Boethius’ dialogue, contained nothing explicitly Christian even where it might be expected. But the *Consolation* is an elaborate literary structure which uses formal and verbal devices to refract the arguments it develops, posing as many questions as it answers. It is no accident that scholars still debate the extent to which the *Consolation* is supposed to show the inadequacy of purely philosophical solutions. The *Consolation* is written in such a manner as to resist a definitive interpretation, which would decide one

way or the other. And so, for its more acute medieval readers – who included the most intellectually challenging of Old French writers, Jean de Meun, the finest Middle English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the greatest philosophical poet of any time, Dante – the *Consolation* problematized the cluster of issues about pagan philosophy and its relation to truth and to salvation: the paths of thought and writing it opened turned out, all too often, to lead not to the clarity of a plain, but to the darkness of a forest, where the trail is so hidden that the traveller must sit still and reflect.

There are, then, two strong reasons to read Boethius whole. First, there is a unifying theme which binds together his very diverse writings, even where the ideas in them are taken from others. Second, the literary art of the *Consolation* shows that his philosophical speculations have a depth which would not become obvious from the logical and theological works alone, though neither would it be apparent without them.

As I mentioned at the beginning, one reason why Boethius is not read whole has to do not with Boethius but with the specialization that leads exponents of different disciplines each to seize their bit of his legacy. For philosophers, at least, this specialization is not, as such, a fault, since they need to ask, when they look at texts from the past, what they mean and how much they matter as philosophy. But the identity and boundaries of philosophy are themselves far from fixed, and specialization becomes dangerous when it places them too narrowly. Reading Boethius whole, avoiding neither the technical challenges of the logic and theology, nor the obliquities of the *Consolation*, will help philosophers to set them more generously. The essays in this *Companion* are intended to further this aim, and I am grateful to the contributors for having given their time and abilities to the project. I am also grateful to Brian Davies for having suggested this volume to the Cambridge University Press, and to Iveta Adams, for the rare intelligence, scrupulousness and scholarship with which she has copy-edited this complex manuscript.

Notes

1. There is, however, an important way in which this book *fails* to present the whole Boethius. There are no chapters on his treatises *On Arithmetic* and *On Music*, both of which were very widely read in the Middle Ages. They have been excluded to leave space for an adequate treatment of the rest of Boethius' work: they are each highly technical works, and cannot be properly understood without a specialist training in ancient and medieval arithmetic or musical theory. Despite the plea against narrow specialization I am making here, it would be overambitious, however desirable, to envisage many people equipped to grasp not only Boethius as a logician, philosopher, theologian, writer and politician, but as (in his sense) a mathematician. For further information see the entries in the Appendix ([p. 303](#)).
2. There is also a practical reason why Boethius is not read whole. Whereas the *Consolation* exists in many modern English versions, and the *Opuscula sacra* are available in English, little of the logical work, except for that on the theory

of topics, exists in translation.

- [3.](#) This is not to say that Porphyry de-ontologized logic, as has been claimed – merely that he tried to follow a generally Aristotelian line in the Aristotelian part of the syllabus, by contrast with some Neoplatonists, who wanted to read Neoplatonic principles directly into Aristotelian logic: cf. Cameron’s chapter in this book, n. 23.
- [4.](#) See below, Moorhead ([pp. 25–6](#)) and Appendix ([p. 310](#)) for translations of this text and further discussion of it.
- [5.](#) On the metaphysics of the axioms see especially Hadot ([1963](#)) and Maioli ([1978](#)). A brief introduction to the problems and further bibliography is provided in Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 87–90. For a good analysis of the main argument of OS III see MacDonald ([1988](#)).

Part I Before the *Consolation*

1 Boethius' life and the world of late antique philosophy

John Moorhead

Boethius, Symmachus and Theoderic

The society into which Boethius was born in about 480 was, in some respects, most unstable. From being the centre of a great empire, during the fifth century Italy had turned into a free-standing unit, as one province after another became independent of the authority of the centre, and a passage of power to military men which made the office of emperor increasingly irrelevant culminated in 476 when a new commander of the army, Odovacer, deposed the last emperor of the West, Romulus Augustulus. The event has been immortalized in textbooks as a major turning point in history, and in the following century some writers in the parts of the old Empire that remained under Roman rule, centred now in Constantinople, saw Odovacer's usurpation of authority as a momentous development. Contemporaries, however, did not see it in this light. The landowning aristocracy and the Catholic Church, both of which had been becoming more important, carried on as before, and the last emperor was sent with a generous pension to live in peaceful retirement on a country estate, possibly the very villa in which the emperor Tiberius had died. For most Romans, the events of 476 marked little change. Indeed, the new regime seemed to go out of its way to present itself as traditionally Roman. Odovacer repaired the Colosseum, where the names of the senators of the period can still be seen scratched onto the seats which were reserved for them, and the senate of Rome regained a right it had lost nearly 200 years previously, that of issuing bronze coins; the scenes these coins depicted, such as Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf, were nothing if not traditional. The consul for the year 494 was working on the text of Vergil when he gave the consular games. Into such an environment, balanced between change and continuity, Boethius was born.

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, to give him his full name, was a man with a distinguished ancestry. His praenomen points to kinship with the Anicii, a great family described by Cassiodorus in his *Variae*, a collection of official correspondence, as being almost equal to princes,¹ while the name Manlius implies a relationship with individuals prominent during the Roman republic. Men named Severinus, with whom Boethius may have been connected, held consulships in 461 and 482. A Boethius who had the distinction of being murdered by an emperor in 454 was presumably his grandfather, and a man with the same name who held the office of consul in 487 will have been his father. But while Boethius was still a child his father died, whereupon he was taken into what he

later described as the care of the highest men.² More than this, he married into a glorious family. His wife, Rusticiana, was the daughter of Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus, the sole consul of 485, and this connection guaranteed Boethius entrée into the most distinguished circles in Rome. The milieu in which he found himself was one of rich, but potentially disturbing, intellectual traditions.

In the 380s a controversy had arisen in Rome over an altar dedicated to the goddess Victory which Augustus, the first emperor, had placed in the senate house. The prefect of the city, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, a holder of priesthoods in the traditional Roman religion who watched the rising tide of Christianity with unease, wrote a formal address to the emperor asking that the altar be restored. In an aggressive piece of polemic, bishop Ambrose of Milan opposed his arguments, and carried the day. The spokesman for the old religion was the great-grandfather of Boethius' father-in-law, and the family was one in which traditions lingered. Not merely were the names of the Symmachi similar, but Boethius' wife bore the same name as that of the elder Symmachus, and her sister shared her name with a granddaughter of Symmachus and Nichomachus Flavianus, a staunch adherent of the old religion who had committed suicide in 394 after the defeat of a rebellion with anti-Christian tinge. When a contemporary author, Cassiodorus, described the younger Symmachus, antitheses playing off past and present came easily. He described him as 'a philosopher of our time who imitated Cato of old', and as 'an exceedingly careful imitator of the people of old, a most noble teacher of his contemporaries'.³ The earlier Symmachus had once promised a correspondent the whole of the work of the republican historian Livy as a gift, but was delayed as he amended the text; the younger Symmachus is known to have published a history of Rome in seven books, a section of the fifth book of which was drawn on by Jordanes, in his *Gothic History*, and is described as having produced his work 'in imitation of his ancestors'. The elder Symmachus remained a living presence. In the early sixth century the deacon Ennodius drew on his voluminous correspondence in writing his own letters, and Cassiodorus quoted a passage from a work of his no longer extant.⁴ Not surprisingly, the younger Symmachus looked backwards. In collaboration with its author's grandson he emended and punctuated a copy of a commentary which had been written some decades earlier by Macrobius on a work of Cicero, the *Somnium Scipionis*, which drew heavily on the thought of the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus; Boethius was to draw on Macrobius' work in a memorable part of his *Consolation* (2.7). Yet the family was Christian. Two of Symmachus' daughters were to become nuns, and we have no reason to doubt that Boethius lived in a Christian atmosphere.

Boethius' contemporaries regarded him as a man of intellectual distinction, addressing him as 'your prudence', 'your wisdom', and 'most learned of men'.⁵ Writing to him when he was in his twenties, Cassiodorus mentioned his having translated into Latin works by Pythagoras, Ptolemy, Nicomachus, Euclid, Plato, Aristotle and Archimedes. He took pleasure in his wonderful library, its walls decorated with ivory and glass (C 1.5.6), in which philosophy took her seat and often discussed knowledge of human and

divine things with him (C 1.4.3); the extraordinary range of Boethius' reading in both Latin and Greek is indicated by the range of reference, usually by way of allusion rather than quotation, in the *Consolation*. The intelligentsia of his day displayed great enthusiasm for works written in what is sometimes seen as the golden age of Latin literature, but Christian authors also found a place in their world view: the Asterius who was working on a text of Vergil in 494 also edited a manuscript of an account of the life of Christ, Sedulius' *Carmen pascale*, which its author had neglected to publish earlier in the fifth century. Boethius lived in a world in which Christian and non-Christian traditions co-existed. And the intellectual liveliness of the period tells against any interpretation of Boethius' labours as an attempt to shore up learning at a time of looming darkness. While the end of a living culture in direct continuity with that of antiquity was at hand, no one could have foreseen its demise while Boethius was alive.

But Symmachus and Boethius were more than bookish intellectuals. They lived as members of the Roman elite traditionally had lived, mixing private lives devoted to scholarship with participation in public affairs. The role they played in public life is suggested by some of the letters Cassiodorus included in his collected correspondence, the *Variae*. Its first four books, which are made up of letters written within the period 507–11, include three letters to Boethius and three to Symmachus. Compared to other letters by Cassiodorus, those addressed to this pair are long and expressed in difficult Latin. Those written to Boethius show that he was taken very seriously as an authority on practical matters, seeking as they do his assistance in establishing the proper relationship between gold and bronze coins (1.10), in having a water clock and sundial made for the Burgundian king Gundobad (1.45), and selecting a harpist to be sent to the Frankish king Clovis (2.40). Moreover, the letters to Symmachus and Boethius were strategically placed within the collection. The contents of the first four books of the *Variae* were arranged so that letters to the emperor or a king were placed at the beginning of each of the first four books, and letters placed at the end of three of the books were also important. The first book of the collection ends with a letter to king Gundobad, accompanying the gifts which were sent to him; immediately before it is a letter to Boethius, asking for his help in preparing them. The second book ends with a letter to king Clovis, accompanying a harpist sent to the king, and the letter immediately before it, addressed to Boethius, asks him to select a suitable person. Each of the letters to Boethius is several times as long as the one addressed to a king which follows it. The fourth book concludes with a learned letter to Symmachus, concerning a restoration he had undertaken of a building originally constructed over 500 years previously, the theatre of Pompey, for which he was reimbursed by the state (*Variae* 4.51).

These commissions came to Boethius and Symmachus from Theoderic, the Ostrogoth who had by then supplanted Odovacer in Italy. While the Empire had been falling apart in the West across the fifth century, its eastern third, with its capital at Constantinople, remained largely unscathed, and in 488 the emperor Zeno, troubled by some Goths, gave their leader Theoderic the job of freeing Italy from the control of Odovacer. The task took some years, but in 493 Odovacer surrendered, to be promptly murdered by

Theoderic, who took over the government. His constitutional position was ambiguous, for it could be argued that after his defeat of Odovacer on behalf of the emperor he should have handed Italy back to the emperor rather than holding it for himself. Nevertheless, Theoderic established his capital in the town of Ravenna, on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, which had been since the beginning of the fifth century the effective capital of both the emperors and Odovacer, having risen at the expense of Rome. Many of the monuments of the former capital were crumbling, and it had lost much of its population, although its growing number of beautifully decorated churches suggested that its days were not past.

Theoderic was praised for his wisdom and justice, but his religion set him apart from most of his subjects. By the time of his rule, Catholic Christianity was supreme in Italy, but the king was regarded as a heretical Arian. This term may not be fully appropriate, for we cannot be sure what his beliefs had in common with the teachings of Arius, an Egyptian cleric whose views were condemned by the council of Nicaea in 325. Nevertheless, Theoderic was a tolerant man who, until the end of his reign, did nothing to harm the Catholics of his kingdom, unlike the Vandals who then held sway in northern Africa. He had come to power during a schism, known to scholars as the Acacian Schism, between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople. But in 518 a new emperor, Justin, came to the throne, and he and the nephew who would succeed him, the famous Justinian, immediately sought reconciliation with Rome. This quickly came, very much on the terms of Rome, and the churches resumed full communion. This development may not have been welcome to Theoderic. Being an outsider, he stood to benefit when the Catholics were divided; subtly, the healing of the schism weakened his position.

A few years afterwards, Boethius became seriously involved in public life. In 522 his sons, unsurprisingly named Boethius and Symmachus, held joint consulships, a mere twelve years after their father held that office. It was an exceptional honour. When the boys were carried from his house to the senate in the midst of crowds Boethius gave an oration in praise of the king, and he sat between his sons in a stadium, satisfying the crowd with largesse; he would later look back on that day as the matchless summit of his happiness (*Consolation* 2.3.8). At about the same time he moved from Rome to Ravenna to assume the post of Master of the Offices. This was a senior administrative post,⁶ and the appointment of Boethius involved a change in Theoderic's policy, for hitherto those he appointed to high office had generally come from families of lower standing. The coming of Boethius to office was soon followed by the election of a new pope. In 523 Pope Hormisdas, who had presided over the ending of the Acacian Schism, died, and was succeeded in office by a deacon of the Roman Church, John, the first man of that name to become pope. By then an elderly man, he seems to have been involved in a schism which had racked the Roman Church from 498 till 506. One contender for papal office, Laurentius, had enjoyed the support of most of the senators; his rival, the ultimately successful Symmachus, was backed by the Roman plebs. John had almost certainly been among the backers of Laurentius, and his accession to the see of Rome marked a switch in the orientation of the papacy. There is no need to see John's coming

to office as having been connected with that of Boethius, for he would have become pope by virtue of seniority among the deacons of the Roman Church, but as it turned out he was a friend of Boethius, the second, third and fifth of whose theological tractates were dedicated to a deacon named John. Indeed, John, one of the few intellectuals among the popes of the period, may have been responsible for the collection of the tractates. The sun was shining on Boethius and his friends, perhaps too brightly.

The fall

Such developments did not pass unnoticed. Others in Theoderic's service felt excluded, and Boethius, a latecomer to life at the court, found its politics difficult to negotiate, experiencing what he later described as 'formidable and relentless disagreements with the unrighteous and, a thing that freedom of conscience entails, the perpetual displeasure of those in greater power; this I despised because of my safeguarding of the law' (*Consolation* 1.4.9, trans. Relihan). And whatever tensions existed among the Romans working for Theoderic were magnified by uncertainty as to what would happen when the king died. He would have been something like seventy when Boethius entered office, and it may not have been clear who would succeed him, for the king had no son and the man who had married his daughter was to predecease him, leaving a grandson too young to govern in his own right. The storm broke, probably towards the end of 523, when Cyprian, a court official, accused a senator, Albinus, of having sent the emperor Justin a letter prejudicial to Theoderic's kingdom.⁷ The healing of the Acacian Schism may have told against Albinus, for he was known to have been interested in relations between the Churches of Rome and Constantinople, and innocent correspondence could have been construed as having political implications. Albinus denied the charge brought forward by Cyprian, and Boethius supported him in front of the king: 'The charge of Cyprian is false, but if Albinus did it, both I and the entire senate have done it, acting together. The business is false, lord king.'⁸ Upon this Cyprian produced false witnesses who testified against Boethius as well as Albinus, and the pair were taken to Verona. Boethius was subsequently imprisoned in Pavia, where he wrote one of the great works in the western tradition, the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Within this work, he produced a defence against his accusers. It was constructed in accordance with a traditional rhetorical pattern,⁹ but from his account we can untangle three charges which were made against him. Firstly, he was accused of having wished for the safety of the senate at a time when Theoderic sought its ruin, preventing an informer from producing documents which appeared to show it was guilty of treason. The charge is a reminder of the continuing prominence of the Roman senate and its perceived unity. Not only was it involved in minting coins, but its members were to the fore in ecclesiastical politics; during the recent schism in the Roman Church 'the senate' is described as having supported Laurentius. Later, when Italy had been invaded, Gothic

kings are said to have accused the senators of having been traitors,¹⁰ although it is difficult to see just what practical outcome such treason could have had, for senators would scarcely have been in a position to influence the outcome of an invasion. Boethius felt that his reward for wishing for the safety of the senate was to see its members turn against him. But why would Theoderic have attacked the senate? This must have been linked with the second accusation, that he had written letters expressing a hope for Roman freedom. *Libertas* was a quality people of the time often associated with the government of Theoderic, but used in this context the word may have been a code term for the replacement of Gothic by imperial rule in Italy. Finally, in a further attempt to blacken Boethius' reputation, his enemies had accused him of having polluted his conscience with sacrilege in his ambition for office, having sought to capture the aid of the filthiest spirits. His love of philosophy may have given this charge some plausibility, but it must have been the product of tensions among Theoderic's officials. Sentence was passed on him by a court made up of senators. We are ignorant of the date of these events, but Boethius must have been held in captivity for a period long enough to have permitted the composition of the *Consolation*, and various pieces of evidence suggest that the end only came in 526. One report has Boethius being tortured and clubbed; according to another, he was killed by the sword. Shortly afterwards his father-in-law Symmachus was arrested and executed.

In the meantime, Theoderic had become concerned at reports that his fellow Arians were being persecuted by the emperor in Constantinople. Pope John, at the head of a group of bishops and senators, was sent there to intercede for them. The emperor agreed to restore confiscated Arian churches, but not to allow people who had been leaned on to become Catholics to revert to their previous adherence. The ambassadors returned to a frosty reception from Theoderic. John was held in some form of captivity, in which he died shortly afterwards, and Boethius seems to have been executed at about this time. It was said that Theoderic planned to take over the Catholic churches of Italy, but that on the very day this was to occur he died, the victim of a bout of diarrhoea, the very illness which had carried off the heretic Arius. Such tales meant that the fall of Boethius would come to be seen as an outbreak of religious persecution, and Boethius was later revered as a martyr. But the *Consolation* he wrote provides no evidence for such an interpretation. It points us clearly in another direction.

While the principal interest of this work lies elsewhere, Boethius leaves his readers in no doubt as to those he thought he resembled in his fall, and these were not Christians. His interlocutor Philosophy mentions that even before the time of Plato she had often struggled with thoughtless foolishness, and that Plato's own teacher Socrates had won a victory over an unjust death as she stood by. A number of exempla follow. Philosophy mentions the flight of Anaxagoras, the poison of Socrates and the torture of Zeno, and she knows of Julius Canus, Seneca and Soranus in Roman history, the first a victim of Caligula and the others of Nero. Later we are reminded that the position of intimates of kings is precarious: Seneca, Nero's confidant and teacher, was forced to commit suicide, and the lawyer Papinian was disposed of by the sword in the presence of Caracalla

(3.5.10).¹¹ The company in which Boethius places himself is indeed impressive. The invocation of Socrates is particularly poignant, and it may be that dialogues of Plato describing the end of Socrates' life stand behind aspects of the self-portrayal of Boethius. And while the thought of Seneca does not seem to have been a major influence on that of Boethius, behind him stood the ominous figure of Nero. It was the tragedy of Theoderic's reign that, whereas he had earlier been seen in terms of one of the great emperors, another Trajan or Valentinian I,¹² he was cast in the *Consolation* as Nero. Boethius saw himself as a philosopher who, no less than philosophers of old, had fallen victim to the raging of an evil ruler.

The waters closed quickly over Theoderic's victim. Cassiodorus, who a few decades earlier had been full of enthusiasm for Boethius' translations, stepped uncomplainingly into his shoes as Master of the Offices. People with whom Boethius had quarrelled while he held office continued at their posts, while his accusers seem to have advanced. Cyprian was appointed Count of the Sacred Largesse in 524 and a few years later rose to be Master of the Offices, while his brother Opilio was appointed to high office in 527. And we have one extraordinary indication of continuity across the fall of Boethius. As we have seen, Cassiodorus placed letters he wrote on behalf of Theoderic to Boethius and Symmachus at strategic places towards the end of the first, second and fourth books of his collected correspondence. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that the fifth book, which comprises letters written in the period from about 523 to 526, contains letters to neither Boethius nor Symmachus. The two letters at the end of this book are addressed to king Trasamund of the Vandals, and that placed before them was sent to Maximus, who held the office of consul in 523, the year after it was discharged by Boethius' two sons. And the pair of letters immediately preceding the letter to Maximus were addressed to Boethius' accuser Cyprian and the senate, on the occasion of Cyprian's appointment to the office of Count of the Sacred Largesse, reflecting a situation which had come to obtain following the demise of Boethius. Almost as if to counter the interpretation of his accusers proposed by Boethius, another letter of Cassiodorus described Cyprian and Opilio as men who were faithful to their friends, devoid of avarice and far from cupidity, language which could be read as a defence against the charges of avarice and fraudulent behaviour Boethius had brought against his enemies at court (*Variae* 8,17.4, cf. C 1.4.10–19). And Cassiodorus' language in one of his letters could be held to suggest that someone like Cyprian had no need of the kind of work Boethius had done; if Cassiodorus had earlier praised the former for turning the teachings of the Greeks into Roman learning (*Variae* 1.45.3), after his fall he could laud Cyprian, described as a master of three languages, for having found on a trip to Greece that it had nothing new to show him (*Variae* 5.40.5)!

The philosopher

In his *City of God*, Augustine asserted that Plato had divided philosophy into three parts:

moral, which was particularly concerned with action, natural, which was thought of as being speculative, and rational, by which truth could be distinguished from falsehood.¹³ Such a way of understanding the content of philosophy was widespread in late antiquity. In the fourth century, Porphyry produced the *Enneads*, an edition of the writings of his teacher, the Neoplatonist Plotinus, which began with ethics, moved on to cosmology and finished with metaphysics. The historian of the Goths, Jordanes, rather unexpectedly describes this people, centuries before the time of Theoderic, being taught virtually the whole of philosophy: ethics, physics, logic, practical things, which encouraged them to good deeds, and theoretical things, which led them to astronomy (*Getica* 69–70). Such a schematization can be placed next to a passage in Cassiodorus, which describes Theoderic enquiring into the courses of the stars, the bays of the sea and the wonders of fountains so that, having examined with care the way things happen, he gave the appearance of being a philosopher clad in purple.¹⁴

In the same passage of the *City of God*, Augustine also stated that philosophy was carried out in two ways, the active, as exemplified by Socrates, and the contemplative, for which Pythagoras furnished an example. This distinction had been made long ago by Aristotle, who wrote of the theoretical, which has as its purpose truth, and the practical, which is directed towards activity (*Metaphysics* 993B; cf. Plotinus *Enn.* 3.8.6). It was also made by Boethius, who, at the beginning of the *Consolation*, describes two letters of the Greek alphabet, Π and, above it, Θ, as being embroidered on the clothing of Philosophy, and they are clearly meant to stand for two aspects of her activity. Just as Jordanes distinguished practical and theoretical things, Boethius elsewhere sees the theoretical and practical as being the two species of the genus philosophy, and glosses these words ‘speculative and active’.¹⁵

As the ways of understanding the subject matter of philosophy and its practice proposed by Augustine suggest, the concerns of philosophers in the society of the ancient world were broader than they subsequently were in the western tradition. Some of the astronomical content of Boethius’ *Consolation*, for example, could arise naturally from the concerns of an ancient philosopher. But for our present purposes, the ethical role that philosophy played was more important. By the time of Boethius, people were coming to look more to religion to supply guidance as to how to live, but in the ancient world it was seen as the job of philosophy to provide this. The practice of philosophy was thought to make a person ethical, so that, far more than is the case today, philosophy in the ancient world can be seen as a way of life.¹⁶ A text attributed to Plato holds that only by the light of philosophy can one see all forms of justice (δικαία) in public and private life (*Seventh Letter*, 326A), and in his description of Symmachus and Boethius the historian Procopius, who was in Italy ten years after they had been executed, brought together the concepts of philosophy and justice, stating that they were renowned for the practice of philosophy and for being mindful of justice (δικαιοσύνη, Procopius, *Wars* 5.1.33). Boethius himself, borrowing an expression of Cicero, describes Philosophy as the teacher of all virtues (C 1.3.3), and tells of a man who had falsely taken upon himself the title of

philosopher, not for the practice of true virtue but for proud glory (C 2.7.20). He brings together these concepts in describing his father-in-law Symmachus as being entirely composed of wisdom and virtues (C 2.4.5); in similar vein, Priscian, a friend of Symmachus who lived in Constantinople, described him as ‘shining with every light of virtue’.¹⁷

Such an understanding of philosophy had practical consequences for Boethius. He presents himself as having followed the teaching of Plato that states would be happy if students of wisdom ruled over them, or if it were the case that their rulers studied wisdom.¹⁸ Professing a conviction that it was a disaster when offices of state and power fell into the hands of a wicked person, and that were they handed over to the upright very rarely (C 2.6.1,3), he asserted that he had entered public life so that virtue would not grow old in silence (C 2.7.1). The title by which Boethius’ work is known suggests that philosophy supplied him with consolation, although it is worth noting in passing that there is no evidence for Boethius having supplied it, and indeed the word ‘consolation’ does not occur in the work. But if Boethius had become involved in affairs of state in accordance with the teaching of Plato, philosophy would have been implicated in his fall. Perhaps, in considering why Boethius chose personified Philosophy as his interlocutor in the Consolation, we should remember that she was in some way responsible for his disaster: are these the rewards, he asked in prison, for being one of your followers (C 1.4.4)?

Boethius lived in what must have been an exciting period in the development of western philosophy. Thinkers such as Plotinus (c.205–70) and his pupil Porphyry (c.232–c.303) had pioneered the development of the movement known to modern scholars as Neoplatonism, although people of the time referred to its exponents simply as Platonists. Purporting to base themselves on Plato, from whom they nevertheless widely departed in both content and accessibility, they held that there was a first principle, the One, from which other classes of being emanated, and that humans could return to the One by means of philosophy. The founders of this system were not Christians, and it is hard to see how its basic teaching could be squared with Christian notions such as the incarnation. Yet many Christian intellectuals found it seductive. In particular, they were haunted by an image in Plotinus of our having somehow left their fatherland (πατρίς, Latin *patria*) where the Father (πατήρ, *pater*) dwelt. But, the philosopher rhetorically asked, how shall we return? We cannot get there on foot, and one cannot get ready a carriage or a boat.¹⁹ This is a powerful expression of human alienation which manages to suggest the possibility of moving beyond this situation. Religious in a general way, the image invites comparison with the biblical parable of the prodigal son, in which a son left his father for a far country from which he later sought to depart (Luke 15:11–32), so that authors such as Augustine could move freely between the imagery of Plotinus and that of Luke’s Gospel (*Confessions* 1.18.28). It was therefore natural for Boethius to represent Philosophy as telling him that he had wandered away from his *patria*, rather than being driven from it (C 1.5.3). But she offers Boethius a way of regaining his *patria*: ‘I will equip your mind with wings, so that it can raise itself on high, so that you can cast your

confusion into exile and return safe to your fatherland, following my lead, along my path, by my contrivances.’ (C 4.1.9, tr. Relihan) The language owes something to Plotinus, yet it has echoes of John’s Gospel, in which Christ speaks of a return to the Father through himself, he being the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). Such parallels may suggest a way of resolving the frequently asked question as to whether Boethius remained a Christian at the time he wrote the *Consolation*; another way of approaching the question would be to place Boethius’ thinking against the entirety of the thought of Plotinus, which would show that much of the thinking of the latter which was not compatible with Christianity was simply left aside by Boethius, and so lead to the same conclusion.

But thinkers in the Neoplatonic tradition were not merely concerned with reworking the ideas of Plato. Indeed, the curriculum of their teaching began with an explanation of some of Aristotle’s treatises, which in some respects pointed away from the views of Plato, and only then moved on to consider Plato’s dialogues. Some people find a variety of conflicting views exhilarating, but others find disagreement disquieting, and Boethius was not pleased by apparent discordance. He held, apparently having in mind Epicureans and Stoics, that violent people had torn strips off the cloak of Philosophy (C 1.1.5, 1.3.7). Against such a tendency to fragmentation, the philosophers of late antiquity acted in the same way that some of their contemporaries did when faced with apparently contradictory parts of the Bible, by resolutely seeking synthesis. A lost book of Porphyry bore the title ‘On the fact that the allegiance of Plato and Aristotle is one and the same’, which directly anticipates an aim of Boethius:

Turning into the Roman way of writing every work of Aristotle which comes into my hands, I shall write out the arguments of them all in full in the Latin language, so that, whatever has been written by Aristotle concerning the subtlety of the art of logic, the weightiness of moral knowledge and the keenness of the truth of nature, I shall translate it all in due order and elucidate it by the light of commenting on it, and by translating all the dialogues of Plato as well as commentating on them I shall work them into a Latin shape. Having achieved these things, I shall certainly not hesitate to bring the opinions of Aristotle and Plato back into harmony, so to speak, and to show that their opinions are not contrary in just about everything, but are in agreement in many matters of the greatest importance in philosophy . . . if I am granted enough life and leisure.²⁰

In such ways, Boethius’ concerns reflected those of the philosophers of his period. But he was a man of his time not only in the content of his philosophical work but also in the way in which he gave it expression. One of the main genres of the period is that of commentary on works written earlier. From the time of Socrates, philosophical ideas had generally been transmitted orally from a master to people who were interested in what he had to say, and were often worked out in discussion; the books in which Plato presented his teaching were in the form of dialogues which, however stylized, give some sense of what it was like to participate in such a group. But by the early Christian Era philosophy

was being taught far beyond the schools of Athens, so that the transmission of teachings by word of mouth in a school which had been founded by a master was no longer possible. In such a situation a canon of central texts became important, and teachers increasingly saw their function as explaining such texts to their students, by way of commenting on them. From this it was a short step to the writing of commentaries on such texts. Even a great teacher like Plotinus, operating in Rome, would proceed by having commentaries read to the students.²¹ The process is a fine example of how institutional developments can shape the content of intellectual discourse. But it was broadly similar to that which saw commentaries on books of the Bible, which often originated in preaching to congregations, become a central part of Christian writing in the period, and it came to be assumed that difficult texts could usefully be approached by commentaries on them; while Augustine claimed to have understood a translation of Aristotle's *Categories* without needing someone to explain it (*Confessions* 4.16.28), others were not so confident; from the fourth century onwards the work attracted commentaries by Porphyry, who produced two commentaries on the one text, Iamblichus, Ammonius and Simplicius. In the Latin world, Boethius too devoted a good deal of attention to this difficult text.

Another genre prevalent in the period, which reflected oral discourse in another way, was that of dialogue. This form was used by Plato, and was to have a long life; among modern philosophers it is used by Hume, and more remotely it lies behind the way in which Thomas Aquinas marshals arguments for and against various positions in his *Summa Theologica*. In a society in which books were read out loud, it was natural to use lively direct speech to express ideas, even in works written for solitary readers. To an extent the convention was artificial, and some authors found it hard to sustain. The discussion Gregory the Great sets up, most unconvincingly, between himself and the deacon Peter in his *Dialogues* operates at the beginning of the work as a platform for Gregory to expound his own ideas, but as the work progresses his interlocutor becomes a more robust character. In Boethius' *Consolation*, on the other hand, the authorial voice diminishes as the work proceeds. The work begins with a poem, written in the first person, in which Boethius bewails his fate, and spirited dialogue between him and Philosophy ensues, but by its end Philosophy gives the impression of speaking to herself, just as Boethius himself does in another work which begins as a dialogue, the *In Isagogen* (first version).

No less than his writing of commentaries and employment of dialogue, Boethius' activities as a translator mark him as a philosopher of his time. When Plotinus, an Egyptian, taught in Rome, he did so in Greek. This reflected not only the overwhelming preponderance of that language in the intellectual life of the ancient world, but also the linguistic realities of the time; St Paul had written his epistle to the Romans in Greek, and in Plotinus' day the liturgy of the Roman Church was still celebrated in Greek. But in the following period knowledge of Greek in the West, like that of Latin in the East, became less common, so that the activity of translation took on a new importance. An African teaching in Rome, Marius Victorinus, apparently prior to his conversion to Christianity

towards the middle of the fourth century, had already produced Latin versions of works by Plotinus and Porphyry which were to play an important part in the intellectual development of Augustine. Victorinus' achievement foreshadowed that of Boethius, who took a dim view of the labours of his predecessor, and it made sense for Cassiodorus to place some of their works side by side.²² The Latin speakers of late antiquity poured much energy into translating (literally 'carrying across') Greek texts into their language, showing far more interest in them than their Greek contemporaries did in Latin texts, and they were aware of some of the difficult issues which translators have to resolve. Boethius produced versions of Greek works on arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music, the medieval 'quadrivium', a word he seems to have been the first author to use in this sense, but these activities pale beside his extraordinarily ambitious project of translating the works of Aristotle and Plato into Latin. He saw the sharing of the richness of Greek thought with speakers of Latin as part of his vocation as a philosopher.

Greece

A popular view of the ancient world sees it as being a relatively homogeneous unit, but this is certainly not true of its intellectual life. While many parts of western thought rest to this day on foundations laid by the Greeks, the contribution of the Romans is decidedly more modest. Indeed, the Romans seem to have been disinclined to master all that the Greeks had to teach them; 'if, by Dark Ages, or Middle Ages, we mean regression and a distinctly lower level of scientific and intellectual thinking, the Middle Ages began in Western Europe during the Roman republic'.²³ Only in the central Middle Ages, and then partly by way of translations from Arabic, would Greek texts become an integral part of the thought-world of scholars writing in Latin. Indeed, Greeks were sometimes looked down on in the West during late antiquity. A military man sent to Italy as emperor in 467 was looked down on as a 'little Greek',²⁴ and a Gothic king is said to have told the Romans that the only Greeks they had seen in Italy before the Gothic war had been actors of tragedy, mimes and thieving sailors!²⁵

Despite such attitudes, and the increasing rarity of knowledge of Greek in the West, the language was certainly known in Italy in Boethius' day. Theoderic is said to have spent ten years of his youth in Constantinople, and is described as having been educated rather than simply raised there, while his daughter Amalasuintha is credited with being learned in the brightness of Attic fluency as well as the pomp of Roman eloquence and the richness of her native speech.²⁶ Symmachus, who travelled to Constantinople, had good Greek, as did Boethius. In the *Consolation*, Philosophy seems to take for granted that Boethius had learned a line of Homer as a boy (C 2.2.13), and he may have spoken Greek as well as Latin from his childhood.²⁷ Boethius' command of Greek and the learning to which it gave access was such as to impress his contemporaries. Cassiodorus wrote to him: 'While placed far away you have so entered the schools of the Athenians

and so mixed the toga with the choirs of those wearing the pallium that you have made the dogmas of the Greeks to be Roman teaching.’²⁸ Even allowing for the exaggeration of someone seeking the goodwill of a correspondent, such a compliment, which precedes a list of works translated by Boethius early in his career, suggests that the level of his Greek was seen as enviable. The work Boethius did with Greek texts is as good as that which any Roman ever did. Indeed, it is so good that some have thought that Boethius was educated in a Greek-speaking area. A traditional view has him studying at Athens, where a highly influential philosopher, Proclus, had been active until his death in 485, but the words of Cassiodorus quoted above, while they refer to Boethius having entered the schools of the Athenians, state that he did so while placed far away (*longe positus*), so the expression should be taken metaphorically. The French scholar Pierre Courcelle presented powerful arguments for Boethius having studied at Alexandria with the great scholar Ammonius (died after 517). The pupils of this teacher were of exceptional importance in the intellectual life of the East during the sixth century, and the possibility of placing Boethius in their company is beguiling. Moreover, Courcelle has seen Boethius and Symmachus as isolated figures who participated in a revival of Hellenism in Ostrogothic Italy that met with little sympathy from other Romans. But the evidence on which he relies is not as strong as it may appear. It is certainly possible to adduce close parallels between the works of Boethius and those of Ammonius, but these may be a sign of the two authors belonging to the same tradition rather than of a direct relationship between them, and passages in the works of Boethius which suggest a failure of contemporaries to understand his works could be no more than *topoi*.²⁹ Perhaps Boethius was able to acquire his formidable learning without travelling. But even if he never left Italy, he found himself caught up in the concerns of contemporary Greek theology.

Boethius wrote five tractates on theological matters, known as the *Opuscula sacra*. The fourth of these in the order they have come down to us, which is not the order in which they were written, a straightforward statement of Christian doctrine, stands apart from the others.³⁰ The remaining four works, like the *Consolation*, were called into being by contingent circumstances; in common with many intellectuals, Boethius wrote some of his best work in response to unexpected demands and situations. These were couched in a technical style, relying on the precise definition of terms and the development of argument in accordance with the rules of formal logic in what may be thought a remorseless way of proceeding, although something similar occurs in the *Consolation*. In one of these tractates Boethius invokes a principle which anticipates the work of the medieval schoolmen: ‘Join together, if you are able, faith and reason.’³¹ Such a way of doing theology, which stands somewhat removed from the way in which the Fathers of the Church usually proceeded, had been adopted by theologians writing in Greek during the fifth century, and his use of it provides another Greek context in which Boethius can be placed.³² This is also true of the content of the tractates. The fifth, the *Contra Eutychen*, seems to have arisen from a letter which Pope Symmachus received

from a group of eastern bishops in 512. The bishops held that Christ existed both from and in two natures, a wording which slightly nudged the teaching of the council of Chalcedon (451), that Christ existed in two natures, towards the understanding of the Monophysites, who held that he had only one nature, but some of whom were willing to add that he existed *from* two natures. The pope rejected the position of the bishops, but Boethius felt there was more to be said, and careful argument led him to accept the formula the bishops proposed. The first, second and third tractates, the last of which recalls the *Consolation* in that it gives the appearance of having nothing to do with Christianity, seem to have been occasioned by a visit, paid to Rome in 519–20, of a group of Scythian monks who sought approval of another formula that could be interpreted as pointing in a Monophysite direction, according to which one of the Trinity suffered.³³ Symmachus' successor, Pope Hormisdas, wavered before condemning the formula, although such an understanding was accepted by Pope John II in 534. In these ways Boethius was involved in a movement taking place in the world of Greek theology which sought to make the teachings of the council of Chalcedon more attractive to those they had been intended to exclude.

But by the time John II was pope the Ostrogothic kingdom was approaching its end. In 527 the ambitious Justinian had come to the throne in Constantinople, and following the speedy success of a war against the Vandals who held Africa in 533 he launched an invasion of Italy. So began one of the most destructive wars ever fought on Italian terrain. It culminated in the extinction of the Ostrogothic state, but in bringing this about it destroyed the environment which had provided the material and intellectual resources allowing Boethius to flourish; paradoxically, an invasion from the Greek East meant that the Hellenic interests of such a man as Boethius would thereafter find little place in Italy. In a way he could not have foreseen when he wrote the *Consolation*, he turned out to have been the last of his kind. But it does not follow from this that he was isolated in his own time.

Boethius has often been seen as a heroic figure desperately trying to shore up intellectual life at a time when Europe was plunging into an age of darkness. This is simply not true. About a decade after his execution, Cassiodorus was dissatisfied at the lack of people in Rome who were able to teach the Bible, whereas the study of secular texts was pursued with great enthusiasm (*Institutiones* 1, praef. 1), and when Boethius wrote that, just as the virtue of men of old had transferred the power of other cities to the Roman state alone, he would do what was still to be done by giving instruction in the arts of Greek wisdom, he was giving voice to optimism (CAT 201B). Although Boethius fatally fell out with the Romans at Theoderic's court, he enjoyed the respect of other intellectuals. He saw his activities as standing in a line with work undertaken by earlier scholars such as Victorinus and, at a greater distance, Cicero. Moreover, unbeknown to him, work similar to his was being undertaken by contemporaries living in situations of tranquillity: Sergius of Resaina, who studied in Alexandria under a pupil of Ammonius and was briefly in Rome a decade after Boethius died, was an active translator of Greek works into Syriac and writer of commentaries.³⁴ The circumstances of Boethius' fall,

which rendered him unable to resume the intellectual work to which he would almost certainly have returned when he left office, while tragic, were by no means unprecedented in Roman history, as he was well aware, and none of the precedents for his plight he provided in the *Consolation* was less than three centuries in the past. To be sure, secular intellectual life in Italy was almost immediately to enter a very gloomy period, but this was for reasons Boethius could not have foreseen, no more than he could have anticipated the central role his writings were to play in European intellectual life in the centuries which came later.

Notes

1. *Variae* 10.11.2 (Cassiodorus, [1894](#) – all references are to this edition). Martindale ([1980](#)) 233–7 is a concentrated source of biographical data.
2. C 2.3.5, on the basis of which it has often been assumed that Boethius had been adopted by the Symmachus whose daughter he was to marry. This is plausible, but by no means certain.
3. *Ordo generis Cassiodorum*, ed. Galonnier ([1996](#)) (although elsewhere Cassiodorus described the consul Felix as *nostrorum temporum Cato*, *Variae* 2.4.4); *Variae* 4.51.2.
4. Livy: Symmachus Ep. 9.13 (Symmachus, [1883](#)). Jordanes: *Getica* 83–8 (Jordanes [1882](#)); the passage contains the first clear use of a mysterious text, the *Historia Augusta*). Imitation of ancestors: Cassiodorus, *De anima* 5 (Cassiodorus, [1973](#)). Cassiodorus quotes: *Variae* 11.1.20.
5. Cassiodorus, *Variae* 1.10.2, 2.40.17; Ennodius ep. 7.13.2 (Ennodius, [1885](#)).
6. For this post, and all those mentioned in this chapter, the best treatment is now Maier ([2005](#)).
7. The chief sources for what follows are the *Anonymus Valesianus pars posterior* (Chronica, [1892](#) – all references are to this edition) 85–7; Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* 1.4; Procopius, *Wars* 5.1.32–9. Modern discussions include Chadwick ([1981](#)) and Moorhead ([1992](#)).
8. *Anonymus Valesianus* 85.
9. C 1.4, with Gruber ([1978](#)) 113; this commentary is an essential tool. Boethius' presentation of material here is not entirely straightforward, but the chapter contains some powerful writing, pre-eminently the last few sentences.
10. Procopius, *Wars* 7.21.12 (προδότηι; cf a more general reference to προδοσία at 5.18.40).
11. The *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* have him being killed by an axe, although Caracalla would have preferred the sword: SHA *Caracalla* 4.1, *Geta* 6.3.
12. *Anonymus Valesianus* 60, with which compare Procopius: 'as truly an emperor

as any who have distinguished themselves in this office from the beginning' (*Wars* 5.1.29).

- [13.](#) *De civitate dei* 8.4; compare for example Cicero, *Academica* 1.5.19.
- [14.](#) *Variae* 9.24.8. When Cassiodorus speaks of Theoderic *rerum . . . naturalium causas subtilissime perscrutatus*, he applies to the Gothic king language elsewhere applied to the consul of 511: *rerum quoque naturalium causas subtilissime perscrutatus*, *Variae* 2.3.4.
- [15.](#) IIS 7–9.
- [16.](#) See in particular Hadot ([2004](#)).
- [17.](#) Priscian ([1859](#)), 405.
- [18.](#) *Beatas fore res publicas si eas vel studiosi sapientiae regerent vel earum rectores studere sapientiae contigisset*, C 1.4.5, cf. Plato, Republic 473D. Cassiodorus' description of Theoderic as a philosopher clad in purple intriguingly plays with the latter notion.
- [19.](#) *Enneads* 1.6.8, echoed for example by Augustine in the form *fugiendum est igitur ad carissimam patriam, et ibi pater, et ibi omnia. Quae igitur inquit classis aut fuga?*, *De civitate dei* 9.17.
- [20.](#) 2IN 79.
- [21.](#) Porphyry, *The Life of Plotinus* 14 (Plotinus, [1966](#) – with English translation)
- [22.](#) *Institutiones* 2.3.18 (Cassiodorus, [1937](#))
- [23.](#) Stahl, Johnson and Burge ([1971](#), [1977](#)) I, 239.
- [24.](#) *Graeculus*, Ennodius, *Vita Epiphani* 54; cf *Graecus imperator*, Sidonius Apollinaris *Epist.* 1.7.5.
- [25.](#) Procopius, *Wars* 5.18.40; Greeks were unmanly by nature according to Gothic commanders, *Wars* 8.23.25.
- [26.](#) Theoderic: *educavit te in gremio civilitatis Graecia*, Ennodius, *Panegyricus Theoderici* 11; Amalasuintha: Cassiodorus, *Variae* 11.1.6.
- [27.](#) Obertello ([1974](#)) 26. Courcelle ([1969](#)), 316–17, n. 129 suggests that Boethius may have been the son of a man by this name who was prefect of Alexandria in 475–6, but seems unpersuaded by his own arguments. The holding of this office by a westerner would have been unusual, although not quite unique.
- [28.](#) *Variae* 1.45.3; the toga and the pallium are similarly taken as standing for Roman and Greek by Valerius Maximus 2.2.2. With *Graecorum dogmata doctrinam feceris esse Romanam*, *Variae* 1.45.3, compare *originem Gothicam historiam fecit esse Romanam*, *Variae* 9.25.5; such dichotomies came easily to Cassiodorus.
- [29.](#) Courcelle ([1969](#)) 273–330; however much Courcelle's conclusions may be

queried, his scholarly achievement remains massive. Among his critics: Kirkby ([1981](#)) 44–69, esp. 55–61.

[30.](#) Boethius' authorship of the fourth has been denied, but the arguments for accepting it are persuasive: Chadwick ([1980](#)).

[31.](#) *Fidem si poteris rationemque coniunge*: Boethius ([2000](#)), 185.

[32.](#) Daley ([1984](#)).

[33.](#) Schurr ([1935](#)) remains the standard discussion.

[34.](#) On Sergius see Hugonnard-Roche ([2004](#)).

2 The Aristotelian commentator

Sten Ebbesen

Raison d'être and extent of the corpus

When conquered, Greece conquered her savage victor, and brought the arts to rustic Latium. Traces, however, remained of the rural past, and still remain, for only late did the Romans apply their minds to Greek writings.¹

In a famous passage Horace explains how the Roman conquest of the Greek world resulted in the refined Greek way of writing poetry conquering the rustic victors, though, he adds, there is still some rustic stink left because the speakers of Latin were rather late to pick up the Greek manners, starting only after the Punic wars.

In the first century BC, when Horace was still very young, Cicero, Varro and Lucretius had tried to introduce philosophy into Latium, but the impact of their work was very modest. Throughout antiquity philosophy remained a basically Greek affair. Some philosophers lived in the houses of Roman magnates or taught in Rome or other Latin-speaking parts of the empire, a few even had Latin as their mother tongue, but usually they would do their philosophizing in Greek, Seneca being the most notable exception.

Even though Cicero's generation did not start a great tradition for doing philosophy in Latin, it did, at least, make it possible for a Greekless Roman to get a good impression of some main aspects of Hellenistic philosophy. But in the second and third centuries AD a revolution took place in Greek philosophy which made the works of the Ciceronian age outdated. The Hellenistic sects of Epicureans, Stoics etc. were swept from the scene, being replaced by a unified Aristoteli-Platonism, which took Plato as the chief authority with Aristotle as a substitute on subjects that Plato had not treated or had only touched on lightly. As a result, Aristotle began to reign almost monarchically in logic, Stoic logic being condemned to oblivion. Among the representatives of the new philosophy, Porphyry (c.234–c.304–10) stands out as the one who both formulated the “program” of the new philosophy (peace between Aristotle and Plato), and provided tools for posterity to use in translating the program into didactic practice.

The basic tools needed to conduct Aristotelian–Platonic studies were (1) introductory handbooks, (2) a selection of the writings of Plato and Aristotle, (3) commentaries on the authoritative books. By the time of Boethius, very few such tools were available in Latin. Half a millennium after Horace the rustic stink still clung to the language.

“Only late did the Romans apply their minds to Greek writings,” said Horace.

Boethius may not have felt that his civilization was in danger of collapsing, but soon the political upheavals in both the eastern and the western parts of the empire were to make a major transfer of Greek philosophy into Latin just about unthinkable. So it was late, indeed, that he decided to provide the West with an up-to-date philosophical library, though not too late, as time was to prove.

At one point Boethius dreamed of doing a complete translation of both Plato and Aristotle, and then writing a work demonstrating that in most important matters the two agreed.² That dream was never to come true, but he did produce an astonishing amount of translation and commentary on Aristotle – especially astonishing in view of the fact that he was not a full-time scholar. The administration of his estates must have demanded quite some time, being an aristocrat he would have many social duties, and in periods, at least, he also served in government.

Sensibly, Boethius started with the *Organon*, of which Porphyry's *Isagoge* ("Introduction to the *Categories*") had by his day become an indispensable part, and for practical purposes we may also count Cicero's *Topics* as part of an extended Latin *Organon*. At some point during his work on the extended *Organon*, Boethius seems to have taken a pause from logic to comment on Aristotle's *Physics*, but nothing is left of that book, to which he briefly refers twice.³ Anyway, what he achieved in the course of a couple of decades was monumental:

Translations of basic books		Commentaries	Companion Monographs
<i>Ars vetus</i>	Porphry's <i>Isagoge</i>	Two extant	<i>On Division</i>
	Aristotle's <i>Categories</i>	One extant, possibly one lost	
	Aristotle's <i>Peri hermeneias</i>	Two extant	<i>Introduction to Categorical Syllogisms</i>
<i>Ars nova</i>	Aristotle's <i>Prior Analytics</i>	?	(in two books, of which the first exists in two versions) ⁴ <i>On hypothetical Syllogisms</i>
	Aristotle's <i>Sophistical Refutations (Elenchi)</i>	None	
	Aristotle's <i>Topics</i>	One, now lost	<i>On Topical Differences</i>
Cicero's <i>Topics</i>		One extant	
Non-logical	Aristotle's <i>Physics</i> (lost, if it ever existed)	One, now lost	

The distinction between *Ars vetus* and *Ars nova* (“The Old Logic” and “The New Logic”) is a medieval one, due to the fact that *Isagoge*, *Categories* and *Peri hermeneias* were introduced into the scholastic curriculum before the rest of the *Organon*. But in Boethius’ own day, there already was a tradition for singling out those three works plus [Chapters 1–7 of *Prior Analytics*](#) I as the most important parts of logic to master.

There was an older translation of the *Isagoge*, done by Marius Victorinus in the fourth century, and Boethius’ first commentary on the work was keyed to Victorinus’ translation. Later, however, he decided that his predecessor had been too unfaithful to the original and did his own, very literal, Latin rendition of the basic book, keying a second commentary to the new translation. *On Division* sets divisions by genus and species as presented in the *Isagoge* in a wider framework of types of division.

According to Minio-Paluello, the editor of most of the translations, the medieval manuscript tradition shows traces of both a first and a second version of the Latin *Categories*, *Peri hermeneias*, *Prior Analytics* and *Topics*.⁵ Boethius did not take his task as a translator lightly!

Only one commentary on the *Categories* is extant, but in it Boethius announces a plan to write a second one, and it seems likely that an anonymously transmitted text may be a

small fragment of the second commentary (whether it was ever completed or not).⁶

Of the two commentaries on *Peri hermeneias*, the second is considerably longer and generally more interesting than the first. There is no dedicated companion monograph, but parts of the lore of the *Peri hermeneias* are presented in the works on categorical syllogisms and the one about topical differences.

It seems possible that Boethius composed or prepared a commentary on the *Prior Analytics*. While preparing an edition of Boethius' translation of this Aristotelian text, Minio-Paluello discovered that a twelfth-century manuscript contains marginal scholia on that work which must be translations from the Greek or adaptations of a Greek source, and the translator's habits seemed to indicate that he was no one other than Boethius.⁷ Possibly, then, these scholia were raw materials intended for use in a commentary. Later I discovered traces of more translated Greek scholia in a twelfth-century commentary on the *Prior Analytics*.⁸ This suggests that either (1) Boethius had left more extensive raw materials than the ones discovered by Minio-Paluello, or (2) he had actually left a whole commentary, of which we have only discovered little fragments, or (3) in spite of the agreement with Boethius' habits as a translator, what Minio-Paluello and myself discovered were in fact traces of a twelfth-century translation – complete or partial – of a Greek commentary. The matter is in need of further research. The monograph on categorical syllogisms may reasonably be seen as a handy summary of the subject treated at length and in depth in the *Prior Analytics*, while the one on hypothetical syllogisms is only linked to the Aristotelian work in the sense that it was customary in late antiquity to think that, by laying the foundations of categorical syllogistic in *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle had also laid the foundations of hypothetical syllogistic, and commentators seem routinely to have said something about the latter in connection with *Prior Analytics* 1.23. Boethius' treatment of hypothetical syllogisms is (to put it mildly) very strange; recently a Greek parallel to a little part of it was discovered,⁹ but for the most part it is unparalleled in ancient literature, though, admittedly, we do not have much by which to gauge what may have been the standard approach to the matter in late antiquity.

Boethius probably never translated or commented on the *Posterior Analytics*, though he obviously had some acquaintance with the work, and must be assumed to have intended to include it in his program.¹⁰ He himself mentions that there was a book by Vettius Praetextatus (c.320–84) which claimed to be a Latin translation of both of Aristotle's *Analytics*, while in fact it contained translations of Themistius' fourth-century paraphrases, “as is obvious to anyone who knows both.”¹¹ Nor does Boethius seem to have commented on the *Sophistical Refutations*, although he did translate it.

About Boethius' lost commentary on the *Topics* not much can be said except that it probably depended on a paraphrase-commentary by Themistius, which he also used in his *De topicis differentiis*, and from which he seems to have derived the idea that a topic (Greek *topos*, Latin *locus*) is not only a highly general notion such as “genus” or “form,” but also an associated axiom (Greek *axiōōma*, Latin *maxima*), such as “A thing is capable of exactly as much as its natural form permits” and “Things that have different

genera are also different from one another.”¹²

In a way, *De topicis differentiis* might more properly be classified as a companion to Cicero’s *Topics*, which was taught in Roman rhetoric schools, it seems, and on which first Marius Victorinus and then Boethius had composed commentaries. Boethius, however, in *On Topical Differences*, inserts so much material with a background in Aristotelian exegesis that the result is something that might well be taken to contain the essentials of the lore of Aristotle’s *Topics* – and, indeed, that was how medieval schoolmen were to read the work.

Fidus interpres

Boethius’ translations of Aristotle kept as close to the Greek as the Latin language would allow, sometimes even a bit closer. He himself comments on this in the second *Isagoge* commentary, saying:

This second exposition will explain the text of our own translation, in which I fear that I have laid myself open to the sort of reproach that people level at any faithful translator (*fidus interpres*), because I have delivered a word-by-word rendition.¹³

Some untranslatable Homeric examples in the *Sophistici elenchi* he ingeniously replaced with quotations of classical Latin poetry, thereby incidentally revealing how he interpreted the function of the original examples.¹⁴ But that was in a situation of *force majeure*. Normally, he delivered a word-by-word translation of the Greek, occasionally even sinning against good Latin grammar. This was clearly intentional: he wanted, as far as possible, to keep his interpretation separate from the basic texts. For *how* to read the authoritative text, the reader would have to consult the commentaries.

Boethius wanted to be a *fidus interpres* also in the sense of being a faithful exegete.

There was, indeed, a long tradition of textual exegesis to build upon. In the Greek world, Homeric exegesis had been around since the fourth century BC or even earlier, and soon philosophical texts had become the object of exegesis. By the time of Boethius the traditional techniques had long since been applied to Christian Sacred Scripture, but there is no sign that he was influenced by Biblical exegesis, about which he may have known little in spite of the theological interest evidenced by his *opuscula theologica*. Among Boethius’ distinguished spiritual forebears was Porphyry, most of whose vast production has been lost. One of the preserved works, however, a little gem called *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, deals directly with the problem of exegesis, using a Homeric passage for exemplification. The passage (*Odyssey* 13.102–12) describes a cave on the island of Ithaca. At first blush, the description may seem unexceptional in the fairy-tale universe of the *Odyssey*, but on a close reading it turns out to be decidedly weird. For instance, the cave contains stone looms which the nymphs use for weaving and stone household jars

inhabited by bees, as well as a northern door for men and a southern one for gods. As Homer was a wise man, Porphyry says toward the end of the essay, some important message must be hiding underneath such “obcurities” (*asapheiai*).

The good exegete has a positive attitude to his author and assumes he has something important to tell us, so the hidden good sense must be teased out of obscure passages.¹⁵ Boethius follows this principle of charity. One example will suffice to illustrate this. The *Isagoge* starts with the claim that “it is necessary, in relation to Aristotle’s *Categories*, to know what a genus is.” Boethius points out that strict necessity cannot be meant here, because what is strictly necessary is so without qualification, not relative to something. Hence “necessary” must be taken in the weaker sense of “useful.”¹⁶

A good exegete further tries not to foist his own views on the author. As Boethius says after having laid out what he takes to be the Aristotelian theory of universals,

The reason why we have here carefully presented Aristotle’s theory is not that it is the one we favour most, but that the present book [i.e. the *Isagoge*] was written for the sake of the *Categories*, which is the work of Aristotle.¹⁷

He thus, rightly, assumes that Porphyry wanted his *Isagoge* to be faithful to the Aristotelian way of thinking, and concludes that this must then be his obligation, too. Occasionally, un-Aristotelian (Neoplatonic) ideas do sneak into his comments, but he obviously strived to avoid that, and with a considerable measure of success.

One passage in Boethius’ *Categories* commentary might suggest that he thought he could become more than a *fidus interpres*. It runs as follows:

I have in mind to discuss some day three questions, one of which is the aim of the *Categories*; I shall then list the interpretations offered by different people and indicate which one I prefer. No one should be surprised that my preference will disagree with the present interpretation, once he sees how much profounder the new one is. It could not, however, be grasped by beginners, and it is in order to give them a first taste of the subject that I have written the present work. The people who stand at the very doors, as it were, of this discipline and whom we prepare for admission to this branch of knowledge must be treated and fashioned somehow by means of an uncomplicated exposition. So, my readers should realize that the reason for the change of interpretation is that in the new work it will be designed to fit Pythagorean knowledge and perfect teaching, whereas here it is designed to fit the simple mental activity of beginners.¹⁸

This sounds strongly as if only pedagogic concerns have kept him from telling the better story, a fully Neoplatonic one. For there can be little doubt that a “Pythagorean reading” would be one similar to Iamblichus’ (fourth century), who thought that both Plato and Aristotle were heirs to a Pythagorean tradition, even though Boethius may not have been convinced by Iamblichus’ claim that Aristotle’s *Categories* is directly dependent on a

work by the Pythagorean Archytas of Tarent (an acquaintance of Plato's), as seems to appear from the following remark:

Archytas also composed two books with the title *Katholou logoi*, in the first of which he laid out these ten categories. This is why some later authors have suspected that Aristotle was not the inventor of the division [i.e. into ten categories], as a Pythagorean had already written about it. This is the opinion of Iamblichus, no mean philosopher, but Themistius disagrees with him and denies that the Archytas in case was the one who was a Pythagorean from Tarent and who for some time lived with Plato; rather he was a Peripatetic "Archytas" who tried to lend authority to a new work by means of an old name. But more about this elsewhere.¹⁹

Themistius was right, of course, except that the forger was probably no Peripatetic but a Platonist who wanted to rob Aristotle of his originality. There is no sign that Porphyry, who must have known about the existence of the pseudepigraphon (and who was not adverse to Pythagoreanism), had been deceived. His pupil Iamblichus had been more gullible.

Whatever Boethius thought about the authenticity of *Katholou logoi*, it is a worrying prospect that he may have believed in the notion that Aristotle was a Pythagorean of sorts. For if he did, he almost certainly followed Iamblichus in thinking that Aristotle's doctrine of categories was a somewhat flawed version of the true Pythagorean (and Platonic) doctrine. He will not have known that what his sources called "Pythagorean doctrine" was actually a Platonist construct. Syrianus, who was a pupil of Iamblichus', and one of Boethius' direct or indirect sources, in his only preserved Aristotle commentary (on *Metaphysics*) repeatedly equates Pythagoreanism and Platonism, and finds a disharmony in Aristotle because he does aspire to the elevated "ancient philosophy" but also lets himself be dragged down by a desire to save common sense beliefs.²⁰ Presumably, Syrianus also followed Iamblichus in considering Aristotelian category lore a debased version of the Pythagorean one.²¹ But even if Boethius accepted that view, he may have felt that a Pythagorean interpretation of the *Categories* might be as faithful as a Porphyrian one. He may have believed that Aristotle had purposely written the work in a way that lends itself to a Porphyrian interpretation, according to which it only concerns the way we speak about the sensible world, because such an elementary understanding would be needed before progressing to intelligibles, hoping at the same time that the reader would realize that at some point he would have to progress to intelligibles.

The format of Boethius' *Organon* commentaries

The first commentary on the *Isagoge*, obviously an early work, has dialogue form. A

short prologue presents the speakers, Boethius and Fabius, who have retreated for winter holidays to a house in the mountains. One stormy night Fabius prevails upon Boethius to explain to him the contents of the *Isagoge*. This *mise en scène* is Ciceronian, echoing such works as *De finibus* and *Academici*. The main part of the work is not Ciceronian, however, and could not be so, since Cicero never wrote an exposition of an authoritative text. The format is like that of Porphyry's minor commentary on the *Categories*: Fabius asks brief questions about the text and Boethius delivers long answers. When a section of the text seems to have been sufficiently elucidated, the conversation moves on to the next. Conveniently, Fabius first asks for some introductory remarks, so that Boethius can go through six standard items of prologues to philosophical works: What is the aim and purpose of the text? What is the use of it? Where does it belong in a reading schedule? Is it a genuine work of the purported author? What is the title? Which branch of philosophy does it belong to? The same and closely similar lists of questions are known from Greek works, and had been used for some three centuries before Boethius.²² Boethius does not follow his list of questions slavishly in the introductions to his other commentaries, but it was to become extremely influential in the twelfth century, when commentaries on all sorts of works could be prefaced with an *accessus* dealing with the six Boethian questions. Even a work of poetry by Horace or Ovid might be subjected to the question "Under which part of philosophy does it fall?"

Boethius' other commentaries have no fictional framework. After a prologue, the text commented on is broken up into manageable sections, each of which receives some treatment, sometimes just a paraphrase with an indication of the relation of the passage to the preceding one(s), sometimes there is extensive glossing, and at times there is also a discussion of points that an attentive reader might raise and that had been raised in the scholarly literature. The second commentary on *Peri hermeneias* is the richest in that respect, and repeatedly contrasts Porphyry's interpretations with those of earlier exegetes, notably Alexander of Aphrodisias. It is also interesting in that it starts with a little treatise on linguistic sound and words intended to supplement Aristotle, who plunges directly into nouns and verbs.

In their general layout, the non-dialogical commentaries closely resemble products from contemporary and near-contemporary Alexandria (school of Ammonius), but one should not jump to the conclusion that the Alexandrians inspired Boethius – more likely, they are just two branches of the same tree of tradition.

Commentators standardly held that Aristotle's writings suffer from lack of clarity (*asapheia* in Greek, *obscuritas* in Latin), and so need exegesis. How Boethius tried to achieve clarity through glossing may be illustrated by a passage from the greater commentary on *Peri hermeneias*. About 13.22b29–36 he says:

In this passage, as in most others, the words come in a distorted order and elliptically . . . But if the reader joins the text of our explanations to Aristotle's words, using our explanations to distinguish and separate what he has fused due to similarity, and to supplement what is lacking in Aristotle's words, the

meaning of the whole passage will be clear.²³

This is how he wants us to read the first lines of the passage.²⁴

Aristotle's text	Glossing
But someone may raise the question whether "possible to be" follows from "necessary to be,"	i.e. whether possibility is consistent with necessity.
For if it does not follow,	i.e. if someone denies that possibility follows from necessity,
the contradiction will follow,	i.e. the contradiction of possibility, for from that from which possibility does not follow, the contradiction of possibility follows, the one, that is, which says
"not possible to be."	In other words, if possibility does not follow from necessity and the contradiction of possibility is consistent with it, this is a sound consequence "if it is necessary to be, it is not possible to be," which is absurd.
And if someone were to say that this is not the contradiction,	i.e. if someone denies that the contradiction of possibility is the one that says "not possible to be," for him, certainly,
it is necessary to say	that the contradiction of possibility is the one that says
"possible to be not to be."	

Interestingly, the technique of exposition applied to this passage is exactly the one Boethius intended to use exclusively in a *breviarium* of *Peri Hermeneias* that he seems never to have finished:

After these two commentaries, we are preparing a *breviarium*, in which we will almost everywhere use Aristotle's own words, but just make the text more transparent by means of additions when his brevity has made it obscure, so as to achieve an intermediate style between the brevity of the text and the prolixity of a commentary by compressing lengthy formulations and lengthening such as are very compressed.²⁵

Boethius' sources

Whereas there is scholarly agreement that Boethius based his commentaries and monographs on Greek material, there has been a good deal of scholarly controversy about what exactly he used for the commentaries.²⁶

As for the monographs, it seems beyond reasonable doubt that *On Division* and *Introduction to Categorical Syllogisms* (both versions) are based on lost works by Porphyry (a commentary on Plato's *Sophist*, and a treatise *On Categorical Syllogisms*, respectively),²⁷ and it is obvious that *On Topical Differences* owes a debt to Themistius, most probably in the form of a lost paraphrase/commentary by him on Aristotle's *Topics*, as a major part of the work consists in contrasting Cicero's list of topics with Themistius'. There is no indication which source(s) Boethius used for *On Hypothetical Syllogisms*.

The contentious question is which are the sources used for the commentaries, because, as far as they are concerned, the evidence is neither non-existing nor clear.

Greeks had been commenting on Aristotle's logic for centuries. The most famous of Boethius' predecessors were Alexander of Aphrodisias (c.AD 200), Porphyry from the late third century, and Themistius from the fourth, but there had been several others. It is unknown when commentaries on Porphyry's *Isagoge* were first produced, but they may have started already in the fourth century. So, there was a rich tradition to draw from.

As for Boethius' two commentaries on the *Isagoge*, there is not much to provide a lead, when we ask for probable sources, but as regards the one on the *Categories* and the second one on *Peri hermeneias* the answer ought to be simple, as Boethius expressly acknowledges use of Porphyry:

So, to conclude about the aim, [i.e. of the *Categories*] we shall have to say that this book offers a treatment of those primary words that signify the primary genera of things and qua signifying. This is a suitable interpretation on the occasion of the simple exposition which we have now composed and in which we follow Porphyry, because he is the least complicated and the plainest.²⁸

. . . the book is called *On Interpretation*. In composing a Latin language exposition of this work I have drawn principally on Porphyry (though on others as well), because, in my opinion, this expositor [i.e. Porphyry] is the best both at penetrating the sense and at presenting his interpretations.²⁹

There are some debatable points in the above translations, but there can be no doubt that Boethius acknowledges use of Porphyry, though he also indicates use of some other, but less important, sources. A natural conclusion is that in both cases, *Categories* and *Peri hermeneias*, Boethius primarily followed Porphyry, while also consulting various other sources. And, indeed, Porphyry is mentioned on numerous occasions. What is known about Porphyry as a commentator indicates that he was a *fidus interpres* who strove with some success not to import Platonism into Aristotle because his whole project of reconciling the two old philosophers relied on having them talk about different levels of

reality, Aristotle about sensible things and concepts formed by abstraction, Plato about the higher realm of intelligible substances and concepts prior to the sensible things. It is very tempting to think that Boethius was both aware of this side of Porphyry and liked it, and so decided to use him as his main source whenever possible.³⁰ As noted above, two of the logical monographs also acknowledge a debt to Porphyry, and the inspiration for the projected book about the harmony between Aristotle and Plato must have come from another lost work of Porphyry's, *On the Unity of Plato's and Aristotle's Philosophy*.³¹

Now, Porphyry is known to have composed two commentaries on the *Categories*, a shorter one, most of which is still extant, and a longer one, of which only quotations survive. His commentary on the *Peri hermeneias* is likewise lost, and so are all other commentaries on the *Categories* and *Peri hermeneias* that Boethius could possibly have used except for those by his older contemporary Ammonius, which cannot be dated with certainty, but some version of which is likely to have existed when Boethius went to work.

In the case of the *Categories*, it is easy to see cases of rather close agreement between Boethius' commentary and the preserved smaller one of Porphyry's. Usually the agreement is one of thought rather than of wording; long stretches of literal translation do not occur, but some Boethian phrases *are* literal translations of Porphyry's Greek, and some sentences are very close to being so. Does this indicate direct use of Porphyry? And what to do about passages that do not match Porphyry as preserved, but rather passages in the extant sixth-century commentaries of Ammonius, Philoponus or, in particular, Simplicius? Nobody doubts that Porphyry's lost commentaries are the source of much that one finds in those sixth-century authors, but exactly how much is Porphyrian is hard to establish, and so it is often impossible to tell whether agreement with them may be explained as shared heritage from the lost Porphyrian works.

Boethius mentions three post-Porphyrian commentators by name, two on the *Categories* – Iamblichus (c.240–325) and Themistius (late fourth century) – and one, Syrianus (fifth century), on the *Peri hermeneias*.³²

The only pre-Porphyrian exegetes mentioned by name are Andronicus (first century BC, on *Categories*), Herminus (second century AD, on both *Categories* and *Peri hermeneias*), Aspasius (second century AD, on *Peri hermeneias*) and Alexander of Aphrodisias (c.AD 200, on *Peri hermeneias*).³³ In almost every case, the interpretations of those older scholars are mentioned only to be contrasted with Porphyry's, and so he was almost certainly Boethius' direct or indirect source of the information, and probably also of whatever unattributed Alexander-material may be detected in Boethius, for Porphyry certainly made extensive use of his most illustrious predecessor as an Aristotelian commentator. The following remark of Boethius, made after a presentation of competing interpretations by Alexander and Herminus, is indicative of how things happened:

But Porphyry examines both interpretations shrewdly and subtly, and prefers

Alexander's.³⁴

It is utterly improbable that Boethius made direct use of either Andronicus, Aspasius or Herminus, and it seems that he could have had all his information about both them and Alexander from Porphyry.

Assuming that the situation is roughly the same for the *Categories* and the two commentaries on the *Peri hermeneias*, there are three fundamentally different ways of attacking the problem of sources:

- (1) We assume, as suggested above, that Boethius follows Porphyry in the main, while also consulting one or two later scholars, and just possibly also Alexander of Aphrodisias. A probable corollary to this view is that for the *Categories* Boethius primarily relied on Porphyry's minor (and preserved) commentary rather than the big *Ad Gedalium* (i.e. dedicated to Gedalios) that we no longer have. True, one longish and acknowledged quotation of Porphyry must derive from *Ad Gedalium*, whether directly or indirectly,³⁵ but the very fact that Boethius acknowledges that he is quoting shows that *Ad Gedalium* was not his main source. Syrianus, who is known to have commented on both the *Categories* and *Peri hermeneias*, though Boethius only mentions him in the second connection, might well be the secondary source responsible for post-Porphyrian materials. Unfortunately, very little is known about Syrianus' two lost commentaries.
- (2) We assume that in the main Boethius follows some later commentator, who himself owed a debt to Porphyry, and to whom Boethius is indebted for whatever material is of indisputably Porphyrian origin.

As far as the *Categories* commentary is concerned, Iamblichus, whose lost commentary is known to have contained long verbatim extracts from Porphyry's,³⁶ would fit the description of the hypothetical post-Porphyrian source, though a later person who used Iamblichus might be an even better candidate; Syrianus is an attractive possibility. Themistius may be left out of consideration, as his commentary will have been of a very different type from Boethius',³⁷ and so may Ammonius, whose commentary does not show any striking similarity to Boethius'.³⁸

Syrianus, the latest commentator mentioned by Boethius himself, is a strong contender for the position of main source in the case of *Peri hermeneias*. Syrianus' pupil Proclus (412–85) may also be considered, for his pupil Ammonius refers to his exegesis of the work, but it is uncertain whether it was published in writing. Ammonius himself was once a popular choice as Boethius' main or even sole source, but there is precious little to substantiate the notion, and some glaring differences; ultimate dependence on one or more common sources easily explains the shared material.³⁹

- (3) We assume that for each of the two Aristotelian commentaries Boethius used a multitude of sources, none of which held a privileged position.

Variants of all three views have been held or at least canvassed. View (3) has never had

any dedicated champion, and is, indeed, entirely implausible. It would demand an extraordinarily time-consuming working process that even a professional scholar would rarely engage in. View (2) has the advantage of economy, as one Greek commentary on the *Categories* and one on the *Peri hermeneias* could have supplied both the Porphyrian and the post-Porphyrian ingredients in Boethius' works, while his own declarations of adherence to Porphyry makes (1) a most attractive view. On both view (1) and view (2), Porphyry would be the ultimate source for what commentators before him had said, though Alexander's fame might just have induced Boethius to acquire a copy of his works so as to be able to check occasionally on Porphyry's information.

- (4) A fourth view, which for some decades won almost universal recognition, held that all Boethius had at his disposal was one Greek codex containing the *Organon* with a fair amount of marginal scholia. It was even claimed that the twelfth-century manuscript with the translated scholia on the *Prior Analytics* (see [p. 37](#) above) reflected Boethius' Greek manuscript.⁴⁰ On this theory, the scholia played the role the "later commentary" plays according to view (2), and no secondary source was to be assumed.

The evidence for view (4) is extremely weak, and it is beyond the imagination of the present writer that a man in Boethius' social position should have been unable or unwilling to procure manuscripts of full-scale Greek commentaries. There might not have been any available in Italy, but it would not have been beyond his means to order what he needed from Constantinople, Athens or Alexandria, so that it could be deposited in a glass-fronted and ivory-decorated bookcase in his home.⁴¹ Boethius was not your next-door poor scholar eking out an existence with public or private alms.

Boethius' pedagogical approach to the task

A primary concern for Boethius, in several of his works, is not to complicate already complicated matters unnecessarily. As regards the commentaries, this is particularly true of that on the *Categories* and the shorter one on the *Peri hermeneias*, in the first of which we are told at one point that he has decided to follow Porphyry because his interpretation – though not the best possible – is the simpler one and better suited to beginners,⁴² while an opposite statement occurs in the latter work, to the effect that he will desert Porphyry in favor of Alexander because Alexander's interpretation of the piece of text in question is the simpler one, although Porphyry's is in fact the better one.⁴³

Boethius' Greek sources sometimes related pieces of Stoic doctrine about matters discussed by Aristotle. Boethius suppressed most of that information, and he states his reason in the following passages:

In this place Porphyry inserts a lot about the dialectic of the Stoics and of other schools, and he did the same in his exegesis of other parts of this book, but we

shall sometimes have to drop that, for superfluous explanations often create obscurity . . .

Porphyry, however, inserts some information about Stoic dialectic, but since that is unfamiliar matter to Latin ears, and does not seem to be relevant to the point in question, I shall deliberately omit it.⁴⁴

Boethius did his best to make the commentaries palatable to his Latin audience. His expected public would have had a good training in Latin rhetoric, and so using familiar examples from theoretical or practical rhetoric was a good pedagogical device that he used on more than one occasion. Talking about bungled divisions he refers to a passage in Cicero's *On Invention*, where the Greek rhetorician Hermagoras is taken to task for dividing in an illogical way.⁴⁵ At a place where Aristotle claims that changes of word order do not matter, Boethius forestalls the objection which a rhetorically trained reader would be likely to raise by noting that of course word order makes a great difference in rhetorical efficacy, and illustrates his point by changing the order in a Ciceronian passage, while disarming the objection by noting that rhetorical or poetical efficacy is irrelevant in logic.⁴⁶

In the monographs, notably in the ones on categorical syllogisms, Boethius voices concerns that his intended public will find all this logic stuff too complicated and nothing more than a convoluted way of saying what they have already learned through their training in grammar (and rhetoric). To overcome their objections, he tells his readers that once they learn the higher discipline of logic they will not treasure their previous knowledge the way they used to do, but he also adds that he does not mean that they should jettison their grammar, because grammar and logic study the same objects from different perspectives:

For different disciplines do not share the same principles, though widely different disciplines may share one and the same subject matter. For the grammarian and the dialectician must discuss the several parts of speech each in his own way, just as the mathematician and the natural scientist do not deal with lines or surfaces in the same way. Thus one discipline does not stand in the way of the other, but by combining several of them we obtain from all of them together a true cognition of reality.⁴⁷

When combined with the description of the hierarchy of cognition at the end of *Consolatio Philosophiae* (5, prose 5), this passage offers a key to understanding what Boethius thought he was doing in his Aristotelian works. For in the *Consolation* he claims that sensation, imagination, reason and suprahuman understanding (*sensus*, *imaginatio*, *ratio*, *intelligentia*) grasp the same objects in different ways, the lower sort of cognition being included in the higher. The point, then, is that we have to start from the lowest level to work our way toward the higher. We have to learn our grammar before we can get a deeper understanding of language-related matters by studying logic. We have to achieve a simplified understanding of logic before we can undertake an in-

depth study. We have to know our logic properly before we can ascend to higher matters, such as Neoplatonic metaphysics, in the light of which our initial understanding of logic will appear primitive.

This way of looking upon things was not Boethius' invention. In its essentials it was already Porphyry's, it was what allowed Porphyry to include the study of Aristotle in a curriculum aimed at producing good Platonists ready to take leave of their bodily frame. As Aristotle's logic was supposed not to have trespassed on Plato's metaphysical territory, teachers of Aristotle need not and ought not Platonize him. Boethius' extant commentaries evince a decision to follow Porphyry, though he was clearly sympathetic to some of the more extravagant Neoplatonists – people of the stripe of Iamblichus, Syrianus and Proclus – and it makes one shudder to imagine what the “Pythagorean” exposition of the *Categories* that his extant commentary says he was contemplating was or would be like.

Notes

1. Horace, *Epistles* 2.1.156–161: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis | intulit agresti Latio . . . | . . . Sed in longum tamen aevum | manserunt hodieque manent vestigia ruris. | Serus enim Graecis admovit acumina chartis.*
2. Boethius 2IN 79–80.
3. Boethius 2IS 190, TC 1152C.
4. The first edition is usually referred to as *De syllogismis categoricis*, the second as *Introductio in syllogismos categoricos*.
5. See Minio-Paluello's introductions to volumes I, II, III and V of *Aristoteles Latinus*. His arguments seem very strong, but I cannot quite suppress a fear that his similar results for each work may be due to some flaw in his methodology. Dod [1982](#): 54 cautiously says that “[t]he revisions may be Boethius' own, or they may be the work of an unknown editor, possibly working in Constantinople where Boethius' works are known to have been transcribed (and perhaps edited) already in the sixth century.”
6. See Hadot [1959](#).
7. See Minio-Paluello [1957](#). Cf. Shiel [1982](#). Edition in *AL* III.4, supplements in Shiel [1984](#).
8. See Ebbesen [1981b](#).
9. See Bobzien [2002](#).
10. A reference to a Boethian commentary on *Posterior Analytics* I is found in a thirteenth-century MS (Munich, clm 14246), but this is surely an error. The work referred to was really the translation of Philoponus' commentary that

most schoolmen attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias. I regret having called attention to the Munich MS in a small article of 1973 (*CIMAGL* 9: 68–73), and I beg my readers not to waste their time on looking up that article.

- [11.](#) Boethius 2IN 3.
- [12.](#) For the history of the Boethian theory of topics see Ebbesen [1981a](#): 1. 106ff. The maxims cited occur at TD 2.7.26: p. 36 (1190A) (page references to TD are to Boethius [1990](#), with references to Boethius [1847](#) added in brackets) and 3.3.11: p. 52 (1197C).
- [13.](#) Boethius 2IS 135: *Secundus hic arreptae expositionis labor nostrae seriem translationis expediet, in qua quidem vereor ne subierim fidi interpretis culpam, cum verbum verbo expressum comparatumque reddiderim.*
- [14.](#) See Ebbesen [1981a](#): 1.188.
- [15.](#) A description of the good exegete is found in the commentary on the *Categories* by Boethius' near-contemporary, Simplicius, *CAG* 8: 7.
- [16.](#) Boethius 2IS 150–1. Cf. Ammonius, Commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, *CAG* 4.3: 24–5.
- [17.](#) Boethius 2IS 167: *Idcirco vero studiosius Aristotelis sententiam executi sumus, non quod eam maxime probaremus sed quod hic liber ad Praedicamenta conscriptus est quorum Aristoteles est auctor.*
- [18.](#) Boethius CAT 160B: *Est vero in mente de tribus olim quaestionibus disputare, quarum una est quid Praedicamentorum velit intentio, ibique numeratis diversorum sententiis docebimus, cui nostrum quoque accedat arbitrium, quod nemo huic impraesentiarum sententiae repugnare miretur, cum videat, quanto illa sit altior, cuius non nimium ingredientium mentes capaces esse potuissent, ad quos mediocriter imbuendos ista conscripsimus. Afficiendi ergo et quodam modo disponendi mediocri expositione sunt in ipsis quasi disciplinae huius foribus, quos ad hanc scientiam paramus ammittere. Hanc igitur causam mutatae sententiae utriusque operis lector agnoscat, quod illic ad scientiam Pythagoricam perfectamque doctrinam, hic ad simplices introducendorum motus expositionis sit accommodata sententia.* I quote from Monika Asztalos' forthcoming edition, excerpts from which she has kindly put at my disposal, but I keep the transmitted phrase *ad simplices introducendorum motus*, which she thinks is corrupt. That may be so, but I have not been convinced by any proposed emendation, and, as my translation shows, I think it is just possible to make sense of the phrase.
- [19.](#) Boethius CAT 162A: *Archytes etiam duos composuit libros quos Καθόλου λόγους inscripsit, quorum in primo haec decem praedicamenta disposuit. Unde posteriores quidam non esse Aristotelem huius divisionis inventorem suspicati sunt, quod Pythagoricus vir eadem conscripsisset, in qua sententia*

Iamblicus philosophus est non ignobilis, cui non consentit Themistius, neque concedit eum fuisse Archytem, qui Pythagoricus Tarentinusque esset, quique cum Platone aliquantulum vixisset sed Peripateticum aliquem Archytem, qui novo operi auctoritatem vetustate nominis conderet. Sed de his alias.

- [20.](#) See, in particular, Syrianus *Metaph.*, CAG 6.1: 60.
- [21.](#) Most of the evidence for Iamblichus' views about Aristotle's dependence on Archytas comes from Simplicius' *Categories* commentary (CAG 8). A rather (but not quite) complete collection of fragments is found in Dalsgaard Larsen [1972](#).
- [22.](#) See Mansfeld [1994](#).
- [23.](#) 2IN 446: *Atque hic quidem ordo sermonum est, ut in aliis fere omnibus, perplexus atque constrictus . . . Quod si quis Aristotelis verbis seriem nostrae expositionis adnectat et quod illic propter similitudinem confusum est per expositionis nostrae distinctionem ac separationem disgreget, quod vero in Aristotelis sermonibus minus est hinc compenset, sententiae ratio totius elucebit.*
- [24.](#) 2IN 444–5: *DUBITABIT AUTEM, inquit, ALIQUIS, SI ILLUD QUOD EST NECESSARIUM ESSE POSSIBILE ESSE SEQUITUR, id est si necessitati possibilitas consentit. NAM SI NON SEQUITUR, id est si neget aliquis ut possibilitas necessitatem sequatur, CONTRADICTIONE CONSEQUITUR, possibilitatis scilicet contradictio. Nam quod possibilitas non sequitur, contradictio possibilitatis sequitur, ea scilicet quae dicit NON POSSIBILE ESSE. . . . Hoc autem est ut, si necessitatem possibilitas non sequatur et contradictio possibilitatis consentiat, sit recta consequentia: si necessarium est esse, non possibile est esse, quod est inconueniens. ET SI QUIS NON HANC DICAT ESSE CONTRADICTIONEM, id est si quis neget possibilitatis contradictionem esse quae dicit non possibile esse, illud certe ei NECESSE EST DICERE quod possibilitatis contradictio ea sit quae dicit POSSIBILE esse NON ESSE.* The small capitals are used to mark Aristotle's text.
- [25.](#) 2IN 251: *Huius enim libri post has geminas commentationes quoddam breviarium facimus, ita ut in quibusdam et fere omnibus Aristotelis ipsius verbis utamur, tantum quod ille brevitatem dixit obscure nos aliquibus additis dilucidiores seriem adiectione faciamus, ut quasi inter textus brevitatem commentationisque diffusionem medius ingrediatur stilus diffuse dicta colligens et angustissime scripta diffundens.*
- [26.](#) See, in particular, Shiel [1990](#) [originally 1958]; Ebbesen [1987](#); Asztalos [1993](#) and [2003](#); Magee, [forthcoming](#).
- [27.](#) Boethius, *Categorical Syllogisms*: see the edition by C. Thomsen Thörnqvist, Boethius [2008b](#). *On Division*: see the introduction to J. Magee's edition. Boethius himself mentions Porphyry in those two works, and in the *Categorical Syllogisms* 813C even speaks of *Porphyry himself* (as opposed to

- some other logicians), which is a strong indication that he was the main source.
- [28.](#) Boethius CAT 160A–B: *Ut igitur concludenda sit intentio, dicendum est in hoc libro de primis vocibus prima rerum genera significantibus in eo, quod significantes sunt, dispositum esse tractatum. Haec quidem est tempore introductionis et simplicis expositionis apta sententia, quam nos Porphyrium nunc sequentes, quod videbatur expeditior esse planiorque, digessimus.* I use Monika Asztalos’ unpublished edition. In the manuscripts the period *Ut igitur . . . tractatum* does not appear in this place, but for my present purpose it is of no importance whether Asztalos’ transposition (argued for in Asztalos [1993](#)) is correct.
 - [29.](#) Boethius 2IN 7: . . . “*De interpretatione*” *liber inscriptus est. Cuius expositionem nos scilicet quam maxime a Porphyrio quamquam etiam a ceteris transferentes Latina oratione digessimus; hic enim nobis expositor et intellectus acumine et sententiarum dispositione videtur excellere.*
 - [30.](#) This was the view I defended in Ebbesen [1987](#). Asztalos [2003](#) has raised objections against it.
 - [31.](#) *Peri tou mian einai tēēn Platōōnos kai Aristotelous hairesin.*
 - [32.](#) Iamblichus: CAT 162A, 224D–225B. Themistius: CAT 162A. Syrianus: 2IN 18, 87–8, 172–3, 321, 324. Notice that in 1IN Boethius on a couple of occasions uses names of earlier commentators in examples: Alexander at pp. 106–7 and Philoxenus, i.e. Syrianus, at p. 123, which indicates that he knew something about Syrianus’ commentary already when writing his minor one.
 - [33.](#) Andronicus: CAT 263B. (The information in 2IN 11 that Andronicus deemed *Peri hermeneias* spurious can be traced back to Alexander; it seems doubtful that his source was a commentary by Andronicus on the work he athetized). Herminus: CAT 212B. Aspasius: 1IN 131; 2IN 10, 37, 41, 74, 87, 121–2, 159, 183, 293. Herminus: 1IN 131; 2IN 25–6, 39–40, 157–8, 183, 273, 275–6, 293, 307, 310. Alexander: 1IN 131; 2IN 3, 10, 11, 16–19, 26, 35–40, 77, 82–7, 93, 98, 121, 158–60, 183, 219, 272, 274, 292–3, 317.
 - [34.](#) 2IN 40: *Sed Porphyrius de utrisque acute subtiliterque iudicat et Alexandri magis sententiam probat.*
 - [35.](#) CAT 233B–D.
 - [36.](#) See Simplicius *Cat.* (CAG 8) 2.
 - [37.](#) The pseudo-Augustinian *Categoriae decem* (edited as *Paraphrasis Themistiana* in *AL* 1.5) is a Latin echo of Themistius’ lost work.
 - [38.](#) See Shiel [1990](#): 355.
 - [39.](#) See Shiel [1990](#): 357–8.
 - [40.](#) View (4) was put forward by J. Shiel in an important article in [1958](#), in which he

even tried to reduce the monographs' sources to the same supposed marginal scholia. A slightly revised version, Shiel [1990](#) (in whose bibliography one can find more of his publications), addresses the critique raised in Ebbesen [1987](#), but unconvincingly, I submit. Shiel overstated his case, but it should be remembered that his original article contains many shrewd observations.

[41.](#) Boethius describes his bookcases in *Consolatio* 1.4.3.

[42.](#) CAT 160A–B (passage quoted above).

[43.](#) 1IN: 130 *Huius sententiae multiplex expositio ab Alexandro et Porphyrio, Aspasio quoque et Hermino proditur. In quibus quid excellentissimus expositorum Porphyrius dixerit, alias dicemus. Quoniam uero simplicior explanatio Alexandri esse videtur, eam nunc pro breuitate subiecimus.* At 2IN: 275, Boethius prefers Porphyry when commenting on the same passage.

[44.](#) 2IN 71: *Hoc loco Porphyrius de Stoicorum dialectica aliarumque scholarum multa permiscet et in aliis quoque huius libri partibus idem in expositionibus fecit, quod interdum nobis est neglegendum. Saepe enim superflua explanatione magis obscuritas comparatur . . .* (201) *Porphyrius tamen quaedam de Stoica dialectica permiscet: quae cum Latinis auribus nota non si<n>t* [*sint* is Ebbesen's conjecture. Meiser's edition has *sit* with no variant mentioned in the apparatus], *nec hoc ipsum quod in quaestionem venit agnoscitur atque ideo illa studio praetermitteremus.* Cf. p. 224: *Et nunc quidem quid de hac re Stoici dicant praetermittendum est.* It is not obvious why at 2IN 393–4 Boethius decided to keep his source's information about what Stoics said about possible and necessary propositions.

[45.](#) 1IS 22–3. Another reference to *De inventione* on p. 12.

[46.](#) 2IN 344–5. Ammonius' commentary on the same passage, *CAG* 4.5: 191–2, also briefly mentions rhetoricians, but uses the beginning of Plato's *Republic* to show the stylistic effect of a transposition.

[47.](#) Boethius ISC 762C, here quoted from a forthcoming critical edition by C. Thomsen Thörnqvist: *Non enim est una atque eadem diversarum ratio disciplinarum, cum sit diversissimis disciplinis una atque eadem subiecta materies. Aliter enim de qualibet orationis parte grammatico, aliter dialectico disserendum est nec eodem modo lineam vel superficiem mathematicus ac physicus tractant. Quo fit, ut altera alteram non impediat disciplina, sed multarum consideratione coniuncta fiat naturae vera atque ex omnibus explicata cognitio.*

3 The logical textbooks and their influence

Christopher J. Martin

Introduction

The time at which Boethius wrote was not a great one in the history of logic and he himself was certainly not a great logician. His importance lies rather in acting as an intermediary between the logicians of antiquity and the those of the Middle Ages. With his translations¹, commentaries² and independent logical works³ Boethius provided mediaeval philosophers with most of what they knew about ancient logic and so with the foundations upon which mediaeval logic was built. The most important parts of those foundations were the metaphysics of substance and semantics of common names which could be extracted from Boethius' commentaries on the *Isagoge*, *Categories*, and *De interpretatione*, his account of conditional propositions in *De hypotheticis syllogismis*, and his treatment of topical argumentation in *De topicis differentiis*. Boethius' own peculiar contribution to the history of logic was an exposition of the hypothetical syllogism which, for the reasons we will consider here, would play no role in the development of logic after the middle of the twelfth century.

Inherence and inseparability

In his commentaries Boethius provided the Middle Ages with their first acquaintance, in a much simplified form, with the distinctions first drawn by Aristotle between *per se* and *per accidens* inherence and between two kinds of inseparability which would be crucial for the later development of logic.

Porphyry offers the *Isagoge* to his readers as an account of what needs to be known about the predicables, i.e. genus, species, differentia, property and accident, by someone setting out to study Aristotle's theory of the ten predicaments, or categories. Boethius follows him in his commentaries in limiting discussion of the predicables almost entirely to their application to the first predicament, substance. This is understandable since all five are needed only to properly characterise substance but has the unfortunate consequence that neither Porphyry nor Boethius provides us with general terminology for talking about them. The following remark from Boethius' account of differentiae in his longer commentary on the *Isagoge* (2IS) reflects this limitation in drawing the distinction between *per se* and *per accidens* inherence and provides a summary of some of the

important elements of his account of substance:

Something is said to inhere *per se* which informs the substance of something. For if the reason that a species exists is that it is constituted by a substantial differentia, then that differentia is present *per se* to the subject, and not *per accidens* or by any other means. Rather its presence informs the species which it maintains, in the way that rationalness <informs> human being. This sort of differentia inheres *per se* in human being; something is a human being because the power to reason is present. It is such that if it were to depart, the species human being would not remain. And no one is ignorant of the fact that what are substantial are inseparable. They may not be separated from the subject without the destruction of the nature of the subject.⁴

The *genus generalissimum* substance is reduced to its species and ultimately to its *species specialissimae* such as human being and horse by the sequence of differentiae which divide it to constitute these species. Finally, according to Boethius, the resulting specific substantial form, for example humanness (*humanitas*), constitutes the entire substance of the individuals which belong to the *species specialissima*, human being.⁵ According to his criterion of *per se* inherence, the forms corresponding to the species itself and to whatever is included in its definition thus *inhere per se* in every individual of that species and so the species, genus, differentiae and the definition itself are predicated of the individual, as latter philosophers would say, *per se*.⁶ Within the categorial hierarchy each item is predicated *per se* of all those items which fall under it. Individual substances, Boethius holds, are constituted as the kinds of things that they are by their substantial forms and distinguished from one another by possessing a collection of accidents which cannot jointly co-occur in any other individual.⁷

According to Boethius, following Porphyry, substantial differentiae are the third and most proper kind of difference which may exist between individuals. They are to be distinguished from proper differences, such as the possession of a snub nose or a scar of a particular shape, and from common differences such as being asleep rather than being awake. Each of the latter kinds of difference is accidental to its subject but, while common differences are separable, once proper differences have been acquired they are inseparable from their subjects.⁸

The claim that there are features of substances which inhere in them accidentally but nevertheless inseparably is developed further in the discussion of the predicables of accident and property. The Aristotelian description of an accident given by Porphyry is that it is a feature of a subject which may be present or absent without the destruction of its subject. Porphyry goes on to distinguish separable accidents such as being asleep from inseparable accidents such as the blackness of crows and Ethiopians. In order that the canonical description apply to such features a possibility of separation is thus required which is compatible with their inseparability in the intended sense. Porphyry's examples of a snub nose and black skin suggest that the inseparability is physical, but he offers

only the briefest hint of the character of the separability compatible with it: ‘We may’, he says, ‘conceive of a white crow or of an Ethiopian lacking colour without the corruption of the subject.’⁹ With a view to later developments let us call the inseparability of inseparable accidents *real inseparability*. In contrast, substances cannot be conceived without the substantial differentiae which modify the genus in their definitions. For a human being to lack the power to reason is not simply physically impossible, it is inconceivable; let us call this *conceptual inseparability*.

Boethius is not at all clear about the mental operation that is to be employed in separating accidents from their substances and slips easily from talk of cogitation and reason to talk of imagination:

It often happens that what cannot actually be disjoined may be separated with the mind and by cogitation. But if the separation of qualities from subjects with the mind’s [power of] reasoning does not destroy [those subjects], and they persist in their substance, [these qualities] are understood to be accidents. Suppose therefore, because the black colour of an Ethiopian cannot be removed, that we separate it in the mind by cogitation. The colour of the Ethiopian will therefore be white. Will the species also for this reason be destroyed? Not at all. Likewise if we separate in imagination the colour black from a crow, it remains nevertheless a bird, and the species is not destroyed. Therefore that [an accident] is said to be present or absent is to be understood not with respect to things but with respect to the mind.¹⁰

Items belonging to the fourth predicable, property, are features possessed by all and only the members of a single species such as the abilities that humans have to laugh and to sail.¹¹ Properties are also accidental to their bearers and so, although he does not explicitly note this, Boethius’ development of Porphyry’s account of properties requires that it is possible to conceive or imagine their subjects without them. It is not at all clear, however, what this might involve. The remark just quoted suggests that we conceive of an Ethiopian who is not black by imagining him be white, but what should we try to imagine if we want to imagine him as not able to laugh?

The mind’s power to think about or imagine the separation of inseparable accidents from their subject substances is an instance of a more general ability which Boethius supposes us to have of thinking constructively about impossibilities. In a confused and confusing discussion of the meaning of ‘hypothesis’ in his treatise *De hypotheticis syllogismis* he tells us that one of the two senses of the term distinguished by Aristotle’s pupil Eudemus was that of something ‘assented to by means of a certain condition [i. e. agreement] of those agreeing among themselves, that may in no way come about, in order that reason may be pursued to its limit.’¹²

Boethius’ example of this procedure is an agreement to suppose that all form is separated from matter which requires us to conceptually separate what is really inseparable. The brief discussion is hard to follow but it is nevertheless clear that the

conclusion that Boethius draws in thinking about this impossible hypothesis is intended to be a discovery about the nature of corporeal substances – that they all consist of matter and form.¹³ The argument is thus not the familiar reduction to impossibility which he employs in his discussion of categorical and hypothetical syllogisms to show that an hypothesis is impossible by deriving an evident impossibility from it. Rather it is constructive reasoning about acknowledged impossibilities.

Mediaeval philosophers found a much more substantial and much clearer example of the use of impossible hypotheses in Boethius' exploration, in his treatise *Quomodo substantiae*, of the nature of creaturely goodness. It is agreed that all beings are created by God and that each of them is necessarily good. Without further justification Boethius asks us to consider the distinction between real and conceptual separability:

There are many things which although they cannot be separated in act, are separated in the mind and by cogitation; for example although no one can actually separate a triangle or any other [form] from its subject matter, with the mind separating it, the triangle and its characteristic property are considered apart from matter. Let us therefore remove the presence of the first good for a while from the mind. That it exists is certain and may be known from the opinion of all learned and unlearned men and the religions of all the barbarian races. With this removed therefore for a little while, let us posit that all those things exist which are good and consider how they might be good if they in no way flowed from the first good.¹⁴

The details of the argument are obscure but the conclusion seems to be that under the impossible hypothesis we discover that the goodness of beings other than God is an inseparable accident of them.¹⁵

Although they were not known to the Middle Ages, there are other examples of reasoning about acknowledged impossibilities to be found in the writings of Boethius' Greek contemporary Philoponus. Boethius' remarks in *De hypotheticis syllogismis* suggest that the procedure might have been regimented in some way, but neither he nor Philoponus provide any further account of its logic.¹⁶ In the twelfth century, however, the procedure was given the name 'impossible *positio*', and rules were provided for it as a form of the discipline of constrained argumentation known as *obligationes*. What is required before one can conduct such a thought experiment is an account of the inferences that are acceptable under an hypothesis recognised to be impossible. In the Middle Ages this account had to acknowledge the principle that anything follows from an impossibility and to insulate reasoning about impossibilities from it. There is no direct evidence that this 'paradox' was formulated in antiquity and we will see shortly that Boethius' account of conditional propositions suggests that he himself was not aware of it.

Categorical propositions

The principles which would constrain the development of theories of term and propositional meaning in the Middle Ages are set down by Aristotle in the extremely brief opening chapters of *De interpretatione*. Relying by his own account heavily on Porphyry,¹⁷ Boethius' commentaries on these chapters enormously exceeded the originals in length and provided a framework for understanding them which continued to be used throughout the Middle Ages. In particular Aristotle proposes in [Chapters 1](#) and 3 of *De interpretatione* a mentalistic account of meaning in which nouns in the first place signify concepts. Claims about conceivability are thus closely connected with claims about meaning, and most importantly the separability or inseparability in thought of one item from another may be interpreted in terms of the relations of meaning between the corresponding words.

According to Boethius signification is a relationship between a name and a concept which in the case of a natural kind term such as 'human being' is established in an act of baptism in which the name is imposed on instances of that kind.¹⁸ Boethius, and like him mediaeval philosophers, seem to suppose that neither the impositor nor his audience ever have any difficulty in locating the intended targets of the imposition as individuals of the same species. The concept associated with the name of a natural kind is, Boethius holds, derived from the things named by a process of form-transference which guarantees that everyone who is introduced to the name in this way will possess precisely the same concept and associate it with that name. The concept is the form, existing as it does in the mind, which instantiated in matter outside of the mind constitutes an individual as an individual of that kind. This combination of Aristotle's semantics, essentialism and philosophy of mind is taken to guarantee that an utterance of the word *homo*, say, will generate in the mind of any competent speaker of Latin who hears it a concept which is formally identical with the nature of each and every individual human.¹⁹ It is these individuals that form the extension of the name. In the idiom of contemporary philosophical semantics a natural kind term thus rigidly designates all and only the individuals of that kind. The referential relation, however, is not direct but rather mediated through the signified concept and its formal identity with the substantial forms of the designated individuals.²⁰ Although he certainly holds that meanings are located in the mind, Boethius' account of signification for natural kind terms is thus not subject to the objections which have been raised in the twentieth century to theories identifying meanings with mental descriptions which may in fact fail to apply to the things putatively so named.

According to Boethius, although the concept associated with a simple natural kind term is itself 'simple', it can nevertheless be analysed with an Aristotelian definition into genus and differentia. In this sense it is a whole 'containing' conceptual parts, and Boethius may plausibly be read as maintaining that someone who hears and understands such a term in some sense understands everything which is included in the corresponding definition:

When someone hears a significant word and grasps it with his mind, he settles his understanding on it; as, for example, when someone hears ‘human being’ he comprehends what it is that he grasps with his mind and determines with his soul that he has heard ‘rational mortal animal’.²¹

The claim that in understanding a natural kind term we at the same time understand the definition is obviously false if it is taken to imply that we are able to state, or determine on reflection, the definition associated with every natural kind term. What is important, however, is the connection which is suggested to hold between these two concepts. The concept signified by the term ‘human being’ signifies, though in a different way, just what is signified by the expression ‘mortal rational animal’ and so in some sense our understanding of the one contains just what is contained in our understanding of the other.

The simple and optimistic theory of form-transference which grounds Boethius’ semantics for terms provides him with an equally simple account of the meaning of categorical propositions.²² The composite concept signified by a simple categorical assertion such as ‘a human being is running’ is formed, he claims, by combining the concept signified by ‘human being’ with that signified by ‘running’.²³ His account thus satisfies in the simplest case one of the requirements which must be met by any theory of sentential meaning, that of explaining how the meaning of a sentence depends upon the meaning of its component parts. Such a theory, however, must do much more, since it must explain the meaning of every kind of sentence, no matter how complex. Closely connected to this, it must also show how different speech acts with the same content are related to one another; how, for example, the assertion ‘Socrates is running’ is related to the command ‘Socrates, run!’ Boethius, it is true, does follow Aristotle in distinguishing various kinds of sentence: assertions, questions, commands and so on, but by giving completely unrelated examples reveals at best an interest in the classification of the different types of speech act.²⁴ He offers no explanation, furthermore, of the difference in meaning between the description ‘a running man’ and the sentence ‘a man is running’ uttered as an assertion.

Most importantly, Boethius does not distinguish between the propositional content of a speech act and the force with which it is uttered. When this distinction is made, as it was in the twelfth century, the formation of compound propositions may be explained in terms of the transformation of propositional contents with propositional operations to form new contents, which may then themselves be asserted, commanded, or whatever. Negation is on this account the propositional operator on propositional contents that produces a content that is true if the original is false and false if the original is true. We may indicate this operation by applying the expression ‘it is not the case that . . .’ to the propositional content to form the *propositional negation* – for example, ‘it is not the case that Socrates is running’ which is *defined* to be false if the proposition ‘Socrates is running’ is true and true if it is false.

Boethius’ account of negation is quite different. Following *De interpretatione* 1, he

holds that the denial corresponding to a given simple categorical affirmation signifies the mental separation of the subject and predicate.²⁵ He thus characterises negation only for categorical propositions and insists that the negative particle must always apply to the predicate since a categorical affirmation is the assertion ‘of something of something’. To oppose it we must form the contradictory proposition signifying the separation of the same thing from the same thing.²⁶ Let us follow Peter Abaelard here and call this operation on the predicate of categorical propositions *separative negation*.

Boethius’ naïve correspondence account of truth would seem to commit him to holding that where the subject term of a simple categorical proposition is empty both the affirmation and the negation are false since nothing corresponds either to the mental combination or to the separation. Here the propositional negation would differ by being true. Boethius in fact also insists that the negation is true but certainly not because he understands it to be a propositional operation. Rather, following Aristotle in *Categories* 10, he supposes that assertions may unproblematically be made about things which do not exist and that every such affirmation is false and every negation true:

If the subject thing does not exist at all, any affirmation of it is false, and the corresponding negation always true. For in our time, since Socrates does not exist and does not subsist, if someone says ‘Socrates sees’, and another says ‘Socrates does not see’, it is false to say of him that he sees, but true to say of him that he does not see.²⁷

Granted this general principle, infinite nouns may be defined in terms of separative negation. The infinite noun *non homo* signifies whatever *homo* does not signify and so everything, whether it exists or not, which is not an actually existing human being.²⁸ The meaning of a proposition with a finite term for its subject and an infinite term for its predicate is identical to that of the corresponding separative negation, but Aristotle says nothing about propositions with infinite subjects. In his *Introductio ad syllogismos categoricos* (ISC), and *De syllogismo categorico* (SC), however, although without explaining why, Boethius systematically investigates the relations between the four standard forms of quantified categorical propositions, (A) ‘Every *A* is *B*’, (E) ‘No *A* is *B*’, (I) ‘Some *A* is *B*’ and (O) ‘Some *A* is not *B*’, and propositions of the same form but with as either one or both the predicate and subject terms the corresponding infinite term both with and without their order transposed.²⁹ Curiously, having established the rules for the conversion of propositions containing such terms, Boethius does not go on to extend the figures and moods of the categorical syllogism to include these propositions. As we will see, however, such forms may have been important for his account of the wholly hypothetical syllogism.

The absence of negation as a propositional operation in Boethian semantics is clearly illustrated in an argument that he offers against the Stoics.³⁰ If we follow their practice, he says, and put the negative particle before the noun, we will not be able to tell whether a proposition such as ‘not human is walking’ is an affirmation with an infinite subject or a

negation with a finite subject. This completely misrepresents the Stoics by suggesting that their differences with the Peripatetics were simply over syntax, whereas in fact they seem to have treated negation as a truth-functional operation and placed it first in a proposition in order to indicate that its scope extends over the whole of the sentence which follows.

In his account, in the *Prior Analytics*, of the three figures of the categorical syllogism Aristotle formulates the valid moods as conditional sentences using letters to stand for general terms. The first mood of the first figure is, for example, ‘If *A* is predicated of every *B*, and *B* of every *C*, then it is necessary that *A* is predicated of every *C*’, and the fourth mood ‘If *A* inheres in no *B* but *B* inheres in some *C*, then it is necessary that *A* not inhere in some *C*.’ In SC Boethius provides a similar conditional formulation for each of the valid moods but also gives instances of the arguments which they validate using the four standard forms of quantified categoricals noted above – for example, for the fourth mood of the first figure, ‘No good is bad, some just man is good; therefore some just man is not bad.’ Gunter Patzig has criticised Boethius’ presentation for obscuring the ‘transparency’ of the first figure, but his examples are in fact entirely harmless since they are always accompanied by the supporting schematic conditional in the appropriate Aristotelian form.³¹

More interesting is Boethius’ formulation of the particular negative categorical proposition in ISC and SC as ‘Some *A* is not *B*.’ His Latin here does not, as it usually does, literally translate the corresponding expression in Greek but perhaps represents a decision to interpret Aristotle’s formulation ‘*B* does not inhere in some *A*’ to make the separative character of negation explicit. A challenge to this account of negation might be thought, and was thought by Abaelard, to be found in *De interpretatione* 7, where Aristotle sets out the relations of contrariety and contradictoriness, for examples of quantified propositions with the form given in the list above for (A) to (I), but in place of (O) gives an example of the form (O*) ‘Not every *A* is *B*.’

Boethius offers an extensive and interesting commentary on this chapter, in which he explains the semantics of quantification in terms of the form-transference model. A general but unquantified proposition such as ‘a human being is white’ is, he argues, ambiguous since the form humanness is present entire in every individual human. The intended proposition might thus be about all humans or about only one of them. The ambiguity is removed by determining the universal ‘human being’ with ‘every’ to form a universal claim, or ‘some’ to form a particular claim. The separative negation of the particular claim is according to Boethius ‘Some *A* is not *B*.’ ‘Not every *A* is *B*’ appears with ‘No *A* is *B*’ in Aristotle’s list, he argues, because the natural way of forming the negation of, for example, ‘Every human is just’ as ‘Every human is not just’ is ambiguous between the universal claim that each individual human is not just expressed by (I) and the particular claim that some human is not just. Boethius’ (O) and Aristotle’s (O*) thus mean the same and there is no trace of propositional negation here: ‘Unless there is some ambiguity the negation is always attached to the predicate.’³²

Boethius’ exploration of the square of opposition and in general of the relations

between pairs of propositions appeals to what will later be called their matter. For example, although an indefinite affirmation and negation do not generally divide truth and falsity, they will do so if their predicates are formed from terms ‘which naturally and necessarily inhere to the subject substances or are not able to inhere in them’.³³ So, for example, ‘a human being is an animal’ divides truth and falsity with ‘a human being is not an animal’ since the former is necessarily true and the latter necessarily false. In ISC Boethius determines the relationship of truth and falsity between each of the four forms of proposition standardly appearing in the square and various others obtained by infinitising or transposing their terms, or by doing both. In each case he considers five possible relations between their terms. The predicate may be (i) such that it cannot be separated from the predicate – ‘Every human being is rational.’ It may be (ii) separable from the subject but such that it can never equal the ‘nature of the subject’ – ‘Every human being is literate.’ It may be (iii) such that it can ‘never hold of the subject’ – ‘Every human being is a stone.’ Or it may be (iv) such that it does hold of the subject but may be separated from it and applies to things other than the subject – ‘Every human being is just.’ Finally (v) the predicate may be such that it is ‘always predicated of the subject but cannot exceed the subject’ – ‘Every human being is able to laugh.’³⁴

Compound Propositions

Aristotle has notoriously little to say about compound propositions in general and nothing at all to say about their logic. In *De interpretatione* 5, he introduces the notion of propositional unity and tells us simply that sentential connectives may be employed to form unitary propositions. Aristotle’s point, according to Boethius, is that while the meaning of a simple categorical proposition is determined by the verb, which indicates both what is affirmed or denied of the subject, and that it is affirmed or denied, in compound propositions this role is played by the connective.³⁵

This seems a promising start, but just as he does not treat negation as a one-place propositional operation Boethius does not treat the sentential connectives as two-place operations, that is as operations which, given any two propositional contents, will produce another which may then be asserted, commanded, or whatever. Worse, he limits the power to unify to the connectives employed to form compound propositions to the conditional conjunction ‘if’, and the disjunctive conjunction ‘or’. The copulative conjunction ‘and’, on the other hand, does not form one proposition from the two which it couples but simply, in effect, serves to punctuate a list. It is understandable that Boethius should think this, since someone asserting a copulative proposition such as ‘Apollo is a prophet and Jupiter thunders’ intends to assert that Apollo is a prophet and to assert that Jupiter thunders.³⁶ If, however, the copulative conjunction is not treated as proposition-forming, its embedded occurrence in the antecedent of conditionals such as those given by Boethius in setting out the moods of the categorical syllogism cannot be

explained by appealing to a propositional operation on propositional content. He leaves such conditionals entirely unexplained, but, as we will see, the same problem arises for his account of simple conditionals.

Boethius tells us in *De hypotheticis syllogismis* that he was able to find nothing in Latin and very little in Greek on the hypothetical syllogism, and implies that what there was in Greek was due to Theophrastus and Eudemus.³⁷ He certainly shows no direct knowledge of Stoic logic and the very curious account that he offers of hypothetical syllogisms suggests that we should take seriously his claim to originality here.

Hypothetical propositions are unitary according to Boethius because they signify one thing, a relation of consequence (*consequentia*), or of separation.³⁸ For example, in ‘If it’s day, then it’s light’,

the two propositions ‘it’s day’ and ‘it’s light’ are coupled by means of the conjunction ‘if’ (*si*) but this expression does not signify many [things]. For it does not propose that it’s day and it’s light but rather that if it’s day, then it’s light. Whence it signifies a certain consequence and not the being [of things]. It does not assert both to be, but rather that if one is, the other follows, because both as it were come together in a single understanding.³⁹

Although the example given here is one often employed by the Stoics, Boethius’ own account of conditional propositions is quite different from theirs and applies rather to propositions which it seems best to read as general claims when they are stated alone and not as part of an argument schema⁴⁰ – that is, as ‘if something’s (not) *A*, it’s (not) *B*’ (*si A (non) est, B (non) est*, or equivalently *si (non) est A, (non) est B*); for example, ‘If something’s a human being, then it’s an animal.’ The ‘Stoic’ conditional presumably appears only because the antecedent and consequent are each themselves well-formed propositions, albeit so-called ‘meteorological’ impersonals. The components of ‘If something’s a human being, then it’s an animal’ on the other hand fail to meet Boethius’ requirement that a conditional proposition has categorical propositions as its parts.⁴¹

In order for a conditional of the form ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s *B*’ to be true, being *B* must be connected to being *A*, according to Boethius, with the ‘immutability of a consequence’. The nature of this connection is revealed by what we must do to show that it does not exist:

Those alone are opposed to hypotheticals which destroy their substance. The substance of hypothetical propositions lies in this, that the necessity of their consequence is strong enough to persist. If, therefore, someone would properly oppose a conditional, he should bring it about that he destroys the consequence. Just as when we say if something’s *A*, then it’s *B*, we will not resist this by showing either *A* not to be or *B* not to be, but rather if *A* is posited we show that it does not follow that *B* is but that *A* may be even though the term *B* is not.⁴²

Boethius' account of the different types of conditional shows that he holds that corresponding to the distinction between real and conceptual inseparability there are two distinct relations of consequence. In SH he initially allows that the connective 'whenever' (*cum*) may be used with just the same force as the connective 'if' (*si*),⁴³ but he goes on to insist that if we employ 'whenever' in this way we must accept as true conditionals in which there is no connection between antecedent and consequent beyond them both being sempiternally true. Since for Boethius sempiternal truths are necessary truths, such conditionals are true because the truth of the antecedent is really inseparable from the truth of the consequent.

Boethius' example of such a conditional is 'Whenever fire is hot, the heavens are round.' It holds, he says, accidentally (*secundum accidens*), in contrast to conditionals which express a consequence of nature (*consequentia naturae*). In addition to the real inseparability there is between the antecedent and consequent of such conditionals a causal, or explanatory, connection. His examples are (1) 'If something is a human being, it's an animal', where the consequent is prior causally to the antecedent, and (2) 'If the earth should stand between [the sun and the moon], an eclipse of the moon would follow', where the opposite holds. Boethius seems to suggest that the use of 'if' always indicates that something more than real inseparability is involved, but that 'whenever' may be used where there is no more than this.⁴⁴

In his brief discussion of the semantics of conditional propositions Boethius does not discuss whether an accidental consequence might hold simply because the antecedent is impossible or the consequent necessary, but his example, and the claim that there is a consequence of some sort here, suggests that it would not. If this is correct, then he is not committed to the principles that anything follows (accidentally) from an impossibility and that a necessity follows (accidentally) from anything, and so the former is no threat to his claims reasoning about impossibilities.

Boethius makes no use of the distinction between different types of natural conditional and indeed tells us nothing more about them in SH. In TD, however, in classifying questions he provides a list of connections which may hold between the antecedent and consequent of a true conditional.⁴⁵ The examples that he gives are practically all of the form 'If something's (not) *A*, then it's (not) *B*'; some, however, have complete propositions as antecedent and consequent, e.g. (I.12) 'If the sun's up, its light.'⁴⁶ It is clearest to present Boethius' position in tabular form.

(I) Both antecedent and consequent affirmative.

Antecedent	Consequent	Antecedent	Consequent
(1) species	→ genus	(9) definition	→ species
(2)	→ differentia	(10)	→ differentia
(3)	→ definition	(11)	→ property
(4)	→ property	(12) cause	→ effect
(5)	→ inseparable accident	(13) effect	→ cause
(6) property	→ species	(14) whole	→ part
(7)	→ differentia	(15) principle form of name	→ mode (derived form)
(8)	→ definition	(16) mode of name	→ principle form
		(17) accident	→ subject of accident

(II) The connections which yield a true conditional with both antecedent and consequent negative are just those given above but with the headings ‘antecedent’ and ‘consequent’ transposed. Boethius accepts, that is, that a conditional and its contrapositive are equivalent.

(III) Antecedent affirmative and consequent negative.

Antecedent	Consequent	Antecedent	Consequent
(1) genus	→ different genus	(3) contrary	→ contrary
(2) species	→ different species → species	(4) privation	→ habit

(IV) The only connection, according to Boethius, which yields a true conditional with a negative antecedent and an affirmative consequent is that between immediate contraries, i.e. those which are both exclusive and exhaustive, for example ‘If it’s not day, then it’s night’,⁴⁷ and for an animal ‘If it’s not well, then it is sick.’⁴⁸

The list confirms that Boethius supposes that real inseparability is necessary and sufficient for consequence. Its context suggests that it is intended as a complete catalogue. Since, however, he accepts the wholly hypothetical syllogism ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s *B*, if something’s *B*, then it’s *C*; therefore if something’s *A*, then it’s *C*’, he must also accept connections which do not appear here, for example that between a definition and an inseparable accident.

Even though, as we will see, Boethius allows more complex forms, he explores only the logical relations between simple conditionals, that is to say conditionals with categorical propositions for both antecedent and consequent. In particular, in his

discussion of the argument forms which Cicero reports in his *Topica* to be the particular property of logicians (*dialectici*) Boethius introduces negation as a means for recovering a true conditional from a false one⁴⁹. He claims, for example, that a conditional of the form ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s not *B*’ (*si est A, non est B*) is equivalent to a proposition of the form ‘Not if something’s *A* then it’s *B*’ (*non si est A, est B*). Although he again substitutes characteristically Stoic conditionals such as ‘If it’s day, then it’s light’ for Cicero’s example from Roman law, Boethius certainly must not be read as employing propositional negation here or, *pace* Stump,⁵⁰ as having something to contribute to our knowledge of Stoic logic. Nor, furthermore, should his classification of conditionals as affirmative or negative solely according to whether the consequent is affirmative or negative be construed as the claim that the contradictory negation of ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s *B*’ is ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s not *B*.’⁵¹ They are, of course, contrary, since if we suppose that something is *A*, if they were both true, it would follow that it both is and is not *B*, which is impossible. Boethian negation is, however, separative not propositional, and all of his remarks on the application of the negative particle to a conditional must be understood in terms of its acting on the predicate of its consequent, and not on the conditional proposition as a whole.

Thus, when he rewrites Cicero’s argument of the form ‘Not both something’s *A*, and it’s *B*, it’s *A*; therefore it’s not *B*’ as ‘Not if something’s *A*, then it’s not *B*, it’s *A*; therefore it’s not *B*’ Boethius is not making a claim about the propositional negation of a conditional. Rather he is appealing to the notion of what he calls a ‘repugnance’, the necessarily false conditional obtained from any true simple conditional by negating its consequent.⁵² Since it is impossible for the antecedent of the true conditional to be true when the consequent is false, the antecedent and consequent of the derived conditional are incompatible or, as Boethius says, repugnant to one another.⁵³ Thus, although he insists on preposing the negative particle to the repugnance in order to return the original true conditional, he does not here invoke propositional negation but rather uses this syntactic device to indicate the negation of the consequent and so to produce a proposition of the opposite quality.

That Boethius is perfectly aware of what he is doing is clear from his treatment of the special case of conditionals of the form ‘If something’s not *A*, then it’s *B*.’ Such propositions are true, he claims, only where *A* and *B* are immediately opposed and so, he points out, there are two repugnances corresponding to them: ‘If something’s not *A*, then it’s not *B*’, and ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s *B*.’⁵⁴ Negating the first of these he obtains a conditional equivalent to ‘If something’s not *A*, then it’s *B*’, his original proposition. Negating the second, however, with ‘Not if something’s *A*, then it’s *B*’ he obtains a proposition equivalent to ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s not *B*.’ He thus reads a preposed negation as, as it were, separated by a comma from the following conditional rather than by a colon.

Hypothetical syllogisms

In modern propositional logics valid argument forms are defined generally by appealing to substitution. For example, all uniform substitution instances of propositional contents of any degree of complexity for ‘ P ’ and ‘ Q ’ in ‘If P , then Q , P ; therefore Q ’ (*modus ponens*),⁵⁵ and ‘If P , then Q , not: Q ; therefore not: P ’ (*modus tollens*) are valid arguments. Lacking our notion of a propositional operation, Boethius cannot appeal to substitution and form in this way and so must give a separate account of the syllogisms which hold for each different combination of affirmative and negative components in the conditional and disjunctive propositions. This is precisely what he does in SH. He thus provides us not with a propositional logic in the modern sense but rather with what we might call a logic of compound propositions which consists of a large number of rules for making inferences from a limited number of kinds of compound proposition without any appeal to propositional substitution. The most complex propositions which Boethius considers are conditionals with both antecedent and consequent a simple conditional.

In the following summary of the hypothetical syllogistic for conditional propositions set out in SH A, B, C and D stand for general terms, u, v, w and x are indicators of the quality, either affirmative or negative, of the component categoricals, the operation ‘-’ changes a quality into the opposite quality. The major connective is always ‘if’ (*si*) and the embedded connective, if there is one, ‘whenever’ (*cum*). Boethius does not have a name for these collections but I will call them classes. He refers to the arguments they contain as moods, which in the case of Class 4 are collected into figures suggesting a connection with the figures of the categorical syllogism. The full set of moods for a given class is obtained by taking all different combinations of quality possible in that class. Class 1, *modus ponens*, thus consists of four kinds of *modus ponens*, each with a simple conditional as its major premiss. Boethius gives all the syllogisms using term variables, and provides examples for each of them.

	<i>Modus ponens</i>	<i>Modus tollens</i>
Class 1	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow vB \\ uA \\ \hline vB \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow vB \\ -vB \\ \hline -uA \end{array}$
Class 2	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow (vB \rightarrow zC) \\ uA \\ \hline vB \rightarrow zC \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow (vB \rightarrow zC) \\ vB \rightarrow -zC \\ \hline -uA \end{array}$
Class 3	$\begin{array}{l} vB \rightarrow zC \\ (uA \rightarrow vB) \rightarrow zC \\ uA \rightarrow vB \\ \hline zC \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{l} -uA \\ (uA \rightarrow vB) \rightarrow zC \\ -zC \\ \hline uA \rightarrow -vB \end{array}$
Class 5	$\begin{array}{l} (uA \rightarrow vB) \rightarrow (wC \rightarrow xD) \\ uA \rightarrow vB \\ \hline wC \rightarrow xD \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{l} (uA \rightarrow vB) \rightarrow (wC \rightarrow xD) \\ wC \rightarrow -xD \\ \hline uA \rightarrow -vB \end{array}$

Class 4 is divided into three figures as follows.⁵⁶

Class 4 is divided into three figures as follows:⁵⁶

Figure 1	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow vB \\ vB \rightarrow zC \\ \hline uA \rightarrow zC \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow vB \\ vB \rightarrow zC \\ \hline -zC \rightarrow -uA \end{array}$
Figure 2	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow vB \\ -uA \rightarrow zC \\ \hline -vB \rightarrow zC \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{l} uA \rightarrow vB \\ -uA \rightarrow zC \\ \hline -zC \rightarrow vB \end{array}$
Figure 3	$\begin{array}{l} vB \rightarrow uA \\ zC \rightarrow -uA \\ \hline vB \rightarrow -zC \end{array}$	$\begin{array}{l} vB \rightarrow uA \\ zC \rightarrow -uA \\ \hline zC \rightarrow -vB \end{array}$

Boethius' argument schemata seem best understood in the same way as the general conditionals given for categorical syllogisms as meta-statements. That is to say, for example, in the case of the first mood of *modus ponens* of Class 1 as 'For any substitution of general terms for A , B , and a proper name or general term for x , "if x is A , then x is B , x is A ; therefore x is B " is a valid argument.' An alternative would be to continue to construe the conditionals as general sentences and to read the schema as 'If something's A , then it's B ; x is A , therefore x is B .' This will not work for compound conditionals with conditionals as consequents, however, since, as we will see, Boethius wants to claim both that the consequent stated without qualification is false and that it may be detached in *modus ponens*.

The four moods of *modus ponens* for Class 1 conditionals are perfect, according to Boethius, since they cannot be demonstrated. Such syllogisms are, however, he claims, dependent on categorical syllogisms since if their premisses, and in particular the conditional premiss, need to be proved, this will ultimately require the use of a categorical syllogism.⁵⁷

The corresponding moods of *modus tollens* are imperfect and proved by appeal to the perfect moods and reduction to impossibility. For each mood of the first class except the third Boethius shows that from the consequent there follows neither the antecedent nor its negation since, for example, in the case of 'If something's a human being, then it's an animal', 'if we suppose that something's an animal it is not necessary that it is, or that it is not, a human being'.⁵⁸ Since, however, a simple conditional with a negative antecedent and an affirmative consequent is true only when the the antecedent and consequent terms are exclusive and exhaustive, we may validly argue in this case by denying the antecedent and affirming the consequent:

If it's not A , then it's B .	If it's not A , then it's B .
It's A .	It's B .
<hr/>	<hr/>
It's not B .	It's not A . ⁵⁹

Such syllogisms hold, Boethius tells us, not in virtue of the relation (*complexio propositionum*) of the antecedent to the consequent but rather in virtue of the nature of

the things (*natura rerum*) signified by the terms *A* and *B* when a conditional of this kind is true.⁶⁰ Boethius extends this claim without argument to conditionals with conditional components and so lists the corresponding pairs of arguments in Classes 2, 3, 4.1 and 5.

The first mood of the first figure of Class 4 is the wholly hypothetical syllogism ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s *B*, if something’s *B*, then it’s *C*; therefore if something’s *A*, then it’s *C*.’ According to Boethius, like all the other arguments except Class 1 *modus ponens*, it is not perfect since it must be demonstrated by showing that, if the premisses are true, then, if we suppose that something is *A*, it follows by two applications of the first perfect hypothetical syllogism that it is *C*.⁶¹

Boethius says nothing more about mediate hypothetical, but it is worth noting that, although he insists that conditionals differ from affirmative categoricals in not requiring for their truth the existence of a subject to which they apply,⁶² Class 4 arguments correspond to categorical syllogisms. By converting their negative components into infinite terms and rewriting the conditionals as universal categorical propositions each argument may be reduced, using Boethius’ principles for the manipulation of infinite terms, to a first figure, first mood, categorical syllogism. Thus the second figure, first mood, syllogism for mediate hypotheticals ‘If something’s *A*, then it’s *B*, if something’s not *A*, then it’s *C*; therefore if something’s not *B*, then it’s *C*’ becomes ‘Every *A* is *B*, every non *A* is *C*; therefore every non *B* is *C*’, which corresponds to the extended first figure categorical syllogism ‘Every *A* is *B*, every non *C* is *A*; therefore every non *C* is *B*.’

Boethius introduces only one connective ‘either . . . , or . . . ’, *aut* . . . , *aut* . . . , to form hypotheses by disjunction. His disjunctions seem like his conditionals, to be best read as general statements, and, since he does not consider disjunctions of more than two disjuncts, this reading may be retained for their argument schemata. Alternatively these may be interpreted as meta-statements like the schemata for conditionals:

$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{(D1)} & uA \vee vB \\ & \frac{-uA}{vB} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{ll} \text{(D2)} & uA \vee vB \\ & \frac{-vB}{uA} \end{array}$$

For a disjunction to be true it is thus necessary that *uA* and *vB* are exhaustive. Boethius’ examples confirm that in the three cases in which one or both of the disjuncts is negative the disjunction is also inclusive. In each case he treats *uA* \vee *vB* as equivalent to the conditional $-uA \rightarrow vB$. The disjunction ‘Either something’s *A* or it’s *B*’, on the other hand, is introduced as signifying that both *A* and *B* cannot hold of something at the same time and that ‘if one should not be the other will be’,⁶³ that is to say, as being both exclusive and exhaustive. Boethius takes it to be equivalent to ‘If something’s not *A*, then its *B*’ and so to support two additional syllogisms:

$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{(D3)} & \text{Either something's } A \text{ or} \\ & \text{it's } B. \\ & \text{It's } A. \\ \hline & \text{It's not } B. \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{ll} \text{(D4)} & \text{Either something's } A \text{ or} \\ & \text{it's } B. \\ & \text{It's } B. \\ \hline & \text{It's not } A. \end{array}$$

Boethius has seemed to some modern commentators⁶⁴ to be committed to the principle of conditional excluded middle (CEM), to the claim, that is, that conditionals of

the form ‘If P , then Q ’ and ‘If P , then not: Q ’ are contradictory opposites, where P and Q are propositional variables and the ‘not’ is propositional negation. This is entirely incorrect, and the result of failing to see that Boethius has no notion of propositional negation and that his logic is not a propositional logic in the modern sense. We have already seen that his account of repugnant propositions certainly does not commit him to CEM and his repeated use as counter-examples of pairs of terms for which he insists that neither ‘If it’s A , then it’s B ’, nor ‘If it’s A , then it’s not B ’ is true is compelling evidence that he does not accept it. There is, however, one further piece of information that we need to consider. Among his hypothetical syllogisms he includes, for example, the following pair, the first in second class and the second in the third class of arguments:

- (MT 2) If it’s A , then (if it’s B , then it’s C).
 If it’s B , then it’s not C .

 It’s not A .
- (MT 3) If (if it’s A , then it’s B), then it’s C .
 It’s not C .

 If it’s A , then it’s not B .

Together these seem to commit Boethius to CEM. We can see that they do not, however, once we take account of the extra conditions which must be met for such compound conditionals to be true and so for hypothetical syllogisms containing them to be valid. Boethius requires in particular that all the embedded conditionals must fail to satisfy the inseparability condition and so that the compound conditional premisses cannot be true merely in virtue of having necessarily true consequents. What he is apparently trying to do is to guarantee that the truth of the antecedent explains the truth of the consequent. In his presentation he doesn’t quite say this, however, or indeed explain why he thinks that the falsity of the components is necessary for an explanatory connection to be possible. Given this restriction, the only way to make sense of his syllogisms seems to be, as I said, as schemata to be instantiated as a whole while the claim about the falsity of the components applies to them understood as general conditionals. Thus for *modus ponens* for the first mood of the second class of syllogisms Boethius gives ‘If it’s a human being, then (if it’s animate, then it’s an animal), it’s a human being; therefore if it’s animate, then it’s an animal.’ If the detached consequence is construed as the general conditional ‘If something’s animate, then it’s an animal’, it is shown by the case of plants to be false.

The embedded conditional is formed with *cum*, which, as we have seen, is compatible with the mere inseparability of the antecedent and consequent in an accidental consequence. Thus we should apparently read the argument schema as warranting the inference ‘If Socrates is a human being, then (if Socrates is animate, then Socrates is an animal) Socrates is a human being; therefore if Socrates is animate, then Socrates is an animal’, where the conclusion simply and truly asserts the accidental inseparability in Socrates of being animate and being human. Each of the examples given by Boethius can be interpreted in this way, though it is hard to see the point of proving such facts about inseparability. Indeed it is very difficult to understand at all what might have motivated

Boethius' restrictions on the relations between the components of compound conditionals. They are especially problematic in the case of conditionals with both antecedent and consequent themselves conditional. In order, according to Boethius, for 'If (if something's *A*, then it's *B*), then (if it's not *C*, then it's not *D*)' to be true both the antecedent and the consequent must be false; he himself, however, relies crucially, and often, on contraposition to obtain one true conditional from another.

Given this account of his arguments, Boethius' apparent commitment to CEM can be explained if we consider the further restrictions which he places on the compound conditionals which appear in them. In the case, for example, of the conditional 'If it's *A*, then (if it's *B*, then it's *C*)' Boethius requires that it is possible for something to be *B* without being *A*, that it is not possible for something to be *A* without being *B*, that it is possible for something to be *B* without being *C*, and that something's being *C* is inseparable from its being *B* following from its being *A*.⁶⁵ This is equivalent to adding premisses to the argument in which the conditional appears so that they are no longer instances of *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*. If we restrict our attention to things which are related in this way, it will be true of those which are *A* that being *B* is inseparable in them from being *C*. Likewise, under the same restrictions, if we locate something which is such that being *B* is inseparable in it from its not being *C*, then it cannot be *A*. A different set of restrictions explains the validity of (MT3). Boethius' inclusion of inferences (MT2) and (MT3) among the hypothetical syllogisms thus does not indicate that he accepts CEM but is rather a consequence of the account that he gives of the relations which must exist between the terms if the compound premisses of the arguments are to be true.⁶⁶

Finally here we must note what will be for twelfth-century philosophers the most important principle given by Boethius to explain the interaction of negation and the conditional. Without further explanation, and indeed without anywhere relying on it, he tells us in SH that according to Aristotle 'it is not necessary for the same thing to be both when something is and when it is not.'⁶⁷

The principle is taken from *Prior Analytics* II.4, where Aristotle claims in effect that if there is a syllogism to a given conclusion there cannot also be a syllogism from the opposite premisses to the same conclusion. In his proof he treats the premisses as if they were together a single proposition and so argues that it cannot both be true that something follows from a given proposition and from its negation.⁶⁸ Thus, according to Boethius the conditionals 'If something's *A*, then it's *B*' and 'If something's not *A*, then it's *B*' cannot both be true.

Topical differences and maximal propositions

Boethius translated but did not comment on Aristotle's *Topics*. He did, however, write a commentary (TC) on Cicero's work of the same name. Most importantly for the later

development of logic, he summarises the theory of topical argumentation in his *De topicis differentiis* and sets out the classifications of such arguments given by both Cicero and Themistius, showing how they may be made to correspond to one another.

Although Cicero notoriously claims at the beginning of his *Topics* to be rehearsing ‘Aristotle’s *Topics*’, his work is very different from that of his predecessor. Boethius reconciles his authorities, however, by finding in them the complementary components of a single account of argumentation. The problem that topical theory is developed to solve according to Cicero is that of removing doubt on some issue. Our means for doing this is, he tells us, an *argumentum* for which our source is a *locus*, the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *topos*, a place.⁶⁹ Boethius greatly expands on Cicero’s account and in particular in TD allows that questions may be conditional as well as categorical. The answer, he tells us, is presented in an argument (*argumentatio*) in which the premisses express the *argumentum*.⁷⁰

Aristotle in his *Topics* classifies true categorical claims as predicating either a definition, accident, genus, or property, of a subject and proposes tests, which he calls *loci*, of whether a particular predicate is related to a given subject in one of these ways. The tests are quite often justified by an appeal to general principles such as, for example, when testing whether a predicate is property of a given subject: ‘If the definition of the property does not apply to the subject, then the predicate is not a property.’⁷¹

In his *Topics* Cicero does not classify questions in this way but rather provides a list of what he calls *loci*, that is of the various features of subjects and predicates from which *argumenta* may be drawn, with examples of corresponding arguments. We may, he tells us, appeal to something which ‘inheres in the thing itself’, its definition, for example, or its division into parts, or to something which is related to it in some way, for example its genus, or something contrary to it. Finally we may appeal to something which is, he says, extrinsic to the things we are interested in, and most particularly to the opinion of an authority.

Boethius combines these two conceptions of a *locus* in his account of topical arguments. He argues that the general principles invoked in such arguments must be indemonstrable and characterises them as ‘maximal propositions’.⁷² Such propositions may either appear as a premiss in a categorical syllogism or, much more importantly for the history of logic, as the warrant for an inference. In this second case they are the generalisations of the consequential relation which may hold between the premises and conclusion of an enthymeme or the antecedent and the conclusion of a conditional proposition. Since we are dealing with dialectical argument rather than demonstration, the *argumenta* which we employ, and so the maximal propositions, and the inferences which they warrant are not required to be necessarily true but rather probable, that is to say, such that seem to be so to everyone, or to the majority, or at least to the majority of experts in the field.⁷³ Maximal propositions are classified according to the features of the world about which they purport to express a fundamental fact. They themselves are *loci* but so also, according to Boethius, are the various terms of their classification, the *loci*

differentiae listed by Cicero and Themistius.

Suppose, for example, that our question is whether trees are animals or not. We consider the terms of the question and notice that animal is predicable of something only as a genus. Our *argumentum* can then be found in the *locus* from definition (*locus a definitione*) as the maximal proposition ‘If the definition of the genus does not apply to something it is not a species of the genus defined’, which with the premiss ‘An animal is defined as an animate sensible substance’ warrants the conditional ‘If something’s not an animate sensible substance, then it’s not an animal’ or the enthymeme ‘It’s not an animate sensible substance; therefore it’s not an animal.’⁷⁴

Boethius’ influence

Boethius bequeathed to the Middle Ages confused and fragmentary accounts of the logic of conditional propositions and of the use of the topics in the discovery and justification of arguments. These were unified at the beginning of the twelfth century into a single theory of inference by the brilliant work of Peter Abaelard.⁷⁵ Abaelard understood the nature of propositionality and propositional operations where Boethius had not and so, as noted above, distinguished propositional from predicate, or separative, negation. He made a great effort to understand Boethius’ account of the hypothetical syllogism but was ultimately unsuccessful because no sense can be made of it in terms of propositional negation.⁷⁶ SH thus ceased to have any influence from the middle of the twelfth century and unlike Boethius’ other works is not mentioned in the arts syllabus of the University of Paris in the statutes of 1252 and 1255.⁷⁷

Abaelard took from Boethius the distinction between accidental and natural consequence, requiring for the former only the real inseparability but for the latter the connection of relevance guaranteed by the conceptual inseparability which holds when the sense, or understanding, of the antecedent contains that of the consequent. Abaelard argued that accidental consequence alone is enough to guarantee that from a true premiss in an enthymeme there will never follow a false conclusion but insisted that for the truth of a conditional there must exist a natural consequence. His interpretation of Boethius’ distinction between accidental and natural consequence, later explicated in terms of the meaning of antecedent including *per se* that of the consequent, remained fundamental for the theory of inference until the end of the thirteenth century, when it was replaced by William of Ockham with the distinction between material and formal consequence.⁷⁸

Crucial to Abaelard’s logical project is the question of how to distinguish between the two different types of consequence. Following Boethius, he holds that maximal propositions serve as inference warrants and examines each of them to determine whether it can guarantee the truth of a conditional proposition. As a test Abaelard appeals to the principle which Boethius had taken from the *Prior Analytics* and thus accepts what is now called the connexive account of negation, according to which no proposition

can entail or be entailed by its own negation. With this he is able to prove both Boethius' Aristotelian principle and also that no proposition can entail both another proposition and the negation of that proposition. Appealing to the second of these, he shows that the *locus* from opposites cannot warrant true conditionals. If it does, he argues, then the conditional (1) 'If Socrates is a human being, then Socrates is not a stone' is true. But since (2) 'If (Socrates is a human being and Socrates is a stone), then Socrates is a stone' is certainly true, it follows that (3) 'If Socrates is a human being and Socrates is a stone, then it is not the case that (Socrates is a human being and Socrates is a stone)' is true. This latter, however, must be false according to Abaelard's principle for the logic of negation. The locus from opposites can thus, he claims, not be a source for true conditional propositions. The crucial move in Abaelard's argument is his appeal in (2) to the principle of propositional logic known as conditional simplification. He explicitly rejects Boethius' claim that the copulative connective is not proposition-forming and incorporates it in this way into a genuinely propositional logic.

Though there was some dispute about it in the first half of the twelfth century, mediaeval logicians followed Abaelard in understanding negation and copulative conjunction propositionally and accepting the principles of propositional logic. Their logic was thus entirely non-Boethian, though it continued to rely on Boethius' accounts of inseparability and of the semantics of general terms. Abaelard's own attempt to regiment the theory of the conditional was ultimately undermined by his failure to see that Boethius' intuitions about negation could not be combined with the principle of propositional simplification, and in the middle of the twelfth century Alberic of Paris dealt a death blow to his project by showing just this. Abaelard accepts as paradigmatically the true conditional (4) 'If Socrates is a human being, then Socrates is an animal', but then by conditional simplification (5) 'If (Socrates is a human being and Socrates is not an animal), then Socrates is a human being', from which it follows that if (Socrates is a human being and Socrates is not an animal), then it is not the case that (Socrates is a human being and Socrates is not an animal). Contrary to Abaelard's fundamental principle for the logic of negation.

With the failure of Abaelard's attempt to distinguish between real and conceptual inseparability logicians came to agree that real inseparability was both necessary and sufficient for the truth of a conditional proposition, and accepted the corollary that any conditional with an impossible antecedent or a necessary consequent is true. They continued, however, to make the distinction between accidental and natural consequence and held, as mentioned above, that the latter alone could be employed in reasoning about impossibilities.

Boethius through the work of Abaelard provided the basic ideas employed in the development of the account of logical consequence in the Middle Ages. Since this account also depended, however, on a proper understanding of propositional operations, mediaeval propositional logic was something quite different from Boethius' logic for compound propositions.

Notes

- [1.](#) Boethius' translations of Porphyry's *Isagoge*, and Aristotle's *Categories* and *De interpretatione*, were known throughout the Middle Ages. His translations of the *Sophistical Refutations*, *Topics* and *Prior Analytics* were rediscovered during the first half of the twelfth century. Boethius' translation of the *Posterior Analytics* (if he made one) apparently did not survive into the Middle Ages.
- [2.](#) On the *Isagoge* (1IS, 2IS), on the *Categories* (CAT), on *De interpretatione* (1IN, 2IN), on Cicero's *Topica* (TC).
- [3.](#) On the categorical syllogism covering the material dealt with in *Prior Analytics* I.1–7 (ISC and SC), on topical inference (TD), on the hypothetical syllogism (SH), on division (D).
- [4.](#) 2IS 250.
- [5.](#) 2IS 250–3.
- [6.](#) Boethius himself does not speak about predication *per se* but rather *de subjecto*, e.g. CAT 173C–D.
- [7.](#) 2IS 235–6.
- [8.](#) 2IS 239 ff.
- [9.](#) *Isagoge* (CAG IV.1) 13.
- [10.](#) 2IS 282–3.
- [11.](#) Porphyry was a Phoenician!
- [12.](#) SH 1.2.5.
- [13.](#) SH 1.2.6.
- [14.](#) OS III (Boethius [1973](#)) 44:87–46:100.
- [15.](#) See Martin ([1999](#)).
- [16.](#) *Ibid.*
- [17.](#) 2IN 7.
- [18.](#) CAT 159A–C.
- [19.](#) 2IN 33–5.
- [20.](#) *Ibid.*
- [21.](#) 2IN 74.
- [22.](#) See Martin ([1991](#)).
- [23.](#) 2IN 42.
- [24.](#) 2IN 95–6.

- [25.](#) 2IN 48–9.
- [26.](#) 2IN 129–35.
- [27.](#) CAT 280C–D.
- [28.](#) 2IN 62.
- [29.](#) ISC 779D ff. See Prior ([1953](#)).
- [30.](#) 2IN 261–2.
- [31.](#) Patzig ([1968](#)) 75–6.
- [32.](#) 2IN 136 ff.
- [33.](#) 2IN 153.
- [34.](#) ISC 780A ff. See Prior ([1953](#)).
- [35.](#) 2IN 105.
- [36.](#) 2IN 109.
- [37.](#) SH 1.1.3.
- [38.](#) 2IN 110.
- [39.](#) 2IN 109–10.
- [40.](#) See below.
- [41.](#) TD 1176A; SH 1.4.1.
- [42.](#) SH 1.9.5–6.
- [43.](#) SH 1.3.1.
- [44.](#) SH 1.3.5–7.
- [45.](#) TD 1178D f.
- [46.](#) TD 1179B.
- [47.](#) TD 1180A.
- [48.](#) CAT 267B–C.
- [49.](#) TC 4, 1136A f.
- [50.](#) Stump ([1987](#)) 1–22.
- [51.](#) As it is in Barnes ([1981](#)) 73–89, and Kneale ([1975](#)) 191.
- [52.](#) TC 1125C.
- [53.](#) TC 1124C; 2IN 199.
- [54.](#) TC 1134D.
- [55.](#) Boethius does not use these expressions but they are convenient for referring to the argument forms.
- [56.](#) This is how Boethius presents the syllogisms in SH 2.9.2 ff. When he

introduces them for the first time, however, in SH, 1.6.2–3, he combines the two conditional premisses with ‘and’ and refers to the result as a mediate hypothetical – midway between those formed from a simple and a conditional and those formed from two conditionals. Since, as we have seen, he holds that ‘and’ cannot be used to form a unitary proposition, the two presentations are equivalent.

[57.](#) SH 1.2.4.

[58.](#) SH 2.2.2.

59. SH 2.2.3–5.

[60.](#) SH 2.2.4.

[61.](#) SH 2.9.4.

[62.](#) SH 1.2.2.

[63.](#) SH 3.10.4.

[64.](#) Dürr ([1951](#)); Barnes ([1981](#)).

[65.](#) SH 2.4.6.

[66.](#) See Martin ([1991](#)).

[67.](#) SH 1.4.2.

[68.](#) See Geach ([1980](#)).

[69.](#) Cicero, *Topica* 6.

[70.](#) TC 1050B.

[71.](#) Aristotle, *Topica* v.132b8–11.

[72.](#) TD 1176C.

[73.](#) TD 1179C–80D.

[74.](#) TD 1187A.

[75.](#) For a detailed discussion of Abaelard’s use of Boethius see Martin ([2004](#)) 158–99.

[76.](#) See Martin ([2007](#)) 153–68.

[77.](#) *Ibid.*

[78.](#) See Martin ([2005](#)) 117–50.

4 Boethius on utterances, understanding and reality

Margaret Cameron

In this chapter, we will look at the three elements that form the basis of the theory of signification for Boethius, namely expressions, understanding and reality, and their relation to one another. Boethius did not write separate treatises on the philosophy of language, cognition or metaphysics. Instead, he wrote commentaries on Aristotelian logic. By the time he began to work on them around the start of the sixth century, the texts of Aristotelian logic were read in a fixed sequence: the first three were the *Isagoge*, *Categories* and *On Interpretation*, and Boethius treated topics as and when they are discussed in these texts by Porphyry and Aristotle. To grasp Boethius' theory of signification, we must therefore gather his views on utterances, understanding and reality from a variety of places in his commentaries and put them together. As evidenced by the sheer length of the treatment of Aristotle's brief comments on signification in his commentaries on *On Interpretation*, there is no question but that Boethius was aware of the importance of a theory of signification in explaining how the words we use are able to make sense to others and to refer to reality. We might expect, therefore, that Boethius' views on language broadly cohere with his theory of cognition and metaphysics given elsewhere in the commentaries on the *Isagoge* and *Categories*.¹

The following sections aim to give a general overview of Boethius' theory of signification by considering in turn what he says about expressions, understanding and reality in his logical commentaries. In the [final section](#), we will consider the ways in which Boethius' views have been variously interpreted from medieval and contemporary perspectives.

Expressions

In the *Categories*, Aristotle had included expression (*logos*, *oratio*) under the category of quantity: like number, an expression is a discrete, rather than continuous, quantity whose parts, i.e., syllables, do not conjoin at any common boundary (*Categories* 4b30). The smallest, metaphysically relevant quantity of speech is the syllable, by which spoken speech can be measured. Boethius (along with Porphyry and other Greek commentators) emphasized that there is nothing natural or necessary about the order of syllables in an expression (CAT 203C–D). In his commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, Boethius classifies the expression (*vox*) as air that is articulated by the tongue differently: here he calls it a quality, since it is a percussion of sound (2IN 5: 20–1). In this he is likely following Porphyry's view (cf. Simplicius [1907](#), 124:22).² There were other ancient

views on the proper classification of expression.³

Why would the metaphysical status of expression matter? It matters only as a question of metaphysics, that is, insofar as the utterance needs to find its proper place within the scheme of Aristotle's categories, over which there seems to have been some disagreement.⁴ Had Boethius held a view according to which significant language was somehow natural, for example the view that letters and syllables are natural imitations of things in reality (onomatopoeic sounds) out of which words and expressions can be built, then the basic significant unit of speech would be those imitative sounds, which are then expressed by letters and syllables.⁵ But Boethius, following Aristotle, was a thoroughgoing conventionalist about signification, and he drew a distinction between expressions considered metaphysically (as quantities, or as qualities) and those considered in terms of their signification. He therefore had to account for signification in a wholly conventional way.

To do so, Boethius relied on the distinction between locution (*locutio*) and interpretation (*interpretatio*), which he used to translate the Greek *lexis* and *logos*. A locution is a vocal sound which is articulate (i.e. percussed) but not necessarily meaningful, whereas an interpretation is a vocal, articulate and significant sound which is either a name, verb, or statement (2IN 5: 5–11; 6: 4–5).⁶ Other of Aristotle's works were concerned with linguistic items, such as the *Poetics* in which many other parts of speech were called locutions including elements, syllables, conjunctions, articles, as well as names, verbs and statements (2IN 8: 7–11; cf. *Poetics* 6, 1450b13), but not all of these are interpretations. *On Interpretation* deals only with the latter three of the list since these are all that are required to make simple statements, which can then be used in argumentation.

Interpretations are either perfect or imperfect depending on their capacity to satisfy the hearer's expectations. An incomplete interpretation, according to Boethius, leaves the hearer waiting for something more, such as in the expression "Socrates with Plato" (2IN 9: 1–5).⁷ From this explanation, it seems that perfection is to be achieved at the statement level – which is the *enuntiatio* – not at the level of the singular terms themselves.

But Boethius' criterion for perfection is not only syntactic: there are also completion criteria for singular terms which are given by the definitions of names (*nomina*) and verbs (*verba*). Following the definitions given by Aristotle in *On Interpretation*, both are utterances which are significant by convention. No separated part of a simple (versus compound, such as "pirate-boat") name is significant. Infinite names and verbs (e.g., not-man, not-running) are excluded, as are inflections (e.g., Philo's, recovered). Names are distinguished by being tenseless (*sine tempore*), whereas verbs consignify time and "are always said of something else" (*est semper eorum quae de altero dicuntur nota*). Put together appropriately in a phrase (*oratio*), complete names and verbs require no additional linguistic items or features to achieve what comes to be the popular medieval definition of signification itself – namely, when spoken, to generate an idea in a hearer's

mind. This cannot be achieved by a mere locution, which for Boethius also includes expressions that do not (yet) signify anything, such as the nonsensical *blityri*, or do not (and could not) on their own signify anything at all, such as conjunctions (for example, “and,” “or”).

But what is it, according to Boethius, that makes an expression significant in the first place? Given his compositional theory of signification, Boethius’ answer draws on a doctrine of names provided by Porphyry, with whom it might have originated.

Porphyry’s explanation for the origin of names, and thus for the “first use of linguistic expressions” (Question and Answer commentary on *Categories*, CAG IV.1, 33: 20; translated by Strange in Porphyry 1992), was transmitted to the Latin Middle Ages indirectly via Boethius, where it served as one of the most fundamental linguistic doctrines. According to Boethius’ version of Porphyry’s doctrine, known as the doctrine of imposition, names were first imposed on things in order to designate what fell under the senses or thought: “this substance will be called ‘gold,’ that ‘stone,’ that ‘water’” (2IN 46). These are names of primary imposition. Secondarily, names were distinguished into types according to syntactic criteria (*ad figuram*): those names which are inflected by case are nouns, those with the distribution of time (or, as Boethius says elsewhere, the consignification of time) are verbs (CAT 159B–C).⁸ Boethius’ medieval readers often read into his text a kind of *historical* imposition – a view which fits well with a belief in the Adamic origins of words.

It is questionable, given all that Boethius goes on to explain about signification in his second commentary on *On Interpretation*, whether the doctrine of imposition was meant to accomplish more than to service Boethius (and Porphyry) with an account of the respective subject matter of the *Categories* and *On Interpretation*: the first treats names insofar as they signify things, and the latter treats nouns and verbs as names of (these) names. Notice that nothing whatsoever is said about what is in the mind of the impositor when names are given to things, nor do we know whether there is any psychological content associated with names that have been imposed this way. Boethius’ fuller treatment of signification elsewhere suggests that he himself recognized that a theory of the origin of types of names on its own does not give a theory of signification, at least not according to the lessons of Aristotle’s logic. In fact, it presupposes one. It cannot explain, for example, how a speaker and a listener can communicate, i.e., how an idea is generated in one’s mind. For this, Boethius needs to account for the understanding (*intellectus*) that is necessarily involved in signification.

Understanding

Understanding (*intellectus*) is for Boethius a kind of linguistic phenomenon, described as the activity of silent thinking and which he called “mental speech” (2IN 24: 23–5). It is thus that understanding is related to reality in such a way that it signifies, or designates, it. Boethius was drawing on the Platonic idea that understanding was a kind of “living

expression” which is “the sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written in the soul of the learner” (Plato, *Phaedrus* 276a). Boethius and his predecessors were interested in the question of the origin of understanding: is there anything that mediates between reality and understanding, such as sensations, incorporeal natures, or images, which might account for the genesis of understanding itself? Before we explore what Boethius says, let us examine the bit of Aristotle’s text on which Boethius was commenting.

The passage toward the start of Aristotle’s *On Interpretation* provoked a great deal of controversy, partly because it is so brief and partly because the text is unclear, lending itself to multiple, conflicting interpretations.⁹ According to Aristotle (in Boethius’ translation),

Therefore those things that are said are the signs (*notae*) of those affections in the soul, and those things that are written [are signs] of those that are said. And just as written letters are not the same for all, so spoken words are not the same for all. But what they are signs of in the first place, the affections of the soul, are the same for all, and those of which these are likenesses (*similitudines*), the things, are also the same.

(*Int.* 16a3–9)

This passage indicates that there are four items which are related to one another in this way: written expressions are signs of oral expressions, which in turn signify passions of the soul, and these conceive of (*concupere*) reality. It is not a semantic triad, consisting of just expressions, passions of the soul, and reality, but a tetrad, including also writing.

Ancient commentators had taken note of Aristotle’s “passions of the soul,” wondering, for example, why he did not just call these “understandings.” Boethius reports some of their queries, but decides on glossing *passiones animae* as understanding (*intellectus*) and describes them as a kind of mental expression. In this he is following the “Peripatetic” lesson that there are three *kinds* of expression: written, spoken and understood (2IN 29: 16–21). All three are kinds of expression, but only two – that which is written and that which is spoken – are conventional. Mental expressions, Boethius interprets Aristotle to say, are “the same for all,” that is, universally or naturally significant.

Note that Aristotle’s text, however, does not suggest that passions of the soul should be regarded as a kind of (mental) expression; nor does Aristotle claim that passions of the soul *designate* reality. But, according to Boethius, the lesson which must most of all be taken from Aristotle’s brief passage is this:

What is expressed by written letters signifies spoken expression, and spoken expression designates mental expression, which occurs in silent thinking, and this mental expression primarily conceives and designates its underlying reality.

(2IN 24: 23–5)

Behind this interpretation of Aristotle's text lies the need to connect understanding and reality in such a way that the written and uttered expressions we use, which are entirely conventional, can signify reality. According to Aristotle's doctrine, written and oral expressions are *always* mediated by understandings, a lesson that Boethius follows. These items are always in a fixed, ordered relationship that is inverted depending on the perspective of the speaker or listener. Boethius repeatedly underscores the communicative context of signification in which there is always a speaker, a teacher, or a questioner on one side and, on the other, a listener, a student or a respondent (for example, 2IN 23: 22–24: 3). The speaker uses the conventional medium of spoken expression to indicate or signify a reality to his listener, a signification mediated by an understanding which, being the same for all, should be (in successful communication) the same for both speaker and hearer.

Thus, for Boethius, expressions primarily signify understandings, and through these signify things.¹⁰ But what, precisely, is an understanding? The paradigm of understanding is that which is in God's mind: according to Boethius, every understanding is in God's mind since he perfectly knows the natures of all things in reality (2IN 22: 6–11). Humans obviously fall short of divine perfection and further explanation is needed to account for their progression from nature (*physis, natura*) to convention (*thesis, positio*), as happens when we speak about reality, and back again, when we hear about it. To inquire into what is signified by expressions just is, therefore, to ask what (if anything) intervenes between understanding and reality which can explain the origin of human understanding.¹¹

There were, apparently, several possible answers to this question circulating among Aristotle's predecessors (2IN 26: 23–27: 6). (Boethius takes this information from Porphyry, whom he considers to provide the best answer.) Boethius dismisses outright the view that expressions signify things directly, leaving three candidates: either sensations, incorporeal natures, or imaginations (or images, *imaginationes*) intervene between understanding and reality. Sensations are ruled out since, although we do have sensual contact with the world, we also have conceptions of it – apparently directly, but not perfectly. What about the incorporeal natures? Even though they are mentioned in the list of alternatives, Boethius does not explicitly dismiss their candidacy, and in fact says little more about them in this commentary. It has been suggested that Boethius might have endorsed the view that expressions signify incorporeal natures, which have been interpreted as Platonic forms, *ex silentio*.¹² We will return to this question below.

Drawing on the authority of Aristotle (*On the Soul* 420b30–35, 432a10–14), Boethius explains that expressions primarily signify understandings, but that these understandings are always and necessarily accompanied by imaginations or images. The process occurs like this: some thing becomes an object of sense or of thought for someone, and from this arises an imagination which is confused and imperfect. Boethius describes the imagination in visual language as images or forms that enter the soul (2IN 34: 2). Upon the imagination a stronger impression supervenes which provides an impression or, with the impression, a perceptual understanding (*quadam intellectus perceptio*, 2IN 34: 5).

According to Boethius, this impression *is* the very likeness (*similitudo*) of the thing initially perceived or conceived. The likeness between the resultant understanding and thing is, on Boethius' interpretation of Aristotle, caused by nature (2IN 38: 15). Finally, this impression (or likeness or form) emerges in expression due to the desire or will to impart one's impression to someone else.

It might appear from this account that at least four things stand between reality and expression: the experience (sensual or cognitive) of reality, a confused imagination, a supervening intellectual clarity – which just is the likeness of the thing, according to Boethius – and then the will or desire to give expression to it. But Boethius gives us no reason to think that he regarded these as discrete cognitive phenomena. Instead, his explanation makes the differences between experiencing reality and being able to speak about it merely stages in one intellectual process. We need not think of imagination as a distinct mental phenomenon, but rather as a description of a mental condition or state (i.e., as confused) on its way to understanding (i.e., as determinate or complete).¹³ The fact that imagination necessarily accompanies understanding secures this process as a natural progression from reality to understanding (explaining, then, how reality and understanding can be “the same for all”). The vocal or written expressions used by speakers to indicate their understanding and, by means of this, reality itself are conventional, varying between linguistic communities.

By suggesting that these are stages of the movement from reality to understanding, Boethius avoids the problem of overpopulating the space between reality and understanding. He does not explain why he opted for theoretical parsimony, but a near-contemporary Greek commentator, Ammonius, cautions that “one must not invent anything else beside these between the thought and the thing, which is what the men of the Stoa posited and thought they should call the ‘sayable’ (*lekton*).” (CAG IV.5, 17: 25) Boethius chose to ignore the references to Stoic philosophy that he found in his Greek sources, which unfortunately deprived his readers (medieval and contemporary) of valuable insight into the motivations for many debates he otherwise mentions. An obvious reason to avoid postulating something like a sayable is that, if we do, we must explain what a sayable is, and what is its ontological status and its cognitive genesis. The Stoics had assembled a sophisticated ontological strategy to account for the status of the sayable by arguing that, in an otherwise entirely corporeal universe, the *lekton* was one of four incorporeal exceptions, along with void, time, and place. Clearly an apparatus such as this one to explain the relation between reality and understanding introduces more complications than advantages for a Neoplatonist.¹⁴

Boethius may have succeeded in presenting a parsimonious theory of cognition to support his interpretation of Aristotle on signification, but it is far from satisfactory. To say that reality is connected to understanding by means of a confused imagination that is somehow acted upon by an intervening clarity to produce a likeness of that reality raises many questions. For example, what does Boethius mean by “perceptual understanding” – a seeming hybrid of perception and cognition? Is the process that is described here an automatic or necessary one, or does it require some sort of activity on the part of the

cognizer? First, we shall address the most pressing of these questions, which is also the most obvious one: what is the likeness (*similitudo*) that is achieved by means of the impression? To answer this question, we need to examine Boethius' views on the nature of reality.

Reality

Recall that, for Boethius, expressions signify reality indirectly, via the mediation of understanding. Thus, we will be concerned with Boethius' views on reality (*res*) insofar as it is cognized or signified.

Let us begin with the signification of things that are individual, about which Boethius says very little. In his second *Isagoge* commentary, he notes that individuals are identified in one of two ways: either by a description or by a proper name. Boethius' description is similar to what we would call a "definite description," since it uniquely identifies that individual in some way: "the son of Sophroniscus" to identify Socrates, for example, presuming that he was an only son (2IS 233–4). Proper names appear to be in some way reducible to descriptions: it is the unique quality of Plato himself – his Platonity – that is signified by the name "Plato." Presumably Plato's Platonity is that unique set of characteristics that makes Plato who he is and nothing else (2IN 136–7). To use either a proper name or a description is akin to ostension, or pointing to the thing with one's finger (2IS 233: 20–234: 6).¹⁵

The semantics of universal expressions, on the other hand, are more complicated. As mentioned above, Boethius regards questions of signification and understanding, especially the question of the origin of understanding, as very closely related. We will therefore get a better grasp of the semantics of universal expressions if we examine Boethius' view on the nature of universals and our cognition of them.

Boethius' best and most influential account of universals is given in his second commentary on the *Isagoge*. Porphyry claims to have written this treatise as an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories* to explain key items in the treatise – genus, species, difference, property, and accident – because "reflection on these things is useful for giving definitions, and in general for matters pertaining to division and demonstration." Porphyry declined to take a position on the philosophical status of these items:

As for genera and species, I shall decline for the present to say whether they subsist or are posited in bare understandings only, whether if they subsist they are corporeal or incorporeal, and whether they are separated from sensibles or posited in sensibles and agree with them.

(Porphyry, *Isagoge* in Boethius' translation, Spade [1994](#), 20)

Boethius, however, gave his own answer, which, he claimed, follows the opinion of the Peripatetic commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias.

Boethius held that universals are abstracted from reality by means of understanding.

Understanding, according to his view, “has the power both to put together what is disjoined and to uncouple what is put together,” which is the power of abstraction and division, respectively. The method of division outlined in Porphyry’s *Isagoge* shows how one can move from a genus to individuals by means of dividing (1) the genus according to its species, (2) the species according to their differentiae, and (3) the individuals according to their properties. The process can be reversed, according to Boethius, so that understanding is able to abstract from individuals to reach a species, and from species a genus. To explain how this is possible, Boethius uses the example of a line in a body. In reality, the line cannot subsist separately from the body. But the mind is able to discern the line and to see “the incorporeal nature by itself and apart from the bodies in which it is made concrete.” In other words, the mind abstracts from corporeal reality the incorporeal form or universal. To think that the line exists independently in reality from any body would be false, but its nature can in itself be grasped “alone and pure, as it is a form in itself.”

Boethius explains the process of abstraction in terms of gathering, or collecting, the likeness (*similitudo*) from particular existing things:

when genera and species are thought, their likeness is gathered from the single things they exist in. For example, from single men, dissimilar among themselves, the likeness of humanity is gathered. This likeness, thought by the mind and gazed at truly, is the species. Again, the likeness of these diverse species, which likeness cannot exist except in these species or in their individuals, makes a genus when it is considered.

(Spade [1994](#), 30)

From the description of the process of abstraction here, it might seem as if the species and the genus are constructed (by means of being gathered) by the activity of understanding, and thus that they have only a conceptual existence. (Debatably, this was Alexander’s own view.¹⁶) But this is not the case, since according to Boethius the genus and species both *exist* in singulars, and are *thought of* as universals: “and so these things exist in singulars, but are thought of as universals” (Spade [1994](#), 25). Boethius illustrates his position with another analogy: a line can be defined as either convex or concave, each of which is understood differently despite there being only one line. “So too for genera and species – that is, for singularity and universality – there is one subject. But it is universal in one way, when it is thought, and singular in another, when it is sensed in the things in which it has its being” (ibid. 32).

To see how Boethius thought that universals are signified, let us put together his doctrine of universals given in the second *Isagoge* commentary and his account of the cognition involved in signification outlined in his second *On Interpretation* commentary. In his discussion of signification, Boethius does not explain what is the likeness (*similitudo*) that is grasped by the mind in the activity of signification. But it is clear that he had in mind the likeness that is transferred to, or collected by, the soul when we grasp this likeness in reality. As Boethius explains, the likeness exists in reality in a real-type

way and in the soul in a soul-type way:

This passion is like the impression of a figure of some kind, but in a soul-type way. For naturally its own figure is within a thing in one way, but its form is transferred to the soul in another, just as letters, [which are] signs of sounds, are not conferred in the same way to marble, wax or paper.

(2IN 34: 13–17)¹⁷

The likeness is not, therefore, a representation in the mind of something in reality; it is not an intentional object of any sort.¹⁸ Nor is it, in the modern sense of the term, an “idea.” Rather, the likeness is one and the same thing that exists in reality and in the mind in the mode appropriate to each.

For Boethius, the likeness links understanding and reality so that we are able, by our use of expressions that designate our thoughts, to refer to reality itself. This likeness – the universal – can then be defined by us (by means of other universal terms, namely, substance terms and differentia terms) for use in communication and logic. For example, the word “human” can be defined as “rational, mortal animal”: indeed, this is what someone hears, according to Boethius, when the word “human” is uttered (see 2IN 74).

Had Boethius written a second commentary on the *Categories* as he had planned, he promised that he would have framed the “more profound” interpretation in terms of *intellectus* or understanding. Such an interpretation would have been an enormous benefit for our understanding of Boethius’ own views on signification and the relationship between expressions, understanding, and reality. Boethius mentioned that this interpretation would have followed a Pythagorean line, which some scholars have taken to be akin to Iamblichus’ interpretation of Aristotelian logic.¹⁹ We do not know, however, the extent to which this interpretation would have been different from Boethius’ views on the role of understanding with regard to universals and the theory of signification.

Boethius from medieval and contemporary perspectives

There are several different perspectives from which to understand better Boethius’ views on the relationship between expressions, understanding, and reality. One is from the perspective of those who relied upon Boethius’ views for their interpretation of Aristotelian logic, namely the twelfth-century medieval Latin logicians for whom Boethius was very important. Another way is to try to situate Boethius’ views on the map of contemporary philosophy of language and describe it in analytic terms.

Medieval influence

The logicians in twelfth-century Latin Europe did not have our access to the ancient Greek commentators, and were wholly reliant on Boethius’ preservation of their ideas.

When scholars began studying Aristotelian logic anew at this time, their interpretation of it was nearly everywhere touched by Boethius', since they used his commentaries (and translations) as an authoritative aid to understanding these difficult texts. He is undoubtedly best described as the first major teacher of Aristotelian logic for this new wave of dialecticians: sometimes lengthy passages are simply transcribed wholesale into the new commentaries being written in the early twelfth century.²⁰ Boethius' commentaries provided the history of philosophy not only with a rich Latin philosophical vocabulary, but also with the transmission of ancient interpretations of Aristotelian logic into a new context of ideas.

Boethius' decision to expand upon what Porphyry only briefly mentioned at the start of the *Isagoge* was monumental. Presenting the debate over universals and offering a solution to it at the start of his commentary on the *Isagoge* had a most interesting result: he managed to place the "most profound" question of the nature of universals at the very start of the medieval philosophical curriculum, forcing commentators to take a stance on an issue whose philosophical implications could hardly be fully grasped from that initial starting position. John of Salisbury complained sourly about this effect on the study of dialectic:

They leave aside the proper order in teaching, and take the greatest care that things are *not* "fittingly arranged, with each in its own place." For they, so to speak, read the end of the art into its title and Porphyry already teaches the main force not just of the *Topics*, but also of the *Analytics* and the *Elenchi*.
(*Metalogicon* II, 19).

Given Boethius' decision, it is difficult to imagine how his medieval readers could have done otherwise. Boethius' theory of universals was soon challenged, and dialecticians with both nominalist and realist leanings eagerly advanced new solutions to the problem.²¹

It wasn't just Boethius' global contribution that had such an impact on the development of logic in the twelfth century. Sometimes a single idea drawn from Boethius was used as a source of inspiration. Take as an example the way in which early twelfth-century commentators approached the question of the subject matter of the *Isagoge*. This prolegomenic question provoked a considerable amount of controversy, and scholars wondered whether it was Porphyry's intention to treat genera, species, differentia, property and accident as five expressions (*voces*) or things (*res*). An undeveloped comment found in Boethius' commentary on the *Categories*, that genera and species can be in some way regarded as names of names (CAT 176D–177A: *et sunt quodammodo nominum nomina*), was for the first time put to work to justify (on the basis of Boethius' authority) a new interpretation of the *Isagoge*.²² That is, it made it possible to read the *Isagoge* as a treatise concerned exclusively with names – a move that might have helped to make possible the sort of nominalist interpretation of Aristotelian logic developed, for example, by Peter Abelard. It permitted logical language to serve as

a kind of second-order language, thereby providing a means to circumvent some of the difficulties presented by the ontologically saturated character of Aristotelian logic (or dialectic).²³

Boethius' medieval readers were soon dissatisfied by Boethius' account of the cognition and signification involved in universals. Attention turned to the development of a richer, more versatile semantic theory, to place more emphasis on understanding, and to explicate more precisely what sort of likeness is shared by both reality and understanding. The tension generated by Boethius' compositional semantics, which first treated the perfection of individual terms and then handled their composition in statements (enforced by the sequence in which the logical treatises were to be read), and his claim that semantic perfection is also achieved at the level of the statement (since statements *signify* what is true or false), demanded resolution. The achievements of twelfth-century logic reflect all of these ambitions, seen most vividly in the writings of Abelard, but also in the work of the *Montani* and in the development of supposition theory.

With the growing popularity of logical textbooks and compendia in the later twelfth century and the development of "schools" of dialectic headed by influential masters, Boethius' popularity appears to have waned. That is not to say that his influence disappeared altogether, but rather that it was distilled – usually silently – into the texts that were produced by medieval thinkers. No longer, however, were Boethius' lengthy (and thus expensive) commentaries the primary resource for interpreting Aristotelian logic. Still, this period is rightly described as the "Age of Boethius," for it was with the massive assistance of Boethius' commentaries that logic would acquire its foothold in the medieval philosophical tradition.

From a contemporary perspective

Another way better to understand Boethius' views on this subject is to interpret them in the terms of contemporary analytic philosophy. This is possible both for Boethius' doctrine of universals and, to some extent, for his theory of signification. It is helpful, since it leads scholars to see that Boethius' views are not especially outdated nor are they as confused as some have suggested.²⁴

Scholars have often characterized Boethius' position on universals as one of "moderate realism," a label that connects Boethius' doctrine with that of D. M. Armstrong. As contemporary theories evolve, however, so do our ways of characterizing the past in terms of them. For that reason, it might be more appropriate now to regard Boethius as a "*naïve* realist."²⁵ The naivety consists in the fact that Boethius does not regard that which is in the mind as having representational content. For Boethius, the process of abstraction generates in the mind a likeness of that which is in reality: the likeness in the mind and in reality are one and the same, but they have two modes of existence. Like contemporary naïve realists, Boethius does not hold that the mental

correlate that is generated involves any sort of judgement about reality: it is not an intentional object which can be compared for accuracy against what exists in reality, nor is it a representation which can be said to be representing truly or falsely. According to Boethius, it is only when a simple expression is combined with the verb “to be” (i.e., “is” or “is not”) that what is uttered can be evaluated in terms of truth and falsity (see 2IN 44–51).^{[26](#)}

Boethius’ position on universals might strike a modern reader as being unsophisticated and hence unsatisfactory, especially because he does not entertain the many problems that are involved with the perception of reality (such as hallucinations, or mistaking a straight stick in water for a bent-looking one). But as a naive realist, Boethius is not concerned to treat the perception of reality, on the basis of which our understanding is generated, as problematic. For him, perception and abstraction are completely neutral on the question of what makes an abstraction accurate. What is important for Boethius is not a question of the accuracy of our perception of reality, nor of the conception that is generated on the basis of abstraction. Instead, Boethius is concerned with accuracy (truth or falsity) only at the level of predication, that is, when we say about that which we have perceived or conceived whether it is or is not.

How should Boethius’ theory of signification be characterized in contemporary terms? For Boethius, the relationship between his theory of cognition and signification is close, and this is because he holds a psychologistic theory of signification. That is, mental content is always involved in signification, and there is no act of signification that does not involve some sort of mental correlate. But the *vis significandi* is more than just what is contained in a hearer’s or speaker’s mind, according to Boethius. This is because what is understood is the same as what is in reality (in the case of general terms), differing only in its mode of existence. What is grasped by the mind from reality, and then signified by expressions, is the likeness or incorporeal nature, i.e., the essence, of a thing itself. This approach to signification draws Boethius in line with other contemporary essentialists about meaning.^{[27](#)}

Notes

- ^{[1](#)}. This is not to suggest that Boethius’ views did not change over the course of writing his several commentaries. With the exception of Aristotle’s *Categories*, Boethius wrote two commentaries per treatise. Here we are concerned to acquire a general overview of Boethius’ theory of signification, and we will concentrate mainly on two commentaries by Boethius, 2IS and 2IN, as well as CAT.
- ^{[2](#)}. For translations of the relevant books of Simplicius’ commentary see Simplicius [2003](#) (Books 1–4); 2001 (Books 5–6). The translations of commentaries published in *CAG* contain the original *CAG* page numbering, and so passages can easily be found using the reference to the Greek text. Note the French

translation with commentary of Simplicius' commentary (1990–), which is coming out fascicule by fascicule.

3. The Stoics, for example, had held that speech is a corporeal substance because it is a body of air which has been struck, a view which was transmitted (without its Stoic context) to the Latin Middle Ages by the fifth-century Latin grammarian Priscian ([1855](#) I.1, 5: 2). Plotinus had objected to Aristotle's classification, since he thought it had to be either a substance (i.e. air) or an action (*Enneads* 6.1.5), and Iamblichus objected to Aristotle's equation of the amount (of utterance) to what is discrete, "since speech is something discrete, like number, but speech is not an amount" (cf. Simplicius [1907](#), 123: 7–11; 2003: 101). The shadowy appearance in Boethius' writings and elsewhere of some of these incompatible candidates prompted a debate in the first years of serious medieval commentary on Aristotle's logic: see Ebbesen, forthcoming a, Cameron [2005](#). Shortly thereafter, however, Abelard pointedly restricted his interest to utterances insofar as they are significant (for example, Peter Abelard, [1919–33](#), 524: 21–4), and the great twelfth-century grammarian Peter Helias exempted himself (and the grammatical tradition that followed him) from the debate by urging that expressions are simply not to be found in any of the ten categories of Aristotle's logic (Peter Helias [1993](#), 66: 16–17).
4. For a different interpretation of Boethius' concern with the metaphysics of expressions see Ebbesen [2003](#), who argues that Boethius had recognized a problem with the metaphysics of utterances and tried to develop a theory that made accentuation the "glue" that bound words together as units.
5. Compare with Ammonius, *CAG* IV.5, 31: 12–34.
6. In his dual role as translator and commentator Boethius was acutely aware of the difficulties that certain technical Greek terms presented, and more than once he commented on the trouble presented by the Greek expression *logos*. The Greek language does not have, Boethius explained, a distinct word for an expression and its cognitive content: both were called *logos*, but in Latin it was possible to disambiguate the term – according to its context and correctly interpreted – as either *oratio* or *ratio* (CAT 204A–B; see also 1IN 72–3). Modern-language translations of Boethius' Latin fall into similar difficulties, since several different words could be used to translate either term. Here we use "expression" for *oratio*, which covers expressions which are either significant, non-significant, or nonsensical. Since Boethius claims that the parts of *orationes* are names and verbs, he also intended *oratio* to be a synonym for complete phrases (e.g., statements, questions, prayers, and so on). *Ratio* is translated according to the context of its use either as "reason," "definition," or, as Boethius suggests, "thinking to oneself" (*intra se ratiocinatio*, CAT 204A). According to Blank [1996](#), the idea that only names and verbs are interpretations (*logoi*) is thought to be a Peripatetic invention, and Boethius'

translation of *logos* as “interpretation” secures this delineation. It also served to situate the Aristotelian categories as the logical basis for Aristotelian logic, since each of the categories is either a name or a verb.

7. Compare this with Priscian, whose grammar was very popular when Aristotle’s *On Interpretation* and Boethius’ commentaries on it began to be seriously studied at the start of the twelfth century. Priscian claimed that the parts of speech are discerned by means of the properties of signification (Priscian [1855](#) II.17, 55: 4: *Igitur non aliter possunt discerni a se partes orationis nisi uniuscuiusque proprietates significationis attendamus*). The property of the noun is to signify a substance and a quality (II.17, 55: 18). This definition generated much discussion in the early twelfth century, and the question was whether Priscian intended *substantia et qualitas* to be taken together or not, i.e., a substance with a quality, or a substance and/or a quality. Although Priscian claims that the division of the parts of speech is based on semantic properties, his sense of “significant” seemed broad enough to include also changes in morphology and syntax. See Priscian [1855](#) II.17, 55: 18–56: 27.
8. All of the ancient commentators (for example see Ammonius *CAG* IV.4, 11: 8–17 (trans. Cohen and Matthews in Ammonius [1991](#)); Philoponus *CAG* XIII.1, 11: 34–12: 3) describe second imposition as that which distinguishes names and verbs in terms of articles (nouns) and tenses (verbs). To accommodate the Latin language, Boethius distinguishes nouns by means of their inflection.
9. See Magee [1989](#).
10. There is a textual question that was noticed by ancient commentators that gave rise to some philosophical debate on this question. For a detailed account of the philological difficulties see Magee [1989](#).
11. Nuchelmans [1973](#), 132ff. urges that *intellectus* should be translated as “opinion” because on its own it is not yet judged to be true or false. The signification of truth and falsity will be discussed below. However, it seems implausible that *intellectus* can everywhere be translated as “opinion,” especially here where *intellectus* are attributed to God. The ambiguity of *intellectus* presents a great challenge, especially because in some cases Boethius uses it to denote an understanding (i.e., a concept, idea, thought), but in others it denotes the activity of understanding (see Magee [1989](#)). Here *intellectus* is translated as understanding to convey the processional character of cognition, central to Boethius’ theory, and to avoid anachronistic connotations that come with words such as “idea” or “concept.” “Understanding” is not meant to imply that one’s cognition is necessarily veridical.
12. De Rijk [1981](#) interprets the *res ipsa* in God’s understanding as a transcendent idea.

- [13.](#) The processional character of Boethius' doctrine is outlined in detail by Magee [1989](#), on whose careful analysis of Boethius' interpretation of this passage this interpretation is largely based.
- [14.](#) This is not to say that Boethius' philosophy is untouched by Stoicism. Porphyry was avidly engaged in debates with Stoic doctrines, and much of the foundation of the Neoplatonic curriculum was inspired by the Stoics.
- [15.](#) The best overview of the topic is Ashworth [2006](#). On singular terms and problems of individuation in Boethius see Gracia [1984](#). The Porphyrian passage provided medieval readers with three types of singular terms: determinate individuals (e.g., "Socrates"), vague individuals (e.g., "this approaching <person>"), and individuals by supposition or by circumlocution (e.g., "son of Sophroniscus") (see Ashworth [2006](#) for details).
- [16.](#) The extent of Boethius' reliance on Alexander is disputed, as is the interpretation of Alexander's views on universals. De Libera [1999](#) interprets Boethius as following Alexander quite closely such that universals have only a conceptual existence which is arrived at by the process of abstraction; Marenbon [2003a](#) disagrees, claiming that Boethius seems to be neutral on the question of the mind-independence of universals. For a concise English translation of Alexander's views with helpful commentary and relevant bibliographical citations see Sorabji [2005](#), 149–56.
- [17.](#) *Fit vero haec passio velut figurae alicuius impressio, sed ita ut in animo fieri consuevit. Aliter namque naturaliter inest in re qualibet propria figura, aliter vero eius ad animum forma transfertur, velut non eodem modo cerae vel marmori vel chartis litterae id est vocum signa mandatur.*
- [18.](#) It would be a mistake to be misled by Boethius' illustration of the difference between imagination and cognition in terms of an outline of a drawing and its being filled in by colours (2IN 29–30). This illustration is not meant to suggest that Boethius thinks of the likeness as a kind of picture, or representation. Rather, it is meant to describe the processional character of the movement from imagination to understanding as from being indistinct to being fully filled in.
- [19.](#) Ebbesen [1990b](#) first indicated the possibility that a second *Categories* commentary might have followed an Iamblichean line (CAT 160A–B, where Boethius promises a longer treatment that is sympathetic to Pythagoreans; see also 180C where Boethius puts off a defense of the necessity and sufficiency of the *Categories*). Ebbesen [1990b](#), 388–9, who is inclined to believe that Iamblichus' interpretation of the treatise is "gibberish," suggests what a Pythagorean interpretation of the *Categories* by Boethius might have looked like. Asztalos [1993](#) points to specific instances in the commentary where Boethius shows a concern with concepts (*intellectus*), several of which have

Iamblichean parallels in Simplicius' commentary: see Boethius on Aristotle's *Categories* 1b25 (CAT 180C–D; cf. Simplicius [1907](#), 69: 1–71:2), 2a4–10 (CAT 181B), 6a36–7 (CAT 217A–B), cited in Asztalos [1993](#). Boethius took very seriously the exegetical point that, although his commentary was written for beginning students and so would not involve deeper questions, still there are often textual reasons why the (simpler) view that the *Categories* is about significant words can be legitimately defended according to what Aristotle himself says: Boethius at 181B makes this point clearly.

- [20.](#) See for example the collection of related commentaries labelled C8 (in London Royal 7.D.XXV, ff. 55ra–62vb; Munich clm. 14458, ff. 95r–102r; Paris B.N. lat. 13368, ff. 195ra–214v; MS Vatican Reg. lat. 230 ff. 41–102r and C14 (in Assisi Biblioteca Cov. Franc. 573, ff. 15v–48r). The alphanumeric designations used here and in n. 22 are those of the Working Catalogue in Marenbon [2000](#).
- [21.](#) See for example Tweedale [1976](#); King [1982](#); De Libera [1996](#); and Marenbon [2003a](#).
- [22.](#) For example, the commentaries P3 (in Oxford Laud. Lat. 67, ff. 9v–14v; Assisi 573, ff. 4ra–15v; Paris B.N. lat. 13368, ff. 215r–223r) and P16 (in Munich clm. 14458, ff. 83r–93r). This interpretation was also supported by the fact that the *Isagoge* is meant as an introduction to the *Categories*, which treats expressions insofar as they signify things, and because a genus is what is “predicated of many” (according to Boethius, *On Topical Differences* 1178A; see also Aristotle *Int.* 17a39–40), only expressions are predicated. Several of these early glosses also list the evidence to support an *in re* interpretation of the *Isagoge*, and urge that either an *in re* or *in voce* interpretation of the treatise is viable: see for example P14 (in Paris 17813, ff. 1r–16v).
- [23.](#) According to Ebbesen [1990b](#), 386, Boethius “understood Porphyry’s de-ontologising of logic and his economy of assumptions so well that on occasion he refused to follow his teacher when the master forgot his own principles.” This interpretation depends on the view that Porphyry was concerned to strip logic of its metaphysical connections, an interpretation which is based on a reconstruction of Porphyry’s logic put forward in different ways by Lloyd [1956](#) and [1990](#), and Ebbesen [1990b](#). Both hold that Porphyry’s doctrine of imposition provides a sufficient semantics for his logic. This interpretation has been recently challenged by Chiaradonna [2007](#) and [2008](#), and the interpretation offered in this article is sympathetic to Chiaradonna’s position. The appearance of ontological neutrality in Boethius seems to be driven by pedagogical, rather than logical, considerations. The semantic theory on which his logical theory is based, as interpreted here, is ontologically rich. Settling this debate, however, stretches beyond the limits of this article.
- [24.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#) rightly objects to the suggestion in Tweedale [1976](#) that Boethius’ ideas are so confused that nearly anything can be based on or drawn

from them.

[25.](#) See for example Travis [2004](#).

[26.](#) Compare Travis [2004](#): “Accuracy conditions come into the picture only after you take the environment as it is presented to you *to be* some specific way.”

[27.](#) For a more detailed analysis of Boethius’ philosophy of language in contemporary terms see Martin, [forthcoming](#). I would like to thank both Chris Martin for sending me a copy of this yet unpublished paper, and Riccardo Chiaradonna for his excellent, yet-to-be published, critical notice of J. Barnes’ *Porphyry: Introduction*.

5 The *Opuscula sacra*: Boethius and theology

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The *Opuscula sacra* are a collection of brief but dense and highly influential theological treatises. Their unquestioning commitment to Catholic orthodoxy, not to mention their concern over issues of dogma, has seemed to many to be at odds with the philosophical detachment of Boethius' other works. For a time in the nineteenth century scholars almost unanimously denied their authenticity, but this situation was reversed in 1877 with the publication of a fragment from a hitherto unknown work by Cassiodorus. The fragment states that Boethius "wrote a book concerning the Holy Trinity and certain dogmatic chapters and a book against Nestorius."¹ This description corresponds nicely to the first, fourth, and fifth of the treatises that have come down to us. Although the others are not mentioned, since they are included in all the manuscripts, and all save the fourth are explicitly attributed to Boethius, there seems little reason to doubt them as well. Our concern here will be the relevance of the treatises for revealed theology, as distinct from their relevance for metaphysics (to be discussed in the [next chapter](#)). Accordingly we will set aside the third treatise, the so-called *Quomodo substantiae* or *De hebdomadibus*, and focus upon the others.

The only treatise for which we have definite knowledge concerning the circumstances of its composition is the fifth. Boethius tells us in its preface that he was concerned by the hasty reaction in Rome to a letter from some Greek bishops about certain points in Christology. This letter survives and can be dated to autumn 512, so that the fifth treatise was probably written in late 512 or early 513.² The other treatises give no certain information about their own composition, but scholars have generally accepted the argument of Viktor Schurr, in a ground-breaking study, that the first and second were prompted by a further interchange between Rome and the East in 519.³ In that year a delegation of Scythian monks was sent to Rome by Justinian bearing a proposal for certain theological formulae which they thought might succeed in reconciling the disputing factions in the Church. Among them was the theopaschite assertion that "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh." This assertion was controversial, not only because of its apparent rejection of divine impassibility, but because of its assumption that the persons of the Trinity can be numbered and treated as distinct subjects of experience. Apparently it was this aspect of the controversy which led Boethius to compose his first and second treatises, which deal with the issue of numeration in the Trinity. The fourth treatise stands apart in that it does not deal with any particular controversy. It is sometimes assumed to precede the others because it is comparatively elementary; however, this assumption is at best rather tenuous, since an accomplished scholar might well choose to write an elementary treatise at any point in his career.

The chronological order, then, was that the fifth treatise was written first, followed by the first and second, with the timing of the fourth unknown. Nonetheless I have chosen here to follow the order in which the treatises are found in the manuscripts and in which they are generally printed. This is partly because the fifth treatise is the longest and raises distinctive issues which are most easily reserved until the end. In addition, the manuscript order may well reflect Boethius' own wishes. Three of the five treatises (the second, third, and fifth) are addressed to the deacon John, who later became Pope John I (523–6).⁴ It is plain from the manner in which John is addressed that he and Boethius were on close terms and discussed theological matters together frequently. Boethius also seems to have entrusted to John the compilation of his writings, for he asks him regarding the fifth treatise, "If you pronounce it to be sound I beg you to place it among the other writings of mine" (77).⁵ Thus it seems likely that the manuscript order is due to John, who in turn would have been in a good position to know Boethius' wishes, if he had any.

On the Trinity

According to some manuscripts the full title of Boethius' *On the Trinity* is *Trinitas unus deus ac non tres dii*, "the Trinity is one God and not three gods." This title brings to mind a short treatise by St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Quod non sint tres dii*, "that there are not three gods." Gregory's treatise is representative of the Trinitarian theology of the three Cappadocian Fathers – Gregory, his brother St. Basil, and their colleague, St. Gregory Nazianzen – whose writings helped pave the way for the formulation of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381. A brief glance at it will be helpful in situating Boethius' work in relation to the larger history of Trinitarian theology.

Gregory seeks to answer the question of why the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three divine persons who share a common nature, are not three gods in the way that Peter, James, and John are three men. He begins by observing that, properly speaking, the divine nature cannot be named: "that nature is unnameable and unspeakable, and . . . every term invented by the custom of men, or handed down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed explanatory of our conceptions of the divine nature, but does not include the signification of that nature itself."⁶ The term 'god', *theos*, is a case in point. Gregory derives it from *thea*, an act of beholding, and takes it to indicate the divine operation of overseeing or superintending the cosmos. Since that operation is shared equally by each of the three persons, each is equally God. No doubt it is true that we often refer to those who share in a common labor as many – as, for instance, many carpenters or shoemakers. The difference is that in such a case the joint action can be resolved into separate actions performed by each agent, whereas the action of the Trinity cannot similarly be resolved into three separate actions. As Gregory observes, "although we set forth three persons and three names, we do not consider that we have had bestowed upon us three lives, one from each person separately; but the same life is wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, and prepared by the Son, and depends on the will of the Father." He

concludes that “the name derived from operation cannot be divided among many where the result of their mutual operation is one.”

Given that the three persons are one God, however, in what sense are they three? Gregory’s answer is deliberately brief and cryptic. “One is the Cause, and another is of the Cause; and again in that which is of the Cause . . . one [the Son] is directly from the first Cause, and another [the Spirit] by that which is directly from the first Cause.” In other words, they are distinguished solely by their relations of origin. Gregory emphasizes that such distinctions do not constitute a difference of nature, and indeed do not pertain to nature at all. He offers as an analogy the question of whether a given tree was planted or grew of itself. In answering such a question one makes an assertion only about the manner or mode of its existence, not about what it is.

These remarks illustrate both the content and the style of the Trinitarian theology of the fourth century. Gregory writes in simple language intelligible to any educated layman. The center of gravity of his argument lies in Scripture rather than philosophy, and his fundamental premise is the separate personal existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which he considers a datum of revelation. The question of how these three can be one God is answered by an analysis of the meaning of the term ‘god’. This in turn begins by positing the unknowability – and hence, in the relevant sense, the unnameability – of the divine nature. Apophaticism is thus woven into the fabric of even such kataphatic assertions as those of Trinitarian doctrine.⁷ Gregory is at pains to underscore that, however the individuating characteristics of the three persons are understood (and he gives somewhat different accounts of them elsewhere), they do not undermine this apophaticism, for they do not shed light upon the fundamental mystery of the divine nature.⁸

Even a superficial acquaintance with Boethius’ *On the Trinity* will reveal that we are here in a different world of thought. Boethius, like Gregory, seems to have written in response to an immediate practical need within the Church. Unlike Gregory, however, he prefers to present his results as a private theoretical inquiry. He emphasizes that he writes only for his father-in-law Symmachus, whom alone he judges capable of understanding the subtleties of his argument. Indeed he warns that he will deliberately use philosophical jargon to put unlearned readers off track: “I purposely use brevity and wrap up the ideas I draw from the deep questionings of philosophy in new and unaccustomed words such as speak only to you [Symmachus] and to myself . . . The rest of the world I simply disregard since those who cannot understand seem unworthy even to read them” (5). Such elitism may offend modern sensibilities, but we must remember that Boethius was not a bishop, as were Gregory and most others who had participated in the fourth-century debates, so he had no obligation to teach theology publicly. No doubt he was aware of how much damage had already been done by irresponsible or premature speculation, and he sincerely wished for the approval of a guide whom he trusted before putting his thoughts before others.

Boethius also informs us – or, rather, Symmachus – that the treatise will reveal “whether the seeds of argument sown in my mind by St. Augustine’s writings have borne

fruit” (5). It is striking that Boethius, whose facility in Greek could have opened for him the entire world of patristic theology, mentions only the work of Augustine. As we shall see, there is little sign either here or elsewhere that he read any of the other Church Fathers. Thus from the outset we are alerted to two salient features which set his work apart from those of earlier writers on the subject. One is that it will draw extensively from technical philosophy; the other is that, apart from philosophy, its main inspiration will be Augustine.

At first glance this might seem an unlikely combination. Augustine, after all, was not a professional philosopher, and his works employ a combination of exegesis, argument, and prayerful meditation quite unlike the scholastic style preferred by Boethius. Yet Augustine did know well the *Categories* of Aristotle, and he had pioneered the application of the Aristotelian categories to the Trinity. Even more importantly, he had developed a natural theology which emphasized the simplicity and *intrinsic* intelligibility of the divine essence, however much our current bodily state prevents us from knowing it directly.⁹ This was a new departure within patristic theology, one sharply at odds with the apophaticism of the Greek tradition, and even of earlier Latin authors such as St. Hilary of Poitiers. Boethius correctly recognized that this Augustinian natural theology was largely compatible with Aristotle’s theology of the Prime Mover.¹⁰ To place Augustinian wine into Aristotelian wineskins was therefore not an unpromising project.

Signs of this synthesis are apparent from the outset. Boethius begins with an assertion of the sole validity and authority of the Catholic faith, which teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God. The cause of their union, he says, is simply “absence of difference” (7). This leads him to a brief analysis of the types of sameness and difference, including the important observation that “numerical difference is caused by variety of accidents” (7). Next he invokes the Aristotelian division of sciences into physics, mathematics, and theology, with theology understood as the study of form which is independent of both matter and motion.¹¹ He adds that “in theology we should not be diverted to play with imaginations, but rather apprehend that form which is pure form and no image, which is very being (*esse ipsum*) and the source of being” (9). In essence Boethius here inserts an Augustinian description of God into an Aristotelian understanding of the nature and methods of theology. For Augustine, too, God is “the uncreated and most perfect form” which gives being to all things, and can equally be described as being itself, *ipsum esse*.¹² The warning against being misled by imagination – that is, by the reliance of our thought on sensory images – is also a familiar Augustinian theme.¹³

Next we learn that since the divine substance is form without matter, it has no parts, and is thus identical with its own essence or *id quod est* (11). The strong emphasis here upon divine simplicity is characteristic of Augustine, although Augustine typically describes this simplicity not as the identity of God with His own essence, but as the identity in God of that which He is with that which He has.¹⁴ Boethius also argues that since forms cannot be substrates save insofar as they are present in matter, and God is

form entirely without matter, God can take on no accidents. This too is a solidly Augustinian conclusion, although reached via an Aristotelian argument.¹⁵ It allows Boethius to apply to God his earlier assertion that the cause of numerical difference is variety of accidents. He concludes that “in God, then, is no difference, no plurality arising out of difference, no multiplicity arising out of accidents, and accordingly no number either” (13).

If there can be no plurality or number in God, however, the obvious question is how God can be a Trinity. Even Augustine, despite his strong emphasis on divine simplicity, had conceded that it is necessary to speak of *three* persons in God in order to avoid the modalism of Sabellius.¹⁶ Boethius’ initial attempt to address this point is perhaps best seen as an exploratory gambit. He distinguishes two kinds of number, that which consists in numerable things (one, two, and so forth) and that in virtue of which things are numerable, such as unity and duality. The mere repetition of the former, he says, does not make plurality. Apparently by this he means that a single item can be named in many ways, for he goes on to give as an example “one sword, one brand, one blade” (15). Unfortunately this is of little help in thinking about the Trinity, for to regard Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the same object named in three different ways would be a form of modalism. Boethius recognizes that the analogy ultimately will not do, for he concedes that whereas the brand and blade are identical, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not. Apparently reversing his earlier conclusion, he states that “there is not, therefore, complete lack of difference between them; and so number does come in – number which we explained was the result of diversity of substrates” (17).

How are these two incompatible positions – the denial of plurality in God and its recognition – to be reconciled? Boethius does not immediately answer this question, but instead turns to a more sustained investigation of the Aristotelian categories. Its main point consists in a distinction between what he calls objective (*secundum rem*) predications, which “point to a thing as being something,” and those which instead “attach something external to it” (25). The first class includes predications of substance, quality, and quantity, and the second those in the other seven categories. Boethius observes that two categories in the latter group (situation and passivity) do not apply to God at all, and that the others change in meaning when applied to Him; for example, to say that God is everywhere means that every place is present to Him, and to say that God ever is means that His “now” embraces all of time. (It is in the course of this discussion that Boethius makes his famous distinction between the eternity which is proper to God and “sempiternity,” that is, continuance through endless time.) *Secundum rem* predications also change in meaning when applied to God, but in a different way, for because of divine simplicity any predication of quality or quantity to God is in fact a substantial predication. Thus God is not only just but is the Just itself, He is not only great but is the Great itself, and so on.¹⁷

The importance of this distinction for Trinitarian doctrine lies in its application to the category of relation. Boethius regards relation as perhaps the paradigmatic example of an external predication. In illustration he cites relations such as that of a master and slave or

of one man standing to the right or left of another. Such relations exhibit two features which seem to be clear signs of externality: (a) if one term is “suppressed,” the other is as well (e.g., if the slave is freed, the master is no longer a master); (b) the relation can change without any intrinsic change in the object (e.g., one who is to my left can come to be on my right without himself changing in any way). The persons of the Trinity, however, “are predicates of relation, and, as we have said, have no other difference but that of relation” (27).¹⁸ It follows that each such relation “will not imply an otherness of the things of which it is said, but, in a phrase which aims at interpreting what we could hardly understand, an otherness of persons” (27–9). In effect, Boethius has now reconciled the denial of plurality in God with its affirmation: the only cause of plurality in God is relation, and relation is always merely external, so that the plurality introduced by relation leaves unity of essence intact. He summarizes his view in the dictum, “the substance preserves the unity, the relation makes up the Trinity” (29–31).

How should we assess this argument? Perhaps its most troublesome feature is that Boethius has so little to say about “otherness of persons.” He does not explain why the otherness he has identified must be specifically one of persons, nor what the term ‘person’ (*persona*) means in this context.¹⁹ This is not merely an oversight, but a serious gap in the argument, for a thing can be related to itself. (For example, to borrow Boethius’ earlier illustration, there is the relation of a brand to a sword when the two are the same object.) Because of this possibility, it does not follow merely from the fact that there are relations in the Trinity that there is a difference of persons; we need some independent description of what the relations are between. Far from amplifying on this point, however, Boethius instead returns to his earlier claim that “in concrete enumerations the repetition of units does not in any way produce plurality” (29), and goes on to describe relation in the Trinity as “a relation of identicals” (31). Such assertions heighten rather than alleviate the worry. Precisely how is it that a “relation of identicals” is supposed to introduce plurality – and if it does not, in what sense are there three persons?²⁰

Another doubt concerns whether Boethius’ key premise, that predications of relation are external, is actually correct in the case of the Trinity. The trouble is that examples such as the relation of master and slave or the relations among spatial objects are not cases where the things related differ *only* by their relation. (In fact it is hard to think of examples of this type, although identical figures in geometry may be a candidate.) If two things do differ only by their relation, surely it is plausible that the relation is essential; after all, one role of an essence is to constitute a thing as what it is, and in such a case that role is played by the relation. Thus it seems either that Boethius is wrong in holding that relations in the Trinity are merely external, or at least that he has failed to establish his case.²¹

I shall have more to say regarding the general character of Boethius’ Trinitarian theology. First let us look at the second treatise, which continues the investigation begun by the first.

Whether Father and Son and Holy Spirit are Substantially Predicated of the Divinity

The second treatise (known generally by its abbreviated Latin title, *Utrum Pater*) is the briefest of the five, and is generally regarded as either a sort of appendix to the first or perhaps as a preliminary essay. Since the two works make no reference to one another, either order is possible. Whatever their relationship, the *Utrum Pater* can be read on its own and raises important questions in its own right.

The first pertains to its title. When Boethius refers to the names of the three persons being “predicated of the divinity,” does he have in mind statements such as “God is the Father,” “God is the Son,” and “God is the Holy Spirit”? That would be odd, for such statements have never been part of Christian teaching about the Trinity, and in fact Boethius never makes such a statement. What he seems to have in mind instead is a question which had been discussed by Augustine: whether each of the three is called by His personal name in relation to Himself or in relation to the others.²² On the first answer the names are predicated in the category of substance (or “substantially”), and on the second they are predicated in the category of relation. Augustine’s answer is that the names are predicated in the category of relation, and Boethius agrees. The difference is that, whereas Augustine was content to argue for this conclusion simply from the meanings of the terms ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ (which plainly are relative to one another), Boethius does so on philosophical grounds.

The argument runs as follows. Each of the three is substance (*substantia*), yet, when they are taken together, “the result is not several substances but one substance” (33). Hence the substance of the three is perfectly one and indivisible. This substantial unity provides a test for whether a given predication is made in the category of substance: “everything . . . that is predicated of the divine substance must be common to the three” (33), in the sense that it is predicated both of each individually and of the three collectively.²³ Conversely, anything said of one of them individually which cannot be said of the others is not predicated in the category of substance. Obviously this includes their personal names, so that “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not predicated of the divinity in a substantial manner, but in some other way” (35) – namely, in the category of relation.

There are also a number of corollaries which Boethius interweaves into his discussion. The unity of substance of the three persons implies that anything predicated of one of them individually in the category of substance can be predicated of the others, as well as of the three collectively. Thus it is true not only that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but that the three together are one God; likewise, not only is the Son truth (as attested in the Gospel of John), so are the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the three collectively are one truth. Furthermore, given the test mentioned earlier, anything predicated of the three collectively which is not predicated of them individually is not predicated in the category of substance. This means that the term ‘Trinity’ is not predicated substantially of God, since it cannot be predicated of each of the persons individually; it is instead, like the personal names, predicated only relatively.

Taken as a whole, this is a remarkably compact and tightly woven piece of reasoning. If it goes wrong it is likely to do so at the beginning, and that is indeed where difficulties arise. What precisely is meant in saying that each of the three is *substantia*? Owing to the absence of the indefinite article in Latin, this could mean either that each of the three is *a* substance (using ‘substance’ as a count noun) or that each is substance (using ‘substance’ as a mass noun).²⁴ In support of the former interpretation is the fact that Boethius goes on to say that the three taken together are “not several substances but one substance,” where substances are clearly things that can be counted. In support of the latter is the fact that he also speaks of “the one substance of the three” (33) and of whether terms such as ‘Trinity’ “belong to substance” (37). In locutions such as these, substance would seem to be an ontological component of that to which it belongs, much like an Aristotelian essence or a Platonic Form.²⁵ If we take the term in this way, then, in saying that each of the three is substance, Boethius means that each is *simply* substance, i.e., identical to that which makes it what it is.²⁶

Presumably one should adopt whichever reading produces a valid argument. The trouble is that neither actually does so. On the first reading, if each of the three is a substance and the three taken together are a substance, how does it follow that “the one substance of the three” (which must be taken in the second sense, as an ontological constituent) is indivisible? One can readily imagine three substances which together make up one substance, without the one substance being simple in the relevant sense.²⁷ On the second reading, the initial premises of the argument turn out to be about quite different subjects: the first says that each of the three is substance (i.e., identical to its own essence), whereas the second says that the three taken together make up *a* substance. These premises do not yield the conclusion that the substance of the three (which, again, must be taken as an ontological constituent) is one and indivisible.

Thus there are serious logical problems in the *Utrum Pater*, as there were also in *On the Trinity*. In light of these difficulties, what conclusions should we draw regarding Boethius’ Trinitarian theology? The high status which these treatises later came to be accorded should not obscure how radical they are from the standpoint of the earlier Christian tradition. Boethius attempts to demonstrate the coherence of Trinitarian doctrine on purely philosophical grounds, without reference to Scripture, and without the apophaticism or the careful attention to the limitations of language which had been characteristic of earlier authors. It is an audacious enterprise, and if it ends in failure, perhaps the lesson to be drawn is that the undertaking itself is misguided. Boethius himself probably had a better sense of the risks accompanying his enterprise than did some of his later commentators; as he remarks at the end of *On the Trinity*, “if human nature has failed to reach beyond its limits, whatever my weakness takes away, my prayers will make up” (31).

On the Catholic Faith

On the Catholic Faith is the only one of the treatises whose Boethian authorship is still widely doubted. The main reason is that in the manuscripts it is not explicitly attributed to Boethius, as are the others; in addition, some have felt that as a mere dogmatic statement it is not the sort of thing which one might expect to come from the pen of Boethius. The first objection has been met by the reply that this treatise, unlike the others, has no particular addressee, and therefore would not normally receive a superscription.²⁸ The second objection has led several scholars to make a detailed comparison of the treatise's style and content with those of Boethius' other writings. These investigations on the whole support the conclusion that the treatise is authentic.²⁹ There is also the important point that the *Anecdoton Holderi* refers to Boethius as the author of "certain dogmatic chapters," and, of the writings which have come down to us under his name, only the fourth treatise fits this description.

Assuming Boethian authorship, it would be fair to say that in the fourth treatise, more than any other, Boethius speaks in the voice of a Roman senator. The tone throughout is measured, confident, and authoritative. Indeed, authority (*auctoritas*) – its marks and proper locus – is perhaps the treatise's most fundamental theme. The first sentence begins, "The Christian faith is proclaimed by the authority of the New Testament and the Old" (53); and the second sentence continues, "Now this our religion which is called Christian and Catholic is supported chiefly on these foundations which it asserts," proceeding then to a string of dogmatic affirmations. Despite the confident appeal to Scripture, Boethius makes no attempt to support his assertions on that basis, resting instead on the authority of *religio nostra*.³⁰ Trinitarian doctrine is presented without any effort to show either that it is internally consistent or that it is the best (if perhaps mysterious and paradoxical) interpretation of Scripture. Instead we are simply told, "our religion calls the Father God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God, and yet not three Gods but one" (53). The manner in which the Son is begotten by the Father, and how procession differs from generation, are among the things which cannot be understood by the human mind but must be accepted because they have been "laid down for our belief" (55). Here and throughout, Boethius seems deliberately to be challenging his reader to believe the Church's teaching for no reason other than that it is the Church's teaching.

Why he adopts this procedure is a matter for conjecture. E. K. Rand, in his classic work *Founders of the Middle Ages*, suggests that Boethius wrote *On the Catholic Faith* to summarize for himself his own beliefs, with no intention of circulating it further.³¹ Another suggestion is that of William Bark, who proposes that it was written to explain Christian doctrine in a simple way for an audience confused by theological debates.³² Neither of these conjectures accounts either for the work's tone or for the balance of its content, which inclines more toward biblical history than controversial theological issues (although several heresies are discussed briefly). A more likely suggestion is that of Henry Chadwick, who remarks that "the tract reads almost like a gage of challenge to the educated, late Roman, aristocratic reader, emphatically, even defiantly insisting on the

supernatural and distinctive elements in orthodox Christianity.”³³ That would explain why Boethius adopts such a dogmatic and peremptory tone: he is deliberately underscoring for a proud and sophisticated audience that Christianity requires an act of intellectual submission.

Yet there is an irony in the work which seems to have gone unremarked by previous commentators. Although Boethius claims to be presenting the faith of the Catholic – that is, universal – Church, what he presents is in fact the faith of the *western* Church. Signs of this limitation are apparent from almost the beginning, when he asserts that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (55). This is the famous doctrine of the *filioque*, which later became one of the primary bones of contention between the eastern and western halves of Christendom. Since he addresses the subject in only half a sentence, Boethius is apparently unaware that the Greek Fathers held that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (or, in some variants, from the Father “through the Son”).³⁴ He also seems unaware that the notion that the guilt of Adam’s transgression (and not only its debilitating effects on human nature) is physically propagated to Adam’s descendants is specifically western, and indeed Augustinian.³⁵ So too is the notion that mankind was created to replace the ranks of the fallen angels.³⁶ More generally, the heavy emphasis that Boethius places on the “arrogant disobedience” of man, and the justice of the consequent punishment, is alien to the outlook of the Greek Fathers, who tend instead to see the Fall as the consequence of ignorance and immaturity, and the subsequent punishment as a kind of medicine given to heal our fallen nature. The difference is most marked in the strange assertion that God allowed Abel to die before Adam so that Adam, “doomed to death himself, might be the more powerfully tormented by the apprehension of it” (61).³⁷

These differences must also be seen against the background of what Boethius does not say. Admittedly, since *On the Catholic Faith* belongs to no particular genre one cannot say precisely what should be expected of it; it is not a catechetical instruction, nor a refutation of heresy, nor an exhortation delivered for a particular occasion, nor an enchiridion of the sort composed by Augustine. Nonetheless, the exclusive focus on what the Church *asserts*, as opposed to what she practices, is certainly striking. There is no mention of prayer, or liturgy, or monasticism, or reverence for the saints, or the elementary duties of charity and almsgiving. A brief mention is made of the sacraments, but it consists only in the statement that Christ “instituted certain health-giving sacraments [so] that mankind might recognize that one thing was due to it through the fault of nature, but another thing through the gift of grace” (69). This statement is striking on two counts: first for the typically Augustinian dichotomy between nature and grace, and second for its reduction of the role of the sacraments to a teaching function. Faced with such a strange concentration on what the sacraments say, as opposed to what they *do*, one may legitimately wonder whether any account of Christian belief, presented wholly in isolation from Christian practice, can succeed even as an account of belief.

Against Eutyches and Nestorius

As mentioned earlier, *Against Eutyches and Nestorius* was the first of the theological tractates, being written in late 512 or early 513 in response to a letter from some unnamed Greek bishops to Pope Symmachus. More precisely, it was written in response to what Boethius saw as the hasty and ill-informed reaction to the letter when it was read in the Senate. In his preface Boethius gives us a vivid picture of the reading and the subsequent commotion, but without going into detail regarding what was said. He does mention that the letter proposed that Christ should be confessed to be both “of” (*ex*) and “in” two natures, and that this is what sparked the heated discussion. A little background is needed to appreciate the importance of these prepositions. That Christ is *in* two natures, human and divine, was a key element in the *definitio fidei* of the Council of Chalcedon (451). The Council affirmed that Christ is “made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union, but the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one person (*prosōpon*) and individual being (*hypostasis*) – not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, the only-begotten, divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁸ This emphasis on the continuing distinction of the two natures is the hallmark of a dyophysite Christology such as that advocated by Pope Leo the Great, whose *Tome* formed part of the basis for the Council’s definition.

Dyophysitism is opposed to a monophysite view such as that advocated by St. Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria (412–44). Cyril’s favorite formula was that there is in Christ “one incarnate nature of God the Word,” that nature being both human and divine. Cyril’s explanations make it plain that by “nature” he had in mind not a common essence or set of properties, but the individual concrete being who was Christ. Eventually Cyril was persuaded to accept that, as regards such terms, “theologians employ some indifferently in view of the unity of person [in Christ], but distinguish others in view of the duality of natures,” and thus that to speak of two natures in Christ can be perfectly orthodox.³⁹ Although Cyril died before the Council of Chalcedon, his concession on this point offered some hope that the Council’s description of Christ as one person in two natures, although superficially dyophysite, would be acceptable to monophysites as well. In the event this hope was not realized; the monophysites instead rallied against the Council, leading to a further round of debate in which the two sides grew increasingly polarized.

This is not the place to recount the complicated history of the Christological controversies in the sixty years between Chalcedon and the time of Boethius’ treatise.⁴⁰ Suffice to say that the two persons against whom Boethius wrote, Eutyches and Nestorius, were by 512 long dead and had few followers, at least within the Empire. Each was instead an emblem for a certain type of theology, and to be called a follower of either was a kind of smear (much as today Hitler and Stalin are emblems for a certain type of politics, and to be called a Hitlerite or Stalinist is a smear). Nestorius had been

patriarch of Constantinople from 428 until he was deposed in 431. The hallmark of his theology was the view that Christ was of two natures and two hypostases, which were united in what Nestorius called the “*prosōōpon* of union.” *Prosōōpon* would seem to mean here not so much “person” as “face or outer aspect,” so that Nestorius found in Christ only a unity of action and outward manifestation, but not of being. After his condemnation Nestorius was widely seen as representing an extreme and untenable dyophysitism, and the accusation of Nestorianism was a favorite charge used by monophysites against their opponents. Eutyches had been the archimandrite of a monastery outside of Constantinople, and was an extreme follower of Cyril. He was known for his express denial that Christ was of two natures “after the union,” and for apparently teaching – although this is less certain – that in Christ the human nature was “swallowed up” by divinity. He was deposed at Chalcedon in 451, and became thereafter the emblem of an extreme and untenable monophysitism.⁴¹

We now are in a position to appreciate the letter of the Greek bishops. Despite his reluctant acceptance of the notion that Christ is “in” two natures, Cyril had preferred to say that Christ is “of” (or “from,” *ek*) two natures, thereby leaving room for speaking of one nature after their union. The bishops at Chalcedon had, in fact, originally used the more ambiguous “of,” and had changed it to “in” only under pressure from the Roman legates. The significance of the letter of the Greek bishops lay in its seeking the Pope’s approval for a modest compromise, one that would use both the Cyrillian “of” and the Chalcedonian “in,” and would thus offer hope of reconciling the more moderate monophysites. Although Boethius does not say so explicitly, part of what moved him to write was apparently his frustration at the intransigence of Pope Symmachus, backed by the curia and the Senate, in refusing any such compromise. Their attitude is illustrated by the statement some years later of the Roman presbyter, Trifolius: “The apostolic see of Rome has never permitted a single syllable or a single dot to be added to or subtracted from the faith of the Synod of Chalcedon. Beware lest anyone deceive you with empty philosophical fallacies!”⁴² The carefully reasoned support which Boethius gave to the compromise played an important role in changing such attitudes. Eventually the compromise formula was accepted officially at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553).

Let us turn now to Boethius’ text. The first issue addressed is the meaning of ‘nature’. Boethius distinguishes four meanings of this term, of which the first three are each progressively narrower in scope. Nature can be all those things which exist and are in some way apprehended by intellect; substances alone, i.e., those things that can act or be acted upon; or the internal principle of movement present in corporeal substances. He then adds a fourth definition, which will turn out to be the one most relevant to Christology: “the specific difference that gives form to anything” (81). A “specific difference” is here the defining characteristic that distinguishes one species from another in the same genus; it “gives form” in the sense that it determines the actual content of the genus, to which it stands as form to matter. As Boethius observes, it is this fourth sense which is at issue in the debate over whether Christ is of one or two natures.

Next is the definition of ‘person’ (*persona*). Here Boethius reverts briefly to the

second sense of ‘nature’, identifying person as something predicated of nature in the sense of substance. But which substances? In answer Boethius analyzes the types of substance, concluding that ‘person’ is said of both rational corporeal substances (human beings) and rational incorporeal substances (God and the angels). He thereby arrives at his famous definition of person as “the individual substance of a rational nature” (85).

Both the procedure by which Boethius arrives at this definition, and the definition itself, raise important questions. The procedure seems to place God within a genus, that of rational incorporeal substance, whereas traditionally God is held not to belong to a genus. More specifically, to identify God as a type of substance runs afoul of Boethius’ own recognition, in [Chapter 4](#) of *On the Trinity*, that properly speaking God is “beyond substance” (*ultra substantiam*) because He is identical with His own attributes.^{[43](#)} It is true that, a few pages later in the present treatise, Boethius will defend the application of the term ‘substance’ to God on the grounds that “He is as it were the principle beneath all things, bringing it about for all things that they have existence (*ousiōōsthai*) and subsist” (93). However, this makes God substance in quite a different sense from that of creatures, whereas the procedure of dividing the various types of substance and locating God among them requires that ‘substance’ be univocal.

Another problem is that Boethius seems to treat God as a single person, whereas in Trinitarian doctrine God is three persons rather than one. This difficulty is linked to another, namely that, on Boethius’ own showing, the names of the divine persons are said in the category of relation rather than that of substance. How then can person itself be a kind of substance? This apparent inconsistency has led many critics to reject Boethius’ definition as fundamentally misguided.^{[44](#)} Yet Boethius has some eminent defenders, among them Thomas Aquinas, who argues that the Boethian definition can be reconciled with his own view that the persons of the Trinity are subsistent relations.^{[45](#)} We cannot enter into the intricacies of this topic here, save to note that the ambivalence of Boethius regarding whether God is one person or three may in part derive from a similar ambivalence of Augustine.^{[46](#)}

Boethius next adds that by *persona* he means the same as what the Greeks call *hypostasis*, that is, “the individual subsistence of a rational nature” (87). This claim could be challenged on two counts, one of which Boethius addresses and one of which he does not. The issue he addresses is that *persona* is etymologically closer to *prosōpon* than to *hypostasis*. Boethius observes that both of the former terms originally signified a mask worn by an actor, and came thereby to mean someone designated according to his appearance or social role.^{[47](#)} However, he sees this as merely an etymological point, not one that should bar him from defining *persona* as strictly an ontological category. The other concern is that *hypostasis* in fact did not mean what Boethius alleges, the individual subsistence of a *rational* nature; it meant an individual subsistence of *any* nature, including, for example, a horse or a rock. This is partly why it had regularly to be paired with *prosōpon* in the Trinitarian and Christological debates.^{[48](#)} However, it is true that because of their frequent association the two terms had come to be seen as more or less

equivalent within these limited contexts, and it is this context-dependent sense that Boethius no doubt has in mind.

There follow a number of further claims about Greek and Latin equivalents. Boethius cites as an axiom of the Greeks that “essences can indeed exist (*esse, einai*) in universals, but they have substance (*substant, hyphistantai*) in individuals and particulars alone” (87).⁴⁹ He adds that one must distinguish having subsistence (*subsistere*) from having substance (*substare*): the former refers to not requiring accidents in order to be, whereas the latter refers to providing other things with a substrate enabling them to be. Thus genera and species have subsistence only, whereas individuals have both subsistence and substance. Surprisingly, whereas up to this point Boethius has explained *hypostasis* in terms of individual subsistence, he now states that *hypostasis* is equivalent to *substantia* as he has defined it, whereas the equivalent of *subsistentia* is *ousiōōsis*. This is surprising not only because it is a shift from his earlier usage, but because *ousiōōsis* normally refers to the process of bringing something into being rather than to the thing which results from that process.⁵⁰ However, the equivalencies between verbs cited by Boethius (*ousiōōsthai* for *subsistere*, *hyphistasthai* for *substare*) are more plausible, and he has probably chosen the nouns as necessary to correspond to the verbs.

However interesting they are in their own right, these equivalences play little role in the subsequent arguments against Eutyches and Nestorius. Boethius understands Nestorius as teaching that Christ was two persons, one human and one divine. From this view Boethius rapidly deduces a number of absurdities. Nothing can be formed out of two persons, which means that for Nestorius Christ is either nothing at all, or he is two Christs, one man and one God. Alternatively, if only the human person is to be called Christ because God worked through him, then why should not any thing through which God works also be named Christ? Finally, on Nestorius’ view there can have been no true Incarnation, for “so long as the persons remain, we cannot in any wise believe that humanity has been assumed by divinity” (99). Unfortunately all of this deals with something of a straw man, since it ignores Nestorius’ emphatic teaching that Christ was a single person, the “*prosōōpon* of union.” It is true that Nestorius also held that each of the natures retained its own *prosōōpon*. Surely what this means is that a *prosōōpon* is not for Nestorius, as it is for Boethius, a strictly ontological category; it is instead a form of appearance, the concrete presentation of a nature *ad extra*. Boethius’ argument is thus less a critique of Nestorius than of a view which had come to be popularly associated with his name.

The critique of Eutyches is more elaborate. Boethius focuses on the puzzles raised by the notion that there were “two natures in Christ before the union and only one after the union” (103). First, when did the union occur? If at the time of Christ’s begetting, one is left with the odd supposition that Christ possessed a human nature before he existed, which seems plainly absurd.⁵¹ The other possibility is that the union occurred at the other terminus of Christ’s earthly life, the resurrection. Boethius deals with this possibility through a complex argument by division. First, on this view did Christ receive human flesh from Mary? If not, then he was not truly human, and there was no Incarnation. But

if he did, then there are three possibilities: “either divinity was translated into humanity, or humanity into divinity, or both were so modified and mingled that neither substance kept its proper form” (109). The first possibility can be dismissed because divinity is by nature immutable. The second requires more attention, but Boethius argues against it on the grounds that for one thing to be changed into another requires that they possess a common substrate, and neither the human body nor the human soul possesses a common substrate with God.⁵² The most interesting possibility, and the one which Boethius thinks the Eutychians actually hold, is the third. On this view the fusion of the natures produced a third thing in which each nature lost its separate identity, as when honey is mixed with water. Surprisingly, Boethius does not argue against this view, merely observing that it is contrary to the Catholic faith (115).

Instead he turns to expounding the Catholic view. He explains that there are two meanings of the preposition “of”: one, assigned to it by the Eutychians, in which it implies that the two natures do not retain their separate identity; the other, assigned to it by Catholics, in which the two natures endure like the gold and gems in a crown. In effect, Boethius here sanitizes the preposition “of” from its contamination by Eutyches. He also observes that the preservation of both natures in Christ implies the legitimacy of theopaschitism: “God may be said to have suffered, not because manhood became Godhead itself but because it was assumed by Godhead” (119). As mentioned earlier, the legitimacy of theopaschite language was the question that would provoke Boethius to write his two treatises on the Trinity, although he addresses it explicitly only here.

The [last chapter](#) of the work is a kind of appendix addressing the relationship of Christ’s humanity to original sin. Certain unnamed persons had objected that if Christ’s human flesh derived from Mary he would be subject to original sin. Boethius takes this as the opportunity to clarify precisely what sort of human nature Christ assumed. Was it like that of Adam prior to the Fall, after the Fall, or as he would have become apart from the Fall? In reply he offers a carefully balanced account granting a place to all three. Christ’s mortal body was of the condition of mankind after sin; his command over his body of the condition of mankind prior to sin; and his will (i.e., his absence of all desire for sin) of the condition mankind would have achieved had the Fall not occurred.⁵³

Conclusion

I have observed that each of the four treatises discussed here is problematic. The problems derive in part from Boethius’ desire to treat theological issues using a purely philosophical method, and in part from his exclusive reliance on Augustine as a theological authority. In addition, there is a certain tendency to exaggerate the role of authority itself within theology, as if theology’s sole task were to make authoritative pronouncements which it is then the job of philosophy to render rationally coherent. This is not a very fruitful way to think of the relationship between the two disciplines. Despite such problems, however, the treatises remain a remarkable achievement. Boethius almost

single-handedly made philosophy into theology's indispensable handmaiden, in the process raising theology to a new level of sophistication.⁵⁴ Anyone who finds his views unsatisfactory would do well to consider the challenge posed at the end of the *Utrum Pater*: "if you are in any point of another opinion, examine carefully what has been said, and if possible, reconcile faith and reason" (37).

Notes

1. See Usener [1877](#). The fragment is known as the *Anecdoton Holderi* after its discoverer, Alfred Holder. Usener's conclusion that it is by Cassiodorus has been challenged by Galonnier [1997](#); even so, Galonnier [2007](#) concludes, on other grounds, that the *Opuscula* are by Boethius.
2. See Schurr [1935](#), 108–27; Chadwick [1981](#), 181–3; Daley [1984](#), 178–80.
3. Schurr [1935](#), 136–227; cf. Chadwick [1981](#), 185–90, 211–13; Daley [1984](#), 183–5.
4. See Chadwick [1981](#), 26–9.
5. Quotations are from the Loeb translation by Stewart, Rand, and Tester (Boethius [1973](#)), with page references in the text. For the Latin see the Loeb or the critical edition by Moreschini (2005) (which rarely differ save in punctuation).
6. For Gregory's treatise see Gregory of Nyssa 1952– III.1, 37–57, and for a translation see *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* v, 331–6. I pass over another argument offered by Gregory (pertaining to the unity of human nature) which is not relevant here.
7. 'Apophaticism' (from *apophasis*, denial) refers to the denial of predicates to God, and more generally to an emphasis upon the inadequacy of human language or concepts in describing God; 'kataphaticism' (from *kataphasis*, affirmation) refers to the ascription of such predicates, and more generally to their acceptance as adequate.
8. For further discussion of fourth-century Trinitarian theology see Kelly [1978](#), 223–79, or (in greater detail) Behr [2004](#). I have discussed some specifics of Gregory's argument in Bradshaw [2004](#), 154–64.
9. See Bradshaw [2004](#), 222–9.
10. The similarity is not accidental, for Augustine was largely inspired by the Plotinian description of Intellect (the second hypostasis of Plotinus' system), and this in turn was inspired by Aristotle's description of the Prime Mover, particularly as it had been interpreted by Alexander of Aphrodisias; cf. Bradshaw [2008](#).
11. See *Metaphysics* VI.1, and for comparison with the somewhat similar division in Boethius' first commentary on the *Isagoge* see Gersh [1986](#) II, 658–64.

(Admittedly, Aristotle does not say that the subject of theology is *form* existing separately from matter, but this is a plausible construal in light of his discussion of the Prime Mover.)

- [12.](#) For God as the first and highest form see *On True Religion* 11.21, 18.35, 36.66, *On Free Choice* II.16.44–17.46, *City of God* VIII.6; and for God as *ipsum esse* see *On the Trinity* V.2.3, *Commentary on the Psalms* 134.4, Sermon 7.7.
- [13.](#) For example, Augustine, *On the Trinity* VII.6.11, VIII.2.3, X.5.7–6.8, 8.11, XI.5.8.
- [14.](#) See Augustine, *On the Trinity* V.10.11, VI.7.8, VII.1.2, XV.5.7–8, 13.22, 17.29; *City of God* VIII.6, XI.10. Boethius returns to the subject of divine simplicity in [Chapter 4](#) of *On the Trinity*, and his discussion there is more typically Augustinian.
- [15.](#) Compare Augustine, *On the Trinity* V.4.5, which argues to the same conclusion from divine immutability.
- [16.](#) Augustine, *On the Trinity* VII.4.9. He also observes that the plural is freely used of God in Scripture, as in the statement of Jesus that “I and my Father are one” (VII.6.12).
- [17.](#) We may note in passing that the application of these distinctions to God is not as straightforward as Boethius seems to suppose. For example, Augustine holds that God is identical with His own eternity, a view which became standard among the later scholastics (*Homily 2 on Psalm 101*, Ch. 10). Would Boethius differ from him on this point, or would he instead hold that ‘God is eternal’ is not a predication in the category of time, after all? (The treatment of divine eternity in the *Consolation of Philosophy* suggests the latter, but if so it is at odds with the present work.) It is also far from clear that the category of action is merely external as applied to God, if Augustine and the scholastics are right in identifying God with His own knowing and willing. Note that in the *Quomodo substantiae* Boethius asserts that God’s being and acting (*agere*) are the same (51).
- [18.](#) Boethius has not in fact said that the three persons differ only by relation, but perhaps he takes this as implied by his earlier denial of plurality in God.
- [19.](#) He does offer a definition in the fifth treatise (to be discussed below), but its applicability within the Trinity is far from clear.
- [20.](#) A similar point is made by Marenbon [2003a](#), 86, in observing that Boethius does not reconcile the notion that relation introduces plurality in God with the claim that the relation is “like that of the same to the same.”
- [21.](#) For a similar criticism see Stump [1983](#), 141–3.
- [22.](#) See Augustine, *On the Trinity* V.5.6.

- [23.](#) Compare the similar rule in Augustine, *On the Trinity* v.8.9.
- [24.](#) Both translations can be found, e.g., the Loeb translation and the more recent English rendering by Eric Kenyon (available at www.pvspade.com/Logic) give the former; Galonnier [2007](#) gives the latter.
- [25.](#) See particularly *Phaedo* 65e, where the Forms are the substance (*ousia*) of sensible objects.
- [26.](#) This is the meaning of the term in the passage of *On the Trinity* pp. 16–18 where Boethius says that only God is substance, since other things owe their being to something other than themselves.
- [27.](#) For example, a body and its parts (assuming that the parts of a substance can be substances), or three water droplets which merge into one.
- [28.](#) Cappuyns [1937](#), 372.
- [29.](#) See Bark [1946](#), Chadwick [1980](#), and Galonnier [2007](#), 380–409; but see also the cautionary note sounded on the basis of stylometric analysis by Lambert [2003](#).
- [30.](#) Later it appears that Scripture itself is merely a mark of the most comprehensive religious authority, the Catholic Church. The Church can be known by three signs: “whatever is believed in it has the authority of the Scriptures, or of universal tradition, or at least of its own and proper teaching” (71). Thus there is no need to ascertain whether a given teaching has the support of Scripture provided that it is taught by the Church.
- [31.](#) Rand [1928](#), 157.
- [32.](#) Bark [1946](#), 68–9.
- [33.](#) Chadwick [1981](#), 179–80.
- [34.](#) See Principe [1997](#). Galonnier [2007](#), 402 makes the interesting suggestion that Boethius’ words (the Spirit is *a patre quoque procedentem vel filio*) mean only that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *as the Son is engendered*, thus leaving the Father the sole causal principle. It seems to me that if this were what Boethius meant, he would have offered some explanation; besides, as Galonnier notes, [Chapter 5](#) of *On the Trinity* states simply that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, without any such qualification.
- [35.](#) See Williams [1929](#), 167–314; Meyendorff [1975](#), 143–6. Williams does note some precedents for the idea in Origen, Ambrose, and Ambrosiaster, but its later prevalence was unquestionably due to Augustine.
- [36.](#) See Augustine, *Enchiridion* Ch. 29, 61–2; *City of God* XXII.1. Here too there is a precedent in Origen (*Homilies on Ezekiel* XIII.2), but the notion’s prevalence was due to Augustine.
- [37.](#) For discussion of the rather meager precedents of this idea see Galonnier [2007](#), 405–8.

38. Kelly [1978](#), 340.
39. The quotation is from the Symbol of Union accepted by Cyril in 433; see Kelly [1978](#), 328–9.
40. See, for example, Meyendorff [1975](#), 13–46; Gray [1979](#).
41. For more on Nestorius and Eutyches see Kelly [1978](#), 310–17, 330–4.
42. Quoted by Daley [1984](#), 180; cf. Chadwick [1981](#), 190.
43. See also the hesitations of Augustine in applying the term *substantia* to God (*On the Trinity* VII.5.10).
44. For example, Ratzinger [1990](#); cf. extensive discussion in Schlapkohl [1999](#) and Hipp [2001](#).
45. *Summa theologiae* I, Q. 29.
46. See Augustine, *On the Trinity* VII.6.11.
47. This is not quite right, since *prosōpon* originally meant “face,” and that seems to have been the root of most of its later development; but it is true that this development included the sense of “mask.”
48. For discussion of the complex history of these terms see Prestige [1952](#), 157–90; Stead [1994](#), 173–83, 194–9.
49. The source of this dictum is probably Alexander of Aphrodisias; cf. Chadwick [1981](#), 193. (I have changed the Loeb rendering of *substare* to “have substance” in order to maintain consistency.)
50. See the relevant entries in Liddell and Scott [1996](#) and Lampe [1961](#).
51. Actually it may not be so absurd, if what Eutyches had in mind was something like the Platonic ideal of humanity (as suggested by Stead [1994](#), 212). Boethius does not consider this possibility.
52. For the requirement of a common substrate see Aristotle, *Physics* I.7, *On Generation and Corruption* I.1; cf. Chadwick [1981](#), 199–200. Even granting the applicability of this doctrine from Aristotelian physics to God and humanity, there seems to be a confusion here. As Marenbon observes, “the question is about whether human *nature* can be transformed into, or mixed with, divine *nature*; and these natures correspond to the qualities (A and B, winey or watery) not to the things (a and b, wine or water) in Boethius’s physical example” ([2003a](#), 75).
53. For the sources of this division in Augustine see Chadwick [1981](#), 202.
54. As Daley [1984](#) observes, this process occurred almost simultaneously with a similar movement in the Greek-speaking East, so that scholasticism had two more or less independent births.

6 The metaphysics of individuals in the *Opuscula sacra*

Andrew Arlig

Three of the five treatises that comprise the *Opuscula sacra* contain interesting philosophical material.¹ All three treatises attempt to make aspects of God intelligible using Greek philosophical concepts. The treatise *Quomodo substantiae* (OS III) discusses how something can be essentially predicated of both God and His creatures. *On the Trinity* (OS I) and *Against Eutyches and Nestorius* (OS V) are concerned with the individuality and unity of, respectively, God and Christ. Along the way to formulating his solution to his chosen puzzles, Boethius presents some of the elements of a general theory of individuals.

In this chapter we will concentrate on the general theory of individuals that can be reconstructed from Boethius' *Opuscula*.² The theological treatises are not the only places that he discusses individuals, and at times we will make use of Boethius' commentaries on Aristotle and Porphyry to flesh out some of his remarks.³ Nonetheless, we will focus on the account of individuals that can be reconstructed from the theological treatises for two reasons. First, this account has exerted a tremendous influence on subsequent generations. Second, Boethius admits that his main role in the logical commentaries is to present a sympathetic elucidation of Aristotle's or Porphyry's views.⁴ The doctrines in the *Opuscula* presumably are Boethius' own.

After we have examined and reconstructed Boethius' general treatment of individuals, we will finish this chapter by asking whether this general account of individuals can illuminate the nature of the Incarnation and the Trinity.

The metaphysics of individuals

A complete metaphysical theory of individuals should account for the things that we pre-theoretically take to be paradigmatic cases of individuals. Hence, the theory should be able to account for things like Adam and Eve, Loti the cat and Leafy the tree, and individual artifacts such as my car and my toaster. It may be that our theory will tell us that these things are not real or that they are derivative beings. Nevertheless, the theory will need to explain why Adam, Loti, Leafy, and my car appear to be individuals.

In addition to these paradigmatic cases, we will need to entertain the possibility that aggregates, such as flocks of geese, crowds of humans, and piles of stones, are individuals. We will also consider whether the constituents and properties of our paradigmatic individuals can themselves be individuals.

When considering the nature of individuals, one must first disentangle two dominant

senses of the term “individual.” In one sense of the term, Adam is an individual in that he is not a universal. As Boethius puts it in his commentaries on Aristotle and Porphyry, a universal is predicable of many, whereas an individual is at most predicable of one thing.⁵ Adam is at most predicable of one thing, because we can only claim that this thing is Adam. We cannot say that both *this* thing and *that* thing are Adam.

Boethius is also working with this first sense of “individual” when he claims that individuals are indivisible, whereas universals are divisible. At first glance, the claim that individuals are indivisible might sound strange. Adam is divisible into form and matter. Adam is also divisible into his various organs. And if we were truly gruesome, we could also saw Adam down the middle. But this is not what Boethius means when he claims that particulars are indivisible (2IS 195.12–18; cf. CAT 174B):

However, “individual” is said in several ways. An individual is said to be that which cannot in any way be cut – as is the case with a unity or mind. An individual is also said to be that which cannot be divided on account of its solidity – as is the case with a diamond. And an individual is said to be that whose predication is not suitable for any other like thing (*in reliqua similia non convenit*) – e.g. Socrates. For, even though there are other men similar [to Socrates], the property and predication of Socrates is not suitable for any other.

The last sense of “individual” mentioned is what is important for our purposes, and it is a sense of “individual” or “indivisible” that is distinct from the sort of division that occurs when one cuts Adam into parts. The division of Adam into form and matter and the division of Adam into his organs fall under a different mode of division, namely, the division of an *integral* whole into its parts.⁶

In contrast to the divisions of an integral whole into its parts, the divisions of the universal into universals and of the universal into particulars are logical divisions. It is not always easy to see that logical divisions are a different sort of division because ancient and medieval authors often describe universals as “wholes.” The items that fall under a universal are called that universal’s “parts.” However, Boethius, like most ancient and medieval thinkers, is not proposing that universals are literally composed out of the items that fall under them. So, for example, it is not the case that humanity is composed out of Adam, Eve, and all the other human beings in the world. In the case of universals and particulars, collection and division are logical operations. When one groups things together because they share a common feature, one is *collecting* together things. When one itemizes the things that fall under a universal, this is known as *division*. Accordingly, when I classify all things like Andrew and Eve as humans, I am collecting a multitude under a single species, humanity. When I classify all things like Adam, Eve, and my cat Loti, I am collecting a multitude under a single genus, namely, *Animal*. When I say that some animals are rational and some animals are irrational, I am beginning to divide the genus into species. When I divide the species humanity into the things that fall under it, I am dividing the species into individuals. Hence, when Boethius claims that Adam is

logically indivisible, he is alluding to the fact that Adam is neither a genus nor a species.

There is a second important sense of “individual,” which is alluded to in the previous quotation from Boethius’ commentary on the *Isagoge*. Adam is not merely non-universal, Adam is an integrated whole. Pre-philosophically, we think that the parts of Adam are glued together in such a way that Adam can move about in and interact with the world “as a whole.”⁷ It is when we turn to this second sense of “individual” that we begin to wonder whether aggregates are sufficiently integrated to be individuals. This second sense of individual also seems to not apply to many of the constituents of Adam. Adam’s humanity, Adam’s paleness, and perhaps even Adam’s matter may be individuals in the first sense, but they are not individuals in the second sense.

When ancient authors focus on individuals in the second sense, they often describe them as “unities.” Boethius himself does not always take care to distinguish these two senses of individual. But let us try to distinguish them by speaking of “instances” when we are talking about individuals in the first sense, and “integrated unities” when we are discussing individuals in the second sense.

A complete metaphysical account of individuals will attempt to answer at least the following questions:⁸

- (1) If x is an integrated unity, what makes x an integrated unity?
- (2) If x is an instance, what makes x an instance?

The second question can be broken down into two parts:

- (2a) If x is an instance, what makes x an instance of a universal, or kind? That is, why does x belong to a type that includes other instances?
- (2b) If x is an instance, what makes x distinct from other instances of that kind?

This last question also needs to be disambiguated, for we might be asking for an answer to the question:

- (2b¹) Why is x *an* instance, which is distinct from all other members of a kind?

Or, we might be asking

- (2b²) Why is x *this* instance, which is distinct from all other members of a kind?

The difference between (2b¹) and (2b²) is this: the former question is asking for the reason why Adam is an instance of the universal *human being*. The second question is asking for the reason why Adam is Adam, and not Eve, who is also an instance of the universal *human being*.

Question (1) is asking for an account of integration. Question (2a) is asking for the metaphysical reason why instances belong to kinds. Question (2b) in all its forms is asking for an account of individuation. Let us turn to Boethius’ account of integration in the [next section](#). In the two sections that follow, we will then turn to his accounts of belonging to a kind and of individuation, respectively.

The construction of integrated unities

Some integrated unities do not have parts. We will say that these entities are *mereologically simple*. Other integrated unities have parts. We will say that they are *mereologically complex*. It would seem at first glance that no account of unity is required for mereologically simple unities. But as we will see, Boethius seems to think that some mereologically simple entities are more unified than others. But before we examine the grades of simple unities, let us consider the construction of mereologically complex integrated unities.

In *On the Trinity* Boethius tells us that the parts of a composite give the composite its “being” (OS I, II, 94–7; Boethius [1973](#), p. 11 – all references to OS in English are to this Loeb edition):

Each and every thing gets its being from those things which compose it (*ex his ex quibus est*) – i.e. from its parts. That is, [each composite thing] is this *and* this (*hoc et hoc*) – that is, its parts conjoined – and not this *or* this taken singularly.

As Boethius tells us in his *On Division*, material individuals can be divided in any number of ways (D 888A–B).⁹ But the parts that Boethius is most interested in are form and matter – or, in the case of a human being, soul and body.¹⁰ Let us call these parts *hylomorphic* parts.

Boethius tells us in a number of places in his logical treatises that a whole is “naturally prior” to its parts (D 879B–C; TC (Cicero [1833](#)) III, 331.23–9 and I, 289.35–9). It is not entirely clear whether “*x* is naturally prior to *y*” means that *y* is ontologically dependent upon *x*.¹¹ If that were the meaning of this rule and if the rule were entirely general, it would have some perverse results. For a house would be ontologically dependent upon its windows, and Adam would be ontologically dependent upon his finger.

When restricted to a discussion of the hylomorphic parts of an integrated unity, it is clear that Boethius thinks that the composite integrated unity ontologically depends upon its form and its matter. Nevertheless, the integrated unity ontologically depends upon its matter in a different manner than it depends upon its forms. The matter is only potentially the thing. It may (as we will see below) also play a role in individuating the thing. But while some matter needs to be present to combine with forms – and this matter may need to be the right sort of stuff – the matter does not contribute to the thing’s “being” in the strictest sense (OS I, II, 83–9; Loeb p. 11):

All being comes from form. For a statue is not said to be a likeness of some animal in virtue of the bronze, which is its matter, but rather in virtue of its form, which has been impressed into the [bronze]. And this is not said to be bronze in virtue of earth, which is [the bronze’s] matter, but in virtue of the [Aristotelian] form of the bronze (*aeris figuram*). And earth itself is not spoken of *kata tēn hulēēn* [sc. in virtue of its matter], but in virtue of dryness and heaviness, which are its forms.

Clearly, Boethius is playing with several senses of “being” in this passage. One sense of “being” is existential. The form is the cause of the fact that the thing exists, since by itself matter is not the thing. The matter is potentially the thing, but it needs the form to actually be the thing. There is a second sense in which the form causes the being of a thing. When a form combines with matter it makes a thing of a certain type exist. In other words, the thing is an *F* – say, a dog or a human or pale – because a form is present. Hence, while a material thing requires both form and matter in order to exist, its *actual* existence and its *being something* are due to its forms, and as the passage above makes plain this holds at every level of analysis all the way down to formless, or prime, matter. Because prime matter has no form, it is hard to have an adequate understanding of it (OS v, I, 69–72; Loeb p. 79). It is also for this reason that one could say that prime matter is the lowest form of existence.

For many ancient and medieval philosophers there is another way in which a form can cause the being of a thing, for at least some forms are the metaphysical glue that holds a thing together through time and change. The forms that bind and preserve the unity of a thing through change are the thing’s essential forms. For example, if a dog were to lose one of its essential forms, the dog would cease to exist. Granted, there would still be some organic material – and this material might still have the shape of a dog – but this material stuff and the forms that it possesses would not be a dog. Other forms are accidental forms. These forms can be gained or lost without compromising the existence of the thing. For example, our dog might gain or lose weight (i.e. change quantitative forms), or its coat might change color (i.e. change qualitative forms).

In the Aristotelian tradition, essential forms are often called substantial forms. This is due to the fact that, for many Aristotelians, the only things that possess essential forms are substances. It is also claimed that only natural things are substances. Artifacts, no matter how complex, are thought to have accidental forms. Hence, the unity of a bed or a car is weaker than that of a tree, a dog, or a human. Boethius alludes to this tradition when he tells us that one sense of “nature” is that it is the “principle of *per se*, not accidental, change” (OS v, I, 96–8; Loeb p. 81). Natural objects have natural ways that they can change and yet stay the same thing. Artifacts do not have natural motions. The natural motions that they do have are due to the substances, such as the wood in the bed or the metal in the car, that compose the artifacts (I, 101–8; Loeb p. 81).

Hence, form and matter are the constituents of an integrated unity, and the binding of form to matter makes the composite individual integrated and unified. In the Aristotelian tradition, unities come in degrees. Both a crowd and Adam are unities. But Adam is more of a unity than the crowd. A crowd is merely the sum of its parts, the people. This means that if even one human is removed, that specific crowd disappears. Adam, in contrast, can lose some of his parts and yet survive. This difference is due to the fact that the crowd only has an accidental form whereas Adam has a substantial form. A crowd has some degree of unity, since the crowd exists when some substances are located in relative proximity to one another. And, in a looser sense, the crowd can endure the addition or removal of some humans, although our inability to pinpoint precisely how

many humans it takes to form this crowd and how many humans must leave before it disperses suggests that this crowd is not a well-defined and well-integrated individual. Moreover, the behavior of the crowd supervenes upon the behavior of the people who constitute the crowd. The arrangement and proximity of the humans does not change the nature of the humans themselves. People may act differently in crowds, but they are still *humans* when they act differently. In contrast, the matter of Adam changes substantially when Adam's substantial form binds with, or imbues, the matter. The elements, which by themselves are substances, cease to exist except "in potentiality" when the form of a human being imbues them. The notion that substantial forms cause substantial transformation is at the heart of Boethius' discussion of mixtures of natures in *Against Eutyches* VI–VII (Loeb pp. 109–23).

In his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius tells us that everything subsists so long as it is one (3.11.13). As we have seen, there are grades of being one. An aggregate is a weak unity. An artifact, such as a bed, is a stronger unity than an aggregate, but a weaker unity than a composite of substantial form and matter. But the truest sorts of unities are mereological simples. Composites of matter and form have parts. Hence, they are dependent upon their parts. But forms do not have parts, and so they are not dependent upon their parts for their existence, their being something, or their persistence. Forms, then, are truer integrated unities than composites.

All forms are mereologically simple. However, the story does not end here. Some forms are truer unities than others, for most forms are distinct from their causes, whereas one form is identical to its cause. This one is the truest sort of integrated unity there is. It is God.

At the level of material beings, Boethius embraces Aristotelian hylomorphism. But, in addition to Aristotelian forms and matter, Boethius must find a place for Platonic Forms.¹² (From this point forward I will use the capitalized term to refer to Platonic Forms and the lower-case version to refer to Aristotelian forms.) According to Boethius, Aristotelian forms are "images" of Platonic Forms (OS I, II, 113–17; Loeb p. 13):

Those forms, which arise in matter and body, come from those Forms that exist apart from matter. We are accustomed to call the others, which are in bodies, "forms" even though they are images, since they resemble the Forms that are not established in matter.

We are allowed to call these images in matter "forms" because they resemble Forms. But Boethius stresses that the true forms are the Forms. And just as images depend upon their archetypes for their existence, these Aristotelian forms depend upon Platonic Forms for their existence. Hence, Platonic Forms are more unified than Aristotelian forms.

Adam's humanity is different from the Platonic Form Humanity with respect to a difference between an effect and its cause. Humanity has a greater degree of unity than Adam's humanity. But the Forms are not the highest degrees of unity, since they too are caused by something external to their being. God provides the subsistence of all other existing things (OS V, III, 261–4; Loeb p. 93). Only God is identical with respect to cause

and effect, for God has no other cause than Himself. God's Form is Being itself (OS I, IV, 184; Loeb p. 19). Everything else gets its being by participating in Being itself (OS III, 37–8; Loeb p. 43).

God is the truest integrated unity. Even mereologically simple entities, including it would seem the Forms, are lesser grades of unity when compared to God. God is the truest sort of individual. He is not only unique, in that He is not an instance of any kind, He is the truest sort of unity. He is not only partless, He is not even distinguishable from His cause.

How instances belong to a kind

We have seen that forms are the cause of a thing's existence, persistence, and unity. We have also noted that the form is the cause of a thing being something, that is, the cause of a thing belonging to a kind of thing.

The default position of ancient and medieval metaphysicians is usually that a form is a universal, that is, it is shared by many instances. Accordingly, the default answer to the question why two instances belong to the same kind is this: the instances in question share a common form. In his theological writings Boethius does not appear to shy away from this default position.¹³ Although, we will press him on this aspect of his thought when we turn to the theory of individuation.

Hence, Boethius' answer to question (2a) begins in this way. Adam and Eve belong to the same kind *human being*, because Adam and Eve share the Aristotelian form humanity. But, since humanity is an image of a Platonic Form, the full answer to question (2a) must include Platonic participation in the Forms, and ultimately in God.

We saw in the [previous section](#) that everything save God gets its being from God. Most things get their being from God indirectly through the Forms. The Forms make things exist and make those things what they are. But Adam is not just human; he is also pale, tall, and knowledgeable. Hence, Adam is also a pale thing, a tall thing, and a knowledgeable thing. In other words, there are two senses in which Adam is "something" (OS III, 35–6; Loeb p. 41):

To be merely something (*tantum esse aliquid*) is different from to be something in virtue of the fact that it exists. The former signifies an accident, the latter substance.

Adam is "merely something" – for example, a pale thing – because he has copies of accidental Forms present in him. Adam is "something in virtue of the fact that he exists" because he participates in Humanity, that is, because a copy of Humanity is part of him.

Combining the accounts from the three philosophical treatises, the metaphysical analysis of a material thing such as Andrew can be summarized in this way:

In the case of substantial forms,

“Adam is human” is true because Adam is a composite of the Aristotelian form *human being* and matter, and *human being* composes Adam because *human being* participates in ϕ , where ϕ is one of the Forms in God’s mind.

In the case of accidental forms,

“Adam is pale” is true because *paleness* inheres in Adam, and *paleness* inheres in Adam because Adam participates in ϕ .

It is not clear whether every Aristotelian form has a correlative Form. It might be that paleness participates in the Pale and that humanity participates in Humanity. But if pressed, Boethius might follow some Neoplatonists and reduce the Forms to some smaller set.¹⁴ Hence, it might be that

paleness inheres in Adam because Adam participates in ϕ , θ , and ψ ,
and, perhaps, even that

the substantial form *human being* composes Adam because *human being* participates in ϕ , θ , and ψ .

Boethius does not give us too many clues about what Forms the forms participate in (other than the Good, which is identical to Being). His use of the common Platonic metaphor of images and archetypes suggests that the correlation is one-to-one, but he is not forced to think this, and there are perhaps good reasons why one would not want all immanent forms to have corresponding Forms. For instance, there may not be such Forms as the Hot and the Tall.

Individuation

We have seen that there are two related senses of individual. A thing is individual because it is an integrated unity. Integrated unities, in virtue of their form, are instances of a kind of thing. We have seen why two instances belong to the same kind. We now must address our last set of questions and ask what makes two integrated unities two distinct instances of the same kind.

Boethius gestures at three theories of individuation in *On the Trinity* and *Against Eutyches*. The first suggestion is that individuation is caused by accidents. The second suggestion is that individuation occurs when forms occupy different locations at the same time. The third suggestion is that individuation is due to matter. Let us examine each proposal in turn.

Individuation by accidents or by location

In *On the Trinity* Boethius informs us that plurality is caused by difference. There are three modes of difference: generic difference, difference in species, and numerical difference (OS I, 1, 51–6, Loeb p. 7; cf. 2IS 191.21–192.16). Generic difference occurs when two items belong to different categories. For example, *grey* and *cat* are generically different. Likewise, and perhaps derivatively, my cat's hair color and my cat are generically different. Specific difference occurs when two items belong to different species. My cat and I are generically the same, since we are both animals. But *cat* and *human* are different species, and, hence, my cat and I are different in species.

The important mode of difference as far as individuals are concerned is numerical difference. Numerical difference is applied to two items that are the same in genus and species, such as Adam and Eve. Both Adam and Eve are human. But they are different individuals. We have two of *human*, not one. The cause of numerical difference is that Adam and Eve have different accidental forms (OS I, 1, 56–63; Loeb pp. 7–9; cf. TC III, 332.29–31):

But a variety of accidents make numerical difference. For three men differ with respect to their accidents, not with respect to genus or species. Even when the mind separates all accidents from these [men], there is still a distinction among them with respect to place, which is something that we can in no way pretend to be one. For two bodies cannot occupy one place. Accordingly, they are numerically many, since they are made many by accidents.

Without much fanfare Boethius has suggested a theory of individuation. Notice that the theory seems to assume the universality of the substantial form of a human being. Adam's substantial form is identical to Eve's substantial form. But Adam is not identical to Eve because Adam is a composite of humanity plus a bundle of accidental forms, *A*, and Eve is a composite of humanity plus a bundle of accidental forms, *E*, and *A* is not identical to *E*.

But buried in the passage that we just quoted is a hint of a second theory of individuation. Boethius proposes that we imagine stripping all the accidental forms from Adam and Eve. The humanity in Adam will still be distinct from the humanity in Eve because they occupy two distinct locations at the same time. Occupying a place at a time is, for Boethius, an accidental feature. This may explain why he does not carefully distinguish between the proposal that a bundle of accidents generates instances of a kind and the proposal that a special type of accident, namely spatio-temporal location, generates these instances. But it is important to keep these two proposals separate. First, one could argue that spatio-temporal location is not a form, but rather a grid on which one realizes forms. Second, even if spatio-temporal location is treated as a form, the second theory effectively proposes that some accidents are more important than others.

Both proposed theories lead to the same fundamental difficulty: as Paul Spade puts it,

these theories “freeze” individuals.¹⁵ Consider the first proposed theory. If Adam is individuated by all of his accidents, then it seems to follow that any addition or removal of an accident belonging to this bundle will entail the destruction of Adam. Adam is the form *human being* plus a set of accidents *A*. Now imagine that Adam gets a suntan. *Paleness* is now gone and *brownness* is now present. But this means that the form *human being* is now connected to a set of accidents that is not *A*, but rather *B*. But, by hypothesis, Adam was individuated by *A*. Hence, it seems that Adam no longer exists. The theory prohibits Adam from changing in any respect. Adam, if he is to survive, must freeze.

The same problem in essence bewitches the second proposed theory, which insists that spatio-temporal location is the true cause of individuality. For example, imagine that the only difference in accidental forms between Adam and Andrew is in fact their location. Adam is at L_1 and Andrew is at L_2 . Let *A* be the set of all the other accidents that Adam and Andrew have in common, and let *H* stand for the form *human being*. According to the thesis under consideration, Adam is $H + A + L_1$ and Andrew is $H + A + L_2$. Now have Adam and Andrew switch locations. At this next moment in time, let us ask who is $H + A + L_1$? Intuitively, we want to say that it is Andrew, but the theory forces us to answer that it is Adam.

There is another potential problem for these two theories of individuation. By suggesting that all or some accidental forms are the cause of individuation, Boethius seems to contradict what he says in *Against Eutyches* when he distinguishes between subsisting things and substanding things.¹⁶

Another theory of individuation?

In *Against Eutyches* Boethius draws a distinction between two modes of existence. Some things merely “subsist” (*subsistere*), other things not only subsist, they “substand” (*substare*). Universals merely subsist. But individuals not only subsist, they substand (OS v, III, 213–20; Loeb p. 89). Boethius tells us that individuals do not require accidents in order to substand. But because they substand individuals can be a subject, or substratum, for accidental forms. This claim is clearly in tension with what Boethius proposes as the principle of individuation in *On the Trinity*, for the first two theories of individuation seem to be proposing that Adam and Eve substand *because* they are bundled with either all or some accidental forms.

But if accidents do not cause Adam and Eve to substand, what does? In *Against Eutyches* Boethius tells us that “now that they have been informed by proper and specific differences” individual substances can be a foundation for accidents (OS v, III, 217–20; Loeb p. 89). What are these “proper and specific differences” and whence did they come? Boethius does not give us an answer. But if we turn back to *On the Trinity* we find a hint at the cause of individuation (II, 102–10; Loeb pp. 11–13). The Divine substance is a form without matter. Hence, it cannot be a subject for accidents, and if it

is not a subject for accidents, it cannot be many in number. Aristotelian forms, on the other hand, can be subjects for accidents because they are images in matter. This suggests a third theory of individuation. One creates individuals by making copies of a Platonic Form in matter. Matter is, therefore, the principle of individuation. Adam and Eve are different instances of Humanity because Adam is humanity informing this hunk of matter and Eve is humanity informing that hunk of matter.

This third theory gets the relation between substances and accidents right. The individual substance is an integrated composite of form and matter. And this integrated unity is not frozen. It can take on different accidental forms and it can move about in space and time.

But individuation by matter has its own problem to overcome: what happens when matter migrates?¹⁷ Suppose that at t_1 Adam is the substantial form H binding to a hunk of matter a , and Eve is the substantial form H binding to a hunk of matter b . The following premises seem to be true:

- (1) H is identical to H .
- (2) a is not identical to b .
- (3) H binding with a (i.e. $H + a$) is not identical to H binding with b (i.e. $H + b$).
- (4) At t_1 Adam is identical to $H + a$ and Eve is identical to $H + b$.

This entails

- (5) At t_1 Adam is not identical to Eve.

So far, so good. But we believe that Adam can change his matter over time through natural metabolic processes. Indeed, it is possible that over time all the matter that constituted Adam at t_1 is now, at $t_1 + n$, the matter of Eve, and vice versa. So, at $t_1 + n$, we have two hylomorphic composites $H + a$ and $H + b$. It is still the case at $t_1 + n$ that $H + a$ is not identical to $H + b$. But the question now is this: at $t_1 + n$, which composite, if any, is Adam? We would like to say that Adam is $H + b$. But the theory does not give us the tools to say with confidence that $H + b$ is *Adam*. In other words, the theory gives us a satisfactory answer to question (2b¹): when H combines with some matter m , we get an instance $H + m$. But it does not seem to give us the tools to satisfactorily answer question (2b²).

This difficulty can be avoided if matter permanently contaminates the form with individuality. In other words, once a copy of a Form is made in matter, this copy is an independently individual instance, and it can now act as the metaphysical glue for further accidental and material changes. So, instead of picturing individual substances as a combination of universal form and matter (i.e. " $H + m$ "), perhaps we should represent individual substances as a combination of an individuated form and matter (i.e. " $H^i + m$ "). The revised theory of individuation would look like this. When a copy of the Form of Humanity is made in a hunk of matter a , we immediately create an individualized form H^a . At the time of creation this individualized form plus a constitutes

Adam. So, at t_1 , Adam is $H^a + a$. But, over time, Adam can *become* $H^a + b$. What allows for this transformation is the persistence of the individualized substantial form H^a .

Which theory does Boethius prefer?

This revised version of the third theory is the most satisfying account of individuation of the three. Is there any reason to think that Boethius subscribes to this theory? There is some evidence that supports this reading. First, this third theory of individuation could make sense of Boethius' claim that a substantial individual has already been informed with "proper and specific differences." Second, recall that Boethius refers to Aristotelian forms as "images" of Platonic Forms. It would seem that these images are particular. Consider an analogy offered by the Neoplatonic philosopher Ammonius.¹⁸ Suppose that I have a signet ring and enough wax to make several impressions. I take this ring and press it into two portions of the wax. Both impressions will resemble one another and they will share a common cause (the ring), but they will be numerically distinct impressions. In other words, they are particularized impressions. Ammonius likens the pattern in the signet ring to a Platonic Form. Just as the signet ring makes copies of its specific sign in various pieces of wax, the Form makes many copies of itself in matter. These copies all resemble their cause, but each of the images in the wax is individualized.

But while there is some reason to hope that Boethius really prefers the third theory of individuation, the evidence is too thin to conclude definitively that individuation by matter is Boethius' preferred theory. Indeed, if the third theory of individuation that we reconstructed represents Boethius' considered views on individuation, why does he suggest that individuation is due to accidents in *On the Trinity*, where we must remember the problem of individuation is explicitly raised? We can only canvas some of the possible answers here.

First, it could be that Boethius is confused, and he thinks that all three theories are somehow equivalent, even though they are clearly not.

A more charitable interpretation would be that Boethius changed his mind. Ideally, he wrote *On the Trinity* first and then came to realize that the theory offered there was flawed. But it could also be the case that Boethius wrote *On the Trinity* after he wrote *Against Eutyches*.¹⁹ If that were true, we would have to accept that Boethius took a step backward.

It could be that the accounts of individuals in the two treatises are compatible, not because the two accounts are complimentary metaphysical accounts, but rather because the metaphysical theory of individuation in *Against Eutyches* is complemented by an epistemological theory of identification in *On the Trinity*. While a bundle of accidents might not be the cause of an individual being an instance, it may still be true that we tend to identify an individual by fixing upon the accidents that accrue to an individual.²⁰ And, in extreme cases, we can determine that there are two qualitatively similar things because two regions of space are occupied at the same time.

Yet, appealing as the compatibilist line is, it does not seem to do justice to the texts. When Boethius proposes that accidents make Adam numerically different from Eve, the most natural interpretation of these remarks is that Boethius is making a metaphysical claim. Boethius wants to demonstrate that God is metaphysically simple, not merely simple in our understanding. Part of his argument for his claim that God is metaphysically simple is that the Persons of the Trinity are not subjects for accidents, and hence they are not numerically distinct.

This leaves us with one final possible interpretation. It may be that Boethius' considered view is more Platonist than Aristotelian.²¹ Two Neoplatonists who probably exerted some amount of influence on Boethius, Plotinus and Porphyry, have been interpreted as bundle theorists.²² Our objections to the theory of individuation by accidents had a distinctively Aristotelian bias. Our preferred theory satisfied a fundamentally Aristotelian desideratum, namely that things like Adam are independent entities capable of surviving accidental change. But a Platonist need not share this belief. A Platonist thinks that the material world is a pale reflection of the real world. One of the signs that the inhabitants of the material world are reflections and images of that which is real is precisely the fact that material beings have ill-defined identity and persistence conditions. Hence, the fact that it is hard to determine whether a bundle of forms is the same individual as a previous bundle of forms does not point to a failure of the theory, it points to the fact that individuals in the sensible realm are not beings, they are things that both are and are not (cf. Plato, *Republic* v.478b–479d; *Timaeus* 51e–52d).

Unfortunately, Boethius does not give us enough information to definitively choose one of these possibilities. This is due in no small measure to the fact that, in the theological treatises, Boethius is not interested in individuals as such. The bits of a theory of individuals that he gives are presented as means to another end, namely to clarify our understanding of two special sorts of individual, God and Christ.

God's individuality and the limits of metaphysics

The two explicitly Christian problems that Boethius tackles in his *Opuscula* are both problems pertaining to the individuality of God. Like Judaism and Islam, Christian orthodoxy demands that there is only one God. Christian philosophers, like Boethius, who are influenced by Neoplatonism also insist that God is absolutely simple. But, unlike the other two monotheistic faiths, Christianity asserts both (1) that God is three persons and (2) that one of these persons, Christ, is made of and consists in two natures.

The notion of *person* is the link to our previous discussions of individuals, for as we will see a person seems to be a certain kind of individual. Father Joseph W. Koterski has observed that the notion of a person must be flexible enough to distinguish the members of the Trinity without dividing the unity of God, but sturdy enough to describe the “single abiding identity” of Christ (2004, 206). In what follows, I will ask whether the notion of person, at least as Boethius defines it, can meet both demands.

The Incarnation and the unity of a person

Let us start with the Incarnation, for it is in his polemic against the Eutychians and Nestorians that Boethius offers his explicit account of personhood. The orthodox position is that one person, Christ, is not only made out of two natures: Christ consists in two natures. Boethius attempts to defend this position from two heretical positions.

Boethius tries to demonstrate that two natures can be present in one person by first defining his terms. In [Chapter 1](#), he defines four notions of nature. The fourth definition is the one that Boethius prefers for his present discussion. According to this definition, a nature is “the specific *differentia* that informs any one thing” (OS v, I, 111–12; Loeb p. 81). In short, a nature seems to be a substantial form. At the beginning of [Chapter 3](#), Boethius offers his considered definition of person. A person is “an individual substance of a rational nature” (III, 171–2; Loeb p. 85). But the notion of a substance needs clarification. A nature is an essence (*ousia*), which Boethius claims only subsists. A person is a substance (*hupostasis*), which not only subsists but also substands (III, 254–64; Loeb p. 87). That is, a person can be the subject for accidents. A person, then, is both an instance and a composite integrated unity.²³

With these definitions in hand, Boethius first turns to the Nestorian heresy. Nestorius agrees with the orthodox that Christ consists in two natures. But he infers from this that Christ consists in two persons (IV, 275–7; Loeb p. 93). The claim that Christ consists in two persons is equivalent to asserting that Christ is two instances of a rational nature. But this undermines the unity of Christ. At best Christ is now a universal. At worst, since there is no common underlying substance that unifies the human person and the divine person, “Christ” becomes no more than the name of an aggregate (IV, 294–301 and 356–8; Loeb pp. 95 and 99). Boethius thinks that neither result is acceptable. Christ is clearly not a universal.²⁴ Indeed, He is not even an instance, since there is no universal of which Christ is an instance. (This is part of what Boethius means when he says that God is “beyond substance.”) Nor can Christ be an aggregate. Boethius’ reason for rejecting this possibility is that Christ would be “nothing.” Clearly, Boethius is overstating his case. Christ would be an aggregate. But the true point is that Christ would not be an integrated unity. Orthodoxy demands that Christ is as much an integrated unity as any other human.

Boethius next turns to the position of Eutyches. The Eutychians assume that there is one person if and only if there is one nature. Consequently, since there is only one person who is Christ, there can only be one nature. The Eutychians do not deny the claim that Christ was made from a divine nature and a human nature. They merely assert that these natures must have combined to form one nature. This is where Boethius attacks the Eutychians. Which nature is now present in Christ? There seem to be only three options: (1) the two natures combine to form a divine nature, (2) the two natures combine to form a human nature, or (3) the two natures combine to form a new nature, which is neither human nor divine. Boethius thinks that none of these options is acceptable (VI, 497–541 Loeb pp. 109–13). The first option is ruled out since a corporeal

rational substance cannot be converted into an incorporeal rational substance. The second is ruled out since an incorporeal rational substance cannot be converted into a corporeal rational substance. Boethius reminds us that substantial transformation occurs when one substantial form leaves some matter and another substantial form arrives in its place. But, in both cases, there is no common matter that can stand under the change. The third possibility is ruled out since a rational substance must either be corporeal or incorporeal; there is no third option.

Boethius thinks that the only option that is left is to assert that Christ is made from two natures, and Christ consists in two natures. (He cannot deny that Christ is made from two natures. That would be blasphemy.) Boethius thinks that two natures, or essences, can be present in one person, or concrete individual. He tries to make this intelligible by resorting to an analogy. Two natures can be mixed together in such a way that they are lost. For example, when hydrogen and oxygen are mixed, they yield water, which has a nature distinct from both hydrogen and oxygen (VII, 589–94; Loeb p. 117).²⁵ This is a case of substantial change. Boethius' previous argument was meant to show that this way of mixing natures cannot occur in the case of the Incarnation. But one can also mix two natures so that they both remain intact. For example, a gem-encrusted crown retains both the gem's nature and the gold's nature (VII, 595–607; Loeb p. 117). Just as the crown is one thing consisting both from and in two natures, Christ can consist both from and in two natures.

Such is the argument in outline. We cannot fully critique this argument, but at least two difficulties should be briefly noted.

First, it is not clear that Boethius has resolved the real puzzle concerning the Incarnation, namely: how can two substantial forms combine to form an integrated unity without compromising the existence of the two substantial forms? There is, after all, a good reason to think that there is one nature if and only if there is one individual. Recall our earlier attempt to locate the principle of persistence for Adam through accidental change. The most promising principle seemed to be Adam's substantial form. The existence of Adam's copy of Humanity is a necessary (and perhaps sufficient) condition for Adam's persistence. Now consider the persistence conditions of Christ. Should we say that Christ persists only if both the divine substance exists and a specific copy of Humanity exists? An orthodox Christian will probably be wary of such a formulation, for it implies that the Person of Christ exists temporarily, not eternally. But, aside from this worry, notice that the persistence condition only demands that the divine nature and the human nature coincide. In other words, the tie between the two natures is contingent and accidental. Clearly, this is also something that Boethius will want to avoid. But how can we get a necessary and non-accidental unity out of two distinct natures? Appealing to the example of a crown has only limited value, for a crown is a man-made object, and many Aristotelians would argue that the mark of an artifact is that the form that binds together the parts is an accidental form.

There is a second worry. In his treatment of the Incarnation, Boethius defines the person of Christ as a subsisting individual consisting of two natures. But is this

understanding of the personhood consistent with the account of persons in *On the Trinity*? In his treatment of the Trinity, Boethius will want to show that the persons of the Trinity are real, but non-substantial, manifestations of the Divine. Given that God is Form without matter, God merely subsists. By asserting that Christ substands, has Boethius compromised God's absolute simplicity?

The Trinity

In the section on the construction of integrated unities (pp. 136–137), we saw that God is the truest integrated unity. He has no matter, He has no parts, and He is not even distinct from His cause. Yet, God is also three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. On the face of it the doctrine of the Trinity threatens God's unity and simplicity. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. These are all substantial predications. But the Persons are not identical to one another. That is, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. If the Persons are not identical, and yet they are all God, it seems that there are three gods, and God is a universal. But God is neither a universal, nor for that matter an instance of a universal.

The knot could be unraveled if it could be shown that predications such as "The Father is not the Son" are not substantial predications. But Boethius needs to avoid another pitfall. In the fourth chapter of *On the Trinity*, Boethius tells us that the ten categories do not apply to God, for God is "beyond substance" (OS I, IV, 184; Loeb p. 17). Predications that seem to fall within the ten categories must be reinterpreted. Statements of the form "God is *F*" must be interpreted as either statements about God's substance or they must be taken as figurative statements. For example, qualitative predications, such as "God is just," must be reinterpreted as identifications. When we say that Adam is just, we are attributing justice to Adam. But when we say that God is just, we mean that God is identical to Justice (IV, 207–12; Loeb p. 19). Other predications are to be taken figuratively or by transference. For example, "God is everywhere" is true, not because God is in every place, but because all places are present to Him (IV, 224–8; Loeb p. 21).

The Persons are neither parts of God's substance, nor are they accidents of God. But if the names of the Persons do not denote parts of God's substance or accidents of God, then there *seem* to be only two available options:

- (1) Contrary to orthodox belief the Father is the Son, the Son is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the Father.
- (2) Claims such as "God is the Father" or "The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father" are figurative, not literal.

But Boethius wants to avoid the heterodox option, and he wants to deny that sentences pertaining to the Trinity are figurative. The Persons are real features of God, and there is a real difference between the Persons. But he wants to show that this real

distinction does not compromise God's absolute unity. To extricate himself from this dilemma Boethius proposes that there is a third way to predicate something of God:

(3) One can predicate non-accidental relations of God (OS I, v, cf. OS II, III).

Relational predications do not compromise the substance of the things that are related.²⁶ For example, if Adam stands to the right of Eve and then moves so that he stands to her left, neither Eve nor Adam has changed in substance. Likewise, if Abel's father dies, Abel is no longer a son, but Abel's substance has not been compromised. Abel is still what he is. Boethius proposes that the Divine Persons are relational predicates of God. If the Persons are relations, then the Persons in no way compromise God's substance. If the Persons are relations, they also are real. "Adam is to the left of Eve" and "Abel is the son of Adam" are both facts about the world. The relations that obtain between Adam and Eve, and Abel and Adam, are real. Likewise, the relations that hold between God and the Father, and the Father and the Son, are real, not figurative. The main difference between Divine relations and categorical relations is that the latter are accidents of enmattered substances. The Persons, on the other hand, are non-accidental relatives.

Boethius hopes that this solution will ward off the threat to God's unity and simplicity. However, it is not clear that the relational analysis of the Persons will preserve God's simplicity. It seems that, in order to have relations, one must have at least two distinct *relata*. But how can God stand in a relation to Himself? In [Chapter 6](#) of his *On the Trinity* Boethius acknowledges this puzzle. His answer is that it is not always true that a relative predicate is predicated of something different. For example, the relation *being the same as oneself* is not predicated of something different (OS I, VI, 349–50; Loeb p. 31).

It is not clear that the property of *being the same as oneself* is a proper relation.²⁷ But even if we grant that it is, there is a deeper worry. Recall that the Persons of the Trinity do not possess accidents. This eliminates the possibility that the Persons are numerically distinct from one another. But one of the three Persons is Christ, who is an individual *substanding* thing of a rational nature. Substanding things can bear accidents, and certainly while Christ was on Earth he actually bore accidents. So, which claim is true? Can a Person possess accidents, or not?

Boethius is trying to satisfy two desiderata: first, that the Persons of the Trinity are real, distinct manifestations of the Divine, and, second, that these manifestations do not compromise the absolute unity of the Divine. Unfortunately, it appears that these two desiderata cannot be mutually satisfied.

Boethius seems to be aware that his treatments of the Incarnation and the Trinity will not completely satisfy the philosopher. After he notes that an object can stand in relation to itself, he adds that, if one cannot find a good example of an incomposite thing that is related to itself, that is because one is looking at transitory things with one's imagination, and not at eternal things with one's intellect (OS I, VI, 352–6; Loeb p. 31).²⁸ Our intuitions about relations, and indeed our intuitions about sameness and difference, are derived from examining material, composite, and changing entities. When we attempt to

understand things that transcend matter, composition, and change, we should expect that these tools are limited. Likewise, in his treatment of the Incarnation, Boethius gives a hint early on in his treatise that at some point our human reason must give out, for the first definition of “nature” that he offers is this: a nature belongs to anything that, when it exists, can be captured by an understanding in some manner or other (OS V, I, 65–7; Loeb p. 79). Boethius claims that he must add the caveat “in some manner or other” because there are some things that exist but cannot be grasped by a “full and complete” understanding. Instructively, the two examples that he gives are prime matter and God (I, 69–72 Loeb p. 79).

Conclusion

In his *Opuscula sacra*, Boethius presents some of the elements of a metaphysical theory of individuals. He does not flesh out his theory. But what he does tell us is tantalizing. It is little wonder that Boethius’ brief and incomplete treatments of individuals captured the imagination of numerous medieval philosophers.²⁹ The elements of the theory of individuals that he presents in the *Opuscula* are marshaled in order to make the Incarnation and Trinity intelligible in so far as these Divine truths can be made intelligible to the unaided human intellect. Our assessment has been that Boethius comes up short. But then again, Boethius admits that his task is doomed to fail. These inadequacies, however, should not detract from the importance of Boethius’ *Opuscula*. The student of medieval metaphysics should begin with Boethius. Boethius defines the problems that will inspire generations of philosophers, and he gestures toward many of the solutions that subsequent philosophers will offer.

Notes

1. All references are to the Latin edition by Claudio Moreschini (Boethius [2000](#)), in the format of number of the *opusculum*, followed by its section and the line of the edition. As an aid to students who do not have much Latin, citations of passages from the *Opuscula* will include a reference to the corresponding English passage in the Loeb edition (Boethius [1973](#)). The Loeb edition is still the only volume that contains a complete English translation of the *Opuscula*. For a good, recent English translation of *Quomodo substantiae* see MacDonald [1991b](#). A good, recent translation of *On the Trinity* is Kenyon [2004](#). There is a new French translation of *Quomodo substantiae* with commentary in Galonnier [2007](#). Galonnier’s translations of *On the Trinity* and *Against Eutyches* are to appear in a future volume.
2. For this reason, we will not be able to touch upon many of the interesting and puzzling aspects of the *Quomodo substantiae*. The third theological treatise is an extremely difficult one, and there is significant disagreement over its

- structure and meaning. For introductions to *Quomodo substantiae* see Marenbon [2003a](#), 87–94 and Chadwick [1981](#), 203–11. For detailed studies see De Rijk [1988](#); MacDonald [1988](#); and McInerny [1990](#), 161–98. There are book-length studies by Schrimpf ([1966](#)) and Siobhan Nash-Marshall ([2000](#)), and a detailed commentary by Galonnier ([2007](#)). Pierre Hadot’s interpretation of Boethius has been extremely influential. See, in particular, Hadot [1963](#) and [1970](#). Recently there has been a lot of work on Boethius’ metaphysical *Opuscula* in Italian. For example, see Maioli [1978](#); Micaelli [1988](#) and [1995](#).
3. For a survey of Boethius’ remarks on individuals and individuation that carefully considers not only the *Opuscula sacra*, but also the logical commentaries, see Gracia [1984](#), Chapter 2, 65–121.
 4. For example, in his famous discussion of universals Boethius announces that he has provided an Aristotelian solution to the problem because he is commenting on an Aristotelian treatise, not because it is the best solution (2IS 167.17–20; English translation in Spade [1994](#), 25).
 5. When commenting upon Aristotle, Boethius repeats Aristotle’s claim that an individual “is said of no subject” (CAT170B; cf. Aristotle *Cat.* 1b6–7, and *De Int.* 17a38–7b1). In his commentary on Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, Boethius repeats the Porphyrian maxim that the individual is predicable of only one thing (2IS 195.18–19, and 233.20–1; cf. Porphyry *Isag.* 7.19–21).
 6. On integral wholes and integral parts see Arlig [2006](#), sections 2.1 and 3.1.
 7. The sense in which an individual can move about and causally interact with the world *as a whole* will need to be flexible enough to allow for changes in parts over time, for intuitively Adam can lose some of these parts and gain others (as humans seem to do when they eat, eliminate waste, shed dead skin cells, and so forth).
 8. Cf. King [2000](#), and also Gracia [1984](#), Chapter 1.
 9. For Boethius’ treatment of other kinds of parts, see his *On Division* (esp. 879B–880A and 887D–888D). For an interpretation consult Arlig [2006](#) and [2005](#), Chapter 3.
 10. Aristotle defines a soul as the form of a body (*De Anima* II.1, 412a19–21). For Christian thinkers a soul, while perhaps not a form, plays the same role as a form in hylomorphic compositions.
 11. For a discussion of the relation of natural priority see Arlig [2005](#), 89–96; Barnes [2003](#), 248–53, and 361–4; and Magee in Boethius [1998](#), 83–4.
 12. For an overview of the Platonic elements in Boethius’ philosophy see Chadwick [1981](#), *passim* and Gersh [1986](#) II, esp. 675–701 and 706.
 13. See Gersh [1986](#) II, 655–7. Boethius’ position in the second commentary on the *Isagoge*, which has been the source of much study, is somewhat more

ambiguous (Tweeddale [1976](#) and Spade [1996](#)). In his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* 1b25–2a10, Boethius discusses individual accidents. This has led some interpreters to think that Boethius embraces tropes, or individual forms. But we should be careful. First, Boethius is discussing Aristotle's views, not his own. Second, accidents are derivatively individual at best, for Boethius tells us that Adam's paleness and Eve's paleness are different because Adam's paleness is present in Adam and Eve's paleness is in Eve (CAT 170A, 171D–172A; cf. 2IS 184.1–11). These claims are consistent with the position that if paleness were stripped from Adam and from Eve, there would be only *one* pale form, not two. In support of this interpretation, observe that the corresponding individual substances are not particular humanities, but Adam and Eve – i.e. composite substances.

- [14.](#) For example, Plotinus reduces the ten Aristotelian categories, or highest genera, to five categories (*Enneads* VI.1–3; cf. *Enneads* V.1.4).
- [15.](#) Spade [1985](#) I, Chapter 23. Cf. King [2000](#) and Gracia [1984](#), 204–10.
- [16.](#) Spade [1985](#) I, Chapter 23.
- [17.](#) See Fine [1994](#), 14–16.
- [18.](#) Ammonius [1891](#) 41.13–42.19; 68.25–69.2 (cf. Simplicius [1907](#), 82.35–83.20).
- [19.](#) See Chadwick [1981](#), 180.
- [20.](#) Cf. 2IS 234.3–6.
- [21.](#) Aristotle seems to endorse the view that matter is the principle of individuation at *Metaphysics* Z.8, 1034a5–8. Cf. *Metaphysics* Δ.6, 1016b31–5. This is certainly a popular understanding of Aristotle's metaphysics of individuals from St. Thomas Aquinas to the present (see, e.g., Lloyd [1970](#)). For a critique of this interpretation see Gill [1994](#) and Furth [1978](#), esp. 642–4.
- [22.](#) Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.8.19–23 (cf. Lloyd [1990](#), 94–5). In an earlier paper, Lloyd attributes the bundle theory to Porphyry (Lloyd [1956](#)). But see Lloyd's later revision of his view ([1990](#), 45–7).
- [23.](#) Cf. Hadot [1973](#), 130.
- [24.](#) Cf. OS II, I, 9–15; Loeb p. 33.
- [25.](#) Boethius' own example is that of honey and water, which he thinks will yield a new nature. But clearly Boethius has in mind a case where mixture brings about chemical transformation.
- [26.](#) For an overview of ancient and medieval theories of relations see Weinberg [1965](#), Chapter 2, 61–119; Brower [2005](#); and for the Scholastic Period Henninger [1989](#).
- [27.](#) Indeed, it is not clear that *being the same as oneself* is even a proper property (see, e.g., Black [1952](#), 153–5).

- [28.](#) Compare this claim to what Lady Philosophy asserts in the fifth book of the *Consolation*. Philosophy tells her interlocutor that minds do not comprehend x in accord with the “force” (*vim*) of x itself, but rather in accord with the faculty used by the mind to comprehend x (5.4.25). Hence, what may be divided from one perspective (say, that of the imagination) may be one from another, higher perspective (say, the faculty of understanding) (5.4.26-29). Philosophy uses this principle to show why it is hard for humans to comprehend that Divine foreknowledge is compatible with the freedom of the human will (5.6).
- [29.](#) On Boethius’ influence in general see the [next chapter](#). For Boethius’ influence on medieval ruminations on the metaphysics of individuals, start by consulting Gracia [1984](#); Spade [1985](#) I, Chapter 23; and King [2000](#).

7 The medieval fortunes of the *Opuscula sacra*

Christophe Erismann

Boethius wrote five treatises of Christian theology grouped under the title *Opuscula sacra*. At least three of them – among which the two most important ones, the *De Trinitate* (OS I) and the *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium* (OS V) – deal with Trinitarian or Christological issues. These treatises came to take a central part in medieval thought and had a surprisingly wide influence upon it. During the Middle Ages, the danger of heresies was a less urgent topic than it had been during the first centuries of Christianity,¹ a time marked by frequent doctrinal disputes. Arius and Nestorius were no longer a danger for a now established dogma and, in the Latin West, the Church was unified. In consequence, the *Opuscula sacra* were no longer topical because of their rooting in doctrinal controversies; they appeared less as a display of militant strength in the struggle of orthodoxy against heresy. Once transferred into the intellectual context of the medieval Latin West, they took on a new life, distant from the task of defending Christian dogma, but central to philosophical thought. From the beginning of the Middle Ages onwards, the influence of the *Opuscula sacra* reached beyond dogmatic theology, into the fields of logic, ontology and metaphysics. For 400 years, from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, the *Opuscula* were among the reference texts of philosophers, beside Aristotle's *Categories* (or its paraphrase, the *Categoriae decem*) and *Peri hermeneias*, and Porphyry's *Isagoge*.² The theological thought of Boethius came to be called upon as a philosophical authority in discussions on the problem of universals and common forms, in accounts of the individuality of individuals, in theories of participation and, later, in the debate on the distinction between being and essence. The height of the influence of Boethius' theological treatises was reached during the twelfth century, when they were often commented upon and became the centre of philosophical questioning. During the twelfth century Boethius came to be evaluated as follows in the words of Peter of Poitiers: *magis fuit philosophus quam theologus*.³ Even if Boethius was greatly renowned as a theologian,⁴ the medieval reception of the *Opuscula sacra* is true to this saying because its influence on philosophical debate was so great. In the period before the gradual entry of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* into the Latin West and before it took the central role it was to occupy subsequently, the *De Trinitate* and the *De hebdomadibus* (OS III) contributed importantly in defining the scope of first philosophy. The problems of Latin metaphysical thought which were discussed before the rediscovery of Aristotle's natural and metaphysical writings – categorical ontology, the application of the categories to God, ontological participation and dependence, and the doctrine of paronymy (or denominative predication) – are related in important ways to the *Opuscula sacra*.

It would nevertheless be a mistake to believe in a one-directional and unitary doctrinal

influence. Boethius' authority was called upon by thinkers whose theories were sometimes completely incompatible; for example, his texts were taken to provide arguments both for accepting and rejecting the real existence of universals. The structure itself of the *Opuscula* and their lack of strong doctrinal unity⁵ made possible such a diverse influence. Medieval thinkers did not seek faithfulness to Boethius' teaching, the coherence of which remains difficult to ascertain, but drew from the *Opuscula sacra* the concepts and theses they needed to expound their own thought.

The history of the medieval reception of the *Opuscula sacra* shows that, like late ancient philosophy, medieval philosophy was often a question of exegesis. Early medieval philosophy is characterised by its frequent reliance on ancient, late ancient and Patristic texts, as a basis for speculation. Commenting on an authority was often the occasion of expressing original thought, as noted by John Marenbon: 'It is in commentaries that much of the most important philosophical work of the ninth to twelfth centuries was accomplished.'⁶ Despite its particular rules, the practice of commentary did not restrain philosophical thought; on the contrary, it often stimulated it. Gilbert of Poitiers and Thomas Aquinas are good examples of this phenomenon.

I shall proceed in three stages: first, I shall give an historical overview of the medieval reception of the *Opuscula sacra*; I shall then consider the methodological and lexical influence of Boethius, and conclude with a presentation of some of the philosophical discussions which Boethius initiated in the Middle Ages.

Historical perspective

Three of the five *Opuscula* – OS I, OS III, OS V – were particularly influential during the Middle Ages. The way in which they were read and the use made of them was different from one century to another. I will consider the most important moments and the more pronounced influences.⁷ Three particular periods constitute the essential stages of Boethian influence: (1) the early Middle Ages, during which the *Opuscula sacra*, added to the set of treatises of Aristotelian logic known as the *Logica vetus*, were the textual basis of philosophical thought; (2) the twelfth century, during which the *Opuscula sacra* became, particularly in the context of the so-called 'School of Chartres', the reference text on which theological, logical and philosophical discussions focused; (3) the scholastic period, during which the *Opuscula sacra* remained an influential text, as testified by the commentaries dedicated to two of the *Opuscula* by Thomas Aquinas, despite the fact that they were not part of the curriculum of the universities, which had by then reached its fully developed form.

The early Middle Ages

The manuscript tradition testifies to a wide diffusion of the *Opuscula sacra* during the

early Middle Ages.⁸ More than forty manuscripts copied before the twelfth century are extant,⁹ originating from the *scriptoria* of important Carolingian cultural centres: Fleury, Tours, Saint-Denis and Corbie. Alcuin appears not to have known the *Opuscula sacra*, but they were used around 800 in the *Munich Passages*, a collection of short texts by Candidus and other disciples of Alcuin.¹⁰ The first example of significant influence is given by Gottschalk of Orbais († 867). He cites extensively the definitions of *persona* and *natura*, as well as the discussions on *essentia*, *substantia* and *subsistentia*, material originating in OS v.¹¹ He also transcribes almost entirely the treatise *Utrum Pater* in his *Responsa de diversis*, but without explicit reference to Boethius.¹²

OS v is also carefully discussed by Ratramnus of Corbie in his *Liber de anima ad Odonem Bellovacensem* (c.865). The book reproduces a debate between the disciple of an Irish master called Macarius and Ratramnus, on the soul understood as a species, which leads to a discussion on the existence of universals.¹³ Whereas OS I would be used, during the twelfth century, to uphold a realist theory, Ratramnus provides an interesting example of a conceptualist position (universals are only concepts) which makes use of the vocabulary and positions of OS v. Ratramnus uses the Boethian notions of *persona*, *subsistentia* (to qualify generic and specific universals) and *substantia*, which is used to refer to primary substances only (Ratramnus of Corbie, 1952, 71: 19–30). According to Ratramnus, universals have no ontological superiority over individuals; on the contrary, universals draw their subsistence from individual substances. Universals are only concepts; they only exist in the mind.¹⁴ A species is a resemblance among beings, which is perceived by the soul.

John Scottus Eriugena († c.877) probably knew the *Opuscula sacra*.¹⁵ E. K. Rand attributes to him a *commentum* – in reality a set of glosses – on four of the five *Opuscula*, the exegesis of the last one (OS IV) being, according to Rand, the work of Remigius of Auxerre († 908).¹⁶ M. Cappuyns questioned this attribution,¹⁷ and argued that the whole text was written by Remigius of Auxerre: he noted the absence of Greek authorities, the use of Latin Trinitarian formulae, and doctrinal discrepancies.¹⁸ What is certain is that these glosses originate in an intellectual context strongly influenced by Eriugena, and contain several ‘Eriugenian’ doctrinal elements. In addition to their Neoplatonic vocabulary (e.g. *hyperousios*), they deal with the theme, central to Eriugena’s thought, of the procession of beings, which are first hidden in God, then appear in genera et species, places and times (ed. Rand, 1906, 51: 22–52: 14).¹⁹ These glosses contain some long developments on the real and eternal forms, which are incorporeal, as opposed to the immanent forms, which are only images of them (37: 4–15). Let us also mention discussions on the divine being (40: 19), on relations in God (44: 23 and 45: 9), on *pluralitas* (38: 17), and on the distinction between *aeternitas* and *sempiternitas* (42: 30). These glosses were widely diffused; approximately thirty early medieval manuscripts are identified.²⁰

The twelfth century

Marie-Dominique Chenu rightly proposed that the twelfth century should be called an *aetas boethiana*.²¹ This name is justified by the importance of Boethius in the philosophical and theological thought of the period.

We can identify two important philosophical debates during the twelfth century. Both dealt with logical–ontological problems (mainly the status of universal entities) and were, at least originally, exegetical in nature, and tried to decide on the correct interpretation of ‘authoritative’ texts. The first set of discussions was held in the schools of logic in Paris during the first decades of the century, and concentrated on the interpretation of works of Aristotelian logic, i.e. Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, Aristotle’s *Categories* and *De interpretatione*, and Boethius’ *On Topical Differentiae*.²² Various, often anonymous, commentaries were written during this period, which discussed the problem of whether these logical texts dealt first and foremost with words (*in voce* exegesis) or things (*in re* exegesis). Among the prominent philosophers in this debate we may identify William of Champeaux and Peter Abelard.

Around the middle of the twelfth century another debate took place, not in Parisian logical schools, but in the context of the so-called ‘School of Chartres.’²³ This second debate was also exegetical, but the reference text and the authority commented on were different. It was centred on the interpretation of Boethius’ *Opuscula sacra*. In the Chartrian milieu, interested in the *Timaeus* and open to Platonism, the *Opuscula sacra* became the basis for heated discussions on the ontology of the sensible world and on universals. This debate was initiated by one of the most original medieval philosophers, Gilbert of Poitiers († 1154). He wrote a set of commentaries on the *Opuscula sacra*. These commentaries have particular importance for the history of medieval philosophy, since they are the only extant exposition of Gilbert’s philosophy.²⁴ Gilbert sets out his own philosophy through his exegesis of Boethius’ texts. He constructs a strictly particularist ontology, notable for its rejection of common entities. According to Gilbert, every thing is singular (*Quidquid enim est, singulare est*, 1371b). This is true of substances, of essences, and of properties. In order to set out his particularist position, which is different from that defended by Boethius in the *Opuscula sacra*, Gilbert sometimes allows himself some liberties with Boethius’ text (see below, pp. 167, 170–1). Gilbert’s very original commentaries attracted strong criticism, on both theological and philosophical points. His commentary on OS I was put into question, in particular by Bernard of Clairvaux, at the Council of Reims (1148),²⁵ notably because of his distinction between *deus* and *divinitas*. Basing himself on Boethius’ distinction between *esse* and *id quod est*, Gilbert states a distinction between divinity, *divinitas quae est in deo*, and God, *Deus in quo est divinitas*, in an analogy with the distinction between humanity and man. He believes in the causality of forms and therefore holds that God is God through divinity.

Despite the recriminations of the council – Gilbert was not officially condemned – the

manuscripts of Gilbert's commentaries circulated widely.²⁶ Gilbert came to acquire a privileged status in the Boethian tradition and was even sometimes called 'the commentator' in the context of the *Opuscula sacra*. His commentaries gave rise to a strong 'conservative reaction' (in the words of M. Gibson), as testified by the commentaries originating in the circle of the disciples of Thierry of Chartres († c.1155) and those of Clarembald of Arras († after 1170), Thierry's student. From the circle of Thierry originated a *Commentum super Boetii librum de Trinitate*, a set of *Lectiones* and a *Glosa* on the same text. A fragment of a commentary on OS III (*Fragmentum Admuntense*) and one of a commentary on OS V (*Fragmentum Londinense*)²⁷ allow us think that Thierry of Chartres taught on the whole set of *Opuscula sacra*. These texts probably record the teachings of Thierry with additions by his pupils. They develop for example a theory of creation based on the efficient causality of the *forma essendi* in OS III.²⁸

Clarembald of Arras wrote two commentaries, on OS I and on OS III (around 1157–8).²⁹ The texts originating in the circles of Clarembald and Thierry are doctrinally close and agree in their rejection of the particularist metaphysics of Gilbert (see below, [p. 171](#)). On several occasions, Clarembald criticises Gilbert on universals and forms,³⁰ and reproaches him repeatedly for postulating numerical difference among the three persons of the Trinity.³¹ Clarembald insists particularly on two things in his commentary: the secondary status of the forms of the sensible world (see below, [p. 168](#)), and the unity of individuals (see below, [p. 171](#)). A commentary formerly attributed to Bede, edited by Migne in the *Patrologia* (PL 95, 391–411) seems to agree with Clarembald. Because this commentary mentions the Council of Reims and Gilbert, it cannot be attributed to Bede.

The thirteenth century

Although they remained respected texts, the *Opuscula sacra* did not retain their central position in philosophical practice. They were not included in the teaching programmes of the newly established universities. This explains, at least partially, why the *Opuscula sacra* played a relatively secondary role during the final part of the Middle Ages, and why next to no commentaries were written on them during the scholastic period. Other explanations can be given, such as the complete restructuring of the set of logical texts which were used, a lessened interest (in comparison with the twelfth century) for Trinitarian problems in theological debate, and the growing use – through translations from Arabic and Greek – of the works of Aristotle and the entry of Arabic philosophers, Avicenna principally. So the *Opuscula sacra* were part neither of the teaching in universities,³² nor of the group of texts on which philosophical attention was focused. Most of the philosophical and theological activity centres on university practice and the study of the *corpus Aristotelicum*. The theological method conveyed by the *Opuscula sacra*, and developed and systematised by Gilbert of Poitiers, also lost part of its significance. Two important exceptions must be noted: on the one hand, Thomas

Aquinas commented on Boethius, and on the other hand some Boethian axioms are frequently called upon in the debate on being and essence.

Thomas Aquinas wrote two commentaries, on OS I and on OS III.³³ Both are works from his youth (probably c.1255–9), when he was a master at the University of Paris. They belong to different literary genres. The commentary on OS I has two parts: first, a brief literal exposition of the text, then a series of questions which deal in a detailed way with the doctrinal problems set out by Boethius' text. Aquinas limits himself to commenting on the prologue, the first chapter, and a part of the second. The commentary on OS III is made up of just an *expositio*, i.e. the explanation of the text, taking each proposition in turn (Aquinas used the same method when commenting on Aristotle). Aquinas' texts have little in common with the previous discussions of the *Opuscula sacra*; Aquinas did not know Gilbert's commentary despite the fact that it was widely diffused in his time. It is of particular significance that, in his commentary on OS I, Aquinas did not go as far as the doctrine of relations and the status of categories, when this part of the text had been of central interest to twelfth-century commentators. He was more focused on the epistemological problem of the status of Christian theology as a science.

The discussion given in the commentary on OS I,³⁴ structured in questions, follows the classical structure of a *disputatio*, with six questions of four articles each. For each theme which is the subject of an article first the arguments in favour of a solution are expounded, then those in favour of the contrary solution (*sed contra*), the exposition of Aquinas' own solution (*responsio*) and finally the answer to the arguments given at the beginning (*ad argumenta*). Questions 1–3 deal with the possibilities and limits of human knowledge about God. Aquinas defends the possibility of scientific knowledge about God. Question 2, article 3 contains a forceful defence of the use of philosophy in theology. Question 4 deals with the causes of plurality and of the principle of individuation (see below, pp. 171–2). Questions 5 and 6 give a division of theoretical sciences and present their respective methods. Aquinas aims at distinguishing between theology as transmitted by Scripture and philosophical or metaphysical theology.

The other noticeable example of the presence of the *Opuscula sacra* during the thirteenth century can be found in a dispute between Dietrich of Freiberg, Henry of Ghent and Giles of Rome on being and essence. In this dispute, axioms from OS III³⁵ and Gilbert of Poitiers' commentary to the text are frequently called upon. Gilbert was considered by scholastic authors as *the* commentator of Boethius (like Averroes for Aristotle). In a debate with Aquinas, Dietrich quotes long passages from [Chapter 2](#) of OS I in his *De ente et essentia* (1.7) and uses axioms from OS III and their interpretation by Gilbert. The interpretation of the Boethian distinction between being and that which is (*esse* and *id quod est*) is central to the controversy between Henry of Ghent and Giles of Rome. In his ninth question on being and essence, Giles of Rome³⁶ uses Boethius in order to defend a real distinction between being and essence. Henry of Ghent, according to whom this distinction is intentional, answers him in the seventh question of *Quodlibet*

10 (Henry of Ghent, 1981, 145–97) with a criticism of the interpretation of Boethius given by Giles.

A method for rational theology

The list of the authors who commented on or used Boethius' text does not give a complete idea of the profound influence which the *Opuscula sacra* exerted on medieval thought, not only from a doctrinal standpoint, but also from a methodological and lexical one. Boethius transmitted to medieval thinkers a theological method based on the use of Aristotelian logic, and he contributed to establishing the Latin theological and philosophical vocabulary, mainly in ontology.

The *Opuscula sacra* are a model of the application of dialectic to theology. Boethius uses the Aristotelian logical tradition as it had developed within Neoplatonism to solve theological problems and to tackle heresy. Boethius himself took his inspiration from Aristotle's idea of science. His theological method consists of the application of the logical rules of definition and demonstration to whatever of the divine nature is determinable by human rational understanding. Before him, the Cappadocian Fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa, had already turned to logic. But Boethius opened the way to the Middle Ages by showing the relevance of the use, in theology, of Aristotelian logic. He makes use of a set of strong philosophical concepts which originate in Aristotle and the Neoplatonic philosophers, and gives the Biblical text and the authorities a secondary role. Aquinas was quite conscious of this when he wrote that there are two ways of considering the Trinity – through the authorities or through reason – and that Boethius preferred the second method.³⁷

The Boethian tradition, in Gilbert of Poitiers as well as Aquinas, is one of rational theology, whereby man can explain the Trinity with rational arguments. Gilbert says that, in God, the unity of essence can be explained through the *rationes theologicae*, and the diversity of the persons through the *rationes naturales*. The natural reasons to which the theologian must turn in order to explain the trinity of the divine persons are no other than the ten Aristotelian categories. Gilbert's understanding of the role of theology as reasoning on divine being (*essentia*) is influenced by Boethius. In his *Theologia summi boni*, Abelard exemplifies the Boethian method of using logic as a way of attaining a rational understanding of the Trinity. From a formal point of view, the axiomatic method of OS III can be seen as the model for that used by Alan of Lille in his *Regulae theologiae*.³⁸

The use of logic in theology gives new life to the problem of the application of the categories to God, known under the medieval name of *praedicatio in divinis* – a problem which was first formulated by Plotinus (*Ennead* VI.1) and inherited from the discussions on the relevance of the categories to the intelligible world which can be found in Neoplatonic commentaries to the *Categories*. This problem – which was also considered by Augustine – was hotly discussed during the early Middle Ages, as testified

by the first book of Eriugena's *Periphyseon*, which is entirely dedicated to it.³⁹ Boethius defends a *mutation* of categories when applied to God.⁴⁰ His solution is based on the principle of the dependence of categories on the subject: the categories are such as the subject permits them to be (*talia sunt <praedicamenta> qualia subiecta permiserunt*; this axiom was to have a long medieval posterity). So, with the exception of relation, all categories can be predicated of God after modification. This modification – Boethius uses the word *mutatio* and not *translatio* like Augustine – is justified by the fact that substance in God is not really substance, but beyond substance. The problem of theological predication is particularly developed during the twelfth century by Gilbert of Poitiers and Thierry of Chartres (see in particular the *Lectiones in Boethii librum de Trinitate* IV.17, Häring, [1971](#), 191: 83–8).

Defining the terms

Like the Greek theologians who were his contemporaries, Boethius attached great importance to defining the words he used. He shares the common opinion of late ancient Greek theology (say from Leontius of Byzantium to John of Damascus), according to which many heresies can be avoided if words are correctly defined; the second chapter of OS v is revealing on this point. We can maybe interpret it as inherited from Aristotle, who considered definitions to be the principles of demonstrations (*Posterior Analytics* 9b24). Defining the terms (mainly *natura* and *persona*) is both the problem with and the solution to the heresies of Eutyches and Nestorius. Boethius' legacy on this point is not so much having transmitted the taste for definitions to the Latin world as having contributed to establishing the definitions themselves. Boethius contributed to establishing the Latin equivalents of some Greek terms (*essentia* for *ousia*,⁴¹ *subsistentia* for *ousiōōsis*, *substantia* for *hypostasis* and *persona* for *prosōōpon*). Boethius also contributed to defining the semantic field of subsistence to refer to the mode of being of universals. Both his translation of the *Isagoge* and his remarks in OS v were influential. He states that the mode of being of universals is *subsistere*, whereas that of individual substances is *substare*.

Boethius' two most important definitions are those of *nature* ('Nature is the specific differentia which informs a thing') and of person⁴² ('an individual substance of a nature endowed with reason', *naturae rationabilis individua substantia*). These definitions, which were elaborated for theology, come from the field of logic. The first presupposes the system of genera and species of Aristotle's *Categories*, as put forward by Porphyry in his *Isagoge*, and the second presupposes the distinction between individuals and universals.

Although Boethius' definition of *person* – which was elaborated from notions of traditional ontology – was widely accepted and very frequently referred to, it was also the subject of criticism and attempts were made to reformulate it. It was criticised from a

theological point of view by Abelard (*Theologia Christiana* III.179; Peter Abelard, [1969](#), 262) and by Richard of St Victor (*de Trinitate* 4, XXI, Richard of St Victor, 1959, 279–81) who consider it not to be applicable to the Trinity. In the *Trinity*⁴³ – a treatise which was written shortly after the Council of Reims – Richard († 1173) removes the notion of substance from the definition of person, insisting on the fact that ‘substance’ answers the question ‘what is it?’ (*quid*) whereas ‘person’ answers the question ‘who is it?’ (*quis*). He emphasises the notion of singular and incommunicable existence (*incommunicabilis existentia*), which is, according to him, more adequate for defining what a person is.

Boethius’ definition has also sometimes been modified on philosophical grounds: Odo of Cambrai, a realist thinker of the end of the eleventh century, said that *persona est individuum rationalis naturae* (PL 160, 1080CD). By removing *substantia* from his definition, Odo gets rid of the substantiality of the person, keeping only the *individuum*. Since the individual is substantially nothing different from its species, Odo can define the person as an instantiation of the universal man which has no particular substantiality.

Doctrinal issues

Several theses of the *Opuscula sacra* were given particular importance by their medieval reception. I shall discuss two examples which illustrate the philosophical importance of the *Opuscula sacra*: forms and individuality. The first example highlights the fact that, even if Boethius gave an important role to Aristotelian logic in his theological method, from a doctrinal point of view the *Opuscula sacra* also had a Platonic influence. The second example shows the role played by Boethius’ theological tractates in the transmission of late ancient philosophy.

True forms and images

In the *Opuscula sacra*, Boethius transmitted a thesis which became fundamental to the philosophy of twelfth-century thinkers related to the School of Chartres. It deals with forms:

For from forms which are without matter come the forms which are in matter and produce bodies. For it is to speak improperly (*abutimur*) to call forms those which are in bodies, since they are images.

(OS I 171: 113–16)

This passage, a piece of pure Platonic metaphysics, contains a thesis which has serious consequences. It entails a Platonic metaphysical principle according to which the ‘forms’ of the sensible world (the immanent forms) are not real forms but only images of real forms. The rejection of the idea that real forms are mixed with matter is also Platonic. A Platonic reading of this thesis gives less ontological reality to the image, and thus establishes two ontological levels: that of the real forms, and the lower one of

images. In consequence, real substantiality is not in individuals, since in them, mixed with matter, only images or imitations can be found. The acceptance of this thesis creates a division between twelfth-century philosophical systems, a contrast between the 'Chartrian' discussion of the *Opuscula sacra* and the 'Parisian' logical debates. Thinkers related to the Schools of logic preferred to follow Boethius the logician, and remained within the Aristotelian framework of logic and the theory of the *Categories*.⁴⁴ On this view, individuals (and the universals in them if one adopts a realist standpoint) are the real substantial elements. For example, one of the doctrinal advantages of an ontological realism such as that of William of Champeaux is to guarantee the substantiality of the sensible world by placing the real substantial entities, the universals, in it. Accepting the Boethian thesis of the forms of the sensible world as images has the contrary effect: that of taking true substantiality out of the sensible world, and leaving in individuals only images, copies of the real forms which are separated.

The Parisian dialecticians worked in an Aristotelian frame of mind and wanted to guarantee the substantiality of the individual; on the other hand, the Chartrian thinkers happily endorsed (and even amplified) one of the most Platonic aspects of Boethius' theological thought. In a coherent interpretation, they complement Boethius⁴⁵ with ideas from their other favourite point of reference, Plato's *Timaeus*. The *Timaeus*' cosmology entails that things which are not, but seem to be, owe their appearance of being to the fact that they are images.

This idea can already be found in the glosses of pseudo-Eriugena,⁴⁶ but Gilbert is the first to theorise it. In a Platonic way, he states the existence of pure forms which are separated from the sensible world and from matter. He calls these forms *sincerae substantiae* (Gilbert of Poitiers, 1966 = G, 100: 14). According to him, forms in bodies 'are not ideas but their images' (*non ideae sed idearum icones*, G 100: 22). Gilbert distinguishes pure ideas or archetypes (*exemplares*) from the forms which, when mixed with matter, produce bodies (G 100: 17–19). Jean Jolivet writes about Gilbert: 'he found most of his Platonism in the author [i.e. Boethius] who was for medieval thinkers one of the main sources of it' (1992, 63). In Gilbert, this Boethian theory is balanced by the high ontological status which is given to individual realities. His metaphysics are a subtle combination of Platonic elements founded on Boethius (such as this statement of the existence of ideas) and a strictly particularist ontology which values and emphasises the reality of individuals.

Thierry of Chartres goes much further in assimilating this Boethian thesis into his metaphysics. Where, on the one hand, Gilbert balances the Boethian theory by a valuation of substantial individual reality, Thierry, on the other hand, denies any proper substantial reality to individuals (as we shall see with regard to the next point, he holds that the essence is common to the individuals of the same species and that it is properly speaking possessed by none of them). For Thierry, only the images of the forms exist in matter, and they come from the real forms which exist in the divine mind.⁴⁷ His world is, according to John Marenbon,⁴⁸ a world of *imagines*. To this Platonic doctrine, Thierry

adds another element related to the problem of universals. He accepts the existence of uninstantiated universals, which means that the existence of a universal does not depend upon that of the individuals which instantiate it: this is an obvious sign of a strongly Platonic position. For example, Thierry states that the *forma humanitatis* is imperishable: if no individual man were to exist, then the form ‘humanity’ would not perish; but it would lose its specific identity and return to the simplicity of the *forma divina* (Häring, [1971](#), 84: 81–4).

Clarembald also insists on the secondary status of the forms of the sensible world. They are the images in bodies of the real forms which are in God. Forms in bodies are an outflow of real forms: *omnis . . . corporum forma ab illa forma . . . profluit* (‘the entire form of bodies flows from that form’, Häring, [1965](#), 115). Immanent forms are degenerate images of prototypical forms. They descend (*descendant*) from the *purissimae substantiae* by a kind of fall or degeneration (*degeneraverunt*).^{[49](#)}

Individuality caused by accidents

The notion of forms separate from matter was accepted almost unanimously by the commentators of Boethius; but this was not the case for another Boethian thesis, dealing with the individual. Having introduced three possible types of identity or difference – through genus, through species (Felix the cat and Cicero are different as to their species) or through number (Socrates is numerically different from Plato) – Boethius introduces an explanation of numerical difference: the variety of accidents produces the difference as to number (*numero differentiam accidentium varietas facit*, OS I 168: 56–7)

Individuals of the same species are different owing to the variety of their accidents. Even alone, this thesis involves a metaphysical position, in that it rejects the essential individuation of the particular. Two individuals of the same species do not differ through their own essence, but through their accidents. This entails two things: (1) the essence is common to all the individuals of the same species (since, if each individual had its own essence, individuals would differ from one another essentially); (2) all the substantial being of the individuals is contained in the species^{[50](#)} (since the difference between two individuals of the same species is accidental, their substantial being comes from what they have in common, their species). The idea that the difference between two individuals of the same species is due to a bundle of properties originates in Porphyry’s *Isagoge* (AL I.6–7, 13: 21–14: 6), where the individual is said to be constituted by a unique bundle of properties. Boethius makes Porphyry’s theory even more explicit by adding that these properties are accidental. Note that this Porphyrian thesis was favourably received among the Greek Church Fathers, in particular among the Cappadocians;^{[51](#)} it was therefore not unnatural for Boethius to call upon it in a Trinitarian context.

Like Porphyry in the case of universals, Boethius provided the terms for the problem of the ontological constitution of individuals for the first centuries of the Middle Ages.

The problem is not that of finding a principle of individuation (*principium individuationis*), but that of knowing what causes (*facit*) numerical difference, that is, of finding an ontological explanation of individuality. Boethius contributed to the understanding of individuality as a kind of difference: to be individual is to be dissimilar to other things.

In OS I – with reminders in his commentary to the *Isagoge*⁵² – Boethius defends an explanation of the individuality of the individual which had already been formulated in other words by Porphyry, and popularises it in the Latin world.⁵³ This theory of individuation through accidents would come to be very widely accepted during the early Middle Ages. As demonstrated by Jorge Gracia,⁵⁴ it is used by John Scottus Eriugena, Odo of Cambrai, William of Champeaux, Thierry of Chartres and Clarembald of Arras. We may add Anselm of Canterbury to this list:⁵⁵ he advocates a theory of the individual as *collectio proprietatum*, which is in line with Porphyry's and Boethius' thought. We can identify two major critics of this thesis: Peter Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers.

Abelard rejects this theory and, more widely, the relevance of individuation itself. For Abelard, substances are individual essentially and of themselves; therefore they need nothing other than themselves for their individuation. Abelard states this very clearly in the *Logica ingredientibus* (Peter Abelard, 1919–33, 13: 18–25) by referring to the following thought experiment: take two individuals of the same species; if their accidents were removed, these two individuals would remain different from each other and would continue to subsist in their proper essence because their personal difference (*discretio personalis*) – the fact that this one is not that one – does not come from accidents but from an essential difference. Abelard makes a powerful criticism of the thesis of individuation through accidents. This criticism is not so much aimed at Boethius himself, as at a contemporary of Abelard who endorsed this Boethian theory, William of Champeaux. Material essence realism – the first theory of universals to be held by William – does indeed take the Boethian thesis as one of its central axioms. One of the arguments of Abelard against this theory is that it entails an unacceptable consequence: the priority of accidents over particular substances (since then particular substances will not be able to act as the substrate for accidents).

In his commentary on Boethius' text, Gilbert gives a theory which depends on the essential individuation of the particular. He states that Plato and Cicero are two distinct individuals, not only through accidental properties, but more importantly through substantial properties (G 58: 45–7). This point is interesting with regard to Gilbert's intellectual attitude. Despite the fact that the theory of the essential individuation of particulars contradicts a literal reading of the Boethian text he comments on, Gilbert develops it in his commentary. He uses Boethius' conceptual tools, but does not hesitate to take his distance from, or even correct, Boethius' text when it is in obvious contradiction with his interpretation. Gilbert bases himself on Boethius' doctrine (in OS III) of the *esse* and *quod est* to develop his theory. According to Gilbert, everything is what it is (*quod est*) by virtue of something which makes it so (*quo est*). For example, a

man is what he is (a man) by humanity, a white thing by whiteness. A *quo est* (like, of course, a *quod est*) is necessarily particular. Gilbert distinguishes between two types of *quo est*, those which are substantial and those which are accidental. Borrowing this term from OS V, he calls *subsistentia* a substantial *quo est*, that is, a *quo est* which makes a thing the sort of thing it is. A *subsistentia* can therefore be generic (animality), specific (humanity), differential (rationality). Gilbert introduces the word *subsistens* to refer to the individual entity which is what it is through a subsistence. A ‘subsistent’ is everything it is by means of a ‘subsistence’. Socrates is a subsistent which is a man, by means of the subsistence humanity which is proper to him. Gilbert insists on the particularity of subsistences. The form of one reality cannot be the form of another reality; a subsistence can only constitute one subsistent (*una singularis subsistentia non nisi unum numero faciat subsistentem*) (G 58: 42–5). The plurality of individuals presupposes a plurality of forms or subsistences which are all particular. Each subsistent has its own essence (*singularitas essentiae*, G 145: 92) which is constituted by the ‘collection’ of subsistences (generic, specific, differential: G 262: 40); Plato for example has a *collecta Platonitas* which is strictly particular, as are the accidents which compose it, like whiteness (*singularis albedo*, G 273: 51–2). This ontological position is very distant from the metaphysical framework given by Boethius in OS I. Therefore, Gilbert does not accept the Boethian theory of individuation through accidents; on the other hand, he gives an epistemic role to the bundle of accidents. Gilbert introduced a distinction between the principle of numerical diversity and the principle of the discernibility of numerical diversity. So where Boethius states that the variety of accidents causes the difference among individuals, Gilbert replaces the word *facit* by *probat*: the diversity of accidents only testifies of, and makes visible, the essential ontological particularity. It is the sign and not the proof of it.

This theory attracts strong criticism from the circle of Thierry of Chartres and Clarembald of Arras, who return to a literal interpretation of Boethius’ treatise. Thierry rejects the thesis of the plurality of humanities; when he mentions this thesis, he adds the following comment: *quod omnino falsum est*. According to him, the species is one and the same form for all the subordinate individuals. It is not the case that there are several humanities; there is only one human nature for all men: *una omnino humanitas omnium hominum*. Plurality comes from accidents, not from human nature, and concerns individuals, not forms.⁵⁶ In Plato, Socrates and Cicero, Thierry sees three distinct human beings, three individuals who differ through their accidents. But in them all, there is only one nature, the unique humanity (*una natura una et eadem sit humanitas in omnibus*). The plurality of individuals comes from the diversity of accidents, not from a diversity of natures (*ex diversitate accidentium non nature hominum provenire pluralitatem*).⁵⁷ Clarembald continues his criticism by accusing Gilbert, whom he always calls ‘the Bishop of Poitiers’, of establishing several humanities, when in fact all men are men by the same humanity (*ex eadem humanitate*). So, according to Clarembald,⁵⁸ in three given men, one and the same humanity can be found. The plurality of individuals in a given species is founded in a diversity of accidents.

Thomas Aquinas devotes the second article of the fourth question of his commentary on OS I to the problem of whether the variety of accidents causes numerical diversity among individuals of the same species. With the help of the new conceptual tools provided by the rediscovery of the natural and metaphysical writings of Aristotle (in particular,hylomorphism), Aquinas offers a completely different solution from what had been previously stated, by introducing the notion of matter. Aquinas begins by noting that Boethius' statement according to which otherness is the principle of plurality does not hold in the case of all beings in general, but only in the case of composed beings. Aquinas explains that, just as diversity of matter causes diversity in genus (inasmuch as it underlies a common form), and diversity of form causes diversity in species, in like fashion this form and this matter produce diversity in number. A form is individuated by the fact that it is received into this matter which is distinct and determined in the here and now. And matter is made to be this matter because it exists under indeterminate dimensions⁵⁹ – Aquinas calls this particularised matter *materia signata* (the word *signatum* was often used by the Latin translator of Avicenna). It is only as this designated matter, i.e. as matter subject to dimensions, that matter can individuate the form it receives (matter considered just in itself cannot individuate anything). The human form can be rendered individual by being received in particular matter, determined as to this place and as to this time. Thus the principle of individuation, the cause of numerical diversity, is matter as subject to quantity and its dimensions. Accidents are therefore not, according to Aquinas, the principle or cause of individuation; however, they are the principle of discernibility of individuals. Aquinas insists on the fact that accidents 'are the cause of our knowing the distinction between individuals', because it is through these accidental differences that we recognise individuals.

The two examples discussed above demonstrate that Boethius was influential in very different doctrinal directions. Another example illustrates well the variety of interpretations of Boethius' text: namely the axiom of OS III⁶⁰ in which Boethius explains the difference between being (*esse*) and that which is (*id quod est*); Pierre Hadot proposed to understand this as Porphyry's distinction between *einai* and *on*.⁶¹ Medieval commentators gave various interpretations of it. Pseudo-Eriugena considers the *esse* to be the being of a thing in divine thought and the *id quod est* to be the thing as it is realised in the sensible world and determined by the hierarchy of genera and species. Gilbert of Poitiers identifies *esse* and *subsistentia* – the Porretan version of Aristotelian secondary substances – and *id quod est* and *subsistens*, i.e. the individual subject. Clarembald understands *esse* as God, the *primum bonum*. The *id quod est* is the concrete thing. Aquinas interprets *esse* as the pure act of being, taken abstractly, without subject, and the *id quod est* as the subject which receives the act of being.

Other Boethian theses played an important role in medieval thought; here are some examples. Through the notion of *forma essendi*, Boethius gave a 'formal' and not only existential interpretation of being. The Boethian axiom according to which all being comes from the form (*omne esse ex forma est*) had a rich posterity. Through its

discussion of the convertibility of goodness and being, OS III is one of the sources of the problem of transcendentals. OS I played an important role in the question of the division of sciences. OS III puts forward a theory of participation; it contains one of the most influential metaphysical schemes, and it provides an alternative to an Aristotelian point of view. Such is the rich medieval history of the *Opuscula sacra*.

1. This did not prevent thinkers from accusing their contemporaries of giving new life to old heresies. Note for example the letter of Bernard of Clairvaux *Contra Petrum Abelardum* to Pope Innocent II, in which he accuses Abelard of repeating the mistakes of Arius, Pelagius and Nestorius.
2. The fact that, in addition, these three Greek texts were read in Boethius' Latin translation illustrates the importance of Boethius' influence on early medieval thought.
3. See Chenu (1966), 154–6.
4. However, Boethius also gave rise to negative reactions, in particular among the adversaries of dialectic, who, like Otloh of St Emmeran, considered him to be a dangerous author: see Courcelle (1967), 301.
5. Nevertheless, we can find in Thierry of Chartres and Clarembald of Arras, two twelfth-century Boethian commentators, an attempt to present the unity of Boethius' thought in a systematic way. See Evans (1983).
6. Marenbon (1982), 446.
7. On the medieval influence of the *Opuscula sacra* see Gibson (1981b); Galonnier (2007), 205–26; Marenbon (2003a), 170–2.
8. For a general presentation see d'Onofrio (1986) and Gibson (1982).
9. See Troncarelli (1988).
10. See Marenbon (1981).
11. *Opusculum grammaticale primum*, Gottschalk (1945), 383: 15–16.
12. *Responsa de diversis* II, Gottschalk (1945), 134: 25–136: 15.
13. See Delhayé (1950).
14. See for example Ratramnus of Corbie (1952), 105: 29–31: *Porro species, sive genus, non sunt res existentes; sed in cogitatione per intellectum quadam similitudine formantur*.
15. See d'Onofrio (1980a) and (1980b).
16. Rand (1906).
17. Cappuyns (1931). See also d'Onofrio (1981).
18. Rand replied to these criticisms in Rand (1934).
19. On the hierarchy of genera and species and the determination of space and time

- as a double determination of the sensible world in Eriugena see Erismann (2007).
20. See the list given by M. Cappuyns (1931), 239–41. Nevertheless, they do not all contain a homogeneous text.
 21. Chenu (1966), 142–58.
 22. See the various studies gathered in Marenbon (2000); see also Marenbon (2004).
 23. It is not the place here to discuss the existence of the ‘School of Chartres’. Let us only acknowledge the existence of a community of learning in which the *Opuscula sacra* played a central role. From this Chartrian context also originated William of Conches, who wrote, among other things, an important commentary on the *Consolatio*. On the reality of the School of Chartres see the opposing points of view of Southern (1970) and Häring (1974).
 24. On the metaphysics of Gilbert see Marenbon (1988); Van Elswijk (1966), 153–203; Westley (1959–60); Maioli (1979), 179–364; de Rijk (1988–9); Jolivet (1992); Nielsen (1982), 47–86.
 25. See Häring (1966) and Hayen (1935–6).
 26. See the list of manuscripts in Häring (1978).
 27. All these texts are edited in Häring (1971).
 28. See Häring (1955) and Parent (1938).
 29. The Latin text is edited by Häring (1965); this edition has to be supplemented by the critical remarks of Châtillon (1965). English translation in George and Fortin (2002).
 30. See Häring (1965), 28: 28; 45: 12; 45: 23; 51: 35; 65: 10; 67: 15; 77: 25.
 31. Häring (1965), 51: 35: *Mirum ergo, quomodo episcopus Pictavensis tres in Deo personas numero diversas scripsit; unde, sicut supra memoravimus, tantum virum reprehendere quidem veremur, sequi autem nolumus*. See Häring (1965), 38–45.
 32. Note nonetheless that teachings were dedicated to OS III during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the Universities of Erlangen, Cracow and Vienna.
 33. For the Latin text see Aquinas (1992). English translation of the commentary on OS I in Aquinas (1987) for questions 1–4 and (1953) for questions 5–6. For the commentary on OS III see Aquinas (2001).
 34. For a general analysis of the work see Hall (1992).
 35. Before this controversy, Albertus Magnus had already discussed OS III in his *De bono* q1, a7: *Utrum omne quod est, inquantum est, bonum est*.
 36. See Nash (1950).

- [37.](#) *Super Boetium de Trinitate*, Prologus: Aquinas ([1992](#)), 76b.
- [38.](#) See Evans ([1980](#)).
- [39.](#) See O'Meara ([1983](#)).
- [40.](#) See de Libera ([2005](#)).
- [41.](#) On Boethius as a translator see Courtine ([1980](#)).
- [42.](#) On Boethius' notion of 'person' see Nédoncelle ([1955](#)); Schlapkohl ([1999](#)); Lutz-Bachmann ([1983](#)); Hipp ([2001](#)), 105–9; Elsässer ([1973](#)); Micaelli ([1981](#)); Milano ([1984](#)), 319–82.
- [43.](#) See den Bok ([1996](#)).
- [44.](#) The two most important thinkers of the twelfth century, Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers, who share many doctrinal views, notably a strict ontological particularism, are separated by their relation to Boethius. Abelard considered only the commentaries on the *Organon* and was not interested, as a philosopher, in the *Opuscula sacra*. Gilbert, on the other hand, commented on the *Opuscula sacra* because he found in Boethius' work a metaphysics of *esse* and flow which was useful to developing his own thought.
- [45.](#) John of Salisbury (*Metalogicon* IV, 35; John of Salisbury, [1991](#), 173: 32–7) testifies to the importance of Boethius' text for the genesis of this thesis: *Sed ex his formae prodeunt natiuae, scilicet imagines exemplarium, quas naturas rebus singulis concreauit. Hinc in libro de Trinitate Boetius. Ex his formis quae prater materiam sunt illae formae venerunt quae in materia sunt, et corpus efficiunt.*
- [46.](#) Rand ([1906](#)), 37: 4–15: *Formae s[cilicet] aeternae. Formae omnium rerum aeternae sunt et incorporales, et illae verae formae sunt, ad quarum similitudinem hae, quae in corporibus sunt, productae sunt. Quia ergo illae aeternae formae meliores sunt, quam materia corporalis, cum tempore, quia aeternae, cum stabilitate, quia inmutabiles, satis congrue ea quae sunt secundum illas potius quam secundum materiam nominantur.*
- [47.](#) *Lectiones in Boethii librum de Trinitate* II.65, Häring ([1971](#)), 176: 40–3: *Vere, imago esset si esset in materia. Nam he forme que sunt in materia non sunt vere forme sed veniunt in materiam ex veris formis que sunt in mente divina vocantur ydee ex quarum scilicet coniunctione cum materia fiunt ista actualia.*
- [48.](#) Marenbon ([1982](#)), 448.
- [49.](#) It is easy to see how remote the idea of degeneration is from the theory of immanent universals advocated in the schools of logic, particularly in a theory like that of material essence realism defended by William of Champeaux.
- [50.](#) This thesis is expressed by Boethius in the second commentary to Porphyry, in

which Boethius explains that the species is the whole substance of its individuals. Man is the whole substance of Socrates and Cicero (2IS 215: 16–18).

- [51.](#) In Cappadocian thought and in the spirit of the Council of Nicaea, the distinction between essence and *hypostasis* (this distinction can easily be interpreted as one between the species or secondary substance and the individual) was superimposed upon that between what is common (*koinon*) and what is particular (*idion*). *Ousia* is related to *hypostasis* as the common is to the proper. If that which is common is the *ousia*, the essence, that which is particular and proper to each individual can only be accidental. Both Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa describe the *hypostasis* as a combination of properties. In his treatise *Ad Graecos*, Gregory states (Gregory of Nyssa [1952–III.1](#), 31: 18–20) that persons are different from each other not because of their essence but because of their accidents.
- [52.](#) 2IS, 200: 5–7: *quae enim uni cuique indiuiduo forma est, ea non ex substantiali quadam forma species, sed ex accidentibus venit*; 2IS 241: 9–10: *ea vero quae indiuidua sunt et solo numero discrepant, solis accidentibus distant*; 2IS 271: 18–20: *quocumque enim Socrates a Platone distiterit – nullo autem alio distare nisi accidentibus potest*.
- [53.](#) In his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, however, Boethius takes the seemingly different position that accidents depend on substance and hence are individuated by it. In this perspective, substances individuate accidents rather than the converse.
- [54.](#) Gracia ([1984](#)).
- [55.](#) See Erismann ([2003](#)).
- [56.](#) See *Lectiones in Boethii librum de Trinitate* II.62, Häring ([1971](#)), 175: 2–5 and II.63, Häring ([1971](#)), 175: 11–17.
- [57.](#) Thierry of Chartres, *Commentum super Boethii librum de Trinitate* I.8, Häring ([1971](#)), 64: 66–82: *Hec ergo huius summa est sententie quod natura semper una est, persone vero diverse: ut in his quidem mutabilibus humanitas sine dubio una est in omnibus, diverse vero sunt humanitatis persone ut Plato Socrates et Cicero. Sed licet in his una sit humanitatis natura, ex personarum tamen pluralitate naturam subintrat pluralitas ut – cum Plato sit homo, Socrates sit homo – plures homines sint: non unus homo . . . Quoniam enim humanitatis persone accidentibus distant, plures homines esse concedimus licet una natura una et eadem sit humanitas in omnibus. Nemo ergo Platonem cum Socrate unum esse concludat hominem licet Socratis et Platonis unam eademque concesserimus humanitatem. Immo taceat in sua sopitus inscitia qui ex diversitate accidentium non nature hominum provenire pluralitatem ignorat*.

- [58.](#) *Tractatus super Librum Boetii de Trinitate* 20, Häring ([1965](#)), 73: *Verum in tribus hominibus licet eadem sit humanitas, ut in sequentibus liquebit, tamen accidentium varietas pluralitatem constituit.*
- [59.](#) Aquinas endorses here Averroes' notion of indeterminate dimensions; in others works, such as the *De ente et essentia*, he uses the Avicennian doctrine of determinate dimensions.
- [60.](#) The medieval history of OS III is detailed in Schrimpf ([1966](#)).
- [61.](#) See Hadot ([1963](#)) and ([1970](#)).

Part II The *Consolation*

8 The Good and morality: *Consolatio* 2–4

John Magee

Form and content

Readers coming to the *Consolatio* for the first time are bound to be struck by a certain formal consideration that serves to set Books 2–4 apart from Books 1 and 5: whereas each of the three central books begins with prose and ends with poetry, Book 1 both begins and ends with poetry as Book 5 does with prose. Books 2–4 in fact highlight the shift in balance from poetry to prose by holding the two in strict equilibrium. This element of formal coherence goes hand in hand with a unity that over the course of the central books obtains at the level of a fundamental literary and philosophical motif, that of the circle or orb. The motif appears in the first two chapters of Book 2 in the form of Fortuna’s wheel,¹ whose spinning symbolizes the constant mutability² of human life and seasonal change,³ and it reemerges in the penultimate chapter of Book 4 in the figure of the nested orbs of fate.⁴ That we are in each case considering one and the same reality is evident both from the fact that the final chapter of Book 4 takes a last look back at fortune in its popular or vulgar sense,⁵ and from the dramatic irony and foreshadowing with which 2.1 is brought to a close: “Would you halt the movement of [Fortuna’s] spinning wheel? But fool! The moment it stops, it ceases to *be* fortune.”⁶ For fortune, as becomes clear at the end of Book 4, is nothing more than a common misconception for fate, which is in turn the ordered temporal change that emanates from immutable providence.⁷ Looking to what lies at the heart of the three central books, and thus of the *Consolatio* as a whole,⁸ we note that the central lines of the great Timaeian hymn “O qui perpetua” (3.m9) eulogize the divine force (*mens profunda*) that drives the celestial circulations from within.⁹ The hymn inaugurates the second half of the *Consolatio*, and Plato is its acknowledged source of inspiration.¹⁰ With this overarching structure Boethius (the author) has effected an impressive convergence of literary form and philosophical themes: two instances of the circle (orb) motif, the second emphasizing the divine immobility of the hub, and both standing at equal removes from a passage that describes the divine mind at the centre of all cosmic rotation. Books 2–4 form a coherent and self-contained ring structure, and it is therefore worth considering them apart from Book 1, which charts Philosophia’s course of therapy but initiates no philosophical argumentation as such, and from Book 5, which pushes in a new direction.

Boethius himself provides a clue to the interpretation of the recurrent circle motif and

thus to the larger ring structure. At the end of Book 3 “Boethius” (the interlocutor), after expressing bewilderment at the complexity of Philosophia’s arguments, asks:

Are you playing with me, weaving an inextricable labyrinth with your reasoning, entering at one moment where you would exit then exiting at the next where you entered, or are you weaving some fantastic orb of divine simplicity?¹¹

He goes on to recapitulate the conclusions drawn in 3.10–12, observing that none has depended on extrinsic assumptions.¹² To which Philosophia then replies:

I am playing no game whatsoever. Through the gift of God, to whom we prayed a while back, I have accomplished the greatest task of all. For such is the form of the divine substance that it neither slips away into, nor receives, anything external to itself; but rather, as Parmenides says, “like unto the mass of a sphere well-rounded on all sides” it turns the moving orb of the universe while maintaining its own immobility. That my arguments have not come from without but were set within the ambit of our subject matter should not surprise you, for you have learned on Plato’s authority that our language should be akin to the things it expresses.¹³

The general tenor of her response evokes *Timaeus* 33a–b, on the sphere as the shape most resistant to extrinsic corruption, but the passage of Plato actually referred to is 29b–d, the meaning of which has been altered.¹⁴ For whereas Plato warns against taking the cosmological “myth” as a matter of scientific certainty, Boethius, in drawing attention to the kinship of language and things expressed, is in effect indicating to his readers that the architecture of the *Consolatio* is a literary manifestation of its philosophical themes. This is a point of some interest, for it suggests that literary motifs are made to recur for a *philosophical* reason.

And the reason is not difficult to guess. Books 2–4 fully develop the therapy metaphor that is set in motion in Book 1 and fades from view with Book 5; by way of a parallel development “Boethius,” although highly visible in 5.3–m3,¹⁵ effectively disappears thereafter,¹⁶ leaving the final chapters of the *Consolatio* to dissolve at last into a kind of soliloquy. His silence betokens healing, and given that the course of treatment is not quite underway in Book 1,¹⁷ the main therapy necessarily falls to Books 2–4, over the course of which Philosophia sounds two calls for “stronger” medications.¹⁸ Her timing¹⁹ is significant: the first call comes immediately after a preliminary probing of “Boethius” tolerance for dialectical reasoning, and immediately before an extended section which involves a repetitive (double) treatment of themes, split between Books 2 and 3; the other ushers in the second phase of that treatment. The implication is clear: the function of the repetition is to occasion a more rigorous treatment of the same set of problems. Like a physician who builds up dosages against a persistent illness as the patient gathers

strength, Philosophia brings stronger arguments to previously considered problems as “Boethius” proves ready for them. Boethius had had ample opportunity to contemplate the underlying methodological point in the course of writing his double commentaries on Aristotle, and the results of his reflections are put to effective use in the *Consolatio*.

What is the philosophical manifestation of the process of recovery? The problem that above all binds Books 1 and 5 is that of freedom, political freedom in the first instance, free choice of the will in the second. In Book 5 the solution to the question of *libertas* is made to depend upon the doctrine that the level of knowledge on the continuum that ascends from sense perception to intelligence is determined not by the nature of known objects but by the powers of knowing subjects – a doctrine that is significantly illustrated by the figure of a sphere.²⁰ Sense perception responds to the “shape” (*figura*) of the material particular, imagination “judges” (*iudicare*) it in separation from matter, reason defines the shape qua universal “species” (*species ipsa*), and intelligence comprehends the “form” (*ipsa illa forma*) in its pure simplicity. The object remains the same, but the mode of comprehension changes. This doctrine represents the philosophical fulfilment of what in Books 2–4 is achieved by way of the repetitive literary strategy and the therapy metaphor: the fundamental questions posed by the *Consolatio* remain constant, but the philosophical perspective develops. On the literary side the strategy plays out in the form of a shift, over the course of Books 2–4, from rhetoric to dialectic, and on the philosophical side, from Seneca/Epictetus to Plato/Aristotle.²¹ 4.7, immediately before the “digression”²² that is Book 5, is the one point in the *Consolatio* where progress is halted in order to reflect on where things are (fate, providence) as opposed to where they have been (fortune).²³ It gives Philosophia the opportunity to revisit the paradoxical claims that misfortune is a boon²⁴ and that every fortune, qua mere state of mind,²⁵ is a function of free choice.²⁶ By 4.7 both have gained in depth: the first is underpinned by a comprehensive diaeresis accounting for the providential distribution of lots,²⁷ the second by the charting of the soul’s flight from the bonds of fate to the freedom of providence.²⁸

Books 2–4 have two main tasks to accomplish. The first, which is set in advance²⁹ and brought to completion at the end of Book 3,³⁰ is to demonstrate that the Good is both the final and efficient cause of all that exists and happens in the world. The second, which is made to appear as a kind of afterthought and fits within the confines of Book 4, is to draw out the moral implications of the conclusions reached by the end of Book 3, more precisely, to explain how evil can exist in a world that is universally governed by the Good.³¹ Hence, although Book 3, in completing the course of treatment prescribed by Philosophia in Book 1, ought to bring the dialogue to a close, Book 4 emerges as a necessary continuation by applying the metaphysics of the Good to moral considerations that have troubled “Boethius” from the start.

First impulses

Book 2 is in two parts of four chapters (and poems) each. The first part enters directly into discussion of the question of human happiness (*felicitas*),³² postponing to the end mention of the goods (*bona*) variously associated with happiness.³³ The central concern is the preservation of mental tranquility in the face of the unforeseen vicissitudes of life,³⁴ and the approach is described as “sweetly rhetorical,”³⁵ postponing “stronger remedies” until the second part of the book.³⁶ Consequently the first part is literary rather than dialectical in tone and provokes some of Boethius’ most memorable writing. Philosophia evokes Epictetus in her manner of addressing “Boethius,”³⁷ and 2.1 concludes with a rapid-fire series of metaphors and moral *sententiae* that are redolent of Seneca.³⁸ She employs, in other words, the *omnibus* style associated with the (misleadingly dubbed) philosophical diatribe.³⁹ Seneca above all informs her clipped periods and provocative manner: until “Boethius” is ready for sustained philosophical reflection on happiness and the Good, Philosophia will cast the discussion in terms of his *apparent* joys and sufferings,⁴⁰ and for that Seneca provides some useful guidance. Wherever Seneca is seen to inform the style of the *Consolatio*, however, we should be alert to the possibility of Plato’s influence at a deeper level. The personification of Fortuna in 2.2 is a case in point. Although Seneca’s personification of Nature in the *Consolatio ad Marciam*⁴¹ might appear *primo conspectu* to settle the question of Boethius’ “source,” the general *mise-en-scène* of the *Consolatio* and the particular implications of the closing words of 2.2 point to more profound resonances with the personification of the Laws in Plato’s *Crito*: Having freely chosen Fortuna’s regime – having *benefitted* therefrom – would “Boethius” now opt out?⁴² It is not, in other words, a question of a “source,” Seneca or Plato, but of the way in which Boethius plays authors and texts off one another in order to achieve his particular ends. The Seneca/Plato tension in particular can be felt throughout, as for example in the figure of the nested orbs, or in the handling of the *quid est homo* theme.⁴³ The rhetoric of the first part of Book 2 is made to adhere to the “straight path” of reason,⁴⁴ and already in the earliest stages “Boethius” has to confront two apparently oxymoronic claims the significance of which emerges only gradually: mutability *is* the constancy of Fortuna, and subjugation to her tyranny is a function of *free choice*.⁴⁵ By the end of Book 4 the second has been inverted: freedom from the changes of fortune and fate means *bondage* to the motionless stability of providence.⁴⁶

The first moment of philosophical reasoning comes at the end of 2.4. With five swift attacks on the value of things fortuitous Philosophia probes for the “hub” of supreme happiness:

- (1) The most highly valued possession is the self; [since no one willingly forfeits that which is most highly valued, and the self cannot be taken against one’s will, happiness lies in] *self-possession* [or possession of that which is most highly

- valued and] is never lost through choice or compulsion.⁴⁷
- (2) Happiness is the highest good for rational beings, and the highest good cannot be removed [against the will of those who possess it], since there would then have to be another good which [being irremovable] was higher still; [hence *happiness* cannot be removed against the will of those who possess it; but since] fortuitous things [are removable, they] cannot confer happiness.⁴⁸
 - (3) One either does or does not know that [his] happiness is mutable (fortuitous); if the latter, then he is unhappy, being in a state of ignorance [which is incompatible with happiness]; if the former, then he is either perturbed or unperturbed by the thought of losing [said mutable happiness]; if perturbed, then unhappy; if unperturbed, then that the loss of which is tolerated with equanimity is an insignificant good [incapable of conferring happiness].⁴⁹
 - (4) The mind is immortal [and the body mortal; that which perishes cannot confer happiness after perishing]; since fortuitous happiness [pertains to and] perishes along with the body it [inevitably] occasions unhappiness [in the immortal mind; hence happiness ultimately pertains to the mind].⁵⁰
 - (5) Many have identified happiness with death and suffering; if [for them fortuitous happiness] does not occasion unhappiness in its perishing, then neither does it occasion happiness by its abiding.⁵¹

The dialogue conceit strains under this scholastic array of arguments, the elliptical and incoherent quality of which seems designed to bewilder rather than aid the ailing “Boethius.” One difficulty is that the arguments do not obviously lead anywhere. They end abruptly, “Boethius” being given no opportunity, or being in no condition, to respond, while the “stronger medicines” of 2.5 point in a new direction. The arguments, however, form part of a network of issues running throughout the *Consolatio*. (1) has its roots in Book 1 and will bear fruit in Books 2–4.⁵² (4) picks up a related concern, and its assumption concerning the immortality of the soul (mind) touches on an issue that is central to the work as a whole.⁵³ (2) anticipates an argument concerning the Good in Book 3.⁵⁴ The substance of (3) resurfaces in Book 4 in connection with the question why vice is chosen over virtue.⁵⁵ The reference in (5) to voluntary death appears unmotivated until we recall that Philosophia has just been tallying up the benefits “Boethius” has received from Fortuna, thereby echoing Stoic advice concerning suicide.⁵⁶

Dead ends

Nearly a fourth of the *Consolatio* is dedicated to consideration of the causes underlying unhappiness. The discussion is split between two parallel treatments, at 2.5–m7 and 3.3–m7, each of which announces the application of stronger medications.⁵⁷ The distribution

of themes is as follows:

Riches	2.5, m5	3.3, m3
Office	2.6, m6	3.4, m4
Rule	2.6, m6	3.5, m5
Glory	2.7, m7	3.6, m6
Pleasure	–	3.7, m7

The first phase conflates (office, rule) and omits (pleasure) subjects, while the second reins in the poetry,⁵⁸ both symptoms raising hopes for a more rigorously philosophical analysis in Book 3. Although it may appear as though Philosophia has her sights on a traditional set of Roman values,⁵⁹ her selection of themes arises directly out of the complaint lodged by “Boethius” in 1.4: having used – *under her tutelage* – his wealth, position, and name only for the public good, never for private gratification, he now feels cheated of them all by fortune. Hence her attack on Roman traditions is secondary to her concern for “Boethius.”

Certain correspondences serve to link the parallel discussions. In the case of wealth, for example, we note that 3.3.5–11 echo 2.5.32–4 on the anxieties of possessing, as 3.3.12–16 echo 2.5.22f. on the dependencies created by it, and as 3.3.17–19 echo 2.5.16 on the minimal requirements of nature. There are, however, clear differences. The treatment in Book 2 is governed by two questions: Are fortuitous goods ours? And are they of any value?⁶⁰ 2.5 is consequently dedicated to showing that what we seek and admire in wealth (money, gems, land, etc.) is of no value precisely because it is never really *ours* to possess. The tone is reminiscent of Seneca and of ancient display oratory⁶¹ up until its more tightly argued conclusion.⁶² The approach announced at the beginning of Book 3 is by contrast dialectical, in that it involves clearing away false conceptions in preparation for the discovery of true ones;⁶³ more precisely, it means ascertaining the pattern or “form”⁶⁴ of the happiness falsely “promised”⁶⁵ by riches, office, rule, glory, and pleasure in order to reveal the pattern of true happiness. Philosophia is after both the natural intention⁶⁶ that seeks the good and the error that distracts from it, and she already has her eye on Plato’s *Gorgias*⁶⁷ in drawing what is in effect a distinction between what people want (the end, or good) and what seems to them best (means) as regards the pursuit of happiness.⁶⁸ And as Plato identifies the counterfeiting that goes on between (e.g.) rhetoric and justice in relation to the soul and between cookery and medicine in relation to the body,⁶⁹ so Philosophia distinguishes between false pursuits (goods of the body),⁷⁰ what they counterfeit (goods of the soul), and the good that stands behind them all. The general principle governing the analysis is articulated at the end of 3.2:

So these are the things people want to obtain, and they desire riches, offices, rule, glory, and pleasure for this reason, that they believe that by means of them there will come *self-sufficiency, reverence, power, nobility, and joy*. The *good* is therefore what they seek through their various pursuits . . .⁷¹

As to wealth, the thing counterfeited is self-sufficiency (*sibi sufficientia* = *autarkeia*). People pursue money in order to gain independence, which is a genuine good; but since money is never securely in their possession and actually adds dependencies to those they seek to free themselves of by its possession, it inevitably fails to deliver on its promise.⁷² Hence the fundamental difference between the parallel treatments of wealth is that 3.3 probes for human motivation in a way that 2.5 does not. The problem, it turns out, is not wealth as such, but understanding why it is mistaken for a “true” good.

In 3.4–7 *Philosophia* endeavors to explain how false substitutions occur in respect of the remaining pursuits (office, rule, glory, pleasure), and although her intention is presumably to add depth to what is said in Book 2, the treatment is strangely disappointing, falling back all too frequently on the earlier rhetorical approach. Office and rule, for example, are treated together in 2.6 but separately in 3.4–5, raising hopes for a more rigorous analysis in the latter. Yet in their appeals to Greek and Roman *exempla*⁷³ and to the *dignitas indignos ostentat* theme,⁷⁴ in their arguments against the intrinsic worth of offices,⁷⁵ and in their providing the occasion for poems on Nero,⁷⁶ the treatments nearly duplicate one another. Insofar as 3.4–5 are not an obvious philosophical improvement on 2.6, it is difficult not to feel that progress has slowed down. It is, somewhat surprisingly, in their rather minimal poems, 3.m4 and 3.m5, that philosophical development is in evidence. The crucial point of the first Nero poem (2.m6) is stated toward its conclusion:

So was lofty power finally able
To curb the savageness of vicious Nero?⁷⁷

The thought arises directly from an observation made in 2.6: office extinguishes tyranny no more than wealth extinguishes greed.⁷⁸ There is a clear hint that the real issue is Nero’s inability to curb his instincts, i.e. his *soul*, as opposed to the political office. Now the second Nero poem (3.m4) takes a different approach in concentrating on the corrupting effect of Nero’s patronage; the difference follows from the fact that 3.4, unlike 2.6, considers offices separately from rule. 3.5 picks up the subject of rule, of course, and although its poem (3.m5) never mentions Nero, it nevertheless reconsiders what was said about him in 2.m6. 3.m5 pushes in the direction of a more *abstract* consideration of impotence, and in devoting only three lines to the outer manifestations of power inverts the balance of concerns in 2.m6.⁷⁹ The series of poems on tyranny (2.m6, 3.m4, 3.m5) reaches its culmination in 4.m2, which brings *akrateia* and the Platonic tripartite soul into view.⁸⁰ Hence the poems display a progression of thought that is lacking in their prose counterparts (2.6, 3.4–5), a progression from rhetorical topos to Platonic psychology. Happiness, as *Philosophia* remarks early on, lies *within*,⁸¹ and to turn the gaze inward is to turn it upward. A similar pattern is discernible in the parallel treatments of glory; for whereas 3.6 does little more than recycle material from 2.7,⁸² their respective poems stand in pointed contrast with one another. 2.m7, casting a glance

back to what has been said earlier about Fortuna,⁸³ affirms human equality under the “mortal yoke” of death, while 3.m6 affirms it with the observation that we are all the “noble shoot” of the one God: from mortal body to immortal soul.⁸⁴

Plato, or the Good

If the primary function of the first part of Book 3 is to expose the “falsity” of riches, office, rule, glory, and pleasure by reducing them to their “true” counterparts (self-sufficiency, reverence, power, nobility, joy), the purpose of the second part of the book is to reveal “true” happiness by carrying the reduction further: not only are the five counterfeit goods substantially identical to (but different in name from) their corresponding genuine ones, but qua good the five genuine ones are substantially identical to (but different in name from) one another.⁸⁵ Happiness is the state that entails the complete congregation of all goods,⁸⁶ and the essential unity of self-sufficiency, power, reverence, nobility, and joy depends on the assumption that differences between them would derogate the shared substantial property of goodness. Through participation in unity they are said to become good,⁸⁷ the practical corollary of which would appear to be that by *our turning* from counterfeit to “true” pursuits we discover the Good. Philosophia speaks in terms of a mental conversion⁸⁸ or seeing things from higher perspectives, as with the *scala cognitionis* in Book 5.⁸⁹ Our errors in judgement stem from a proclivity for making multiplicity out of unity:

So then, that which is by nature one and simple human depravity breaks up, and in trying to get a part of that which has no parts it gets neither a part (for there is none) nor the thing itself (which it is not even seeking).⁹⁰

This has been foreshadowed by the allegory of Philosophia’s gown in 1.3: Stoics and Epicureans stole pieces of it, each believing that he possessed the whole. The intention in 1.3 was to contrast the Hellenistic schools with Socrates/Plato,⁹¹ and as 3.9 marks Plato’s point of entry⁹² it appears that the contrast has now been completed: the Stoic elements permeating the first half of the *Consolatio* will gradually fade from view, to emerge again only for purposes of a final assault.⁹³

The reference to Plato in 3.9 heralds a series of three poetic monuments to his thought (3.m9, 3.m11, 4.m1). 3.m9 is a hymn to the Creator. It stands at the centre of the *Consolatio* and inaugurates its second half.⁹⁴ Its placement might well have reminded Romans of the invocation that launches the “Iliadic” half of the *Aeneid*,⁹⁵ but the actual contents of the poem would instead have suggested Plato’s *Timaeus*.⁹⁶ The very fact that such a hymn is included in the *Consolatio* marks a departure from Plato, whose interlocutor Timaeus in effect disregards Socrates’ request for an invocation.⁹⁷ The

prayer in the *Timaeus*, insofar as there is one, is a mere prelude to the cosmology; 3.m9, by contrast, *is* the cosmology of the *Consolatio*.⁹⁸ Such a hymn is necessitated by “Boethius”’ failed prayer to the Creator at 1.m5,⁹⁹ i.e. by the need for a more philosophical consideration of the goodness of creation.¹⁰⁰ It is frequently asked which of the commentators and Neoplatonists influenced Boethius’ reading of the *Timaeus*. Modern interpreters are divided on this question, and it is a difficult one to answer.¹⁰¹ The influence of the Latin poetic tradition has the effect of obscuring doctrinal points in 3.m9, whose handling of the *Timaeus* itself is associative rather than exegetical. Most of the allusions are extremely elliptical, as with the participle *reditura* (“about to return,” v. 16), the future tense of which serves as shorthand for Plato’s description of Soul’s “beginning of unceasing life” in circulations back upon Herself,¹⁰² or with *livore carens* (“lacking ill-will,” v. 6), a two-word epitome of *Timaeus* 29e. Did Boethius use only the *Timaeus* or did he also consult a later intermediary? Since the phrase with which the second example construes, *insita summi forma boni* (“the indwelling form of the highest good,” v. 5f.), runs against the doctrine of the *Timaeus* by implicitly moving the divine ideas into the mind of the *deus-artifex*,¹⁰³ there must have been an intermediary, but which one remains uncertain.¹⁰⁴ For a text as complex as 3.m9 it is essential to consider all of the relevant background, but any quest for its “source” is bound to end in disappointment.

3.m11 epitomizes the Platonic theory of reminiscence.¹⁰⁵ It is occasioned by the conclusion reached at the end of 3.11, that the Good is the end of all things,¹⁰⁶ which at 1.6.10 “Boethius” claimed once to have known but subsequently forgotten. Hence the poem can be seen as the celebration of a specific act of recollection within the immediate *mise-en-scène*. That, however, leaves the philosophical doctrine unanchored in the broader context of the *Consolatio*, and Philosophia is presumably doing more than merely offering congratulations. 3.m11 forms a pair with 5.m3,¹⁰⁷ the two together summing up Plato’s theory without building on any particular dialogue.¹⁰⁸ One of the metaphors employed in 3.m11 is that of fanned kindling, or (presumably) of embers that are *rekindled* into flame. The Latin term for kindling is *fomes* and the fanning is said to be effected through *doctrina*,¹⁰⁹ *doctrina* in turn evokes a figure borrowed from Plato in 3.12, to the effect that dialectical reasoning “ignites” truth (*veritatis scintilla*).¹¹⁰ Now *fomes* has an alternative in *fomentum* (“poultice/remedy,” “kindling”), which appears several times in connection with the therapy metaphor,¹¹¹ and in diagnosing “Boethius” in 1.6 Philosophia in fact mixed metaphors by playing the two words off one another: the kindling *or* remedy – i.e. a true conviction coupled with dialectical reasoning – would generate a vital spark (*scintillula*) in the patient.¹¹² The label used in 1.2 for “Boethius”’ condition is “lethargy,” and Boethius, ever the translator, there has Philosophia elicit for the benefit of his Roman readers the precise philosophical (Platonic) implications of the underlying Greek compound: “Boethius” suffers from obliviousness of who he is.¹¹³

Hence 3.m11 has a double function: it commemorates an act of recollection in 3.11 while commenting generally on the Platonic therapy appropriate to the malaise specifically diagnosed in Book 1.

4.m1 epitomizes *Phaedrus* 246a–248e, on the soul’s ascent to the “place beyond the heavens.”¹¹⁴ The theme is announced at 4.1.9, where Philosophia promises “Boethius” wings to bear the mind aloft. 4.m1 gathers energy from the end of Book 3, in that it, like 3.m10, sounds the call for the soul’s return to its haven (homeland)¹¹⁵ and, like 3.m12, focuses attention on the soul’s backward (downward) gaze.¹¹⁶ The poetic adaptation significantly alters the *Phaedrus* myth. The charioteer and pair of winged horses, Plato’s figure for the tripartite soul, and eight of the nine patterns of life into which the soul is said by Plato to descend, are omitted, leaving only that of the tyrant. The boldest change occurs in connection with the latter, for against the expectation that the downward gaze will be said to initiate the soul’s becoming filled with oblivion and falling,¹¹⁷ Philosophia describes the soul as *free and aloft*, looking down upon the tyrants who terrorize nations. In effect, Philosophia sidesteps the issue of metempsychosis (rebirth as philosopher, king, politician, etc.) and instead has the soul calmly looking down upon the last, and lowest, form of life mentioned by Plato, viewing it as a state of *exile*.¹¹⁸ Without the theory of metempsychosis there is no place for an eschatological myth to offer consolation for the injustice of tyranny,¹¹⁹ and there is a sense in which the *Consolatio* never fully comes to grips with the desire for revenge. As “Boethius” in 1.m5 reassures himself that Fortuna will eventually overturn tyrants, and not just the innocent, so *Philosophia* in 4.m1 assures him that the just soul will peacefully gaze down upon their exile.¹²⁰ The isolation of the tyranny theme draws the moral concerns of Book 1 back into focus, thereby charting a course for Book 4.

The poetic epitomes of Plato do not constitute philosophical arguments as such, but neither are they mere literary adornment. Despite the long-range shift in balance between poetry and prose, there is a sense in which the literature/philosophy dichotomy breaks down with the *Consolatio*, and the philosophical poems in particular are best viewed as stenographic affirmations of crucial philosophical doctrines and measures of the work’s general progress.¹²¹

The structure and purpose of the second and final part of Book 3 are transparent, in that 3.11–12 provide explicit indications of where the *Consolatio* is and ought to be. They arise out of the diagnosis conducted by Philosophia in 1.6, which consisted of four questions:

- (1) Is the world ruled by chance or by reason?
- (2) By what mechanisms is it governed?
- (3) What is the end for which all things strive?
- (4) What is man?¹²²

“Boethius” answered (1) correctly, was at a loss for (2), had forgotten the answer to (3), and got (4) wrong, and it was from his responses (or silence) that Philosophia was

then able to assess his condition, taking the gathered evidence chiastically:

- (4) explains his sense of exile and deprivation;
- (3) explains his belief that the wicked are powerful and happy;
- (2) explains his belief that fortuitous events are without governance;
- (1) is the “kindling” from which a “spark” of health will be generated.¹²³

The chiasmus is reflected also in the order with which answers to (2) and (3) are reached in 3.12 and 3.11, respectively. The solution is in each case the same: the Good is both the final and efficient cause of all creation.¹²⁴ Hence what emerges in 3.11–12 is the realization that 1.6 has a programmatic function, establishing the course of therapy for Books 2 and 3.

The fact that no reply to (4) is explicitly announced has led to the suspicion that our text of the *Consolatio* is defective.¹²⁵ There is, however, an answer to the ‘What is man?’ question, although it is delivered in stages rather than at a single blow. In 1.6 “Boethius” can only summon in response to Philosophia’s interrogation the thought that man, that *he*, is a “rational *mortal* animal,” a definition backed by Aristotle but ultimately falling short.¹²⁶ From that moment the hunt for the immortal soul is on. Already by the end of 2.4, as we have seen, Philosophia mounts an argument which on the basis of “numerous demonstrations” *presupposes* its immortality,¹²⁷ and in 2.5 she returns to the question by remarking man’s habit of thrusting himself below the level of beasts through willed obliviousness of his divine and godlike dignity.¹²⁸ The latter idea is developed with an argument in 3.10, to the effect that we are deified through participation in divinity,¹²⁹ and with another in 4.3, to the effect that we become beasts through ignorance of the Good.¹³⁰ The general principle is articulated in 4.4: it is divinely sanctioned that by redirecting its gaze the human soul should “become what it contemplates.”¹³¹ The description of Philosophia herself is probably an allegory for the idea of its mobile, intermediate status.¹³² Like spirit, nature, the heavens, angels, and demons, the soul is an instrument of providential influence over the phenomenal world and is the particular key to human self-determination.¹³³ Its descent is in three stages, contact with corporeality and then with earthly limbs, followed by a moral fall, each stage involving further loss of memory, freedom, and self.¹³⁴ Boethius never explains what triggers the downward impulse, but it does not exaggerate to say that the whole of the *Consolatio* constitutes his moral and metaphysical reflection on the process of conversion and return. The soul exists prior to incarnation and while in the body retains dim visions of truths previously known,¹³⁵ as if inebriated it dreams of revisiting its homeland.¹³⁶ The cultivation of philosophy is what ignites the spark that initiates the return,¹³⁷ what stirs the “agent” intellect,¹³⁸ and there are hints that the most deeply buried truths are through the aid of divine grace or illumination recollected in a flash of insight, prayer playing an important part in the process.¹³⁹ The Plotinian hierarchy of Soul–Intellect–One (Good) is never mentioned but is implicit, particularly in the idea that Soul revolves around or radiates

from Mind.¹⁴⁰

What is the fate of the soul after the body? Philosophia declines to reply, as though the question were not hers to answer.¹⁴¹ Her refusal comes in a passage inspired by Plato's *Gorgias*, which suggests that Boethius is warning readers not to expect an eschatological myth comparable to the one that follows Socrates' colloquy with Callicles.¹⁴² As has been noted, there is no myth because there is no theory of metempsychosis to support it. Philosophia several times specifies that humans become (are) *like* beasts or God as a result of changes within the mind,¹⁴³ but even her stronger claim that in redirecting their gaze they become (are) beasts or gods carries no suggestion of reincarnation. She explicitly says that the mental state changes although the human form remains,¹⁴⁴ thus inverting an ancient myth: Circe's potions altered only the *bodies* of Odysseus' companions.¹⁴⁵ In 4.m1, as has been noted,¹⁴⁶ Philosophia diverts the *Phaedrus* myth from the theory of rebirth, and in 4.4 she unambiguously speaks of the soul-body diremption, the "final death," as initiating an "infinite" and "eternal" state.¹⁴⁷ The wicked will not be reincarnated as beasts, but the changes their souls undergo in this life are nevertheless real to the extent that evil qua privation represents an absence of being: in ceasing to be fully human (godlike), the soul can only devolve to its bestial self.¹⁴⁸ The idea of deification, on the other hand, is ultimately unproblematical for the Christian Boethius, and Moreschini rightly emphasizes the acquisition of divinity over assimilation to it.¹⁴⁹

3.10 sets in motion the densely argued style briefly foreshadowed at the end of 2.4. There are five arguments:

- (1) Imperfection is unimaginable in the absence of perfection, in that it is a falling away or procession from a perfect source. Hence the imperfect happiness associated with lower goods implies a perfect Happiness.¹⁵⁰
- (2) It is universally held that nothing better than God is imaginable, and that-*than-which-there-is-nothing-better* is obviously good. If the Good is not in God, then there must be something superior to God to possess it. But since there cannot be an infinite hierarchy of goods, God must fully possess the Good, which has earlier been shown to be Happiness. Happiness is therefore in God.¹⁵¹
- (3) *Sed contra*: to say that God fully possesses the Good is to posit a source of goodness extrinsic to God – even if the Good and God are said to be only conceptually distinct. But to separate God from the Good is unthinkable, since nothing is superior to its source and we hold nothing to be superior to God. Hence the source of all things, God, must be the Good; but since the Good is Happiness, Happiness must be God.¹⁵²
- (4) If there are two highest Goods, then in lacking the other each will be imperfect. But that which is imperfect cannot be highest; hence there cannot be two such Goods. But since Happiness and God have been shown to be the Good,

Happiness must be Divinity.¹⁵³ *Corollary*: people become happy by obtaining Happiness; but since Happiness is Divinity, they become happy by obtaining Divinity; and in the same manner as they become just by obtaining Justice and wise by obtaining Wisdom, so they become gods by obtaining Divinity. Hence every happy person is a god, not by nature (for God is one) but by participation.¹⁵⁴

- (5) Is Happiness a whole of which self-sufficiency, power, reverence, nobility, and joy are the constituent parts? Parts differ from one another, but self-sufficiency, power, reverence, nobility, and joy have been shown to be one; since Happiness [qua whole] cannot consist of a *single* part, the whole/part relation cannot obtain. They are therefore related to the Good as to a final cause (*summa causa*) for the sake of which (*cuius causa*) they are pursued. But since Happiness is that for the sake of which they are pursued, the Good and Happiness must be substantially one; and since God and Happiness are the same, the substance of God must therefore be in the Good.¹⁵⁵

As analysis of this important passage would require extensive commentary, general observations must suffice.¹⁵⁶ The purpose is to bring Happiness, the Good, and God under a *reductio ad unum*, and the arguments revolve around the principle that, if the first of two identical things is identical to a third, then the second is as well. (1) begins by positing supreme Happiness. (2) argues from Good = *in* God and Good = Happiness¹⁵⁷ to Happiness = *in* God. (3) removes the assumption vitiating (2),¹⁵⁸ that goodness is an incidental attribute (*inesse = hyparkhein*) of God, in order to demonstrate that Happiness *is* (*esse = einai*) God. (4) draws essentially the same conclusion as (3), inserting Divinity for purposes of the corollary. (5) argues from Good = Happiness and God = Happiness to Good = God. The function of (5) is to bridge the discussion of false pursuits in 3.3–7 and the consideration of the Good qua final cause in 3.11. As at the end of 2.4, so here the argumentation strains the conceit of conversational spontaneity, and the tension becomes especially evident at the seam between (2) and (3), where Philosophia affects a Socratic tone.¹⁵⁹

3.11 furnishes the answer to the third of the four diagnostic questions posed by Philosophia in 1.6.¹⁶⁰ It involves no serious repetition of the final argument in 3.10, which demonstrated that every desire is of the Good but not that *everything* desires it.¹⁶¹ The mainspring of 3.11 is the notion that all things, animate and inanimate, move by natural intention¹⁶² toward the Good. The movement is manifested most immediately in the universal drive toward being or subsistence. Animate beings naturally seek what is most favorable to their existence, just as inanimate ones move in accordance with what their innate natures determine.¹⁶³ The purport of the argument is to make unity into a kind of middle term between being and goodness: everything seeks to be; but whatever seeks to be necessarily seeks to be one;¹⁶⁴ and whatever seeks to be one seeks the Good; thus everything seeks the Good. The argument involves a shift from the

conclusion that self-sufficiency, power, reverence, nobility, and joy are good only insofar as they are one to the further inference that unity is goodness, and is based on the assumption that since unity and goodness produce the same effect (making things good) they are therefore one in substance.¹⁶⁵ The path is then clear for a reply, in 3.12, to the second question raised in 1.6.¹⁶⁶ “Boethius” explains why at the start he recognized the world as being ruled by God rather than by chance, noticing that its observable unity can only bespeak a governing force that is itself one, God.¹⁶⁷ If God is Happiness and Happiness entails complete self-sufficiency, then God rules the world only through Himself; but God is the Good; hence He rules the world through the Good. Since, moreover, everything spontaneously hastens toward the Good, there is a complete convergence of aims between ruler and ruled: submission to the Good is both compulsory *and* voluntary (*fortiter suaviterque*), a thought the biblical resonance of which pleases “Boethius.”¹⁶⁸ The latent dualism driving his complaints about Fortuna in Book 1 is finally obliterated by the conclusion that, since divine omnipotence is incapable of evil, evil is nothing.¹⁶⁹ If 3.11 is our path up to the Good, then 3.12 is its path down to us. The *Anecdoton Holderi* confirms what was to be inferred from 3.11–12: the *Consolatio* and *De hebdomadibus* flow from the same pen.

Morality

The *Gorgias*, particularly the Polus colloquy,¹⁷⁰ influences the argument of the *Consolatio* more transparently than any other Platonic dialogue does. Although its presence is felt already in Book 3,¹⁷¹ the dialogue comes into full view in 4.2–4.¹⁷² Boethius was faced with the difficulty of adapting some of Plato’s most compelling writing to the requirements of his own very different work, and the incommensurable equations, Socrates = Philosophia, Polus = “Boethius,” have the inevitable effect of privileging *arguments* over the psychological interplay between their exponents. Philosophia is ill at ease in the role of Socrates, “Boethius” lacks Polus’ impetuousness, and there is no Callicles to bring matters to a head. The difference becomes noticeable in Philosophia’s stiff attempt at the end of 4.4 to imitate the paradox and irony with which Socrates brings the Polus colloquy to a conclusion: her digression on the subject of oratory appears slightly intrusive and flat, especially without a Callicles to seize upon its apparent absurdity.¹⁷³

4.2–4 target a series of paradoxes:

4.2: that the good are always powerful and the wicked impotent;

4.3: that virtue is always rewarded and vice punished;

4.4: that the wicked are unhappier in attaining their ends than in failing them;

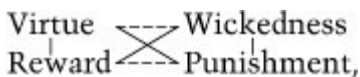
that the wicked are less unhappy when punished than when not;

that those who do wrong are unhappier than those who suffer it.

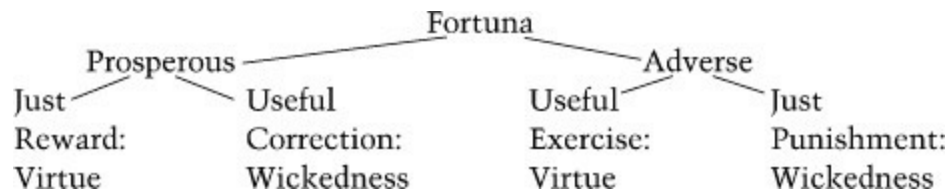
Those in 4.2 and 4.4 derive from the *Gorgias* and preserve Plato's general order of treatment. Their respective themes point to the particular symptom associated in 1.6 with "Boethius'" ignorance of the *finis rerum*: his failure to see the universal end has led to the belief that the wicked are *powerful* and *happy*.¹⁷⁴ 3.11–12 have not given a fully satisfactory solution to the problem, in that their discovery of the Good as final and efficient cause avoids the most immediate questions. "[T]here is no indication," as Marenbon observes, "of how the individual man, Boethius, is supposed to relate to true happiness, which is God."¹⁷⁵ Book 4 must therefore fill the gap, and the *Gorgias* furnishes its starting point.

In distinguishing between will (*voluntas*) and power (*potestas*) as forming the basis of all human action, 4.2 makes a central tenet out of an idea that is by comparison peripheral to the arguments of the *Gorgias*;¹⁷⁶ the importance of the distinction is highlighted by the addition of a third element, accomplishment (*perficere*), in the course of establishing a basis for the arguments of 4.4.¹⁷⁷ Although 4.2 is thoroughly Platonic in both its thrust (confusion of end and means, of what one wills and what to one seems best) and its conclusion (that the despot acts against his will), Stoic resonances too are heard (only the wise rules).¹⁷⁸ The triad on which 4.4 is built (*velle, posse, perficere*) finds no precise analogue in the *Gorgias*, and for the third member Boethius has had to reach beyond the Polus colloquy.¹⁷⁹ Philosophia appears at least once to fall asleep at the wheel,¹⁸⁰ and she diverts from at least three distinctions that are crucial to the arguments of the *Gorgias*: that between doing and suffering *vis-à-vis* just punishment; that between pleasure and benefit *vis-à-vis* the Good; and that (seized upon by Callicles) between what is by nature worse and by convention more shameful.¹⁸¹ The paradox treated in 4.3 appears to be of Boethius' own device and can be explained in connection with our previous observation¹⁸² that the *Consolatio* leaves no room for an eschatological myth. Philosophia's express purpose is to show that virtue is its own reward and vice its own "inseparable" punishment – in *this* life.¹⁸³ Hence, although the *Gorgias* paradoxes form a kind of skeleton for the flesh of Philosophia's arguments, 4.2–4 ultimately exhibit a structure all their own.

"Boethius" frames his concerns in an implicit square of opposition:



the diagonal pairs of which bring the discussion directly back to the problems expressed by him in Book 1.¹⁸⁴ Philosophia, in elucidating the providential order behind the apparent confusion of lots,¹⁸⁵ then reconfigures the square, producing in its place an implicit diaeresis:



The division explains the injustice signalled by the diagonally disposed pairs in the square of opposition and is intended to put Fortuna to rest once and for all: even those who are prepared to credit common parlance must acknowledge that *every* fortune, in that it can be shown to be either useful or just, is good.¹⁸⁶ Although these schematizations are foreign to the *Gorgias*,¹⁸⁷ they are completely at home with Boethius the Peripatetic commentator. The *reportatio* of Olympiodorus' lectures on the *Gorgias* everywhere evinces a similar fondness for such organization of ideas and shares with the *Consolatio* an interest in finding in the *Gorgias* grounds for exonerating God from responsibility for unjust suffering – or in seeking divine justification *for* it.¹⁸⁸ It is not surprising that Boethius' adaptation of Plato should breathe the dry air of the Neoplatonic schoolroom, only that it should capture some of the spirit of Plato's literary genius without resorting to the wild allegories that so intoxicated certain Neoplatonists.

4.6 finally brings to light the dilemma that has been building from the start. In 1.6 "Boethius" plumped for a world ruled by divine reason rather than by chance (*casus*), thereby giving Philosophia a foothold for the course of therapy that develops over the course of Books 2–4.¹⁸⁹ What he could not foresee is that he was painting himself into a corner. For 4.6 brings matters to the brink of strong determinism in claiming that fate not only governs the movements of the cosmos but "constrains . . . the actions and fortunes of men by means of an indissoluble concatenation of causes."¹⁹⁰ "Boethius" has gotten what he asked for, in that his original complaint was precisely that God controls the cosmos but refuses to constrain human actions, abandoning them instead to Fortuna.¹⁹¹ Hence at the beginning of Book 5 he feels compelled to ask whether there is any room left for chance (*casus*), by which he means unnecessitated events subject to the influence of free choice.¹⁹² The fact that Book 5 is made to appear as a diversion¹⁹³ suggests another attempt to imitate Plato's technique of dramatic irony: Boethius' plan¹⁹⁴ was that the pendulum should swing between the extremes of Fortuna (2.1–2; cf. 4.7) and fate (4.6) before finally settling on a compromise between providence and free choice.

Notes

1. 2.1.19; 2.2.9.

2. 2.1.10.

3. Magee [2003a](#): 159f.

4. 4.6.15–17.

- [5.](#) Magee [2003b](#): 362f.
- [6.](#) 2.1.19.
- [7.](#) Magee [1987](#): 529–33.
- [8.](#) Gruber [2006](#): 232; 275, ad 3.m9.
- [9.](#) 3.m9.13–17.
- [10.](#) 3.9.32.
- [11.](#) 3.12.30.
- [12.](#) 3.12.31–5; cf. 2.4.22; 3.3.14; 3.m9.4; 3.10.12f.; 3.12.11; 4.3.6; 5.4.13; 5.5.1.
- [13.](#) 3.12.36–8.
- [14.](#) Klingner [1921](#): 73f.
- [15.](#) Magee [2005](#): 348–50.
- [16.](#) Cf. Gruber [2006](#): 387, ad 7 (= 8, *minime*).
- [17.](#) Cf. 1.5.11f.; 1.6.21; 2.1.7; 2.3.3f.
- [18.](#) 2.5.1; 3.1.2f.
- [19.](#) Note in this connection the themes of 1.m6 and 3.m1.
- [20.](#) 5.4.25f.
- [21.](#) Cf. 2.1.8; 2.3.2; 3.12.25; Klingner [1921](#): 74.
- [22.](#) 5.1.5.
- [23.](#) The recapitulations at 1.5.7–10, 3.12.31–5, and 4.4.24f. do not mark significant shifts in perspective.
- [24.](#) 4.7.2; cf. 2.8.3; above, [n. 5](#).
- [25.](#) 2.4.18; cf. 1.5.5; 4.6.15f.; Seneca *Ep.* 9.20–2; Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 5.
- [26.](#) 4.7.22; cf. 2.1.16–18.
- [27.](#) Cf. below, [p. 199](#).
- [28.](#) 4.6.14–16; cf. 4.1.9; 4.m1; etc.
- [29.](#) 1.6.7–19.
- [30.](#) 3.11.40f.; 3.12.2f., 14.
- [31.](#) 4.1.1–5; cf. 1.4.30.
- [32.](#) 2.1.13.
- [33.](#) 2.4.25, 27.
- [34.](#) 2.1.6.
- [35.](#) 2.1.8; 2.3.2.
- [36.](#) 2.5.1.

- [37.](#) 2.1.9; cf. 2.2.2; 2.4.22; 2.6.4; 3.3.1. The teacher/disciple relation evokes Epictetus as well (e.g. 1.3.3f.).
- [38.](#) 2.1.16–18; cf. Seneca *Ep.* 12.4f.
- [39.](#) Klingner [1921](#): 8–20.
- [40.](#) 2.3.11.
- [41.](#) Seneca, *Consolatio ad Marciam* 17.6f.
- [42.](#) 2.2.14; Plato, *Crito* 50a–52d. Note *commune . . . proprio*, with *to koinon . . . hypo idiōtōōn* (50a8–b4).
- [43.](#) Nested orbs: 4.6.15 (Neoplatonic); Seneca *Ep.* 12.6. *Quid est homo*: 1.2.5; 1.6.14–17; Seneca, *Consolatio ad Marciam* 11.1–3 (“mortal” is the problem for Boethius but strikes the consolatory note with Seneca).
- [44.](#) 2.1.8; cf. 1.m7.23f.
- [45.](#) 2.1.10, 16–18; cf. 4.6.15; 4.7.22; 5.2.10.
- [46.](#) 4.6.19; cf. 1.5.4; 3.12.17.
- [47.](#) 2.4.23.
- [48.](#) 2.4.25.
- [49.](#) 2.4.26f.
- [50.](#) 2.4.28.
- [51.](#) 2.4.29.
- [52.](#) 1.2.5; 1.6.17; 2.5.24–9; 3.10.22–6 (4.3.8–10); 4.3.15–21; 4.4.26–31.
- [53.](#) Cf. below, [pp. 193–5](#).
- [54.](#) 3.10.7–10; cf. 3.2.3; 3.8.12; below, [p. 195](#).
- [55.](#) 4.2.31.
- [56.](#) 2.3.4–9; 2.4.4–9. On suicide, cf. 1.m1.13f.; 3.11.32; and on the Stoic “calculus,” Cicero *Fin.* 3.18.60 (with *Off.* 1.18.59); Seneca *Ep.* 58.32–6; Pliny *Ep.* 1.12.3f.
- [57.](#) Cf. above, [n. 18](#).
- [58.](#) Gruber [2006](#): 233.
- [59.](#) E.g. Cicero *Tusc.* 5.15.43–16.46.
- [60.](#) 2.5.2.
- [61.](#) E.g. Seneca *Ep.* 41.6–9. Comparison of 2.5.8–10 (gems) with Petronius, *Satyricon* 55.6.9–13 (cf. IIS 132, 3), and Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.20, gives some sense of the complex intermingling of traditions.
- [62.](#) 2.5.24–35.

- [63.](#) 3.1.7; 3.m1.11–13; 3.9.1, 24.
- [64.](#) 3.1.7; 3.2.12; 3.9.24.
- [65.](#) 3.3.4, 11; 3.8.1, 12; 3.9.22, 31.
- [66.](#) 3.2.9, 15; cf. 1.6.10; 3.3.1; 3.7.4; 3.11.30, 33; 3.12.17; 4.2.10, 12, 26; below, [pp. 197](#)–8.
- [67.](#) Cf. below, [p. 198](#).
- [68.](#) Plato, *Gorgias* 467b–468b.
- [69.](#) Plato, *Gorgias* 464b–466a.
- [70.](#) “Falsely named” goods (2.6.19; cf. 3.12.38).
- [71.](#) 3.2.19f.
- [72.](#) 3.3.9–19.
- [73.](#) 2.6.8–12; 3.5.6–12.
- [74.](#) 2.6.18; 3.4.1–10.
- [75.](#) 2.6.13–20; 3.4.14–16.
- [76.](#) 2.m6; 3.m4.
- [77.](#) 2.m6.14f.
- [78.](#) 2.6.18.
- [79.](#) 3.m4.5–7; cf. 2.m6.1–13.
- [80.](#) Magee [2005](#): 354f., with n. 30; cf. Scheible [1972](#): 136, ad 9–10; O’Daly [1991](#): 96.
- [81.](#) 2.4.22.
- [82.](#) 3.6.4f. (with cross-reference) = 2.7.3–12 (the more impressive treatment).
- [83.](#) 2.m7.14 (*summ̃is inf̃ima*); 2.2.9 (*inf̃ima summ̃is, summa inf̃imis*).
- [84.](#) Similarly, the contrast between 1.m1 (“Boethius”) and 1.m2 (Philosophia): both rest on the same *quondam . . . nunc* antithesis (1.m1.1, 19; 1.m2.6, 24) but pit body against soul (*effeto corpore/lumine mentis*, 1.m1.12; 1.m2.24); cf. *heu* (1.m1.2, 15; 1.m2.27); *cogor/cogitur* (1.m1.2; 1.m2.27). On 1.m5 and 4.m6 cf. Magee [2003a](#): 155–62.
- [85.](#) 3.9.15.
- [86.](#) 3.2.3; 3.8.12.
- [87.](#) 3.11.5–9; cf. below, [p. 197](#).
- [88.](#) 3.9.24.
- [89.](#) Cf. above, [p. 183](#).
- [90.](#) 3.9.16; cf. 3.9.4.

- [91.](#) 1.3.6f.
- [92.](#) 3.9.32.
- [93.](#) 5.m4; cf. Magee [2005](#): 359–63.
- [94.](#) 3.9.33 (*exordium*); cf. above, [n. 8](#).
- [95.](#) Vergil, *Aeneid* 7.41–5.
- [96.](#) Esp. 29e–42d. Boethius had access to Cicero’s translation (TC 1092d) as well as the Greek original, and his study of the *Timaeus* dates back to the time of the mathematical works (Bakhouche [2003](#): 7–11). Macrobius was known to him (cf. IIS 31, 22f.), but his knowledge of Calcidius remains a question.
- [97.](#) Plato, *Timaeus* 27b–c.
- [98.](#) Although the *Timaeus* itself makes two further appearances (3.12.38; 5.6.9–14).
- [99.](#) Cf. 1.5.10 (*vota*).
- [100.](#) Magee [2003a](#): 153–6; [2005](#): 352f.
- [101.](#) E.g. Klingner [1921](#): 44–51; Scheible [1972](#): 111; Chadwick [1981](#): 234; Gersh [1986](#): 701–5.
- [102.](#) Plato, *Timaeus* 36e.
- [103.](#) Cf. 3.m9.8; 4.6.12; Plato, *Timaeus* 29a.
- [104.](#) The idea goes back at least to Cicero (*Or at.* 2.9f.) and was widespread by the sixth century.
- [105.](#) 3.m11.15; 3.12.1.
- [106.](#) 3.11.40f.
- [107.](#) Cf. also 5.m4.35–40.
- [108.](#) The dilemma stated at 5.m3.11–19 is found in (e.g.) the *Meno* (80d–e), *Theaetetus* (191a–b), and Augustine’s *Confessions* (10.18.27). Cf. Scheible [1972](#): 163, ad 20–31.
- [109.](#) 3.m11.12–14.
- [110.](#) 3.12.25; Plato, *Republic* 435a.
- [111.](#) 1.6.21; 2.3.3; 2.5.1.
- [112.](#) 1.6.20f.; cf. Gruber [2006](#): 164, ad 1.6.21.
- [113.](#) 1.2.5.
- [114.](#) 4.m1.15–18; Plato, *Phaedrus* 247c.
- [115.](#) 4.m1.25f.; 3.m10.4–6.
- [116.](#) 4.m1.27–30; 3.m12.52–8.
- [117.](#) Plato, *Phaedrus* 248c.

- [118.](#) With 4.m1.25, 30 (*patria . . . exsules*) cf. 1.5.3–5.
- [119.](#) Cf. below, [pp. 194–5](#).
- [120.](#) 1.m5.39–41 (reading *gaudet*); 4.m1.27–30; cf. 1.3.14.
- [121.](#) Magee [2003a](#): 169.
- [122.](#) 1.6.3–16.
- [123.](#) 1.6.17–20; for the chiasmus cf. 5.4.28–37; Magee [2005](#): 362, n. 63.
- [124.](#) 3.11.40f.; 3.12.2, 14.
- [125.](#) Tränkle [1977](#): 152f.
- [126.](#) 1.6.14–18.
- [127.](#) 2.4.28; cf. 2.7.22; above, [p. 186](#) with n. 50.
- [128.](#) 2.5.25–9.
- [129.](#) 3.10.24f.; cf. 4.3.10; below, [pp. 195–6](#).
- [130.](#) 4.3.15–21.
- [131.](#) 4.4.28–31; cf. IIS 9, 4.
- [132.](#) 1.1.2; cf. 1.m2.6f., 26f.; 5.m3.20–31; 5.m4.22f.; 5.m5.13–15.
- [133.](#) 4.6.13; cf. 2IN 231, 11–232, 10.
- [134.](#) 5.2.8f.; 3.12.1; cf. 1.1.9; 1.5.11; 1.6.10; 1.m7; IIS 9, 2f.; Macrobius *In Somn.* 1.11.12.
- [135.](#) 3.m11; 5.m3.20–31.
- [136.](#) 3.1.5; 3.2.13; 3.m2; 3.3.1; 3.12.9; 4.1.8f.; 4.m1; 5.1.4; cf. Macrobius *In Somn.* 1.12.9–12.
- [137.](#) 3.12.25; cf. above, [p. 192](#) with [n. 110](#).
- [138.](#) 5.m4; 5.5.1.
- [139.](#) 3.9.32f.; 5.3.33f.; 5.4.30–3; 5.5.11f.; 5.6.46f.
- [140.](#) 3.m9.15–17; cf. 4.6.17.
- [141.](#) 4.4.22f. (also 14). Cf. 4.6.38, 53f.; 5.6.1, 25; *De fide catholica* p. 204, ll. 234–40 Moerschini.
- [142.](#) Plato, *Gorgias* 523a–527a; cf. above, [p. 192](#); below, [pp. 198–9](#).
- [143.](#) 2.5.26; 4.3.17, 19; 4.4.30; cf. 4.6.55.
- [144.](#) 4.3.15; 4.4.1.
- [145.](#) 4.m3.27–32; cf. Scheible [1972](#): 140; O’Daly [1991](#): 213.
- [146.](#) Above, [p. 192](#).
- [147.](#) 4.4.9.

- [148.](#) 3.12.29; 4.2.32–6; 4.3.15; cf. Gruber [2006](#): 309, ad 26ff.
- [149.](#) Moreschini [2003](#): 34; cf. Chadwick [1981](#): 211; Marenbon [2003a](#): 111; Gruber [2006](#): 293f., ad 23ff.
- [150.](#) 3.10.2–6.
- [151.](#) 3.10.7–10.
- [152.](#) 3.10.12–17.
- [153.](#) 3.10.18–21.
- [154.](#) 3.10.22–6.
- [155.](#) 3.10.27–43.
- [156.](#) Cf. Marenbon [2003a](#): 108–12.
- [157.](#) Established at 3.2.3; cf. 2.4.25 (above, [p. 186](#), with n. 48).
- [158.](#) Cf. OS I 4.
- [159.](#) 3.10.11; cf. generally Klingner [1921](#): 74–83.
- [160.](#) Cf. above, [p. 193](#).
- [161.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#): 112f.
- [162.](#) Cf. above, [p. 188](#) with n. 66.
- [163.](#) 3.11.14–29.
- [164.](#) 3.11.10–13.
- [165.](#) 3.11.5–9, 36f.; cf. 3.9.4, 16; above, [p. 190](#) with n. 90.
- [166.](#) Cf. above, [p. 193](#).
- [167.](#) 3.12.4–8; cf. 1.6.3f.
- [168.](#) 3.12.22; cf. Gruber [2006](#): 308, ad 22.
- [169.](#) 3.12.29; cf. 4.2.34–9.
- [170.](#) Plato, *Gorgias* 461b–481b.
- [171.](#) Cf. above, [p. 188](#) with n. 67.
- [172.](#) Klingner [1921](#): 84–8.
- [173.](#) 4.4.38–40; Plato, *Gorgias* 480b–481b.
- [174.](#) 1.6.19; cf. above, [p. 193](#).
- [175.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#): 112.
- [176.](#) 4.2.5; Plato, *Gorgias* 509d.
- [177.](#) 4.4.5.
- [178.](#) Klingner [1921](#): 85, n. 3; cf. Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 33f., *Tusc.* 4.6.12; Epictetus, *Discourse* 4.1.53, etc.

- [179](#). Plato, *Gorgias* 525e; but cf. 468e–469a; 471a–d.
- [180](#). 4.4.4 (*willing* evil); she may have the “Calliclean man” in mind (*Gorgias* 491e–492c).
- [181](#). Plato, *Gorgias* 476b–e; 477a; 482d–e.
- [182](#). See above, [pp. 192](#), 195.
- [183](#). 4.3.11–13; cf. above, [n. 141](#).
- [184](#). 4.1.4; 4.5.4; cf. 1.4.30; 1.m5.29–38.
- [185](#). 4.6.23–47.
- [186](#). 4.7.2f.; cf. above, [n. 5](#).
- [187](#). *Gorgias* 463e–466a may furnish the sole methodological analogue.
- [188](#). Olympiodorus, *In Gorgiam* 19.3. Similarly, Olympiodorus’ description of passions dominating the tyrant (26.4) resembles C 4.m2.9f.
- [189](#). 1.6.3f., 20; cf. 3.12.4–8.
- [190](#). 4.6.18f.; cf. 1.5.4; 3.12.17.
- [191](#). 1.m5.25–9.
- [192](#). 5.1.3.
- [193](#). 5.1.5.
- [194](#). *Pace* Tränkle [1977](#): 153.

9 Fate, prescience and free will¹

Robert Sharples

The reconciliation of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is the culmination of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius' is the most persuasive attempt in Greco-Roman antiquity to solve the problem, and the basis for subsequent medieval discussion. Whether it is successful, and whether the issue is now of any interest except as a philosophical exercise, may be questioned; Boethius' treatment is however of great historical importance. The details of his argument, and its relation to his own earlier work and that of his predecessors, are controversial. In this chapter I will begin by considering in the section on 'Future truth and the *Commentaries* on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*' not the *Consolation* but the two *Commentaries* on Aristotle's *On Interpretation* 9. These are chiefly concerned not with the problem of divine foreknowledge but with that of future truth; but they are doubly relevant to the *Consolation*, first because they make points which are taken up in the argument in the *Consolation*, and second because comparison with the *Commentaries* shows how the *Consolation* goes beyond them. Philosophy at C v.4.1 refers to Boethius' earlier consideration of the issues (see below); this gives us Boethius' own warrant for considering the *Consolation* and *Commentaries* together.

I then proceed to consider the argument in the *Consolation*. In the section on 'Providence and fate' I consider the discussion of fate and providence at the end of book 4. In the section on 'The ingredients in Boethius' solution to the foreknowledge problem in the *Consolation*' the three essential elements in Boethius' solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge are identified and discussed. The section on 'The three elements and the solution in the *Consolation*' considers how they are brought together in the solution, and emphasises that all three are essential to it; this also provides an opportunity to spell out how Boethius' solution is an advance over his predecessors. Finally, the section on 'The concluding part of C v.6 and the problems it raises' deals with the unresolved puzzles that remain at the conclusion of the work.

As will be clear from this summary, the structure of the present chapter is determined by the requirements of an analysis of Boethius' arguments; it does not follow the course of his treatment in sequence, and is not a paraphrase of his discussion. Consequently it should not be read as a substitute for Boethius' own presentation, but as ancillary to it.

Future truth and the *Commentaries* on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*

In [Chapter 9](#) of *On Interpretation* Aristotle raises, and apparently to his own satisfaction

resolves, the problem that, if every statement is either true or false, and the statement that, for example, ‘there will be a sea-battle tomorrow’ is true today, it would appear that the occurrence of a sea-battle tomorrow is already decided and that nothing anyone can do can alter this. Similarly if the statement is false; so either way the naval commander has no option in the matter. Various solutions to the paradox have been advanced both in antiquity and in modern times. The questions ‘What is the correct solution?’ and ‘What is Aristotle’s own solution?’ are distinct, though the principle of charity may incline interpreters of Aristotle, both ancient and modern, to attribute to him the solution that they themselves find satisfactory.

One ‘solution’, if it can be so described, adopted by the Stoics as determinists, is to accept that the paradoxical conclusion is in fact true and the occurrence (or not) of the sea-battle must already be fixed.² Apart from this, three main lines of interpretation can be distinguished: (A) to avoid the unpalatable consequence, it must be accepted that statements about undecided future events (future contingents) are neither true nor false; (B) future-tense statements are all true or false, but the truth (or not) of a future-tense statement is itself decided by the occurrence (or not) of the event, and cannot then be appealed to as *itself deciding* the occurrence of the event; (C) statements about contingent events in the future are true or false (against (A)) but are true or false *indefinitely* (against (C)). Whether middle ground can in fact be found between (A) and (B) is itself an issue which will concern us.

(A) is the solution adopted in antiquity by Epicurus and his followers;³ it is the solution which some have understood Aristotle himself to favour (it is the reading of Aristotle identified by McKim 1972 as the ‘Standard Interpretation’);⁴ and it inspired Łukasiewicz to develop multi-valued logic (with intermediate values as well as ‘true’ and ‘false’).⁵

(B) is the solution to the paradox advanced by the Academic Sceptic Carneades in the second century BC, as reported by Cicero, *On Fate*.⁶ He expresses it by insisting that sentences referring to future contingent events are, if the event will in fact occur, *as true now* as they will be when the event occurs; I quote the relevant passages, as the way in which they are expressed will provide significant points of comparison with Boethius’ own account:

T1. ‘[Epicurus] will die when he has lived 72 years, in the archonship of Pytharatus’ was always true, and yet there were no causes in fate why it should so happen; but because it did so happen it was certainly going to happen just as it did happen (19).

T2. Nor do those who say that the things that are going to be are *unchangeable*, and that a truth that will be cannot be turned into a falsehood, establish the necessity of fate, but [rather] they are explaining the meanings of words (20).⁷

T3. The causes which render true those statements which will be made like ‘Cato will come into the senate’ are fortuitous, not inherent in the nature of things and the universe; nevertheless, it is as *unchangeable* that he will come, when it is true [that he will come], as that he has come (28).

Similarly Ryle [1954](#), 15–35, who notes the misleading connotations of expressions like ‘true prediction’. Rephrase the paradox as saying that, if someone’s *guess* today that a certain horse will win the race tomorrow turns out to have been *correct*, then the result of the race must have been fixed in advance, and it will be rather less convincing. This is also, according to some, the solution favoured, in effect, by Aristotle himself; it is the reading of Aristotle identified by McKim [1972](#) as the ‘Non-Standard Interpretation’. And it is the solution to the paradox itself which is generally accepted now.

(B) as an interpretation of Aristotle has derived support from a passage at the start of Aristotle’s solution, which is significant for Boethius’ discussion both in the *Commentaries* and in the *Consolation*, though not, as we shall see, in the way in which interpretation (B) would suggest.

T4. That what is is when it is, and what is not is not when it is not, is necessary; but it is not the case either that all that is, necessarily is, or that [all] that is not, [necessarily] is not. For it is not the same thing for all that is to be of necessity when it is, and [for it] to be of necessity without qualification (*Peri hermeneias* 19a23–6)⁸

This passage has been taken (e.g. by Anscombe [1956/1968](#)) as an indication that the issue turns on distinguishing between truth and necessity, and recognising that the necessity of the event is a different issue from the analytical necessity involved in the definition of the term ‘true’. That the truth of the prediction and the eventual occurrence of the event each necessarily imply the other is simply, as suggested by T2, a consequence of the meaning of the term ‘true’ in a correspondence theory of truth; it has nothing to do with whether the event in question is itself necessary or not.

This point can be expressed in terms of a distinction in the scope of the modal operator ‘necessary’.⁹ Using Polish notation (L = necessarily, C = implies, Cpq = p implies q, “p” = the statement that p),¹⁰ Aristotle can be seen as distinguishing between Lp and what, for the moment, I will formalise as LC“p”p. LC“p”p is true; C“p”Lp, the claim that the truth of the statement makes the event necessary *in itself*, is not. However, interpretation in terms of a *scope* distinction is questionable in the context both of Aristotle and of Boethius. The Peripatetic tradition draws a distinction *not* between the necessity of a conditional and the necessity of its consequent, but between two types of necessity which apply to the consequent,¹¹ or to the event which it describes.¹² (In what follows, for the sake of brevity, I will use ‘the consequent’ for both; in the context of a correspondence theory of truth this will not affect the argument.) The distinction is expressed as one between the *absolute* necessity of the consequent and *the consequent’s*

– not the *consequence's* – being only conditionally necessary.¹³ Against this background, to speak of a contrast between LCpq and CpLq is misleading; I will therefore use L' to indicate conditional necessity (the context identifying the condition in each case) and will formalise the contrast rather as that between CpLq and CpL'q.

(C) In later antiquity commentators on Aristotle adopted – and attributed to Aristotle himself – a solution which is labelled by Kretzmann 1998 as the ‘second-oldest interpretation’. This, as noted above, involves the claim that statements about contingent events in the future are true or false (thus agreeing with (B) rather than with (A), which denies them truth-values at all) but they are true or false *indefinitely*.¹⁴ This is the solution which Boethius in his *Commentaries* adopts, and I shall argue that, in his understanding at least, it is different from (B) as well as from (A). (C) is advanced not only by Boethius but also by the sixth-century AD Alexandrian Neoplatonist Ammonius in his commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*. There has been much discussion of the relation between the two commentaries; probably, rather than Boethius being dependent on Ammonius, they both derive from a common tradition.¹⁵

It is possible to interpret (C) in such a way that what is indefinitely true is true *simpliciter*, in which case solution (C) in effect collapses into solution (B).¹⁶ However, it is also possible to read (C) as denying that future contingents can be described as true or false *simpliciter* at all. The Greek *aphorismenōōs* can mean ‘separately’ as well as ‘definitely’ (White 1985, 60); the point is that one cannot separate the affirmation and the negation, and declare that *this one* is true and *this one* false. Moreover, as Boethius repeatedly makes clear,¹⁷ this is because of the contingent nature of the event, not just because of the limitations of our knowledge.¹⁸ The question will indeed arise whether (C) collapses, not now into (B), but into (A).¹⁹

Boethius emphasises that the truth of future contingents is *changeable*:

T5. Statements in a certain way have a double nature; some of them are such that, not only are truth and falsehood found in them, but one of them is definitely true, the other definitely false; in others however one indeed is true, the other false, but indefinitely *and changeably (commutabiliter)*, and this through their own nature, not in relation to our ignorance and knowledge (2IN 208.11–18 = Sorabji 2004 5a3; my emphasis).²⁰

As we have seen (above, T2 and T3), one of the points Carneades, according to Cicero, emphasised in advancing solution (B) is that the truth-value of statements relating to future contingents is *unchangeable*; if the event occurs, the statement that it will occur is as true before the event as the statement that it has occurred is afterwards. The question is how we are to understand ‘changeably’ in Boethius’ account.

- (i) ‘There *will be* a sea-battle on 21 October 1805’ was true before the event, but became false afterwards because the future tense was no longer appropriate.²¹ But this would hardly justify talk of *indefinite* truth.

- (ii) The change in question is simply the change from being indefinitely true or false to being definitely true or false once the event has occurred (or the outcome has become irrevocably fixed).²² This certainly draws the contrast with Carneades' position (B); but it may be questioned whether anyone not familiar with Carneades' discussion would read T5 in this way, and whether the point that what is indefinite is changeable just in the sense of potentially becoming definite would deserve the emphasis that Boethius apparently gives it.²³
- (iii) The truth of the prediction changes this way and that along with the likelihood of the impending event.²⁴ This might draw support from one possible reading of Aristotle's remark at 19a35–9 (emphasis mine):

T6. This applies to things that are not always so or are not always not so. For in the case of these it is necessary that one part of the disjunction be true – or false – but not this one or that one but whichever it may be; and one [may be] true *rather [than the other], but not yet [or: 'not just for that reason'] true or false*.²⁵

Kretzmann argues, rightly, that (iii) is incoherent: the statement 'there will be a sea-battle tomorrow' cannot be *true* (or '*more true*') at 9 p.m. today and *false* (or '*more false*') at 10 p.m. just because, say, the commander has become more nervous.²⁶

- (iv) *commutabiliter*, which could (but need not) mean 'exchangeably with each other', could simply be a way of saying that it is impossible (and impossible not just because of the limitations of our knowledge) to identify either part of the disjunction as the true or the false one as opposed to the other. This is perhaps the most likely interpretation, but we should also note that
- (v) Ammonius, and to a lesser extent Boethius, conduct their discussions partly in terms of a 'statistical' notion of contingency; that is to say, they consider *types* of situations that sometimes occur and sometimes do not, rather than individual *token* events.²⁷ It might therefore seem that Boethius in T5 is referring to types rather than tokens, and that 'changeably' simply indicates that we are considering what is contingent rather than what is necessary.²⁸ However, consideration *purely* of types constitutes an *ignoratio elenchi* where the Sea-Battle paradox is concerned; after all, it refers to a sea-battle *tomorrow*, a token rather than a type. With some degree of charity Ammonius, and more easily Boethius in 1IN, can be read rather as drawing *inferences* about predictions of token events from what applies to types; and at 2IN 248.13–14 Boethius explicitly presents this inference as an *argument* separate from what has preceded.²⁹ We may conclude that, even if Boethius' talk of changeability reflects (v), it nevertheless in his view implies (iv) also.

To divine *foreknowledge*, as opposed to future *truth*, Boethius makes only passing reference in 2IN, at 224.27–226.25.³⁰ Crucial is 226.9–13:

T7. God knows future things not as coming about of necessity, but as doing so contingently, in such a way that he is not unaware that something else too could happen, but what comes about he knows on the basis of the human beings themselves and their actions.

This suggests that Boethius holds that God knows what our future choices will in fact be, and also holds that they are not necessitated and that God knows this to be so. The ancient sources point out that if God foreknew the contingent as necessary rather than as contingent he would, impossibly, be in error. But this is ambiguous between saying (a) that he knows the outcome, while knowing that it could be otherwise, and (b) that he just knows what the possibilities are, but not which of them will be realised. The point is used in the first way (a) by Proclus,³¹ and in the second (b) by Alexander and Calcidius.³² The emphasis of Boethius' discussion in 2IN is almost entirely on the fact that God avoids the error; it is only in the last clause of the passage cited above, the last of the entire discussion, that it becomes clear that Boethius is opting for (a) rather than (b).³³ Boethius consistently maintains, in 2IN and in the *Consolation*, both that God knows what we will choose and that he knows that we could choose otherwise;³⁴ but 2IN offers this as a position, and does not yet offer a solution. Gaskin indeed notes that, because Boethius in 2IN does not appeal, as he will in the *Consolation*, to the idea that to God all time is as the present, his account of divine knowledge risks jeopardising his insistence on (C) rather than (B) where future *truth* is concerned.³⁵

It is uncertain whether Boethius at the time of writing the *Commentary* had not yet developed the solution in the *Consolation*, or whether he thought fuller discussion of the topic would be inappropriate in the context even of the more advanced of his two commentaries. At C v.4.1 Philosophy refers to Boethius' previous consideration of the question, and says that neither Boethius nor anyone else has yet explained the matter adequately. Since the contrast is with the explanation in written form that Boethius is going to put into the mouth of Philosophy, it is natural to take the reference as being to the written exposition that Boethius had given earlier in the *Commentary*; clearly the thoughts of the author Boethius – as opposed to the character in the dialogue – have advanced beyond what is stated in the *Commentary* by the time he comes to write the *Consolation*, but this passage cannot itself tell us whether they had done so at the time of writing the *Commentary* itself. Ammonius certainly thought the topic of divine knowledge suitable for extended consideration in *his* commentary (132.8–137.11, discussed below); ironically, the very fact that Boethius' solution in the *Consolation* is superior to that of Ammonius, and requires a more complex discussion, may have made it less suitable for inclusion in his *Commentary* even if it had already suggested itself to him.

Providence and fate

In C IV.6 Philosophy draws a distinction between providence and fate. The distinction already had a long history; it became particularly significant in the Platonist tradition of which Boethius is part, where it was emphasised not only that fate is the working-out of the providential plan in space and time,³⁶ but that rational human souls can rise above the level of fate.³⁷ Philosophy gives expression to this in the memorable image of circles revolving around the divine mind; the nearer one moves to the central pivot, the more one is freed from fate (C IV.6.14–17).³⁸ The initial point of the contrast between providence and fate is to explain the apparent arbitrariness of providence,³⁹ of which the Prisoner had complained in C IV.5; it is hard, she says, for us to see from our perspective (C IV.6.21), but in fact providence orders all things for the best – as Philosophy proceeds to argue with such questionable examples as the wicked person who is allowed to prosper as he might otherwise do even worse things (C IV.6.45). In C V.2 it is argued that human souls are most free when they contemplate the divine mind, less so when they turn away from reason and subject themselves to ignorance, ‘being in a certain way prisoners through their own freedom’.

This is not, and is not intended to be, an argument that can preserve human freedom of action, if this is understood simply to mean an ability to perform either of two opposed courses of action, an ability unconstrained by any factors, even those internal to the agent.⁴⁰ To use the notion of rising above fate to establish *this* sort of autonomy would risk the absurd consequence of arguing that the internal workings of our minds are free even though our physical actions are not, so that freedom would not extend to the ability to refrain from committing theft, which is a physical event predetermined by fate, but only to the ability to regret committing it.⁴¹ But the view that autonomy is simply unconstrained freedom to perform either of two opposed courses of action was no more universally accepted in antiquity than it is now.⁴² For Platonists freedom is not the unconstrained ability to do otherwise than one chooses to do, but rather freedom from error, that is from ignorance; human beings have autonomy to choose whether to pursue wisdom or ignorance, and their actions will depend on the consequences of *this* choice. The actions of human agents, whether free or self-enslaved, are not themselves brought about by divine providence, but are none the less worked into its plan.⁴³

However, the special status accorded to human choice in C V.2 is threatened by the fact that God, if he is omniscient, can foreknow the workings of our minds just as much as he can foreknow physical events.⁴⁴ Boethius thus proceeds to the discussion of the relation between divine foreknowledge and human freedom in C V.3–6.

The ingredients in Boethius’ solution to the foreknowledge problem in the *Consolation*

The distinction between absolute and conditional necessity (henceforth: ‘ACN’)

discussed in the section on ‘Future truth’ above is one of three ingredients which enter into Boethius’ solution in C v.3–6 to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. Boethius’ discussion differs from all previous ones in bringing the three ingredients together.⁴⁵ How it does so has been a subject of dispute. It will be convenient first to consider the other two ingredients, and then to proceed to an analysis of the use to which Boethius puts them.

The second ingredient is that the nature of knowledge is determined by the nature of the knower rather than by that of the thing known. This claim can be traced back to the Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus (c.245–c.345 AD)⁴⁶ and has been labelled by Evans [2004](#), 268–9 as the ‘Iamblichus Principle’, a label which it will be useful to retain (as ‘IP’) in what follows.⁴⁷ IP was apparently originally advanced, and was certainly regularly used, as an answer to the problem how the divine can have knowledge of what is different in character from itself, without thereby taking on the alien character of the thing known.⁴⁸ This is not always connected with the specific issue of future contingents. IP is indeed used by Proclus to find middle ground between the positions of the Stoics, who (i) held that God cannot foreknow future contingents and (ii) argued from this that, as God has universal foreknowledge, there cannot be any future contingents, and the Peripatetic Alexander of Aphrodisias, who agreed with (i) but argued conversely that, as there are future contingents, God cannot have universal foreknowledge. Proclus uses IP to reject (i); God can have necessary foreknowledge of what in itself is only contingent.⁴⁹ On its own IP does not provide an adequate solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom; it asserts that God *can* foreknow even what is contingent, but does not yet suggest how this foreknowledge and the contingency of the event may be reconciled. Ammonius indeed links it rather (132.19–133.15) to the discussion in Plato, *Laws* 10 of whether providence is burdensome for the gods.

IP, baldly stated, may not seem very plausible to those who do not share its underlying theological assumptions. Boethius in C v.4.24–39 and C v.5.1–12 supports it by a persuasive analogy; for us to deny that God can know things in a way that transcends their own nature would be like sense-perception, which is of particulars, claiming that the universals apprehended by reason do not exist (C v.5.6). That different living creatures have fewer or more cognitive faculties, and that some have sense-perception but not reason, has been indicated at C v.5.2–4, the ultimate source being Aristotle’s *On the Soul*. It is no accident that C v.5 is followed by the last poem in the *Consolation*, on the theme – going back to Plato’s *Timaeus*, 91e – that only human beings can, and should, stand upright and look to the heavens, this giving the final poetic answer to the Prisoner’s dejection in C metr.2.⁵⁰ Boethius may not have been the first to give IP such a telling expression, but the surviving earlier accounts, at least, are in the dry prose of the lecture-room commentary.⁵¹ A further distinctive feature of Boethius’ presentation of IP in the *Consolation* is that he does not – for good reason, given his concern with human autonomy – link it with the notion of God knowing all things as their *cause*, except at the very end of his discussion.⁵²

The third ingredient in Boethius' solution is the notion that to God all time is as the present is to us – 'the Eternal Present', or 'EP' for short. In C v.6.1–14 EP is explicitly contrasted with endless duration as a succession of experiences; to God past, present and future are present *simultaneously*. The contrast derives ultimately from Plato, and is expressly attributed to him by Philosophy herself (C v.6.9–14), alluding to *Timaeus* 37d. However, a distinction may need to be drawn between being outside time altogether and being in a situation where past, present and future are all experienced as present.⁵³ For if God is outside time altogether, far from the future being as accessible to him as the present and the past, it might seem that everything in time would be equally inaccessible.⁵⁴ The specific notion that future and past are equally present to God is found in Ammonius' discussion of *On Interpretation* 9;⁵⁵ anticipations have also been found in Augustine.⁵⁶ Ammonius, however, connects EP, like IP, *only* with the question of how the gods can know future contingents, and ACN *only* with the eventual solution to the paradox of future truth. To be sure, the structure of a section-by-section commentary on *On Interpretation* 9 does not encourage a connection between all three principles, for Boethius in his *Commentaries* any more than for Ammonius.

The three elements and the solution in the *Consolation*

ACN, IP and EP all have a part to play in Boethius' solution. It might seem that ACN is the crucial point, in other words, that Boethius' claim will be that while God's foreknowing what I will do implies that I will do it, so that it is *conditionally* necessary given God's foreknowledge, it does not follow that my doing it will *in itself* be necessary rather than voluntary. And this is in a sense right; it is where Boethius' argument will end up, at C v.6.25–36. However, Boethius introduces ACN at the *start* of the discussion of divine foreknowledge, to make the point that, while the Prisoner is well aware that God's foreknowledge does not itself bring my action about (and thus remove my autonomy), he is still concerned that God's foreknowledge necessarily implies the occurrence of what he foreknows (C v.3.10–11).⁵⁷ This amounts to saying that *even conditional* necessity is still a problem. Philosophy does respond by insisting (C v.4.11–20) that necessity must be in the event and extend to the prediction, rather than being imposed on the event by the prediction, and arguing that, if present events are not made necessary in themselves by our observing them, foreknowledge need not make future events necessary in themselves either. But this points forward to the need to introduce IP and EP; if ACN alone provided the solution, the discussion could have finished at C v.4.20.⁵⁸

While ACN is not enough on its own to provide the solution, another argument, found in Aquinas,⁵⁹ is, as Marenbon and Evans have emphasised,⁶⁰ not part of the problem and solution as considered by Boethius at all. This argument turns on the necessity of the past, admitted by Aristotle at *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.2, 1139b8 and *Rhetoric* 3.17, 1418a5; it claims that God's knowing in advance what I will do will itself be past, and

therefore irrevocable, even before the event occurs, and that this necessity will be transmitted to the future event. (Even if LCpq is to be distinguished from CpLq, rejection of CpLq does not entail rejection of CLpLq.)⁶¹ But, as Marenbon points out, if this were the issue it would hardly be an answer to say, with EP, that God's knowledge is *present*.⁶² True, the irrevocability of the past is beyond question in a way that the necessity of the present is not; one can regard the present as the time in which we perform our free actions.⁶³ Nevertheless, EP would hardly be the most persuasive answer to the supposed argument.

The issue that continues to concern Boethius after C v.4.20 can best be expressed in terms of *accessibility*. The problem is not so much whether divine foreknowledge implies the necessity of future events in a sense that conflicts with human freedom, but rather how, if we grant that some future events are *not* necessary in a sense that conflicts with human freedom, divine knowledge can have access to them – the original context of IP.⁶⁴ Putting the matter in formal terms, if 'S' = 'is known' and 'F' indicates the future, so that 'Fp' = 'p will be the case', then for *human* knowledge CSpL'p and CSFpL'p are both true, CSpLp is false (we can know things that are not and never were necessary in themselves), but CSFpLFp is *true* – we can only foreknow things that are necessary for some reason *other* than the fact that they occur or that we foreknow them. The challenge to Philosophy is to show that CSFpLFp does not apply to God's foreknowledge. And this is where IP and EP play their part in the argument.⁶⁵

If one holds that God's unchanging nature prevents his knowing things that are changeable, the problem of how God can know my actions, for example, will apply as much to my present and past actions as to my future ones. The point is that in *our* experience there is a particular problem about the accessibility of undetermined *future* events. The argument that God's knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the present, which itself rests on the combination of EP and IP, is used by Boethius to give God access to a future which is concealed from us. By doing this it removes the requirement, which applies to *our* knowledge of the future, that anything that is foreknown must be necessary in itself independently of its being foreknown.

The distinction between absolute and conditional necessity, ACN, is thus part of Boethius' solution, but not in itself *the* solution.⁶⁶ For it is not enough simply to distinguish between the two types of necessity involved. The argument that God's knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the present is needed to *legitimise* the application of the distinction.⁶⁷

The combination of ACN with IP + EP is finally made at C v.6.19–21: CSpLp is false for God's knowledge of our future just as it is for our knowledge of the present. Immediately before this, God's foreknowledge (*praevidentia*) has (C v.6.17) been renamed *providentia*, 'looking forth'. God does not foresee the future but sees past, present and future all at once, as if looking from a high mountain.⁶⁸ It is after this (C v.6.25–36) that Philosophy draws the general distinction between absolute and conditional necessity, illustrating it with the example that, if someone is walking, it is

necessary that he be walking (CpL'p), but not that his walking is itself necessary in the sense of being compelled (not CpLp). This analysis is then applied ('in the same way', C v.6.30) to God's *providentia*; and the discussion of this point concludes with an echo (C v.6.36) of the example of reason and the senses used to illustrate IP in C v.5.

All three of ACN, IP and EP are present in Ammonius' discussion of *On Interpretation* 9, but he does not combine them to give a solution like Boethius' in the *Consolation*. To understand Boethius' argument requires us to see the issue in terms of the accessibility of future contingents to divine knowledge, rather than just in terms of the implications of divine knowledge for the things it is agreed that it knows. But Ammonius, in the part of his discussion concerned with divine knowledge, focuses on the accessibility issue *exclusively*.⁶⁹ The notion of conditional necessity is brought in only later, where it occurs in Aristotle's text.⁷⁰ And what is missing is the crucial insight in Boethius that, of four cases of knowledge – God's knowledge of our present, God's knowledge of our future, our knowledge of the present and our knowledge of the future – the first three are all alike, and all unlike the fourth, in requiring only conditional and not absolute necessity.⁷¹

The concluding part of C v.6 and the problems it raises

Philosophy proceeds by putting the principle that God's knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the present to further use in denying (C v.6.37–41) that God can be affected by our decisions. I cannot, by changing my mind about what I will do, force God also to change his judgement about what I will do (a problem raised at the start of the discussion, in C v.3.6). For God foresees the whole story in one go, as it were, my changes of mind included. However, Philosophy goes further and denies that our actions are the cause of God's foreknowledge of them at all (C v.6.41–43; an issue raised, as she says, by the Prisoner at C v.3.15–16). But her explanation is unclear: 'this power of [divine] knowledge, embracing all things in its present knowledge, has itself established a limit for all things, and owes nothing to things that come after it'. If this suggests that the truth of God's knowledge does not depend on its correspondence with the free choice that I will in fact make, it goes against the model of the relation between knowledge and its objects that has been the basis of the whole preceding discussion; it is not clear that IP can remove *all* dependence of knowledge on its object. For a Platonist like Boethius the difficulty will not indeed be apparent in the sort of case he used to illustrate IP in C v.4–5; the content of Intellect's knowledge of the Form of Man determines, rather than being determined by, the content of sensation's awareness of a man (in so far as the latter is not also affected by such things as direction of view, lighting conditions and so on), for flesh-and-blood men are themselves what they are because of the Form of Man, not vice versa. But it is difficult to see how a similar account can be given of God's knowledge of a human agent's individual future choices.

Perhaps Philosophy's point is just that it would be inappropriate for God's knowledge

to depend on *future* actions, and that EP removes *this* necessity. The alternative is that Philosophy in this passage concedes that God determines our actions after all, thus destroying her own argument.⁷² But the remarks that follow (C v.6.44–8) seem to endorse human autonomy; our wills are free from all necessity, and divine providence *concur*s with our actions, rather than causing them. The final sentence engages in deliberate word-play: ‘A great necessity to be good is laid upon you.’ Our actions may not be necessitated in the sense of being determined by forces outside our control, but that does not remove – indeed it creates – the moral necessity to act virtuously.

If Philosophy has sacrificed human autonomy, Boethius’ account is paradoxical. If she has retained it, Boethius’ account is incomplete. For he has only attempted to reconcile human autonomy with divine *omniscience*. God can foreknow what I will do without removing my power of independent action. But there still remains the problem of the relation between human autonomy and divine *omnipotence*.⁷³ Solutions can indeed be suggested – for example, that God himself chooses to limit his power by giving human agents the freedom to err, since only thus is virtue (and, of course, vice) possible; but this problem is not one that the *Consolation* claims to resolve.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Peter Adamson, Jonathan Barnes, John Magee, Daniel Schulthess and Gerhard Seel for discussion and suggestions, and to Gerhard Seel for inviting me to give a paper on the topic of the first part of this chapter in Bern. The responsibility for errors or misunderstandings is my own.
2. Cicero, *On Fate* 20–1 (= LS 38G). This is to be distinguished from the claim, *not* made by the Stoics, that the truth of the prediction itself *causes*, rather than *requires*, the event to be necessary. Cf. e.g. Sharples 1991, 12 n. 1.
3. Cicero, *On Fate* 21; 37–8 (= LS 20H); *Academica* 2.97 (= LS 20I).
4. As McKim 1972, 81 n. 4 notes, view (B) below had already been labelled the ‘Non-Standard Interpretation’ by Rescher 1963, 46, discussing al-Farābī.
5. Relevant papers by Łukasiewicz are collected in McCall 1967.
6. Cicero, *On Fate* 17–20; 27–8 (= LS 70G).
7. Added emphasis mine; on ‘unchangeable’ see further below.
8. Echoed by Ammonius, *On Aristotle’s On Interpretation* (CAG IV) 153.13–154.2, Boethius 1IN 121.20–122.20, 2IN 241.1–243.28. In the former Boethius expresses the contrast as between ‘temporal’ (*temporale*) and ‘unconditional’ (*simpliciter*) necessity, in the latter as between ‘conditional’ (*condicionalis*, 243.26) and ‘unconditional’ (*simplex*). Gaskin 1995, 91 discusses various labels for the first type and opts for ‘relative necessity’ or ‘necessity relative to the facts’; cf. id. 114–15, 128. Ammonius’ commentary and Boethius’ two commentaries are translated in Blank and Kretzmann 1998. All references to

Ammonius in this chapter are to this commentary.

[9](#). Cf. e.g. Sorabji [1980](#), 122–3.

[10](#). ‘C’ is to be read as ‘implies’ rather than as ‘causes’: Cpq and Cqp may both be true, but both of two states of affairs cannot each be the *cause* of the other, at least not in a single sense of ‘cause’.

[11](#). Cf. Weidemann [1998](#), Marenbon [2003b](#), especially 537–8, [2005](#), 45–6; and, of Aristotle’s own practice in the *Prior Analytics*, Patzig [1968](#), Ch. 2, especially 16–28. Sorabji [1980](#), 122 n. 7 suggests that the scope distinction is found in Aristotle not in T4 but at *Soph. el.* 4 166a23–31; however, that passage too is arguably better interpreted in terms of absolute and conditional necessity.

[12](#). Marenbon [2003b](#), 535.

[13](#). At SH 1.6.6–7 pp. 276–7 Obertello = *PL* 64 839d–840a Boethius distinguishes between (i) the necessity of sitting when sitting, (ii) the necessity of a living creature’s having a heart when alive, and (iii) the necessity of God’s being immortal; Rescher [1967](#), 37; Galonnier [2003b](#), 592–3 n. 87. The same tripartition (in the reverse order, with (iii) and (ii) presented as subdivisions of a single type contrasted with (i)) appears at Ammonius 153.13ff., with the example for (ii) of fire necessarily being hot as long as it is fire (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 103d; Aristotle, *Categories* 10 12b38). Cf. Theophrastus, frs. 100ABC FHS&G; Boethius 2IN 187.29–188.2, 239.6–7. Further elaborations of these classifications in Islamic philosophy are discussed by Rescher [1967](#); see also Sharples [1978b](#); Kretzmann [1998](#), 28; Sorabji [1998](#), 8–9 and n. 25.)

[14](#). Ammonius, *In De int.* (CAG IV) 131.2–4, 138.16–17, 139.14f.–15, 144.9–14 (Sorabji [2004](#) 5a8), 149.15–18 (Sorabji [2004](#) 5a10); Boethius, 1IN 106.30–107.16 (Sorabji [2004](#) 5a4), 2IN 191.5–10, 208.11–18 (Sorabji [2004](#) 5a3, quoted below), 215.21–6, 245.9–19, 246.12–15, 249.28–250.1. Chadwick [1981](#), 157–63; Kretzmann [1998](#); Sorabji [1998](#), 10.

[15](#). See [Sten Ebbesen’s](#) chapter in this volume.

[16](#). Cf. Mignucci [1989](#), 51 and [2001](#), 267–8; Seel [2001](#), 35–6 (‘the difference between Carneades and Ammonius and Boethius in this respect is not fundamental’); *contra*, Gaskin [1995](#), 155 n. 41. Sorabji [1998](#), 17 (cf. Sorabji [2004](#), 111) allows that (B) might be the view of Ammonius but not of Boethius, and notes that the divergence might be explained by Proclus’ having been an intermediary between Porphyry and Ammonius. (Seel [2001](#), 35 n. 60 (cf. Mignucci [2001](#), 247 and n. 305) misinterprets my 1978a as supporting (B): I specified there that in my view Ammonius and Boethius do *not* ‘admit the unqualified truth’ of future contingents.) At C v.4.19 Boethius seems to allow that what happens was previously going to happen, without inserting any qualification; but Gaskin [1995](#), 173 n. 90 points out that this is at a stage in the argument that is superseded by what follows (below, [n. 58](#)).

- [17.](#) E.g. 2IN 139.15–19, 245.9–12; Kretzmann [1998](#), 31–2.
- [18.](#) Cf. Gaskin [1995](#), 146–59.
- [19.](#) Mignucci [2001](#), 250–5 criticises Gaskin’s reading of Ammonius and Boethius for introducing a third truth-value either-true-or-false and thus reducing (C) to (A). Gaskin himself claims that (C) preserves the existence of only two truth-values ‘in an extended sense’ ([1995](#), 151); he concedes ([1995](#), 146) that (C) is not logically, only ‘rhetorically’, distinct from (A) (cf. Frede [1985](#), 42–3; *contra*, Mignucci [1989](#), 51), but insists that (C) is nevertheless closer to Aristotle’s intentions than (A) is. Kretzmann [1998](#), 44 argues that future contingents may retrospectively become true (or false) *for* a time even though they were not true *at* that time; *contra*, Gaskin [1995](#), 176–9.
- [20.](#) Mignucci [1989](#), 69 n. 47 notes that a good MS, E, has *incommutabiliter* (corrected by E²). But this is presumably just a copying error resulting from the preceding *indefinite*. See also 1IN 108.4–5 (the truth and falsity shared between the disjuncts is “without distinction and variable”, *indiscreta atque volubilis*); Kretzmann [1998](#), 47–48 n. 43.
- [21.](#) For this argument see Alexander, *On Fate* 10, 177.7–9 = Sorabji [2004](#) 5e6.
- [22.](#) Kretzmann [1998](#), 35.
- [23.](#) Moreover, *past* events and propositions are described as ‘stable’ at 2IN 189.5–7; ‘stable’ is presumably the opposite of ‘changeable’, and the point about past propositions is presumably not just that they *remain* definite.
- [24.](#) Considered and rejected by Kretzmann [1998](#), 32 and n. 44.
- [25.](#) On T6 as evidence for (C) rather than (A) or (B) see Gaskin [1995](#), 164–5 and n. 71.
- [26.](#) See White [1985](#), 48–9. However, the passages cited against (iii) by Kretzmann [1998](#), 48 n. 44 (1IN 115.30–1, 2IN 200.14–18) are more naturally read as simply saying that *at every time* one of the affirmation and the negation is (indefinitely) true, the other false, rather than that it is always the same one. Cf. also Mignucci [1989](#), 64.
- [27.](#) Notoriously, Hintikka [1973](#), 147–78 interpreted Aristotle’s own discussion in these terms (though with some doubts and considering (iii) above as an alternative; 173); against this, Gaskin [1995](#), 39 and 164. See Knuuttila [1993](#), 51–8; Evans [2004](#), 251–7.
- [28.](#) So Knuuttila [1993](#), 58. Cf. Ammonius, 155.2–8 and Boethius, 1IN 125. 12–14, on T6. Boethius at 1IN 126.18–21 compares the variable truth of the future-tense sentences to the way in which the things themselves are going to be ‘changeably and indefinitely’; cf. 125.5–7, with Mignucci [1989](#), 69; 2IN 247.7–10. At 2IN 193.5 things, and at 214.9 sentences, that admit of either alternative are described as ‘unstable’.

- [29.](#) See Mignucci [1989](#), 69–70 and [2001](#), 278; Gaskin [1995](#), 132–7; Seel [2001](#), 209.
- [30.](#) Divine foreknowledge is also mentioned at 2IN 203.1, but only to make the point that God foreknows what is already certain to nature (though there are problems with the example used: Kretzmann [1985](#), 40–1; Blank and Kretzmann [1998](#), 189 n. 32).
- [31.](#) *Ten Problems* 8.
- [32.](#) Alexander, *On Fate* 30, 201.13–18 (Sorabji [2004](#) 3a3) and Calcidius [1975](#) 195.4–7. See Sharples [1991](#), 27–8.
- [33.](#) Boethius in 2IN is interpreted as advocating (a) by Courcelle [1967](#), 213–14 and [1969](#), 309; Sharples [1991](#), 28; Gaskin [1995](#), 171–2 n. 877; Blank and Kretzmann [1998](#), 190 n. 50; (b) by Huber [1976](#), 18 n. 45 and Chadwick [1981](#), 159. In the *Consolation* (C v.3.25) the Prisoner dismisses (b) as like ‘that ridiculous prophecy of Tiresias, “Whatever I say either will happen or won’t.”’ (I follow Lerer [1985](#) in using ‘Boethius’ to refer to the author of the dialogue, ‘Philosophy’ and ‘the Prisoner’ to refer to the characters.)
- [34.](#) For (ii) see C v.3.18–28, C v.6.24.
- [35.](#) Gaskin [1995](#), 172–3 and n. 89. Mignucci [1989](#), 74–6, conversely, uses this to support his view that Boethius endorses a position closer to (B).
- [36.](#) Plotinus 3.3, 5.14–25 = Sorabji [2004](#) 4b1; Proclus, *On Providence* 10, 13–14 (Sorabji [2004](#) 4b5). See Sharples [1991](#), 29–31 and references there.
- [37.](#) Plotinus 3.1.9–10, cf. 3.2.10, 3.3.4; Proclus, *On Providence* 4; Calcidius [1975](#), 186; Augustine *City of God* 5.9. Cf. Boethius 2IN 231.12–232.10, contrasting humans with other animals in this respect; Chadwick [1981](#), 242.
- [38.](#) On the sources of the image see Sharples [1991](#), 205 and references there; particularly significant are Plotinus 6.8.18, 6.9.8–9.
- [39.](#) It also anticipates the contrast between the passage of time and God’s eternal present in C v.6, as Marenbon [2003a](#), 119 points out; see further below, the section on ‘The ingredients in Boethius’ solution’.
- [40.](#) On the contrast between internal and external factors see (in the context of Stoicism) Brennan [2001](#), 279–83; [2005](#), 288–96. Kretzmann [1985](#), 34 and n. 52 connects Boethius’ view of human autonomy with the modern theory of agent causation: significantly, both Alexander of Aphrodisias (*On Fate* 15) and, earlier, Carneades (as reported in Cicero, *On Fate* 25) adopt a similar view (Sharples [1991](#), 10 and references there; [2001](#), 556–9 and references in 558 n. 320).
- [41.](#) A frequent misinterpretation of the Stoic position too, for which Epictetus’ fondness for extreme cases (the prisoner bound hand and foot but free to resist

- the tyrant in his mind) is largely to blame. See Sharples [1986](#) and [2005](#); Brennan [2005](#), 315–20.
- [42.](#) See Bobzien [1998](#) and [2000](#).
- [43.](#) C IV.6.52, cf. C v.2.11, Plotinus 3.3.5; and so already the Stoic Cleanthes, *SVF* 1.537 = LS 54I.
- [44.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#), 126–7.
- [45.](#) Emphasised by Huber [1976](#), 44–58; see also Courcelle [1967](#), 221; Dronke [1969](#), 126; Scheible [1972](#), 176–7 n. 3.
- [46.](#) Iamblichus cited by Ammonius *In De int.* 135.14–137.1 (Sorabji [2004](#) 3a10), cf. Stephanus *In De Int.* 35.19–33. Huber [1976](#), 40ff.
- [47.](#) Cf. Marenbon [2003a](#), 130–5, where it is referred to as the Modes of Cognition Principle.
- [48.](#) Cf. for example Proclus, *Elements of Theology* 124, *In Ti.* 1.352.11–16 (Sorabji [2004](#) 3a11), *In Parm.* 957.14ff., Ammonius 136.1–21 (Sorabji [2004](#) 3a15).
- [49.](#) Proclus, *On Providence* 63 (Sorabji [2004](#) 3a16) and *Ten Problems* 8; cf. Alexander, *On Fate* 30 = Sorabji [2004](#) 3a2–3, and Hager [1975](#); Sorabji [1980](#), 123–5 and [2004](#), 69–78; Sharples [1991](#), 25–8 and [2001](#), 574–5; Gaskin [1995](#), 351–67.
- [50.](#) Reiss [1982](#), 136.
- [51.](#) Ammonius’ account is closer to the standard Neoplatonist hierarchy, for while Boethius places Intellect at the top of his scale in C v.5, Ammonius notes (135.28–32, cf. Stephanus, *In De Int.* 35.26–9) that Intellect knows even higher things only as an inferior.
- [52.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#), 134, contrasting Proclus, *On Providence* 65, *Ten Problems* and *In Parm.* locc. citt., and Ammonius 137.1–11.
- [53.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#), 136–8, cf. [2003b](#), 543–4 and [2005](#), 48–53.
- [54.](#) Cf. Sorabji [1983](#), 253–67. On eternity see Stump and Kretzmann [1981](#).
- [55.](#) Ammonius 136.1–25 = Sorabji [2004](#) 3a15. Ammonius cites the *Timaeus* and also the *Parmenides* (140e–141e, which does seem to place the *One* outside time altogether; Blank and Kretzmann [1998](#), 123 n. 31). Proclus, *On the Timaeus* 3, 42.23–33 Diehl, argues that the present tense ‘is’ has a double sense, and that the sense that applies to the intelligible is that which is not contrasted with the past and the future.
- [56.](#) Augustine, *City of God* 11.21 = Sorabji [2004](#) 3a13, *Ad Simplicianum* 2.2.2 = 3a12.
- [57.](#) Cf., of future *truth* (rather than knowledge), Ammonius 149.22–34.
- [58.](#) Gaskin [1995](#), 173 n. 90; Weidemann [1998](#), 201.

- [59.](#) Aquinas, *De veritate* q.2 art.12 arg.7; *Summa theologiae* 1 q.13, 2 art.14; *Commentarium in Sententias Petri Lombardi* I dist. 38 qu.1 art.5 arg.4. Kenny [1969](#); Wippel [1985](#), 218; Marenbon [2005](#), 140. Sorabji [1983](#), 255 outlines the argument and the solution, but recognises that this is not the way in which Boethius himself presents the issue. Cf. Sorabji [1980](#), 125.
- [60.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#), 141; [2003b](#), 533; [2005](#), 15–18. Evans [2004](#), 265–6.
- [61.](#) This argument is in fact a version of Diodorus Cronus’ Master Argument, with the link between knowledge and the truth of what is known playing the role that was taken in Diodorus’ original version by the assumption that all statements about the future are already either true or false, and in some other similar arguments by the thesis of causal determinism. Cf. Hintikka [1973](#), 201–5; White [1985](#), 79–90.
- [62.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#), 207 n. 31; [2003b](#), 538.
- [63.](#) The present is sometimes coupled with the necessary past and contrasted with the future (Aristotle, *Peri hermeneias*. 9, 18a28), but sometimes not (Aristotle, *De caelo* 1.12, 283b13). Cf. Hintikka [1973](#), 183.
- [64.](#) That accessibility is the issue is signalled at C v.4.21–22, immediately followed by the statement of the Iamblichus Principle at C v.4.24ff. Cf. also C v.5.8–9. Knuuttila [1993](#), 60; Marenbon [2003a](#), 129–30; [2003b](#), 540; [2005](#), 27.
- [65.](#) Marenbon [2005](#), 34–6 shows that IP is needed as well as EP and ACN; the argument is not just that present knowledge does not render what is known necessary in itself and that what is future to us is present to God.
- [66.](#) Cf. Marenbon [2003a](#), 139–41; [2005](#), 27 and 40.
- [67.](#) As noted by Evans [2004](#), 263 in connection with the example of the charioteers at C v.4.15. Or, putting it the other way round, with Marenbon [2003a](#), 142, ACN shows that there is nothing strange in an event’s being conditionally necessary but not absolutely necessary; it remains to show that the necessity involved in divine foreknowledge can be of the former type but not also of the latter.
- [68.](#) This is the image developed by Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* 1 q.14 art.13 ad 3), who presents God watching us proceed along a road when *we* can only see those who have gone before us and not those who will come after us. (But the image is not perfect: to comprehend past, present and future all at once God would have to see me not as I proceed along the road, but simultaneously *both* before I come to a fork in the road *and* after I have taken one route or the other. See Sharples [1991](#), 229.)
- [69.](#) Cf. Sorabji [1980](#), 125.
- [70.](#) Ammonius has indeed, at 136.30–137.1, the statement that what is contingent in its own nature is definite in God’s knowledge. But this is not expressed as a

contrast between two ways of being *necessary*.

[71.](#) Marenbon [2003b](#).

[72.](#) Marenbon [2003a](#), 143–5; cf. Gegenschatz [1958](#), 128–9, and Marenbon [2003b](#), 545–6.

[73.](#) Cf. Gegenschatz [1958](#), 128.

10 Interpreting the *Consolation*¹

Danuta Shanzer

This chapter concerns itself primarily with the literary interpretation of the *Consolation*. This will involve taking account of generic markers, sources, allusions, and narrative patterns and structures to read the *Consolation* accurately and meaningfully. There will be some coverage of different types of critical approaches applied to it, especially those of more recent critics. The chapter will conclude with some discussion of a matter that is not strictly speaking literary, namely the Christianity of the *Consolation*. For one can indeed think of texts, in addition to authors, as having religious affiliations, and much of the evidence used to determine such affiliations requires philological detective work.

The *Consolation*, an undisputed masterpiece of Latin literature, was widely read and imitated and exerted a powerful literary influence during the Middle Ages and beyond. The very fact can be distorting, for most educated readers, willy nilly, are aware of its later *fortuna*, and can experience difficulties in taking off the multiple colored lenses of reception to recover the work in its original historical and literary context. It is still, astonishingly, alive, as a touchstone for the eccentric, appalling (but also appealing) Ignatius Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*.² The *Consolation* stands at the end of many ancient traditions that it consciously invokes and evokes and is a work of considerable literary innovation in its own right. Boethius wrote the *Consolation* as a last work,³ and it is tempting to see him shoring fragments up, not just against his own ruin, but against that of the *Romanitas* he so prized, and whose last, most glorious representative he arguably was. All these features conspire to create a dense and often cryptic text. While the *Consolation* can be understood at a flat narrative level by the reader lacking a rich classical education, and the philosophical argumentation can be absorbed whole, much would be lost in translation.

Intertextuality and the poet: *Qui aures audiendi habet, audiat!*

A rich and resonant intertextuality informs the work from the very first words and signals volumes to the literate reader.⁴ The opening lines, *Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi, eheu, nunc maestos cogor inire modos* (“I who once completed verses with flourishing eagerness am now forced to enter sad measures”), contain an encapsulated poetic and Vergilian biography, mixing an allusion to the interpolated proem to the *Aeneid*:

Ille ego **qui quondam** gracili modulatus avena

carmen, et egressus silvis vicina coegi
ut quamvis avido parerent arva colono,
gratum opus agricolis: at nunc horrentia Martis . . .
arma virumque cano

I am he **who once**, having played song on the slender reed,
and, leaving the woods, forced the fields to obey the farmer,
however greedy he might be, work pleasing to farmers: but now
the bristling arms of Mars I sing and the man . . .

with the authentic Vergilian sphragis to the *Georgics*:

Illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat
Parthenope **studiis florentem** ignobilis oti,
carmina qui lusi pastorum audaxque iuventa,
Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi [cf. *Buc.* 1.1].

At that time sweet Naples nourished me, Vergil,
flourishing in the **eager pursuits** of inglorious leisure,
I **who** played the **songs** of shepherds and bold in my youth,
sang you, Tityrus, under the cover of the spreading beech.

Vergil harkened back nostalgically to his earlier bucolic verse, resuming the first line of the first *Bucolic* in haunting echo.⁵ His move would be forwards and upwards, namely to the higher genre, epic. Boethius' imprisonment marked a key change from major to minor. Not the demoting Ovidian bump from hexameters to the elegiacs of love, but those of exile and sorrow.⁶ External evidence fleshes out the image of Boethius-*poeta* when he was a younger and happier man. His lost bucolic verse is attested by the *Anecdoton Holderi*.⁷ *Condidit et carmen bucolicum* ("He also composed a bucolic poem").⁸ For his life in elegy, we need go no further than his ambiguous role as pander in Maximianus, *Elegia* 3.⁹ So Boethius self-consciously alludes to his own past career as a secular Latin poet. And, if we read the poems of the *Consolation* in their literary historical context, we see many signs of the later Roman epigrammatist in, for example, the shorter poems of C 3.¹⁰

Dialogue and the philosopher

Previous efforts

Boethius has a better-documented record in the field of Latin philosophy and the *artes*.

He knew how to translate,¹¹ how to adapt,¹² and how to evoke the world of the philosophical dialogue. Unlike the handbooks on the *disciplinae*, the commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge* features an introduction and scene-setting that are comparable to those used by Augustine in his Cassiciacum dialogues. In this case it is time-hallowed winter nights and the Aurelian mountains.¹³ Boethius used a fictitious interlocutor, Fabius.¹⁴ Unlike his Latin predecessors, Cicero and Augustine, Boethius may not have had a suitable living conversational partner for even such a fictitious dialogue; Fabius is no more than a template for inculcation.¹⁵ The external markers of dialogue are clear.

Classical sources

A closer inspection of the *Consolation* allows us to see which dialogues are most important for its generic parentage. Aristotle's *Protrepticus* and Cicero's *Hortensius* are early ancestors; neither survives, but both can be (in part) reconstructed from surviving fragments in multiple authors and from generic imitators, such as Iamblichus.¹⁶ Plato is, of course, crucial, be it for the last days of the righteous philosopher in prison, awaiting death (*Crito* and *Phaedo*), the flight of the soul (*Phaedrus*), the Cave (*Republic*),¹⁷ the philosophy of punishment (*Gorgias*), or for cosmogony (*Timaeus*).¹⁸ The *Consolation*'s title evokes the *logos paramythetikos* or consolation, not in this case for the death of a friend or relative, but for literal and metaphorical exile.¹⁹ Philosophy's consolation addresses the condition of a righteous man in a world where evil happens. In the scenes with Fortune in Book 2 we see a far loftier version of the sort of street-smart snappy answer to fortune's ills that are preserved in the Pseudo-Senecan *De remediis fortuitorum*.²⁰ And we need to acknowledge at various key rhetorical moments the influences of monologic forensic *apologiae* too.²¹ But there is more to the prose *Consolation* than that.

Talking personifications

The *Consolation* differs from its classical literary models in that one of the interlocutors in this sublime conversation is not a human being.²² The status of Philosophy poses important questions. Not divine, not strictly human,²³ presented as an external epiphany in all her strange glory,²⁴ she is a living personification, a type of figure taken for granted in serious didactic medieval literature, but not in classical. By framing the work as a dialogue between a supernatural entity and a human being, Boethius borrowed from the tradition of religious revelation discourse.²⁵ Trappings, such as the epiphany and the different natures of the interlocutors, point to revelation, but the prose content is no different from that of any philosophical dialogue, and the human interlocutor shows much more independence than, say, the interlocutors of the *Hermetica*. The *Consolation*

emerges as a fusion of the Platonic dialogue²⁶ and the revelation discourse.²⁷ The human interlocutor, however, is firmly anchored in historical place and time, and the knowledge gained is rational, not the stuff of revelation.

To understand what Boethius meant by conversing with Philosophy herself, we must examine the reception of personifications in late antiquity. After his conversion Augustine experienced growing anxieties about figures like Philosophy, because they seemed to be pagan holdovers.²⁸ And while no hard connection can be proven,²⁹ one may be permitted to ask oneself whether Augustine's decision to hold a soliloquy with a Ratio who is not unambiguously an exterior voice, and may well be his own *ratio*, had some influence on Boethius' Philosophy.³⁰ After all, although she stands for all that is right in the philosophical tradition, she cannot logically express more than the sum of philosophical knowledge in Boethius' own head. After Martianus Capella and Boethius the fate of such personified learned ladies was secure – they were there to stay and became domesticated goddesses in the Middle Ages.³¹

And what a Protean creation Boethius' Philosophy was!³² This authoritative figure emerges very much in the round. Her characterization modulates from that of Athena-like divine epiphany (C 1.1.3), ancestor *imago* (C 1.1.3), impatient or jealous mistress³³ or *arbitrix morum* (C 1.1), Thetis, kind mother and goddess (C 1.4.1), doctor (annoyingly discussing her patient in the third person in his presence at C 2.2.5–6), former nurse (C 1.3.1), impersonator of Fortune (C 2.2.1) teacher, stand-in for the *philosophus*,³⁴ totality of philosophy (C 1.1.1) and state of the subject in historical time (C 1.15 and C 1.3.6–7). This goes far beyond Synesius on Hypatia: mistress, mother, sister, teacher, but Synesius provides a model for a possible relationship of a male student with a brilliant woman philosopher.³⁵

We are not forced to regard her epiphanic appearance as anticlimactic on the grounds that in the final analysis she has no supernatural powers to help Boethius.³⁶ Elements of divine epiphanies had long since migrated to the *adventus* of allegorical personages in the Later Roman Empire.³⁷ In addition, the options open to the author were limited. Since he chose to converse with a personification, which had to enter a prison secretly, the author had few choices: dream, vision, or epiphany. Epiphany, given that a lengthy dialogue needed to take place, seems the best choice. Philosophizing in a dream or vision would have required embedding and framing-closure with the inevitable worries about *mise en abyme*. Boethius, unlike Augustine and Sidonius, had no qualms about taking over an unabashedly pagan form of encounter without bothering to Christianize it.³⁸

Some functions of verse in the *Consolation*

Thus the *Consolation* springs from familiar modes of the Greco-Latin prose dialogic tradition. But it also comprises many types of verse that have an important role to play

throughout the work.³⁹ we have seen above what Boethius can pack into his first two verses. The prosimetrical interplay provides varied punctuation and structural separation through polymetry, and significant polymetry,⁴⁰ as well as variety of texture. At the opening of the work we find the Muses consoling Boethius. After they are packed off by Philosophy, she is free to accommodate their meters to her muses.⁴¹ And most of the *metra* are sung by her.⁴² They provide intellectual reinforcement and illustration, rest and refreshment,⁴³ a way of visualizing the natural world beyond the cell,⁴⁴ revelations of material inaccessible to reason alone, and different generic voices for Boethius and Philosophy. It has been recognized that there is considerable rhyme and reason in the assignment and placement of the different *metra*.⁴⁵ The highly schematic form of *prosimetrum* employed by Boethius is unparalleled in extant Latin literature. It most probably represents a formal innovation of his own, and invites the reader (dangerously, as we shall see) to consider the work as a perfectly wrought urn, with an elegant cyclical structure of alternating verse and prose, pivoting around the great *metrum* in the only meter that is not used at least twice: 3.M.9 in hymnic hexameters.⁴⁶

Prosimetry and *Menippea*

The prosimetrical form of the *Consolation* raises questions that affect the work's interpretation, for prosimetry is a formal characteristic of the ancient *satura Menippea*, a corpus that includes texts such as Varro's fragmentary *Menippeae*, Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, some of the works of Lucian, and Julian's *Caesares*. All these *Menippeae* have unquestionable comic, ironic, and satirical overtones appropriate for a genre that was *spoudogeloion* ("jesting in earnest"). The nub of the difficulty concerns four of the later texts, Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, Ennodius' *Epistle to Ambrosius and Beatus*, Fulgentius' *Mythologiae*, and Boethius' *Consolation*. Are these also standard satirical *Menippeae*, or do they belong to a special educational prosimetrical subgenre?⁴⁷ After all, there had been a few epistolary works that exhibited prosimetry without being *saturae*.⁴⁸ This begins as an argument about generic taxonomy.⁴⁹ (One could think about it as like trying to decide at what point a dinosaur became a bird, and stopped thinking "dinosaur" as species and started thinking "bird.") But, as we shall see, it also has hermeneutic implications.

Cases have been made that both the *De Nuptiis* and the *Mythologiae* show strong generic ties to the *Menippea*, and Boethius clearly worked from the *De Nuptiis*.⁵⁰ In addition to formal prosimetry many thematic motifs are shared between these works and the *Consolation*.⁵¹ But while the *De Nuptiis* and the *Mythologiae* clearly have intentionally humorous elements that link them more closely to earlier *Menippeae*, the *Consolation* does not. Thus modern critics are divided on the significance of the Menippean form of the *Consolation*. For a long time it was simply noted and left at

that.⁵² Nineteenth-century critics such as Hirzel (and their followers) saw actual generic evolution at work: the *Menippea* began to be used for instructional rather than satirical purposes, viz. it took on a more serious face.⁵³

Genres “on the ground”

To understand the hermeneutic relationship between genre and text one needs to consider genre itself and its observed behaviors.⁵⁴ A genre is a literary form with freight. No genre was a genre at the time its first exemplar was written. Genre is created by sequences of authors doing the same thing as well as doing it with a difference,⁵⁵ where the difference evoked the original work (or even just its genre). Generic markers create expectations. Genres comprise formal elements (verse vs. prose, various specific meters) as well as content, attitude, function, and themes,⁵⁶ and even far more specific tropes (e.g. the *recusatio*) and *topoi* (the time-description). Some *topoi* can inhabit more than one genre; others would be out of place. Genres can be declared explicitly by the author or left up to the reader to discern.⁵⁷ Some genres can be inserted into others (e.g. a hymn in an epic). While it would be a fine thing to have a comprehensive family tree of all genres and types of writing,⁵⁸ the project is impractical because there is such abundant cross-fertilization, and usually the moment at which a genre was born is unknown.⁵⁹ Above all genres evolve and cross or re-combine. Often we cannot be sure whether an author is writing with some sort of Platonic form of a genre in his mind or whether he is bouncing off a specific text, in part or in whole.⁶⁰ For this reason it can be fallacious to assume that any text that shows generic affiliations to a given genre must be interpreted according to the generic criteria of the collectivity of its predecessors.⁶¹ To take a crude example: an epic is heroic; a mock epic is parodic and parasitic, inverting what it imitates, but incomprehensible without some knowledge of epic and the specific texts parodied. Thus, although there are close generic links, it would be simply silly to apply the same critical standards to both sorts of text. We would be in equivalent trouble if we insisted that the authors of novels, such as Petronius or Apuleius, and the authors of novelistic *hagiographica*, such as the *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, had identical views of the ontological status of their subject matter.

The deconstructive Menippea

Joel Relihan, a recent quasi-deconstructionist⁶² interpreter of the *Consolation*, however, has tried to use evidence from Menippean predecessors and congeners to discern a satirical tone and message in the work. Everyone to date has “missed the joke.”⁶³ The prisoner, we are told, never gets wings to fly out of prison – so Philosophy fails.⁶⁴

Whatever happened to metaphorical interpretation? If Philosophy's arguments are not perfect, the author must be signaling something to us. What is the author signaling? Recourse to Christian faith, *a via media*, we are told.⁶⁵ Yet faith is never mentioned in the *Consolation*. We must also remember that no philosophical text can know more than its author does.⁶⁶ Who *has* solved the problems raised by Boethius?⁶⁷ Philosophy promises *acriora remedia*, which must be "surely Socrates' cup of hemlock," so when the prisoner does not die within the narrative, we have yet another failure of Philosophy's.⁶⁸ Boethius was not as fortunate as the martyr Perpetua, who found someone to publish her diary with an account of her execution!⁶⁹ And why cannot we see the immediate *acriora remedia* in the tight arguments of Philosophy in C 3?⁷⁰ Likewise to assert that Books 4 and 5 are digressions, away from Philosophy's original intent, is simply not true.⁷¹ They clearly respond to the theodicy question posed at C 1.4.29–30.

This approach reminds the present author of a Cornish innkeeper who cornered her many years ago with his crypto-Gnostic view of the universe. Didn't she know that the evidence that we are *all* asleep is to be found in *Genesis*, for God cast a deep sleep upon Adam, *but Adam never woke up*?⁷² The exegetic fallacy here is overinterpretation that demands a level of consistency of a text that is inappropriate or inapplicable.⁷³ We all constantly take innumerable shortcuts in conversation and writing that rely on the "need to know" principle. "Someone told me." If your interlocutor doesn't need to know *how* they told you (telephone, face-to-face, email, letter, fax, carrier pigeon), then there is no need to specify and no license to "problematize" the statement and thereby create an untrustworthy narrator. The narrative economy does not require the specification, so it simply doesn't matter. Relihan has fallen prey to a kindred fallacy in the demands he puts upon the *Consolation*. Recourse to argumentation such as his indeed seems "a desperate compulsion of evidence to fit a theory."⁷⁴

Metadialogic modernism

Another modern trend is an interest in examining the *Consolation* not for its primary content, but for its setting, mechanics of dialogue, and metadialogic markers,⁷⁵ an approach that bears some similarity to postmodern architecture with exposed pipes and struts. Thus the *Consolation* is read as being "about" itself and its own dialogic process. This is the approach of Seth Lerer in his *Boethius and Dialogue*. The very title poses an ambiguity: is this a book about Boethius or one about dialogue?⁷⁶ This approach breathes the critical Zeitgeist of the seventies and eighties, when Alexandrian self-consciousness about the act of writing and its reception at Rome fueled an industry of studies on *recusatio*, poetics, metaphors for poetic production and activity, poetic apologia, and encounters between poet and predecessor or poet and Muse. Poems were about poetry.

Texts were self-referential or self-reflexive. And similar things could be done with Boethius. “The speakers come to talk more and more about the structure of the dialogue itself. Their discussions become self-reflexive, in that it is fundamentally concerned with elucidating its own method. It also becomes self-referring, in that key terms presume the reader’s familiarity with their use elsewhere in Boethius’ writings.”⁷⁷ There is however an important and neglected difference. Philosophical texts were written in dialogue form in part for pedagogic reasons, so that the recreation of an authoritative dialogue could work on the mind of the external reader, who reacts sympathetically in parallel with the internal participants. Explicit outlining of the progress and procedures thus has a very practical and mundane function for the reader. One must beware of overpathologizing it.

More traditional literary approaches

Despite such aberrations, excesses, and monomanias, literary scholarship over the years has taught us much about how to interpret the *Consolation*. Take the matter of close attention to the crucial distinction between author and persona.⁷⁸ Not many years ago a scholar as sensitive as C. J. De Vogel could be fully aware of the possibility of distinctions in characterization between Boethius-prisoner and Philosophy,⁷⁹ but could miss the possibility of nuance in the evolving characterization of Boethius-prisoner, through whom the narrative is focalized. She therefore concluded that there was a significant popular pagan element in Boethius’ thinking, the subjection of the world to Tyche, without considering the possibility that Boethius-*auctor* may have characterized his distressed alter-ego, the prisoner, as having succumbed to such denial of divine Providence – without believing it himself qua author.⁸⁰

Close reading can reveal new problems and possibilities. Take C 1.4.26: *de compositis falso litteris, quibus libertatem arguor sperasse Romanam*. Were these hostile forgeries purporting to be Boethian autographs? Or were they false allegations about Boethius’ treason? A close look at C 1.4.26 suggests that, according to Boethius, the *delatores* were, or should have been, tortured. We might be astonished to see this anti-humanitarian attitude in someone who himself would die under torture.⁸¹ Close and watchful reading must continue, for there are still passages that remain obscure.⁸²

Space remaining for source criticism

There has been a great deal of extremely valuable source criticism on the *Consolation*.⁸³ Virtually no word in the work lacks genetic commentary. But this approach still has surprises to offer. I’d like briefly to discuss one example that provides an interesting glimpse through a glass darkly at a lost work that must have been related to the *Consolation*.

Philosophy's hymn, C 3.M.9, and its Timaeian content have long attracted attention. C 3.M.9 falls within a tradition of hexametrical philosophical hymnography that goes back on the Greek side to Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* and on the Latin side to Valerius Soranus. Latin congeners of Boethius' *metrum* include hymns by Ausonius, Tiberianus, and Martianus. It is the hymn by Tiberianus, however, as we shall see, that is suggestive.

The introduction to the hymn, C 3.9.32 *ut in Timaeo Platoni nostro placet* ("as it pleased our Plato in the *Timaeus*"), deliberately points the reader to the *Timaeus* 27c 2–d1, where the necessity of prayer before minor, let alone major, enterprises is stated by Timaeus.⁸⁴ Philosophy then invokes the *pater*, but uses an aretology that reprises important elements from the cosmogony of the *Timaeus*.

Over sixty years ago an important posthumous article by Hans Lewy on the Tiberianus Hymn (Tiberianus, *Carmen* 4) was published.⁸⁵ In it he suggested that the poem's heading, *Versus Platonis a quodam Tiberiano de Greco in Latinum translati* ("Verses of Plato translated from Greek into Latin by a certain Tiberianus"), should be taken seriously, and that Tiberianus did translate it from Greek into Latin. Lewy pointed out the fact that this poem is not just any hymn, but specifically the hymn that Plato might have used for Timaeus' prayer in the *Timaeus*. The questions at the end of the poem make this clear.⁸⁶

Quem (precor, adspires), qua sit ratione creatus,
quo genitus factusve modo, da nosse volenti.
Da, pater, augustas ut possim noscere causas,
mundanas olim moles quo foedere rerum
sustuleris animamque levem quo maximus olim
texueris numero, quo congrege dissimilique
quidquid id est vegetum, per concita corpora vivit.⁸⁷

To know it [*sc.* the universe], why it was created (I pray you grant inspiration)
how born or made, grant to one desirous.
Grant, father, that I may be able to know the lofty [first] causes
by what bond of the elements you once hung the massy universe,
by what proportion (number) you, greatest, wove the delicate [world-]soul, by
what
[number], same or other, whatever it is that is alive lives
through bodies set in rapid motion.⁸⁸

Lewy then tried to figure out where this poem might first have been published. He thought it Middle Platonic in content, and suggested that it was written at the end of the second century, and translated by Tiberianus to be put in the mouth of Plato in the same work in which Socrates may have spoken about gold.⁸⁹ He also suggested that the poem may have appeared in Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*.⁹⁰ It is not clear which

solution he finally settled for, presumably because the piece was published from his *Nachlass* without the authorial *summa manus*.

If one looks at the Tiberianus Timaeon hymn, described as *versus Platonis*, praying for a revelation of what will be (in part) the content of the *Timaeus* side-by-side with its Boethian parallel, a hymn of Timaeon content sung by Philosophy, it is clear that the parallels cannot be coincidental.⁹¹ The Boethian hymn, it seems, clinches Lewy's case for ascribing the Tiberianus poem to a work (whether his own or in a Greek source) involving Plato (or Timaeus), a prayer, and the *Timaeus*.⁹² We are thereby licensed to read C 3.M.9 within the context of late antique discussions of philosophic prayer, for it shows us not just the or a philosopher (Plato?) praying to the creator for understanding, but Philosophy herself. This discussion was linked to a specific exegetic moment anchored in *Timaeus* 27c. Proclus' *In Timaeum* (ad loc.) clearly shows us that Porphyry had discussed prayer, probably in his own lost commentary on the *Timaeus*.⁹³ The coincidence between Tiberianus and Boethius is the visible sign of a submerged textual iceberg that might have helped us read C 3.M.9 in a more sophisticated fashion,⁹⁴ and would have helped us understand more about the history of the quasi-submerged Latin late Platonic tradition.⁹⁵

Analyst criticism

Analyst criticism has raised important questions about whether the *Consolation* is a complete work. And, dismayingly, the arguments involved pro and con can often cut both ways. An experienced critic can, like Carneades, argue *in utramque partem* with equal conviction. For example, at C 4.4.22 the prisoner asks Philosophy whether there are no punishments for souls after death. She answers that there are indeed tortures, both punitive and purgatorial, but that "it is not her plan to talk about these now." Tränkle suggested that the work could well have been intended to end with a Platonic myth.⁹⁶ And yet Courcelle has explained this *renvoi* to a later treatment by maladroit plagiarism of a Greek Neoplatonic commentary on the *Gorgias*.⁹⁷ A third alternative is that Philosophy was simply cutting Boethius off altogether: "now" meaning "now," not "now as opposed to later." Tränkle also pointed to other curious features such as the lack of explicit response to the question, "Quid ipse sis,"⁹⁸ the dangling *alia quaedam* at C 5.1.1, the way in which the use of dialogue diminishes in Books 4 and 5, and the lack of a final *metrum*.⁹⁹

There is no denying these features, but different responses are possible. One might argue, to take one case, that there is in fact an implicit answer to the question of what Boethius-man is at C 4.3.10, namely divine by participation¹⁰⁰ or alternatively that the question hinted at the immortality of the human soul, a point made explicit in various places.¹⁰¹ One can argue that increasing haste as the author's execution approached

affected the composition.¹⁰² One could agree that the work is indeed unfinished and speculate about how it might have ended. One could argue that what appear to be imperfections cannot be used to prove that the work was unfinished, because they could easily be examples of the author “nodding.”¹⁰³

Primary audience

One could profitably add other questions. For example, to what extent is the consolation of the *Consolation* customized for the prisoner-auctor? At the beginning, particularly in C 1.4, Boethius wallows defensively in the specifics of his own case. After this point at various times Philosophy directly adverts to his own position and situation.¹⁰⁴ In other cases it is harder to tell. Is the criticism of the *longus ordo famulorum* (C 2.5.18) a pet weakness of Boethius’ or simply something appropriate for the sort of Roman aristocratic audience he imagines? The constructed image of false happiness in C 3.9 is still clearly a secular Roman aristocrat’s. Interesting likewise is the omission of *voluptas* from C 2 and its introduction at C 3.1.7 *voluptate diffluere* and C 3.1.10, with a full development at C 3.7 and 3.M.7. Does Boethius feel he must introduce it here as an afterthought because the topic of C 3 is the *summum bonum*, and *voluptas* was thought to be Epicurus’?¹⁰⁵ Or should we perhaps see it as a belated concession to bad behavior that he himself may have displayed?¹⁰⁶ Is there a not-so-subtle reproof in C 4.7.22 that all bad fortune tests, corrects, or punishes?

Christianity

I will conclude with some thoughts about the Christianity of the *Consolation*. Critics of the *Consolation* have historically been starkly divided on this question. The debate started in the tenth century with Bovo of Corvey.¹⁰⁷ A major landmark was Usener’s publication of the *Anecdota Holderi* in 1877, for it proved beyond a doubt that Boethius was the author of the *Opuscula sacra*.¹⁰⁸ Christians wanted Boethius to be Christian.¹⁰⁹ But the controversy has continued and been refined with some such as Momigliano arguing for apostasy; Chadwick saying, “The *Consolation* is a work written by a Platonist who is also a Christian, but it is not a Christian work”;¹¹⁰ Galonnier, apparently, seeing some sort of token Christian;¹¹¹ and now Relihan arguing recently that the *Consolation* is “about humble access to God through prayer, not revelation.”¹¹² The present author takes her starting point from the sociolinguistic and philological work of Mohrmann¹¹³ and De Vogel¹¹⁴ to get a sense not of whether or not Boethius was a Christian (for he clearly was), but of *what sort of a Christian he was*. But to work out what Boethius is, we must observe what he *does*.

One might profitably start with examining Boethius' relationship to the Bible and to the Christian *Sondersprache*. To do so one needs a somewhat scientific way of categorizing his alleged citations.¹¹⁵ The following has proved a helpful taxonomy:

- Explicitly flagged with intent to enable identification of precise quotation and original context (= citation);
- Not flagged or discreetly flagged, but nonetheless precise: "Peek-a-boo." Under this heading should go deliberate examples of contrast imitation that produce a *Verfremdungseffekt*;
- Vaguer with intent to provide recognizable coloration or flavor, but not necessarily invoke a precise passage;
- Allusion with careful rewording or disguise (neutralization);
- "Bleed through" "seepage," or *lapsus*, where the author is not aware that a cat has poked its nose out of a bag.¹¹⁶

What we find, if we do this responsibly, is that he neutralizes,¹¹⁷ either "repossesses" or is unaware,¹¹⁸ avoids explicitly Christian language, such as *creator* (but *creatus* "bleeds through"),¹¹⁹ uses Christian sources,¹²⁰ and deliberately plays with what Jacques Fontaine calls "double transparence."¹²¹ The moments at which he adverts to various important theological topics (martyrdom and asceticism,¹²² supplicatory prayer, hell and purgatory, and creation) exhibit *at best* syncretistic paraphrase. It is far from clear that the hints of Christian terminology and thought are allocated primarily to Boethius and surface only in Philosophy's words as "bleed through."¹²³ There is only one example of a clear biblical signal transmitted and received, and that is the quotation from Wis 8:1 *adtingit enim a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter*.¹²⁴ I have argued elsewhere that Boethius' pleased reaction is not to the Christian or biblical language, but to the fact that Philosophy refers specifically to the OT book of Wisdom, a text in which he would have found many congenial thoughts and scenarios.¹²⁵ He has few plausible echoes of the NT. There is no hint in the *Consolation* of Christ, or of the incarnation, both acid tests for a Christian.¹²⁶ The doctrine of the preexistence and descent of the soul hinted at in C 3. M.9.18–21 and C 5.2.8 would have been unacceptable to orthodox Bible-centered Christians.¹²⁷ There is only one brief allusion to divine grace.¹²⁸ Instead the *Consolation* mostly emphasizes self-help, making the ascent on one's own. A passage such as C 4.4.28: *nihil opus est iudice praemium deferente. Tu te ipse excellentioribus addidisti*, might suggest that the author did not believe in *post mortem* judgment, but at C 5.6.48 Philosophy mentions the need for probity when pleading one's case before the judge who sees all.¹²⁹ There are several passages that allude to the problem of prayer, and their use of the words *humilis* and *humilitas* and *commercium* betrays a Christian sensibility.¹³⁰ It needs to be emphasized, however, that prayer was not a Christian monopoly, and pagan philosophers regularly discussed it.¹³¹

As expected, the evidence is mixed, but the overall picture that emerges is of suppression of religious specifics.

The Christianity of the *Consolation* is of a curious, non-NT based, sapiential¹³² and philosophic, sort, with its strongest parallels in the syncretism of a much earlier period, namely Hellenistic Judaism. We need to have a more nuanced view of spectrums of belief and practice that leave a place for people such as Boethius. They cannot simply be pigeon-holed under monolithic labels, such as “Christian” or “pagan.” Synesius *Epistula* 105, written to his brother shortly before he became a bishop, is instructive, for in it he details his religious exclusions, what he is prepared to do and believe, and what not.¹³³ Topics covered include celibacy, the preexistence of souls, the destruction of the world, and popular views about the Resurrection.¹³⁴ We need to think about Boethius in a similar fashion.

Boethius was a highly educated denizen of the late antique world, not just a serious philosopher who read a great deal of Latin poetry. His opening scene, if read with the eye of the body, shows us a famous funerary image: the *homme cultivé* surrounded by the Muses.¹³⁵ His Philosophy’s pi and theta owe something to the *gammadia* on later Roman garments.¹³⁶ While Boethius did not inhabit Gregory of Tours’ theological *rus* of exorcisms and healings, demons, and visions, nonetheless *maleficium* was still a useful political charge in his circles.¹³⁷ This is hardly surprising, for his world was peopled by a more complex set of entities than ours is today. One could depict oneself conversing with an incarnated female personification of human reason,¹³⁸ who herself acknowledged the existence of one even higher than herself, who spoke in hexameters.¹³⁹ One could imagine a holy man who was completely exempt from physical ailments.¹⁴⁰ The world of the *Consolation* included a *summum bonum*, God, and also a personified Wisdom,¹⁴¹ but no Christ.

Reading silences is always tricky, but the *Consolation* is the product of a writer who works hard not to send signals to fellow Christians, not merely by not sending them, but also by muting and damping them whenever he can. Why? In Ostrogothic Italy there was no reason for a Christian to be coy about his Christianity, although there is evidence that high functionaries would wisely function on a vague common level by merely talking about *divinitas*, perhaps to avoid Christological divisions.¹⁴² That alleged stylistic or generic proprieties forced the average Christian author to construct a firewall is unlikely. If the *Consolation* is complete, and if Boethius had wanted to suggest that faith in a Christian divinity and theology was man’s only ultimate recourse, he could and would have signaled that fact clearly and could have done so without employing aversive pious or priestly terminology.

It has been suggested that Boethius’ Christianity in the *Consolation* is similar to that of Augustine at Cassiciacum – with the clear implication that it is therefore non-problematic and hence “acceptable.”¹⁴³ This seems to me to be a flawed argument. Augustine’s failure to mention Christ, etc. is explicable by the fact that he was on his way in, so to

speak, and in a process of conversion. Boethius was the seasoned veteran of theological tractates at the time he wrote the *Consolation*, and a documented Christian. So his silences cannot be explained the same way. Indeed they invite the suggestion that he was on his way out, if not an actual apostate, or that he was consciously exploring an alternative route. The historical circumstances of the composition of the *Consolation* make his approach all the more marked, for, at such a time, above all, men are wont to seek the consolations of religion. One is left with either some form of apostasy or failure of faith or else with a conscious decision to work with the philosophical minimum required to establish common ground between the matter of philosophy and that of religion, to think outside the Christian framework.

Ultimately the answer will depend on who one sees as the audience of the *Consolation*. If one focuses exclusively on the author addressing Boethius-prisoner within the framework of the text, then one will be more likely to feel the lack of explicitly Christian consolation as problematic, given Boethius-prisoner's known religious affiliations. If however one imagines an external audience quite separate from the prisoner,¹⁴⁴ one's perspective changes, and it is far easier to see the work as an experimental philosophical work aimed at anyone seeking answers to any of the major philosophical problems touched on in the *Consolation*. Since none of these has yet been susceptible of either a philosophical or a religious solution, it is fallacious to judge the work as if it had in some way either failed intentionally or intended to depict the failure of a philosophical solution.

Thus in the *Consolation* we see yet another genetically mixed and creatively conceived opus from late antiquity. It borrowed form and some overarching and individual themes from the ancient *Menippea*, but dropped the *spoudogeloion* ("jesting in earnest") along the way. It exhibits none of the biting satire of Seneca or teasing archness of Martianus. While there are moments of wit,¹⁴⁵ the nature and amount are similar to what one might meet in a Platonic or Ciceronian dialogue – with even less satirical *reductio ad absurdum* or *ad hominem* customization. We can never be certain – for much has been lost¹⁴⁶ – but on the available evidence we can only conclude that Boethius, with a little help from his predecessors,¹⁴⁷ was an innovator in casting a serious work, with a tragic frame-narrative, in what had been a serio-comic form.¹⁴⁸ If one defines the *Menippea* as satire with no solutions to offer,¹⁴⁹ then the *Consolation* does not qualify. It was and is something new.

The *Consolation* was one of those odd works that did not attract much serious attention immediately after they were written.¹⁵⁰ But it took off in the ninth century with the appearance of its earliest MSS.¹⁵¹ The *Consolation* used many different poetic forms and voices, often to striking effect.¹⁵² The poetry of the *Consolation* lived its own life in the Middle Ages. It was its prose *mise-en-scène*, and philosophical content, however, that proved most potent, unforgettable, and empowering: prisoner, prison, muses, celestial visitant, fortune, wheel, divine providence, and human free will.¹⁵³ But that is a

topic for other chapters.

Notes

1. Members of my Boethius seminar at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in Fall 2006 helped me work through some of the issues discussed here. Howard Jacobson kindly commented on a draft for me and, as always, was ready to discuss philological and religious problems. Howard Weinbrot read a draft and took the time to send me generous and detailed advice on literary matters. I have benefited considerably from discussions with John Marenbon, our patient editor. And Karen Dudas and Bruce Swann of our Classics Library *always* found me the books.
2. Toole (1980) 42–3 for a scene that begins with the *Consolation* and ends (after a canine epiphany) with a masturbatory climax.
3. Shanzer (1984).
4. For the following, Daly (1991) 37–8, working from Alfonsi and Crabbe.
5. Verg. *Ecl.* 1.1: *Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi*.
6. See Ovid *Am.* 1.1.27–8; 3.1.7–8. Also Crabbe (1981) 244–8.
7. Usener (1877) 4.
8. His interest in the genre may materialize in an example in ISC 767 B, where he cites *Ecl.* 2.36–7: *est mihi disparibus septem compacta cicutis / fistula*.
9. Boethius advocates premarital sex to Maximianus' youthful male literary persona. There is also a contemporary epigram of Ennodius' that seems to be mocking Boethius' sexual exhaustion. For both see Shanzer (1983) 183–95; Barnish (1990) 16–32, arguing at 27 for a rehandling of the themes of the *Consolation*; or O'Daly (1991) 10, who transposes Boethius' sex life to a putative persona in unattested erotic poems.
10. E.g. C 3.M.3, 3.M.4, 3.M.5, 3. M.6, and 3.M.7. Also compare C 4.M.7.13–31 with Ausonius, *Eclogae* 17 and Sidonius, *Carmina* 9.93–100.
11. 2IS 1.3, p. 135: *cum verbum verbo expressum comparatumque reddiderim* acknowledges his procedure in the *editio prima*.
12. *De arithmetica* praef. p. 4.27: *At non alterius obnoxius institutis artissima memet ipse translationis lege constringo, sed paululum liberius evagatus alieno itineri, non vestigiis, insisto*.
13. IIS 1.1, p. 3.1–4.3; 2.1, p. 85.1–4; 2.32, p. 132. 2–5 where the dialogue and the night end with a quotation from Petronius: *sol tectis arrisit* (Fr. 5b Müller). See Hirzel (1895) 363.
14. Boethius (1906) ix.

15. [Ibid.](#) Contrast Augustine's vividly sketched companions at Cassiciacum: Licentius, Trygetius, Navigius, Adeodatus, and Monica.
16. See for example Bywater ([1869](#)); Usener ([1873](#)); Hartlich ([1889](#)); Rand ([1984](#)); Alfonsi ([1951](#)). There are numerous protreptic themes in the *Consolation*, e.g. C 3.2.2. The genetic fingerprint is most clearly discerned at C 3.8.10 (the eyes of Lynceus).
17. C 3.1.5 and 3.M.1.11–12.
18. The *Meno* also is evident in C 3.M.11.
19. Seneca, *Consolatio ad Polybium* and *Consolatio ad Helviam*. Menander Rhetor 2.9, pp. 161–5 Russell and Wilson. O'Daly ([1991](#)) 23.
20. Seneca, *De remediis fortuitorum* v. 3. There is a notable link to its terminology, friends as *ancorae*, at C 1.5.2.
21. See Boethius' in C 1.4 (characterized as *oratio* in C 1.5.2) and Fortune's in C. 2.2; Socrates' lurks in the background too. Shanzer ([1984](#)) 363–6.
22. The *nomoi* of *Crito* 50a ff. being a rare exception. But they never make a direct appearance; Plato uses imagined prosopopoeia.
23. C 4.6.32 *quae ratio valet humana* and 4.6.53–4. Philosophy is not a god.
24. C 1.1.1–6.
25. Klingner ([1921/1966](#)) 113; Thomassen ([2004](#)) 218 for the term “revelation discourse.”
26. For Platonic dialogue see especially Klingner ([1921/1966](#)), 75ff.
27. Courcelle ([1948](#)) 279, following, presumably, Klingner ([1921/1966](#)) 113, says that the teaching is administered in the form of a revelation. This is not strictly true any time after the opening of Book 1. After her epiphany, Philosophy functions like a Socratic interlocutor (aside from her singing!).
28. Shanzer ([2005a](#)).
29. *Pace* the suggestive work of Silk ([1939](#)).
30. Schmidt ([1963](#)) 125: “beide reden im Grunde mit sich selbst.”
31. Newman ([2003](#)).
32. For her multiform nature see Crabbe ([1981](#)) 239.
33. [Ibid.](#) 250.
34. See C 1.3.4–6 for the symbiotic relationship between Philosophy and her *familiares*. When they are on trial, she is on trial.
35. Synesius, *Epistulae* 10 δέσποινα and 16 μήτηρ, ἀδελφή, διδάσκαλος.
36. Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 153 and at 162, the “pretensions of her goddess-like initial appearance are satirized in the *Consolation*.”

- [37.](#) See Pabst ([1994](#)) 172–8 and Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis*, *passim*.
- [38.](#) For Augustine’s concealed epiphanies in the *Confessions* see Shanzer ([1992](#)) 56. Sidonius cleaned up his Philosophy in *Epist.* 9.9.12–13 like the fair captive of Deut. 21:10–14 (in Jerome, *Epistulae* 21 and 70.2).
- [39.](#) Although they do not do much for the philosophical argument. See Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 147.
- [40.](#) E.g. in C 1.M.1 elegiacs for mourning; in C 3.M.9 hexameters for a hymn; in C 3.M.12 and 4.M.3 glyconics for mythological narratives. See also Marenbon ([2003a](#)), 150 for poems sung by Boethius.
- [41.](#) C 1.1.11.
- [42.](#) Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 147 counts twenty-eight.
- [43.](#) C 2.1.8 and 4.6.57.
- [44.](#) E.g. C 1.M.2.6–23; 1.M.5.1–24; 4.6.
- [45.](#) Gruber ([2006](#)) 20–2.
- [46.](#) There may be a (partial parallel) in the *Supergedicht* posited for Prudentius’ oeuvre by Ludwig ([1963](#)).
- [47.](#) See Gruber ([1981](#)) 209 for the “paränetisch-protreptisch” genre. He omits Fulgentius.
- [48.](#) *Ibid.*
- [49.](#) Viz. are these texts a splinter-group, a genetic branch of their own, or was the genre itself evolving and changing, as genres do?
- [50.](#) Shanzer ([1986](#)) 32.
- [51.](#) See for example Shanzer ([1986](#)) 32; Pabst ([1994](#)) 162–8. So it no longer seems appropriate, as Gruber ([1981](#)) did, to ascribe these works not to the genre, *Menippea*, but to the prosimetric *form*. See O’Daly ([1991](#)) 20.
- [52.](#) See, for example, Courcelle ([1967](#)) 17.
- [53.](#) Hirzel ([1895](#)) 347: “This pitifully poor piece of work [*sc.* Fulgentius’ *Mythologiae*] is none the less noteworthy, because in it the Menippean satire begins to take on a serious face.” Also Hirzel ([1895](#)) 347 “Here, now holy seriousness has completely taken over a literary form that initially served comic purposes,” or as Klingner ([1921/1966](#)) 114 put it, apocalypse was combined with *Menippea*.
- [54.](#) Weinbrot ([2005](#)) 4 calls genre itself (as opposed to its instantiations) “a necessarily uncertain, but certainly necessary construct.”
- [55.](#) For a felicitous formulation, Halsall ([2005](#)) 64: “Writers can play with the rules of composition as well as within them.”

- [56.](#) Formal criteria are not sufficient for a meaningful typology. See Schmidt ([1963](#)) 108.
- [57.](#) The distinction is analogous to a piece labeled “tango,” vs. a piece with no label, whose rhythm and phraseology are nonetheless unmistakable as anything but a tango.
- [58.](#) E.g. *consolatio*, comedy, dialogue, elegy, epic, epigram, epitaph, didactic, history, Menippea, novel, protreptic, satire, tragedy . . .
- [59.](#) Jokingly Perry ([1967](#)) 167: “The first romance was deliberately planned and written by an individual author, its inventor. He conceived it on a Tuesday afternoon in July, or some other day or month of the year. It did not come into being by a process of development in the literary plane. What had really developed was the complex cultural outlook, the Weltanschauung, of society as a whole in the Alexandrian age . . .” Pabst ([1994](#)) 2: “neue Formen sich selten adhoc bilden.”
- [60.](#) Weinbrot ([2005](#)) deserves great credit for pointing out Bakhtin’s historical fallacies in reading Dostoevsky as Menippean satire and also for attacking the intolerable bagginess of the genre as defined by many modern literary critics outside Classics departments. Conte ([1996](#)) 144 discusses how questions are turned into answers to explain the form of Petronius’ *Satyricon* with the result that “we are in danger of attributing a distinct identity to a creature whose generic characteristics are so indefinite as to be unrecognizable by any reader.”
- [61.](#) Conte ([1996](#)) 37 wisely reminds us that “categorical distinctions, after all, are merely a compromise with chaos.”
- [62.](#) Relihan ([2007](#)) xi. While the goals of Relihan’s readings (namely to crown faith as “present by absence” in the *Consolation*) are not compatible with true deconstructionist denial of authentic meaning, his exegetic methods, the consistent excessive, “semiotically aroused” (in Richard Landes’ inimitable phrase), demands put on the text create a *Tendenz* that is indeed deconstructionist.
- [63.](#) *Ibid.* 9.
- [64.](#) *Ibid.* 4 in reference to C 4.1.9 and C 4.M.1.
- [65.](#) *Ibid.*
- [66.](#) The point is made in a positive sense by Gibbon, quoted at O’Daly ([1991](#)) 23.
- [67.](#) Emotional responses are never addressed, e.g. C 2.4.2 and its sublime imitation by Francesca da Rimini in Dante, *Inferno* 5; likewise C 4.5.2–4. The problems of evil and God’s providence (C 4.1.3–9) are hardly susceptible of simple solutions. See Philosophy’s own remarks at C 4.6.2–3.
- [68.](#) Relihan ([2007](#)) 5. Note however that the final words, far from suggesting that

- Boethius lives, contain a threat in *si dissimulare non vultis*.
- [69.](#) *Passio Perpetuae* 10.15: *hoc usque in pridie muneris egi; ipsius autem muneris actum, si quis voluerit, scribat*, with the following vision of Saturus and anonymous continuation describing the martyrdoms.
- [70.](#) See Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 103. The contrast is to the popular philosophical harangues of C 2 that are informed by rhetoric. C 2.1.1 and C 2.1.7 *molle atque iucundum*; C 2.1.8 *rhetoricae suadela dulcedinis*; C 2.3.2 *oblitaque rhetoricae ac musicae melle dulcedinis*.
- [71.](#) Relihan ([2007](#)) 21 and 129. How can we know what Philosophy intended? Both she and the prisoner Boethius are creations of Boethius-*auctor*.
- [72.](#) Relihan ([2007](#)) 48 also has the narrator dictate the first poem of the *Consolation* in his sleep *and not wake up* . . .
- [73.](#) For more on exegetic principles see Shanzer ([2005b](#)) 360–1.
- [74.](#) Relihan ([2007](#)) 6. “If the shoe fits . . .” The key on the cover and the words on p. 8 about “figuring it out” say it all. Pabst ([1994](#)) 3–4 thinks much the same.
- [75.](#) Relihan ([2007](#)) 3 likewise relied heavily on this sort of reading.
- [76.](#) If the former is the case, then the walk-throughs of Cicero and Augustine are odd, because the literary connections between Boethius and his two famous predecessors have not been firmly proven, and it is not clear what they have to do with Boethius.
- [77.](#) Lerer ([1985](#)) 125.
- [78.](#) We face the same problems as Dantisti with Dante-poet and Dante-pilgrim. Boethius, who makes his *prosopopoeiai* (Fortune and the multiple personae of Philosophy) speak in self-consciously different voices and is well aware of modulations in his own self-represented discourse (mourning, apologia, etc.), clearly is operating with a persona theory. For more on the spectrum of “persona” see Weinbrot ([1988](#)). With Boethius there is no evidence for a completely separable (non-plausibly authorial) mask. He represents himself, both as he would like himself seen (viz. in a noble light), but also at different emotional moments and stages.
- [79.](#) De Vogel ([1972](#)) 3 and 35.
- [80.](#) *Ibid.* 26–7 and 35. At 39, though, it is clear that she comes close to seeing Boethius-prisoner’s thinking as a symptom of depression.
- [81.](#) Anonymus Valesianus 2.87.
- [82.](#) E.g. C 3.11.23–4 (for intent and significance) or C 1.5.5 (for syntax).
- [83.](#) The works of Rand, Klingner, Courcelle, Schmidt-Kohl, Scheible, and Gruber are especially valuable.

84. . . . ἐπὶ παντὸς ὀρμῇ καὶ σμικροῦ καὶ μεγάλου πράγματος θεὸν αἰεὶ που καλοῦσιν· ἡμᾶς δὲ τοὺς περὶ τοῦ παντὸς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι πῇ μέλλοντας, ἣ γέγονεν ἢ καὶ ἀγενές ἐστίν, εἰ μὴ παντάπασιν (C5) παραλλάττομεν, ἀνάγκη θεοὺς τε καὶ θεὰς ἐπικαλουμένους εὐχεσθαι πάντα κατὰ νοῦν ἐκείνοις μὲν μάλιστα, ἐπομένως (d) δὲ ἡμῖν εἰπεῖν.
85. Lewy (1946) 243–58.
86. *Ibid.* 245.
87. The text is a hybrid in part based on Mattiacci (1990) 59 (who prints without comment a hypermetric line at v. 32), but to a greater extent also on Courtney (1993) 432–3, e.g. v. 30 *levem*.
88. Translation mine, but developed with reference to the commentaries of Lewy (ad loc.), Mattiacci (1990) 194–9, and Courtney (1993) 433–7.
89. Lewy (1946) 256. I since then noted the allusion to the Arian controversy (*genitum factumve*, alluding to *genitum non factum*) to date the Tiberianus hymn (if not its original) to the early fourth century at least. See Shanzer (1990) 306–18.
90. Lewy (1946) 258.
91. The coincidence of significant relations is greater than between either Boethius and Martianus Capella, *De Nuptiis* 2.185–93 or Martianus and Tiberianus. See Mattiacci (1990) 166.
92. More (including Agozzino’s improbable suggestion that Tiberianus’ hymn was written to introduce Cicero’s translation of the *Timaeus*) in Mattiacci (1990) 160–1.
93. Proclus *In Tim.* 1.207.21: Δεῖ δὴ οὖν πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων ἡμᾶς περὶ εὐχῆς τι γνῶναι σαφές, τίς τε ἡ οὐσία αὐτῆς καὶ τίς ἡ τελειότης, καὶ πόθεν ἐνδίδεται ταῖς ψυχαῖς. ὁ μὲν γὰρ φιλόσοφος Πορφύριος διοριζόμενος.
94. If those scholars are right who conjecture that Tiberianus may have been the author of lost *Menippeae*, he gains even more literary–historical importance. The suggestion about *Menippeae* was originally made by Lersch (1844) 774, who imagined Varronian satires with mixed meters or something like Martianus Capella. For its more recent history see Mattiacci (1990) 21, 24, 161, and 67.
95. Tiberianus, however, does not appear in Gersh (1986), though he deserves to be discussed in connection with the problem of Calcidius.
96. Tränkle (1977/1984) 318.
97. Courcelle (1948) 290–1 cites *In Gorg.*, p. 119.24 Norvin: “How the punishment under earth can be called eternal, we will learn in the myth.” He then assumes that the sentence was in Olympiodorus’ source, Ammonius.
98. C 1.6.17.

- [99.](#) Tränkle ([1977/1984](#)) 312–18. The *De nuptiis* ends with one. The absence is said to be intentional by Lerer ([1985](#)) 231–2: Boethius now has no need to read.
- [100.](#) Klingner ([1921/1966](#)) 7 and C 4.3.10 *deos fieri*.
- [101.](#) E.g. C 2.4.28 *mentes hominum nullo modo esse mortales*; C 2.5.26 *vos autem dico deo mente consimiles*; C 2.7.22 *nostrae rationes* prohibit thinking that men die altogether: *toti moriuntur homines*.
- [102.](#) A possibility not listed by Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 159, but presumably intended by C 4.6.5 *angusto limite temporis saepti*.
- [103.](#) One should consider the problems of composing with pen and parchment and a limited library under the conditions faced by Boethius. Their results cannot simply be classified as “ineptitude.” See Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 159.
- [104.](#) C 1.3.9 *quoniam sunt peregrina* (perhaps mocking him with the implication that he will not know about Greek philosophers); also C 2.4.5–7, the reasons he still has to be happy.
- [105.](#) C 3.2.12.
- [106.](#) For Boethius and sex see above, [n. 9](#). If this is true, then here is some seepage (or belated honesty *malgré lui*) that confirms unattractive evidence about Boethius in the external tradition.
- [107.](#) Chadwick ([1981](#)) 247.
- [108.](#) Usener ([1877](#)). For the most recent historiography of the question see Galonnier ([1997](#)) 34–53.
- [109.](#) See, for an example, Hildebrand ([1885](#)).
- [110.](#) Chadwick ([1981](#)) 249.
- [111.](#) Galonnier ([2007](#)) 19 sees a “relatif échec.” “Nous n’en possédons aucun [*sc. indice*] capable de nous faire comprendre son soi-disant tournant théologique, ni les raisons de sa disgrâce, tant que l’on persiste à leur trouver un motif d’ordre religieux. Ce bilan ne fait que confirmer un christianisme se réduisant à une formalité, dont on ne s’aquitte pas moins avec conscience, à une attitude extérieure dictée par les nécessités politiques et familiales.” Also Galonnier ([1997](#)) 36–40 for the opinions of others.
- [112.](#) Relihan ([2007](#)) xii.
- [113.](#) Mohrmann ([1984](#) [[1976](#)]) 302–10. Note also C 3.12.8: *usitato cunctis vocabulo deum nomino*.
- [114.](#) De Vogel ([1972](#)).
- [115.](#) The laundry list presented by Fortescue and Ludwig Bieler in Boethius ([1984](#)) 109 is grossly overdistant. In addition, the source-criticism that guarantees

that the apparent allusion must come from the Bible is frequently of a very poor standard. Consider Relihan ([2007](#)) 127, who insists that C 5.6.48 *ante oculos agitis iudicis cuncta cernentis* must imitate Esth. 16:4 *sed dei quoque cuncta cernentis arbitrantur se posse fugere sententiam*. One has only to consider Curtius Rufus 9.11.4 *cuncta cernentis e ripa*, Lucan, *Bellum civile* 4.699 *cernit cuncta* and Manilius, *Astronomica* 4.194 *qui possint cernere cuncta*, not to mention C 5.M.2.1, to see that the alleged *iunctura* is far from probative.

- [116.](#) The concept is invoked in the case of a similar problem in Jacobson ([2006](#)) 216.
- [117.](#) See C 5.3.34: *illique inaccessae luci prius quoque quam impetrent ipsa supplicandi ratione coniungi*, with Klingner ([1921/1966](#)) 101 and De Vogel, ([1972](#)) 6. For Christian *Sondersprache* neutralized see C 1.4.14 and C 1.4.36 *sacrae aedes* for *ecclesia*. Also C 1.4.39 *vilissimi spiritus* for *daemones*.
- [118.](#) His use of “second death” (Apoc. 20:14 and 21:8) in C 2.M.7.25.
- [119.](#) Hildebrand ([1885](#)) 89 notes *creatis a se rebus* in C 3.11.33 with reference to *providentia*.
- [120.](#) E.g. C 3.M.9.24 *conspicuos visus* is related directly to Prudentius, *Hamartigenia* 863–4: *Ne mirere locis longe distantibus inter / damnatas iustasque animas concurrere visus / conspicuos meritasque vices per magna notari*, and indirectly to 1 Cor. 13:12 *facie ad faciem*. See Klingner ([1921/1966](#)) 53–5. Boethius inverts the infernal context of the Prudentian original to use it *in bonum* to convey the Pauline idea of “face to face.”
- [121.](#) Fontaine ([1968](#)) 103 and 11. My colleague Maryline Parca explains to me that “transparent” is used in the sense of “dont le sens caché se laisse deviner” (as in “une allusion transparente”) – hence “with a double hidden meaning.” The latter passage, a discussion of Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 31.1–7, merits comparison with Boissier ([1889](#)) 454 who points out that everything in Boethius seems to be classical, even things one might be tempted to think Christian, such as C 2.4.29 on those who bought victory through death.
- [122.](#) E.g. C 3.11.32.
- [123.](#) Pace Marenbon ([2003a](#)) 157–8. One need only look at Philosophy’s citation of Wisdom.
- [124.](#) Septuagint, Wisdom 8.1 διατείνει δὲ ἀπὸ πέρατος ἐπὶ πέρας εὐρώστως καὶ διοικεῖ τὰ πάντα χρηστῶς.
- [125.](#) In a lecture, “*Haec quibus uteris verba*: The Bible and Boethius’ Christianity”, delivered at the Seventh Biennial Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity Conference (Boulder, Colorado: March 2007). The proceedings will be published (Shanzer, forthcoming). My treatment here overlaps with that in the

conference volume.

- [126.](#) See the *non ibi legi* sequence at Augustine, *Confessiones* 7.9.13–14.
- [127.](#) *Pace* the clear implications of a text such as Gen. 2:7 cited (even!) by Porphyry, *Pros Gauron* 11.1–2.
- [128.](#) C 5.3.34: *si quidem iusto humilitatis pretio inaequabilem vicem divinae gratiae promeremur*. While *divina gratia* is very much a Christian locution (see *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* s.v. ‘gratia’ 2226.52–2227.69: *de favore dei in homines*), *gratia* here does not seem to be used in its more loaded sense of “state of grace.” It could mean no more than a favor from God.
- [129.](#) Mistranslated by Relihan ([2007](#)) 42 who takes *agitis* as “acts” rather than [*causam*] *agitis*.
- [130.](#) See the commentary of Mohrmann ([1984](#) [[1976](#)]) 304. For the absence of the *aqua humiliationis* in pagan thinking see Hildebrand ([1885](#)) 140 citing Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 31.18 and Quacquarelli ([1981](#)) 245. *Humilitas* was already ascribed to Moses in Num. 12:3. Unfortunately the dichotomy is not as perfect as scholars like to pretend. See Cic. *Inv. rhet.* 1.16.22; Verg. *Aen.* 12.930; Ovid *Her.* 4.147 for a few pre-Christian examples. For prayer as *sacrum commercium*, Herz ([1958](#)).
- [131.](#) *Pace* Relihan ([2007](#)). There is no evidence that prayer is “offered grudgingly by Philosophy.” For pagan discussion of prayer see Festugière ([1966](#)) 27ff. and 35 for different types of prayer = *In Timaeum* I.206.26–214.12 Diehl. The views of the philosophers characterized at *In Timaeum*, pp. 208.3ff. Diehl precisely correspond to those of Philosophy; Maximus of Tyre, *Oratio* 5, and Rist ([1967](#)) 199–212.
- [132.](#) See C 4.3.5: *Quantumlibet igitur saeviant mali sapienti tamen corona non decedet, non arescet*, compared to Proverbs 14:24; *corona sapientium divitiae eorum, fatuitas stultorum inprudencia* (also Wisdom 1.22 *corona sapientiae timor domini*). This is definitely a Christian expression. The first example of *corona* and *sapien** is in Tertullian. See also Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium* 9–10 τοῖς ἀμείαντοις τῆς σοφίας ἀναδήσασα πετάλοις.
- [133.](#) *Ep.* 105, Synesius ([2000](#)) 239.98–100 shows him drawing lines between philosophy and faith, using analogies from philosophy and myth. εἰ ταῦτα καὶ οἱ τῆς καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἱερωσύνης συγχωροῦσιν ἔμοι νόμοι, δυναίμην ἂν ἱερᾶσθαι· τὰ μὲν οἴκοι φιλοσοφῶ, τὰ δ’ ἔξω φιλόμυθος· εἰμι διδάσκων. Nonetheless, *pace* Courcelle ([1948](#)) 302–3, who invited us to read Boethius like Synesius, the former’s practice is very different from Synesius’, who sought a rapprochement between Platonic and Christian terminology in his Doric hymns, but never leaves us in any doubt about his Christianity. See Bregman ([1982](#)) 78–124.

- [134.](#) See especially *Ep.* 105, Synesius ([2000](#)) 238–9.
- [135.](#) Marrou ([1938](#)).
- [136.](#) Quacquarelli ([1981](#)) 242–3.
- [137.](#) See C 1.4.37–9, which could describe either theurgy or *maleficium* (C 1.4.41)
- [138.](#) Courcelle ([1967](#)) 21–2.
- [139.](#) Shanzer ([1983](#)).
- [140.](#) C 4.6.37. One could adduce a very interesting comparandum against Boethius’ theory from Firmicus Maternus’ *Mathesis* 1.7.14 on Plotinus and his use of providence to combat *fortuna*. At *Mathesis* 1.7.20 Firmicus narrates his appalling death from disease, from which even the cardinal virtues could not protect him: the stars got him!
- [141.](#) For some intriguing pages on the possible Anician and Constantinopolitan connections of Hagia Sophia see Troncarelli ([1981](#)) 67–70.
- [142.](#) See Shanzer, forthcoming and above, [n. 125](#).
- [143.](#) Boissier ([1889](#)) 460. For a modern exponent see Chadwick ([1981](#)) 249.
- [144.](#) The external reader is signaled in generalizing vocatives such as C 2.4.22 *O mortales!*; C 3.3.1 *terrena animalia*. Also plurals, such as C 3.M.12.52 *vos haec fabula respicit*; C 4.M.7.32 *ite nunc fortes*. And likewise Philosophy’s sudden switch to *vos* at C 5.6.47–8.
- [145.](#) Dark witticism at C 1.4.27; Ironic *papae* at C 1.6.6 and C 4.2.1; Stoic–Cynic arguments at C 2.6.4–5 *mures* and *musculae*; the silent philosopher at C 2.7.20.
- [146.](#) E.g. Acilius Severus’ prosimetrical autobiography attested by Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 111. In addition, there are probably quite a few places where Boethius alludes to lost work. Even now new sources can be found. See Shanzer ([1991](#)) 143.
- [147.](#) E.g. Martianus.
- [148.](#) See Pabst ([1994](#)) 160 on how those who try to read it as a typical *Menippea* must fail.
- [149.](#) Weinbrot ([2005](#)) 24.
- [150.](#) See Galonnier ([1997](#)) 34 n. 98.
- [151.](#) See Troncarelli ([1981](#)) and ([1987](#)).
- [152.](#) Scheible ([1972](#)) and O’Daly ([1991](#)).
- [153.](#) One should start with Courcelle ([1967](#)).

11 The *Consolation*: the Latin commentary tradition, 800–1700

Lodi Nauta

Introduction

‘There is nothing superfluous in such a perfect work as the *Consolation* written by such a perfect philosopher as Boethius.’¹ These words, written by the twelfth-century master William of Conches, express a sentiment which was almost universally shared by readers and commentators in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The popularity of the *Consolation* was immense, in fact almost unparalleled. It was translated into different vernacular languages from an early time onwards, which ensured an unusually wide readership, in which every stratum of society is represented: kings and queens, the nobility, monks, clerics, university teachers, school masters, and lay men and women.² As a school text it was glossed by thousands of school teachers, and though it did not find a fixed and permanent place in the university curriculum, it was also frequently studied at this highest level. In this chapter we shall study some aspects of its reception, focusing on the Latin commentary tradition.³ It goes without saying that this can only be done in a highly selective way. There is a huge number of commentaries and glossed copies of the text, and many of them still await a first inspection. Courageous attempts are now being made to catalogue all the manuscripts, and to study and edit sets of glosses and commentaries.⁴ This has resulted in a much fuller but also much more complicated picture of the reception of the *Consolation*. Scholars have come to realise that the modern notion of a text written by one single author is hardly of use in charting traditions of fluent texts such as glosses and commentaries. They were often considered to be common property, and each commentator took from older works what fitted his purpose or suited his interests. The survey presented below can therefore only be a rough and provisional one.

A major challenge for any commentator who took his (or perhaps in a few cases ‘her’) job seriously was the absence of overtly Christian teaching in the *Consolation*. Boethius was universally and rightly believed to be the author of some important theological treatises. So the 64,000-dollar question was: why had he opted for a consolation by reason rather than by faith at the end of his life? Modern scholars may rightly point out that there is nothing in the text that would have been unacceptable to a Christian in Boethius’ time (nor, for that matter, to a Neoplatonist of a rationalistic stamp),⁵ but such a historical perspective was generally not available to the medieval

reader, who was rather worried by the presence of Platonic, heterodox opinions (such as the pre-existence of the soul and its descent through heavenly spheres to an earthly body) as much as by the absence of citations from the Bible or clear allusions to the person of Christ and Christian faith. But creative reading was the medieval scholars' strong point, and they developed various methods to solve this hermeneutical knot. This will be a major theme in what follows.

Another major theme in the *Consolation* concerns Boethius' attempt to reconcile divine Providence with human free will in Book 5. He guides the reader through a series of connected problems such as causal determinism (everything seems to be ruled by fate) and divine prescience, which seems to be incompatible with the contingency of events. In solving these 'knotty problems' he introduces distinctions which became stock elements in the medieval debates on these themes: fate and providence, God's *providentia* and *praevidentia*, four levels of understanding, two kinds of necessity (simple/absolute and conditional), eternity and sempiternity. He develops the notion that knowledge is dependent on the capabilities of the knowing subject rather than on the thing known, and the notion of God's atemporal eternity (*tota simul*), arguing that God's infallible mode of knowing things is compatible with their contingent outcome, even though this seems to be impossible from the humble, human, point of view.⁶ Medieval logicians and philosophers often quoted the *Consolation* but went much further in developing their own logical tools to attack the problems. Commentators, on the other hand, usually stuck closely to the text, but we shall see that occasionally they drew, if their ambitions went beyond textual exegesis, on contemporary terminology and debates.

The early medieval period

After Alcuin of York had introduced the text in the late eighth century, the *Consolation* was soon intensively read in the monasteries and cathedral schools of the Carolingian Empire. Apart from an influential treatise on the metrical forms by Lupus of Ferrières from the mid ninth century, the two most important groups of commentaries are associated with the Anonymous of St Gallen and Remigius of Auxerre. The first seems to be represented in a series of MSS dating from the late ninth to the early eleventh century, and comprising at least four different forms: (a) a corpus of marginal and interlinear glosses, (b) a more expansive version in the form of a single continuous commentary, (c) a shorter version of the previous item, and (d) stray glosses mixed with Remigian material.⁷ The Remigian tradition is the dominant one in early medieval Europe, with some forty MSS ascribed to Remigius of Auxerre and his revisers. Remigius' commentary, probably composed in the early years of the tenth century, was soon revised by other glossators, both on the Continent and the British Isles. Different versions have been distinguished, but the precise details of their dissemination remain difficult to unravel, since commentators copied freely from each other, omitting, adding and revising as they deemed fit. In addition to these two groups or traditions, there are a

number of other commentaries, which seem independent from them, though to what extent is still often an open question. There is, for instance, an interesting commentary in the Vatican library, containing glosses dating from different periods.⁸ A number of them are by a Welsh hand, and seem to predate Remigius' commentary; it has even been suggested that they are in the hand of Asser, who is said by William of Malmesbury to have aided King Alfred in translating the *Consolation* into Old English; other glosses in this MS have been attributed to Dunstan from the mid tenth century. Here too, a number of questions remain unsolved.

Though there is an enormous variation in glosses, commentators pursued a common aim, namely to clarify the meaning of the text by explaining words and grammatical constructions, and by providing some background information of Boethius' allusions to Roman history and politics, mythological lore and the natural world. This textual explanation served the wider goal of giving the text its proper place in the liberal arts curriculum by linking it to other texts, both pagan and Christian. The *Consolation* gave vivid expression to the belief that the cosmos, created by God out of pure goodness, is a copy of the divine original and hence bears the stamp of the divine, rational plan. Since the human soul, as an image of God, is among created things closest to its creator, it would be able to learn the structure and plan of the cosmos were it not hampered by the impediments of the body – an inheritance of Adam's sin. By climbing the stairs of the liberal arts, however, men can overcome their fallen state and come to learn the structure of the cosmos and its creator. Study of such texts as Boethius' *Consolation*, Plato's *Timaeus*, Martianus Capella's *On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, and Macrobius' *On the Dream of Scipio*, was often only the beginning of the way upwards towards evangelical perfection, and needed to be complemented by Christian teaching and education. This is of course not to say that these texts were solely studied with this aim in mind. They were also studied for their mythological and historical lore, and for their natural philosophical contents, as for instance advanced astronomical diagrams in manuscripts of some of these texts testify.⁹ But early medieval readers could confidently believe that especially the *Consolation*, written by a devout Christian, was essentially in agreement with Christian teaching, indeed is just another formulation of it. Some revisers of Remigius may even have used the *Consolation* as a source book for exempla to be used in sermons and devotional literature.¹⁰

However, not all commentators shared the same conviction that the entire text could be so easily coordinated with Christian teaching. In particular the hymn 'O qui perpetua' (3.m9), based on Plato's mythological account of the creation of the world and the soul in his *Timaeus*, could lead to feelings of uneasiness. Boethius here clearly refers to the Platonic notion of the soul's pre-existent life, and writes that God had each soul allotted to a star, a light chariot (*levis currus*), for its companion from which it descended at its appropriate time into a body. The soul's perfect knowledge was lost upon embodiment, but 'a seed of truth' (*semen veri*) remained, and by kindling this seed through study of the liberal arts the soul could regain that perfect knowledge: knowledge therefore is recollection (3.m6, m9 and m11, 5.m4). This cluster of passages thus formed the litmus

test for any commentator. According to the Anonymous of St Gallen this terminology of ‘light chariots’ must be taken metaphorically: Boethius speaks in the manner of a pagan here (*gentili more loquitur*),¹¹ but he is nevertheless assured of Boethius’ Christianity. Remigius of Auxerre is less hesitant and writes that Augustine held a similar opinion about the soul’s descent. After giving a survey of some other opinions, he argues that the souls’ ‘chariots’ can be interpreted as ‘the subtle contemplation and intellect by which God directs man to the heavenly order (*caelestem conservationem*)’.¹² Other commentators were less willing to bend ‘the waxen nose of the authority’ in the desired direction (to use the famous image of the twelfth-century theologian Alan of Lille), though most would not go so far as the monk Bovo of Corvey from the late ninth century, who roundly declared that Boethius’ words were ‘monstrous comments’ (*monstruosa commenta*) and that the Platonic doctrines were nothing but ‘most inane fables’ (*inanissimae fabulae*).¹³ Since Boethius’ intention was to discuss the doctrines of the philosophers and not ecclesiastical doctrine, the *Consolation* was often ‘contrary to faith’, says Bovo.

William of Conches

The commentaries from this earlier period were usually written in the form of interlinear and marginal glosses. A more thorough and systematic exegesis of ancient texts became prominent in the schools in the late eleventh century, and hence commentaries developed into more systematic and comprehensive readings. They often obtained a certain independence from the authorial text and could circulate as autonomous works. An important proponent of this development is William of Conches, author of commentaries on Boethius, Priscian, Plato and Macrobius, as well as of two systematic works on natural philosophy.¹⁴ William’s work is a blend of tradition and innovation both in its glossing technique and in its contents. Like his predecessors William does not comment on each and every phrase, and passes over long sections from Boethius’ text in silence. Yet on the whole his approach is much more systematic and comprehensive. He usually starts with a lemma, placing it in the wider context of the argument and then descending to the level of explanation of words.

William is also innovative in using the commentary for developing new areas of knowledge, in particular in the field of natural philosophy, but here too the difference between his and earlier texts is one of degree rather than of kind. William intersperses his glosses with long digressions on natural philosophical themes such as the elements, winds and planets, convinced as he is that the *Consolation* embodies profound truths which have to be clarified with the aid of all possible branches of learning. Hence, the commentary already shows all the hallmarks of William’s daring reading of the cosmos *secundum physicam*. As such it is a typical product of the early twelfth century when scholars began systematically to study the natural world along rational and physical lines.

Connected to this is William's interpretation of Boethius' Platonism. Here too we find the same blend of tradition and innovation. He shares the Christianizing tendencies of his predecessors, but leaves them far behind in originality and audacity. Drawing on the literary theory of *fabula* derived from Cicero, Macrobius and Isidore, according to which truths can be found beneath the veil (*integumentum* or *involucrum*) of fabulous narratives, William searched for profound truths behind the veil of pagan fictions and fables.¹⁵ Such an integumental reading was applied to several types of texts. We may distinguish the following 'functions':

- (1) It could be a vehicle for the Christianization of (a) pagan myths and philosophy, and (b) fabulous narratives with possible base and improper elements. Christianization often means moralization, neutralizing possible heterodox, base or improper elements. Examples of (a) are the Platonic account of the origin and descent of the soul, the notion of knowledge through recollection, and the concept of the World Soul. Examples of (b) are the fables of Orpheus (3.m12), Ulysses and his comrades (4.m3), and the labours of Hercules (4.m7). Thus the souls' chariots, for instance, in Boethius' 'O qui perpetua' are identified with reason and intellect, because they bring the soul to knowledge of heavenly and earthly things, or, alternatively, with the stars, since it is by stellar influence that the soul can live in the body.¹⁶
- (2) This accommodation of pagan myth and metaphor to Christian dogma, however, could put that dogma into a new light: the dogma could become 'infected' by association with the pagan notion: the prime example is William's identification of the Platonic World Soul with the Holy Spirit (3.m9), by which the World Soul was not only absorbed into Christian thinking, but also exerted its influence on discussions about the precise status and nature of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity in general.¹⁷ The *integumentum* could lead to a reconsideration of the established reading, but admittedly this was often an unintentional effect.¹⁸
- (3) Unlike in (1) where 'deviant' texts were 'domesticated', an integumental reading could also be used to challenge established readings of texts or events. In William's works this often takes the form of rationalistic–naturalistic readings of biblical passages (the creation of man from warm mud, the formation of Eve, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, all of which were interpreted by William in a naturalistic way). This demythologization or profanation of sacred truths may seem to be different from the search for *veritas* beneath pagan fables by having recourse to *integumenta*, but for William the difference did not seem to be so fundamental.¹⁹ When faced with ecclesiastical opposition, William was willing to recant and accept the conventional and established readings of these passages, but this did not diminish his belief in the correctness of his approach; he even offered a new piece of naturalistic explanation of Adam's expulsion from Paradise.²⁰

William is less original in his exegesis of the major themes of Book 5 on God's providence and human free will. But it is easy to overlook William's achievement here. He is the first commentator who gives a fair synopsis of the complicated text, taking care not to lose sight of the drift of the argument. And while he generally stays close to the text, on a few occasions he draws on contemporary terminology and debates. For instance, Boethius argues that, as soon as one realizes that knowledge is dependent on the capacities of the knowing subject rather than on the object known, it will become clear that one and the same object may be viewed from different perspectives, and that God may (fore)see events which in themselves are not necessary, in his eternal and immutable gaze. William here quotes from Boethius' commentary on Porphyry where a distinction is made between 'an understanding by conjunction' (as in 'man is an animal') and 'an understanding by abstraction or division' (as when a line is conceptually abstracted from a body, though it cannot exist separately from it). Abelard makes use of the same Boethian distinction, distinguishing between two different senses of 'I understand a thing otherwise than it is':²¹ (a) the mind abstracts when it attends just to one aspect of something, for example when I regard a man only as substance or only as a body, without implying that man consists only of substance or only of body ('otherwise' qualifying 'I understand'), and (b) the mind regards the nature of a thing different from its true being, for example when I regard man's nature as being only substance or only body ('otherwise' qualifying 'than the thing is'). Only in the latter case would I be mistaken. The same sort of distinction is applied by William to God's knowledge: God understands things differently from what they are, since he sees them 'as immutable and invariable, even though they are mutable and variable', but this does not mean that his knowledge is erroneous.²² God's infallibility does not entail the necessary outcome of events and acts of free will.

In the last paragraphs of the commentary William discusses the syllogism 'What God foresees, it is necessary to occur; but God foresees everything. So it is necessary that everything occurs' (*Quod deus providet, necesse est evenire; sed deus cuncta providet. Ergo necesse est cuncta euenire*).²³ Having refuted two current explanations, William proceeds to give his own interpretation, which makes use of a distinction between 'split' or 'cut' (*incisus*) versus 'non-split' or 'uncut' (*non incisus*) syllogisms. The first is defined as a syllogism which consists of a modal major premise, a 'simple' (i.e. non-modal) minor and a 'simple' conclusion. The 'non-split' or 'uncut' syllogism consists of only modal or only simple statements. William's suggestion seems to be that we can only derive a simple conclusion ('it will occur'), rather than the modal one ('it will necessarily occur'), from this syllogism since the major is split into two parts of which one is stated in the minor premise ('God foresees everything') and one part in the conclusion ('it will happen'). It may seem that William has allowed the modal operator to vanish into thin air, but unfortunately the text is too brief, and may even be corrupt, in order to assess his interpretation. But what is interesting is that William here introduces a distinction which must have been a very recent addition to the philosopher's armoury. We find another

early use of it in Abelard's *Logica ingredientibus* (dated 1118–20), which is exactly contemporary with William's commentary. Abelard was probably misled by such a phrase as *Initium primae incisionis*, which is found in some MSS of the Latin translation of Aristotle's *Prior Analytics*; *incisio* is the Latin rendering of the Greek word *τμήμα*, which was the technical term for dividing books in the Aristotelian corpus.²⁴ The phrase caught up in logical treatises from the twelfth century, but at first there may not have been a standard interpretation of it, which is not surprising in view of the difficulty of Aristotle's modal logic and the fact that the *Prior Analytics* was only beginning to be studied in the Latin West in this period. Thus Abelard's example consists of two modal premises and a non-modal conclusion; later texts take such a syllogism to consist of a modal major premise, a non-modal minor, and a modal conclusion, according to Aristotle's own discussion in his *Prior Analytics* (1.9–10, 15 and 21), without using such a term however.²⁵ It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss William's exegesis of Book 5 any further, but it may be said that as a whole it is an impressive piece of work, which for the first time pays careful attention to the overall structure of the argument.

William's work became the standard commentary during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. His own work survives in at least seventeen MSS, and a thirteenth-century revision in at least eleven MSS.²⁶ In addition there is a great number of manuscripts which contain 'Conchian' material, for instance commentaries in the form of compilations in which parts of William's work are mixed with other (Remigian) commentaries, and the marginal commentary that accompanies the Latin text of the *Consolation* and Jean de Meun's translation, *Li Livres de Confort de Philosophie*.²⁷ But while William's commentary, in one form or another, was widely copied or exploited, there are a number of MSS with glosses or commentaries which are independent from his. Here we enter a terra incognita. Further research into these and other anonymous MSS must also verify the impression that the thirteenth century was relatively uninterested in Boethius' masterpiece.²⁸

Nicholas Trevet

In the fourteenth century William's dominant position was taken over by the Dominican scholar Nicholas Trevet, whose commentary dates from around 1300. It became the late medieval commentary par excellence. More than a hundred MSS have survived, not counting various kinds of adaptations, usually made for teaching purposes. It is not difficult to see why medieval readers appreciated Trevet's work, even though modern scholars have been slow to recognize its value: it is comprehensive, highly organized, clear, and on the whole scholarly and judicious.²⁹ Trevet lived at a time when the Dominicans were engaged in a reasoned, undogmatic defence of Thomistic positions, and it comes as no surprise to see him using Aristotelian–Thomistic positions in order to

clarify Boethius' text, in particular on cognition and free will. This does not mean, as has often been maintained, that he was hostile towards Boethius' Platonism. Like William of Conches, he did not doubt seriously that behind Plato's words a 'sane' (*sanus*), acceptable philosophy was to be found. As Trevet reminded his readers several times, Plato often transmitted his philosophy in fables and metaphors, in the manner of ancient theologians, and 'therefore Boethius, particularly in his metres, where he is retaining the poetic style, uses Platonic terms, which are acceptable with a reasonable understanding (*sano intellectu*)'.³⁰ Far from being unsympathetic to this figurative way of speaking, Trevet follows Macrobius in fully accepting as legitimate the category of fabulous narratives which proceed by 'honest words' and which are the property of philosophers. He cites Boethius' myth of Orpheus, Plato's myth of Er and Cicero's account of Scipio's dream as examples, and his interpretation of the Platonic account of the soul clearly seems to imply that Plato's *fabulae* must be placed in this category too.

Just like William of Conches, who spoke about 'adapting' (*adaptare*) the controversial literal meaning (*littera*) of the text to an acceptable, deeper meaning (*sententia*),³¹ Trevet too speaks of explaining the literal account in terms of an acceptable interpretation of the passage. His explanations of the various passages where Boethius alludes to souls descending into bodies and losing their knowledge on account of their embodiment show that he is aware that some hermeneutic force has to be used to coordinate the controversial *littera* to an acceptable *sententia*. But while the modern reader may feel uneasy at such a 'twisting', the medieval commentator saw nothing strange or unnatural in it (or did not even recognize it as 'twisting'), used as he was to distinguishing between two meanings, a literal and a figurative one, or more. Thus when Boethius talks about the loss of the soul's perfect knowledge upon embodiment ('the soul who is not totally forgetful of itself', 5.m3), Trevet's explanation echoes Aquinas' teaching, that the soul has a twofold being – connected to the body and separated from it – and, correspondingly, a twofold way of knowing. In the embodied state, the soul must have recourse to phantasms; in the disembodied state, the soul receives forms from God by which it attains knowledge. The disembodied state is less natural and less perfect than the embodied state; yet in another way it comes prior to it, because in this state the soul is immaterial form (*forma immaterialis*), not the corporeal form (*forma corporis*), and hence knowledge is not dependent on the bodily senses. Having presupposed these things (*hiis suppositis*), Trevet writes, one can construe the literal sense accordingly (*expone litteram sic*).³² At the end of this passage Trevet must admit, however, that those who take Boethius here to treat souls as descending into bodies and losing their knowledge on account of their embodiment have the *littera* on their side, and yet the *sententia* will be false.³³

In his commentary on 3.m9 Trevet's explanation comes close to William's. The star, which is said by Boethius to be the soul's chariot, can mean the soul's immortal power, by means of which, when the body has been dissolved, the soul flies out from it. Alternatively, it can mean 'the cultivation of devotion and justice, by reason of which the

soul is carried up to heaven after the dissolution of the body'.³⁴ And Boethius' next verse about God dispersing the souls in the heavens and on earth should not be understood in the Platonic way, but they are said to be sown on the face of heaven because of the power acquired from heaven, from which the union of soul with body derives its period. The soul's heavenly home and its companion star are interpreted in terms of the mediating influence of the stars on the union of soul and body and the duration of that union.

What the *glosa ordinaria* was for biblical commentators Trevet's work was for commentators on the *Consolation*, and we find his work in countless MSS either in its original format or in the form of glosses extracted from the larger work, sometimes mixed with Remigian and Conchian glosses. Other commentators such as Pseudo-Thomas, William Wheteley and Tholomaeus de Asinariis clearly built on Trevet's work, shortening, revising and simplifying it.³⁵ From the later medieval period we also have a number of commentaries, apparently independent from Trevet's, though the vast majority of them have hardly been studied so far. Pierre Courcelle was scathing about them, including Trevet's work, but he obviously judged them solely on the basis of their merits in correctly explaining the text.³⁶ But a commentary could of course serve more purposes than giving a mere explanation of the text, and it is often a good barometer of intellectual and institutional developments of the time.

William of Aragon

This can clearly be seen in the case of William of Aragon's commentary, extant in at least five MSS.³⁷ In all likelihood the commentary predates Trevet's work; the once usual date of 1335 was based on a misreading of the colophon in one MS.³⁸ It is an original work, taking a somewhat different approach from that of Conches and Trevet. William's Aristotelian reading of the *Consolation* is underscored by his exclamations that 'Boethius knew Aristotle very well' and that we should not impute to him the *crimina Platoniorum*.³⁹ He frequently brings down the Platonic atmosphere of Boethius' text to the Aristotelian world of sense, suppressing the Platonic overtones for instance in 3.m9.18, where Boethius says: 'You bring forth, with the same bases, souls and lesser living beings.' According to William of Aragon, some have interpreted this as referring to the souls of good and bad angels (*calodemones* and *cacodemones*) on the one hand and human souls on the other, but William concludes that Boethius must have meant the souls of men and those of animals and plants: 'Because we have no philosophical experience of these other souls, we should not impute this [doctrine] to such a philosopher.'⁴⁰ But William was not the anti-Platonist that modern scholars, without having the full text at their disposal, have taken him to be. He quotes from Proclus' *Elementatio theologica* (in William of Moerbeke's translation) and the *Liber de causis*, and refers to Hermes Trismegistus.⁴¹ Without referring to the notion of the soul's pre-

existence, William claims that for Plato recollection is the process of learning which starts with the soul's first principles, from which knowledge of all things can be derived. Through deduction from these first principles potential knowledge is turned into actual knowledge: 'Hence, when we read Boethius in this way, we should not condemn Boethius or Plato.'⁴² On the question whether Plato and Boethius did not consider the body to be an impediment to intellectual cognition William simply states that he believes that Plato, when speaking about bodily impediment, referred to the soul's perfect knowledge after its separation from the body, for in this life the body is a natural companion to the soul and a *sine qua non* for intellectual activities. In view of his reputation as being an anti-Platonic Aristotelian, it is remarkable to see William trying to save Plato, without relinquishing his Aristotelian position on the vital importance of sense perception as the starting point for intellectual cognition; it is Plato's followers rather than Plato himself who are attacked for their crimes (*crimina*).⁴³ But William simply ignores the question of how the soul can arrive at its perfect knowledge in a life without a body. And elsewhere he interprets the spatial character of the descent, by which the soul becomes less free, in terms of an ever increasing dependence on the body. The terminology of *descendere* (descend), *cadere* (fall) and *labi* (glide down) is adopted but stripped of its Platonic overtones. William of Aragon blandly claims that his interpretation of Boethius's words shows that those who have argued that Boethius is speaking here about a descent of the soul have misunderstood the text.⁴⁴

Thus, like William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet, William of Aragon interprets the descent in terms of an ever closer dependence of the soul on the body. Though in many details their interpretations agree, their motivations are not entirely similar. William of Aragon did not really believe that Boethius needed to be rescued from heterodox Platonism, for at root Boethius was a follower of Aristotle, and even at the level of words Boethius was no genuine Platonist.

Some later medieval commentaries

From roughly the same time we have some other lemmatic commentaries. We have already mentioned Tholomaeus De Asinariis, a jurist from Asti, who belonged to the powerful family of the De Asinariis.⁴⁵ He completed his commentary in 1307, which shows how quickly Trevet's work, which is one of its sources, was circulating in Italy.⁴⁶ Boethius' fate was congenial to this author, since he too had suffered personal adversity: as a result of civil strife, culminating in the defeat of the Ghibelline faction in Asti in 1304, he was exiled from his home town and lost his properties. In the preface he identifies himself with Boethius. The work has not been studied, but from the few sentences published by Courcelle it appears that he duly Christianizes Boethius without ignoring the fact that Boethius was a Platonist. Thus where Boethius leaves open the question whether fate works by divine spirits acting as servants to providence, or

whether the course of fate is woven by the service of the soul or the whole of nature (6 pr. 6) or by still other means, Tholomaeus glosses ‘*spirits*, that is the divine Holy Spirit’, put in the plural by Boethius ‘because it is a multiple force, viz. spirit, intellect, counsel, as is said in the Bible’.⁴⁷

Another commentary, extant in at least nine MSS, was written by the Dominican scholastic Guglielmo da Cortemilia (Guillermus de Cortumelia, † 1342).⁴⁸ It is a huge work, even more extensive than Trevet’s, on which it seems to be based. Guglielmo suggests that Boethius speaks the language of the Platonists but without holding their opinion, for instance on knowledge as recollection of things known in a previous life.⁴⁹ This commentary too has hardly been studied. Less ambitious is the commentary by William Wheteley, preserved in three MSS, and completed in 1316 when he was rector of Yatesbury and master of Lincoln school. It is a simplified version of Trevet’s work for the use of his grammar school pupils.⁵⁰ Some sixty years later the Flemish schoolmaster Renier of St Truiden wrote a much more extensive work. It became the source not only for the ‘Ghent Boethius’ – a translation plus massive commentary in Dutch, printed in 1485 by Arend de Keyser in Ghent – but also for Arnoul Greban’s commentary dating from the mid fifteenth century; the latter also incorporated explanations from William of Conches and Trevet.⁵¹

A different kind of commentary was written by Denys the Carthusian (c.1470). It is written as a dialogue between master Denys and pupil Joannes, with the text divided into *articuli*. Denys explicitly says that his commentary aims at the religious and erudite men rather than schoolboys.⁵² The title is significant: *Enarrationes sive Commentaria*, by which Denys means that from this text one can distil philosophical and theological truths.⁵³ His Boethius commentary forms a kind of diptych with his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius, for in both works one of the central arguments is that the human mind, at its highest level, can perceive spiritual realities intuitively, without having recourse to phantasms. He explicitly sides here with the Cologne Albertists against Thomistic teaching.⁵⁴ In the famous passage from 5 pr. 4 Lady Philosophy distinguishes four different cognitive faculties, sense, imagination, reason and intelligence, and of the last it is said that it transcends the boundaries of the created world, gazing ‘on the simple Form with the unsullied sight of the mind’. While Boethius is clearly referring to the divine mode of cognition, Denys applies these words to the human intellect. Human intelligence can contemplate directly spiritual realities such as the divine ideas, and even the divinity itself. But while Denys uses Boethius here as a source for a mystic theology of an intuitive contemplation of God, he is well aware of the more problematic passages e.g. on the soul and its descent. He says he is not sure whether Boethius took the notion of the world soul in the same (pagan) way as Plato did. And if Augustine and Boethius endorsed the pre-existence of the soul, we should not follow them. Like his predecessors, Denys interprets the soul’s chariot in terms of God’s grace and spiritual aid.⁵⁵

Quaestiones commentaries

The survey so far suggests that Boethius' place in the curriculum was in the pre-university years, in the grammar schools and religious houses before students were sent to the university. But though there is no evidence that the *Consolation* belonged to the main stream of university teaching, it is mentioned in the records of some German universities of the later medieval period (Erfurt, Prague and Vienna), and also in a number of 'Introductions to Philosophy' (for example in a thirteenth-century guide to the Parisian Arts courses).⁵⁶ That it was frequently read in the universities in the later Middle Ages is also suggested by the existence of some *quaestiones* commentaries on the text. These commentaries consist of a series of questions, derived from the text of the *Consolation*, but often loosely connected to it.⁵⁷ Some of them are of a fairly simple nature, and seem to have served as vehicles for explaining basic points in logic, epistemology, natural philosophy and ethics to the young student. The format in answering a question basically follows scholastic patterns of argumentation, giving pro and contra arguments and quoting Aristotle as the main *auctoritas*. Of a different kind is Pierre d'Ailly's question-commentary, dating from about 1380, which consists of only two *quaestiones* on themes derived from the *Consolation* which were however also highly relevant in fourteenth-century discussions on the relationship between natural reason and faith.⁵⁸ The first consists of eight articles and discusses, using and quoting a number of scholastic authors, 'whether a philosopher, through philosophical enquiry, can achieve true knowledge of human beatitude by using natural reason'. Siding with Ockham on the question of beatific vision, his answer is that, using 'natural light' (*in naturali lumine*), it is probable that human beatitude can only consist in union of the rational soul with God in the life hereafter.⁵⁹ The second question consists of six articles and deals primarily with the question of whether the contingency of events can be reconciled with God's eternal and immutable foreknowledge of future events. The answer would surely be 'yes', but D'Ailly has apparently run out of time and does not develop his answer.⁶⁰ However, in this second question he deals with a number of related issues, often drawing on and quoting extensively from Gregory of Rimini. He discusses for instance whether God is the author of sin, the status of astrology, the nature of divine knowledge, the status of the past (and whether God can undo the past), and chance. Though hardly surprising, it is interesting to see Boethius featuring in a late medieval debate on divine knowledge, where he is quoted by Gregory of Rimini and by D'Ailly in support of the view that there is no succession, no before and after, and no divine ideas or other intermediaries in God by way of which he would know his creatures.⁶¹ One may deplore this use of Boethius, as Courcelle did in his influential study, but that is to miss an important point: far from showing the 'defects of the educational system of that time' ('les défauts de l'enseignement à cette époque'),⁶² it is a work which testifies to the importance allotted by scholastics to the *Consolation* as a primary source of some

important questions concerning divine knowledge and human free will.

Humanism

At the end of the medieval period humanist modes of reading and commenting on ancient texts began to prevail. This was to some extent a natural development from medieval glossing techniques, and humanists were often indebted to their medieval predecessors for traditional historical and linguistic explanations.⁶³ As we have seen, the *Consolation* had often been a school favourite (especially in the schools of North-Western Europe), and though the reading of it had never been limited to the grammar school – it had a widespread circulation among the laity and at the courts – this was certainly its principal place in the curriculum. We should therefore not expect too wide a gap between the medieval and humanist grammatical commentaries, especially in view of their close links to the schools. Humanist school teachers, however, laid greater emphasis on grammar and style, often neglecting philosophical issues. Their commentaries are often concatenations of notes on words and grammatical constructions, with occasional glosses on history and mythology. In Italy this process can already be seen in the commentaries of Pietro da Muglio († 1383), respected friend of Petrarch and Boccaccio, and, to a lesser extent, Giovanni Travesio (c.1411).⁶⁴ In Northern Europe there are two interesting examples of humanist commentators who will be briefly discussed here.

Badius Ascensius published his commentary, written for the schoolboys (*aetas imbecillior*) in 1498.⁶⁵ It is predominantly philological in nature, but it is not true, as has been claimed, that he discarded the medieval *interpretatio christiana*, and looked down on the work of Pseudo-Thomas, whose commentary often accompanied Badius' work in print.⁶⁶ Badius Ascensius often speaks with respect of Pseudo-Thomas, and even defends him on the latter's interpretation of the creation of the souls: when Pseudo-Thomas writes that souls are created daily in order to be infused into bodies, this should not be understood as meaning that they are created first and then united with bodies. Badius Ascensius refers to Augustine, but leaves the question to theologians for discussion. Boethius' 'returning fire' was glossed by Pseudo-Thomas as *charitas*, which is not absurd, Badius Ascensius writes, because it is only charity which can lead us to heaven. 'But because all the other things [in this metre] are couched in Platonic terms, this too can be understood in a Platonic way', and Badius Ascensius then proceeds to quote Virgil's famous lines on the spirit nourishing heaven, earth and all the rest (*Principio caelum ac terras camposque liquentes*, *Aeneid* 6.724–32) by way of parallel.

His commentary on 3.m9 is brief and passes over the reference to the pre-existence of soul. In his comment on 3.m11 he expresses some reservations about Boethius's adherence to the Platonic doctrine of knowledge as recollection in 3.m11, suggesting that Boethius does not say that Plato spoke the truth. The very words 'Plato's muse' already suggest that we must look for a different understanding of these words. Badius Ascensius

then gives the traditional explanation in terms of the soul's innate first principles from which potential knowledge can be actualised. Faced with Boethius's words 'I strongly agree with Plato' at the beginning of the [next section](#) (3 pr. 12), his answer is basically that Boethius did not accept Plato's argument in its entirety (*totum illud dictum Platonis*) but only something similar: namely that knowledge is based on first principles that are innate. Boethius' purpose was only to point out that, by the weight of grief, men could lose their knowledge of things which they had known previously.

The Dutch commentator Joannes Murnellius, whose work was published in 1514, bears even more clearly the stamp of the work of a humanistic grammar teacher.^{[67](#)} Like Badius Ascensius, he focuses on the grammar, style and terminology of Boethius, and shows a critical attitude to the transmission of the text, which sometimes leads to emendations. His range of quotations is wider than that of Badius Ascensius, and these quotations often serve to underline the high moral-proverbial value of the *Consolation*. Thus, far from functioning solely as literary adornments, these quotations helped to give the *Consolation* its place in a wider network of edifying works, which comprise not only pagan but also Christian literature (including the Bible), ancient as well as modern. They were the vehicles by which classical literature was delivered to youth, and they helped to convey the idea of the compatibility of the moral sayings in all these different works.

The belief in this compatibility is also reflected in Murnellius' reluctance to express strong opinions about Boethius' Platonism vis-à-vis his Christianity. He himself calls Plato's *Timaeus* a 'very beautiful book' and a 'very noble dialogue', and he notes that "O qui perpetua", by far the most beautiful and erudite poem, is almost exclusively derived from Plato's *Timaeus* by Boethius's admirable genius'.^{[68](#)} His commentary on these verses consists for a large part of long quotations from the *Timaeus* in the translation of Ficino (he quotes regularly from Ficino's works). At one point he addresses the reader saying that, although Plato's opinions on the world soul and on souls of lesser beings are not approved by all Christians, 'Boethian Philosophy follows Plato carefully and prudently', and that in turn he, Murnellius, 'will expound carefully the elements of Platonic doctrine'. Murnellius then gives a brief catalogue of opinions on the question of whether heavenly bodies are animated, which must confirm the same point, namely that Christian faith is neutral on this issue: witness the positions of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.^{[69](#)}

Only in 3.m11 does he criticise the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul as 'most vain' (*vanissimum*); Plato is said to have used 'the highest and extraordinary eloquence' (*summa et incredibili eloquentia*) when he spoke about the notion of knowledge as recollection, and the authority of Augustine ('of all mortals by far the wisest') is invoked, though not quoted, to refute this "Platonicum dogma".^{[70](#)} The notion of recollection of knowledge is explained along traditional lines: the soul would have known all the things it could possibly know, if the body had not weighed it down.^{[71](#)} And the Boethian 'seed of truth', remaining in the soul after embodiment, is described as a certain principle and starting point, from which man is suited to perceive truth and

acquire knowledge.⁷² Yet it is clear from the ample quotations from Plato and Platonic authors such as Ficino, as well as from the non-committal way in which they are often presented, that Murrnellius considers his role as commentator to consist primarily in clarifying philological points and providing sources (from which moral lessons could be drawn) rather than in giving verdicts on the doctrinal soundness of the opinions expressed in the text. Thus, in his comments on 5 pr. 2 where Boethius alludes to the pre-existence of souls, Murrnellius simply writes that this is taken from Plato, without trying to give it a Christian reading, and the same is true for his comments on other such passages (e.g. on 5 pr. 3).

After the Renaissance

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the range of texts was immensely wider than 500 years before, the *Consolation* was of course no longer one of the foundational texts in the republic of letters. Nevertheless, it remained a popular work which attracted learned commentaries from scholars such as Johannes Bernartius,⁷³ Theodorus Sitzmannus, Petrus Bertius and Renatus Vallinus. They apparently did not feel the urge to rescue Boethius from his association with pagan ideas. Occasionally, a critical note is struck, for instance when Sitzmannus admonishes the reader to peruse Arnobius' *Adversus nationes*, 'from which it can be learnt that the Platonic dogma [namely on knowledge as recollection] is not without absurdity',⁷⁴ but in general Boethius' Platonism is taken for granted without any criticism and its sources quoted in a neutral, non-committal way. Vallinus offers an historical argument why Boethius spoke of light chariots which brought souls down from the stars. He interprets these chariots as the souls' astral bodies. It would be amazing indeed, Vallinus writes, if this doctrine, which is so contrary to the Christian doctrine, would have influenced Christian thinkers and especially the 'Catholic philosophy of Boethius', were it not for the fact that only at the fifth synod, that is, many years after the death of Boethius, was it condemned alongside other errors of Origen (that is, at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553; but there had been earlier condemnations, which Vallinus does not mention). Alternatively, Boethius might simply have meant, following Themistius' interpretation of Plato's words, that the vehicle was nothing other than the soul's *ingenium*.⁷⁵ Vallinus must have been one of the first who interpreted this verse correctly in terms of astral bodies.⁷⁶

The presence of these heterodox opinions was the very reason why some thinkers felt attracted to the *Consolation*. Leibniz, who made a summary of Books 1 and 2 of the *Consolation*, wrote that his friend F. M. van Helmont 'had a special affection for this book [i.e. the *Consolation*] because he believes he can find traces of Pythagorean ideas in it'.⁷⁷ Van Helmont's friend, the cabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, was also interested in the *Consolation* for this reason, and translated it into German. But here, not for the first time, we enter into terra incognita. Much remains to be studied of the rich

and varied *Nachleben* of Boethius' masterpiece.⁷⁸

Notes

1. William of Conches [1999](#), 200, lines 31–4.
2. See [Wetherbee's](#) contribution to this volume.
3. But of course Latin commentaries exercised considerable influence on vernacular translations. See Minnis [1981](#) and some of the essays in Minnis [1987a](#), Minnis [1993](#) and Hoenen and Nauta [1997](#).
4. See *Codices Boethiani*, a project initiated by the late M. Gibson; three volumes have now appeared. For the early medieval period see the Oxford Boethius project at www.english.ox.ac.uk/boethius/index.html, and Troncarelli [1987](#). For Florentine MSS see Black and Pomaro [2000](#). Editions will be mentioned in due course.
5. Mohrmann [1976](#); Chadwick [1981](#), 249. See also [Shanzer's](#) contribution to this volume.
6. These themes are fully dealt with by [Sharples](#) in this volume.
7. I follow the summary of Godden (at the website mentioned in [n. 4](#) above), which is based on Tax [2002](#). See also Roti [1979](#); Beaumont [1981](#), 282–4.
8. Bibl. Apostolica Vaticana, lat. 3363; Courcelle [1967](#), 269–70; Troncarelli [1973](#), [1981](#), 137–96 (partial edition) and [1987](#), no. 133, pp. 269–70; Godden (at the website mentioned in [n. 4](#) above).
9. Eastwood [2002](#) (Calcidius, Martianus Capella, Plinius); White [1981](#) (Macrobius).
10. Beaumont [1981](#), 289–90; Bolton [1977](#).
11. Courcelle [1967](#), 277, quoting from Paris, BN lat. 13953, fol. 36r.
12. Silvestre [1952](#), 65.
13. Huygens [1954](#), 397.
14. On William's commentary see Nauta [1997a](#) and Nauta's introduction to William of Conches [1999](#), on which the following paragraphs are based.
15. Jeuneau [1957](#); Dronke [1974](#); Nauta in William of Conches [1999](#), xxxvi–xliii.
16. See William of Conches [1999](#), 174–5.
17. William of Conches [1999](#), 169. Gregory [1955](#), 133–74.
18. In his commentary on Macrobius, for example, William writes: 'The World Soul, according to some, is the Holy Spirit, which moves and gives life to all things on earth . . . but it is heretical to say that the Holy Spirit is "created", unless perchance the word "created" here means "sent"' (Southern [1979](#), 23; Latin text in Jeuneau's 1965 edition, 145 n. c); and in William of Conches

- (2006), 124.
- [19.](#) Dronke [1974](#), 52.
 - [20.](#) Gregory [1955](#), 15–16 and 123–74. Cf. Elford [1988](#).
 - [21.](#) I follow the summary given by Marenbon [1997](#), 167 and 189 n. 37.
 - [22.](#) William of Conches [1999](#), 303–4.
 - [23.](#) See William of Conches [1999](#), 347–9, and the discussion on pp. lxxvii–lxx.
 - [24.](#) Minio-Paluello [1954/1972](#). He does not exclude, however, a common source for Abelard and later scholars who used this expression. Yukio Iwakuma has kindly informed me about the occurrence of the term *incisus* in a twelfth-century *Peri hermenias* commentary in Orléans, Bibl. mun. 266 (a famous big collection of logical texts). Because this commentary can be associated with the school of Jocelin of Soissons, an adversary of Peter Abelard, Iwakuma suggests that the term *incisus* may have been introduced already before Abelard. He has also found the term in a few other contemporary sources.
 - [25.](#) For instance the Anonymous Venetianus (mid twelfth century?), quoted by Fredborg [1988](#), 88 critical app. See also the *testimonia* in Minio-Paluello's edition of the Latin text of the *Prior Analytics*, *Aristoteles Latinus* III.1–4, pp. 433–42. Iwakuma has an unpublished list of addenda to this.
 - [26.](#) On this version see Nauta's introduction to William of Conches [1999](#), lxxxiii–lxxxiv, and esp. Nauta [2004](#) for conclusive evidence that this is a non-authentic, thirteenth-century, revision.
 - [27.](#) For some (early) twelfth-century MSS see Troncarelli [1987](#), 276 (table) and the *Codices Boethiani* volumes ([n. 4](#) above). An interesting early twelfth-century glossed copy is discussed by Beaumont [1981](#) (Glasgow, Univ. Library, Hunterian U.5.19). Extracts from William's commentary were also translated into Italian. See Black and Pomaro [2000](#), 16 and 85–8 on Giandino di Carmignano (in Florence, BML, Pl. 23 dxt. 11).
 - [28.](#) Gibson and Smith [1995](#)–2001 I, 24–5; Courcelle [1967](#), 317–18.
 - [29.](#) E. T. Silk's edition, which is not a very critical one, has not been published, but a microfilm could be obtained through Mrs Silk. (I do not know the current situation.) Extracts from it (on 3.m9 and m11) have been published and translated (by A. B. Scott) in Minnis [1993](#). On Trevet's commentary see Lord [1992](#); Minnis and Nauta [1993](#); and Nauta [1997b](#) with further bibliography. What follows is based on Nauta [1997b](#) and [2002](#).
 - [30.](#) Ed. Silk in Minnis [1993](#), 53; transl. Scott *ibid.*, 79.
 - [31.](#) In William of Conches [1965](#), 213.
 - [32.](#) Ed. Silk in Minnis [1993](#), 712–13. I follow my account in Nauta [2002](#), 187–8.
 - [33.](#) Ed. Silk in Minnis [1993](#), 715.

- [34.](#) Scott's transl. in Minnis [1993](#), 75.
- [35.](#) See on the Italian MSS Black and Pomaro [2000](#), esp. 19–23. See also Gibson [1984/5](#), 73–5. On William Wheteley see Sebastian [1973](#); Minnis [1981](#), 354 n. 23; Courcelle [1967](#), 322–3; Kneepkens [2003a](#), 217–20 and [2004](#). On Tholomaeus see Courcelle [1967](#), 320–1 and Kneepkens [2003a](#), 230–2.
- [36.](#) Courcelle [1967](#), 317–32. This part of Courcelle's important work should be read with great caution. For a critique see Nauta [2002](#) and [2003](#).
- [37.](#) I am indebted to Carmen Olmedilla Herrero for sending me a typescript of her forthcoming critical edition in *Corpus Christianorum*, which will replace Terbille's partial edition [1972](#) (William of Aragon [1972](#)), which was based on only one MS.
- [38.](#) Two Old French translations, among which that of Jean de Meun, based their prologues on that of William of Aragon. Dronke [1994](#), 125 n. 40 doubts this priority. But, as Colker has shown, another work by William must be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century (Colker [1961](#), 50). The misreading was pointed out by Crespo [1973](#).
- [39.](#) William of Aragon, forthcoming, 190; William of Aragon [1972](#), 135.
- [40.](#) William of Aragon, forthcoming, 188 reading correctly *philosopho* with four MSS rather than *plato* with one MS (which was followed by Terbille, William of Aragon [1972](#), 132 and 180, and 'emended' to *Platoni*).
- [41.](#) William of Aragon, forthcoming, 332 (Proclus) and 310 (Hermes Trismegistus); William of Aragon [1972](#), 144–5. For other references to Plato and the 'Platonists' see Nauta [2002](#), 190–5.
- [42.](#) William of Aragon, forthcoming, 209.
- [43.](#) William of Aragon, forthcoming, 209.
- [44.](#) William of Aragon, forthcoming, 312, and [1972](#), 147.
- [45.](#) Kneepkens [2003a](#), 212; cf. 230–1 on the preface.
- [46.](#) Cf. Courcelle [1967](#), 320. On the link between Trevet and Italy, esp. Nicholas of Prato, see Dean [1948](#) and [1966](#).
- [47.](#) Courcelle [1967](#), 320.
- [48.](#) Kaeppli [1970–93](#) II, 97 lists eight MSS to which must be added Florence, BML, Pl. 76.56 (Black and Pomaro [2000](#), 31 and 50 n. 241).
- [49.](#) Courcelle [1967](#), 327–8, quoting a few brief passages from Paris, BN lat. 6773.
- [50.](#) Cambridge, Pembroke College 155, Oxford, Exeter College 28 and Oxford, New College 264; Gibson and Smith [1995–2001](#) I, 73–4, 227–8 and 237–8; Kneepkens [2004](#).
- [51.](#) On Greban see Courcelle [1967](#), 329–31 and Kneepkens [2003a](#), 226–30; on

- Renier see Pattin [1982](#), Angenent [1991](#) and Kneepkens [2003a](#), 220–6.
- [52.](#) Denys [1906](#), 89B. See Macken [1984](#) on this work.
- [53.](#) Cf. Courcelle [1967](#), 328; Macken [1984](#), 48.
- [54.](#) Denys [1906](#), 219C; cf. Macken [1984](#), 49 who also refers to Denys’ *Elementatio philosophica, seu compendium philosophiae*.
- [55.](#) Denys [1906](#), 379A.
- [56.](#) See Rashdall [1936](#), I, 447–8 (Prague), II, 243 n. 1 (Vienna); Palmer [1981](#), 380–1; Lafleur [1988](#), 148–9.
- [57.](#) Kneepkens [2003b](#) (on Wolfenbüttel, 79.4 Aug. Fol.) and [2004](#) (on Oxford, Exeter College 28).
- [58.](#) The first question is edited by Chappuis [1993](#). On the second question see Chappuis [1997](#). There is also another commentary (probably wrongly) ascribed to Pierre d’Ailly with the same implicit and explicit, but this is a running commentary on the text of the *Consolation*. See Chappuis-Baeriswyl [1984](#), 102–7 on Erfurt CA F 8, to which must be added Leiden BPL 133. This commentator mentions Trevet, and cites King Alfred via Trevet. The name of Petrarch is also mentioned.
- [59.](#) Chappuis [1993](#), 32*. A full analysis of the text is given by Chappuis in Part II of her edition. The prologue may be read as a first announcement of French humanism (p. 22).
- [60.](#) *ad cuius lectionis finem perueni antequam possem hunc articulum diffusius pertractare*, quoted by Chappuis [1997](#), 84–5 from D’Ailly’s autograph Paris, BN lat. 3122. My account here draws on her article.
- [61.](#) Boethius meant to say, Gregory writes, that future events are present to God’s eternal mind, not in their essence (*actualiter*) but according to his mode of knowing (quoted by Chappuis [1997](#), 81 n. 41). On scholastic debates on divine knowledge see Hoenen [1993](#).
- [62.](#) Courcelle [1967](#), 324 and 325: ‘De Boèce seul il n’est plus question’.
- [63.](#) This is a large subject. For some excellent treatments see Minnis and Scott (with Wallace) [1991](#), esp. 1–36 and chapters 8–9; Moss [1996](#), e.g. 69.
- [64.](#) Vescovini [1958](#); Frati [1920](#); Courcelle [1967](#), 326–7; and Black in Black and Pomaro [2000](#), 25–7.
- [65.](#) On Badius Ascensius’ commentary see Nauta [2002](#), 195–9 where the relevant passages are cited from *Duplex commentatio ex integro reposita atque recognita in Boetium de consolatione philosophica et de disciplina scolastica*, Lyons 1511.
- [66.](#) Courcelle [1967](#), 332; Grafton [1981](#), 413.

- [67.](#) Murmellius [1847](#). I shall quote the reprint in *Patrologia Latina* 63: 878–1074.
On Murmellius’ work see Nauta [1999](#) and [2002](#), 199–201; cf. also idem [2003](#).
- [68.](#) *PL* 63: 1025; cf. 891D.
- [69.](#) *PL* 63: 1029C/D. His catalogue of opinions is indebted to Paulo Cortesi’s
Commentary on the *Sentences*, Book 2, dist. 4, which he quotes (1030A).
- [70.](#) *PL* 63: 1036–7 (the quotation on Augustine is on 1024C).
- [71.](#) *PL* 1036B, following Wis 1:9, which was often quoted at this place by
commentators.
- [72.](#) *PL* 63: 1036C.
- [73.](#) On this commentary see Belli [2005](#).
- [74.](#) Boethius [1823](#) (= editio ‘Vulpiana’), 515–16.
- [75.](#) Boethius [1823](#) (= editio ‘Vulpiana’), 509–10.
- [76.](#) For a modern commentary along the same lines see Gruber [1978](#), 284–5.
- [77.](#) Letter from Leibniz to Sophie Charlotte, quoted in Coudert [1995](#), 130–1. On
the question of Leibniz’ relations with Van Helmont see also Brown [1997](#).
- [78.](#) See Nauta [1996](#) for a discussion of the ‘Cartesian’ commentary by Pierre Cally,
published in 1680 (reprinted in *PL* 64).

12 The *Consolation* and medieval literature

Winthrop Wetherbee

The early Middle Ages

Though the *Consolation* was evidently little read through most of the seventh and eighth centuries,¹ clear evidence of a literary appreciation of Boethius begins as early as Alcuinobelus († 804). The *Consolation* is the inspiration for the vision of philosophy as the culmination of study of the Liberal Arts boldly set forth in the dialogue *De vera philosophia* which prefaces his *De grammatica*.² His moving poem “O mea cella” turns on a plangent echo of the opening meter of the *Consolation*,³ and the letters that promulgate his cultural program contain frequent quotations. Toward the middle of the ninth century Lupus of Ferrières produced a *libellus* identifying the different meters which imbue Boethius’ dialogue with *musicae suavitatis dulcedo*,⁴ and Sedulius Scottus’ *De rectoribus christianis* alternates prose with verse in a range of meters comparable to Boethius’ own. The poet-monk WalDRAM of St. Gallen could find no better way to express his grief over the death of a fellow monk than by incorporating into his lament the first two couplets of the opening meter of the *Consolation*, and Boethius’ “elegy” is echoed repeatedly in ninth-century poetry.⁵

Further evidence for the literary *fortune* of the *Consolation* in the early medieval period is provided by the surviving translations, and these are inseparable from the evolution of the commentary tradition discussed elsewhere in this volume. The tenth-century translation by Notker of St. Gall, clearly designed as an aid for students reading the Latin text, is equally a commentary; the translation proceeds phrase by phrase, offering first the Latin (often rearranged to clarify syntax), followed by the Old High German rendering, and interpolating vernacular glosses which define or interpret Latin words and explain classical references. Many of these are drawn from the anonymous late ninth-century Latin commentary which seems to have inaugurated the rich tradition of Boethian studies at Notker’s monastery, St. Gall, and again their purpose is clearly to make the Latin text more accessible.⁶

Study of the *Consolation* is well attested in late Anglo-Saxon England.⁷ The Old English translation produced under the direction of King Alfred (Alfred 1899) toward the end of the ninth century was clearly intended for a non-Latinate audience, and anticipates the widespread concern of the later Middle Ages to disseminate the *Consolation* in vernacular versions. Alfred complains of having to use classical fables rather than biblical

stories as parables, and he treats the argument of the *Consolation* with a certain freedom. Drawing on a tradition which can be traced to the earliest *vitae*, he declares that Boethius had indeed committed treason, sending secret letters to Constantinople in a desperate attempt to save Rome from the heresy and tyranny of Theodoric.⁸ And he diverges in the later books to counter Boethius' lurking fatalism and emphasize the justice of the order of things. Aelfric's vernacular homilies draw on Alfred, and copies continued to circulate into the twelfth century and even beyond: the fourteenth-century commentator Nicholas Trevet seems to have managed to decipher Alfred's English.⁹ Like Notker's, Alfred's version incorporates numerous glosses, but these can be referred to no single commentary tradition, and for that very reason suggest that an accumulated knowledge from shared traditions had by Alfred's time become generally accessible.¹⁰

The fragmentary eleventh-century Provençal *Boeci* (Anonymous 1963) is a popularizing adaptation rather than a translation. All that survives of the *Consolation* proper is a free rendering of the first *metrum* and the ensuing entry of Philosophy, and these are grafted onto a biography which, while it draws on the Latin *vitae*, makes Boethius not only a noble but a preacher, whose attempt to admonish "Teiric," here a militant atheist, leads to his imprisonment on false charges. His opening lament shows him still engaged in learned pursuits, unlike his counterpart in the *Consolation*, and before the appearance of the *domna* he has already come to see the vanity of worldly pursuits and examined his own conscience.¹¹ The narrative is filled with echoes of the Bible as well as patristic and medieval homiletic writings, and while the author draws on the commentary tradition, he at times completely ignores it. The images on Philosophy's robe, a Greek pi and theta and the ladder which connects them, traditionally read as defining the hierarchy of knowledge that ascends from practical to theoretical understanding, are here made the basis for an elaborate allegory of moral-spiritual ascent which has no counterpart in either the *Consolation* itself or the commentary tradition. Only a single manuscript preserves this fragment, and it is clearly an isolated phenomenon.

Later translations

The earliest French version of the *Consolation*, the Anglo-Norman *Roman de Philosophie* of Simund de Freine, canon of Hereford cathedral, appeared at the end of the twelfth century (Simund de Freine 1909). Like the *Boeci* it is as much adaptation as translation, and anticipates the appropriation of Boethius by later poets in its emphasis on the personal experience of the clerk-narrator. Simund prefaces his highly selective 1,500-line version of the *Consolation* itself with a brief narrative of his own sufferings at the hands of Fortune, and after declaring himself first confounded, then convinced by Philosophy's teachings about fate and providence, ends by asking, with an un-Boethian lack of guile, whether a man might change that which God has foreseen. Philosophy

urges him to live well and pray.

Though a dozen French translations of the *Consolation* were made between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the first widely influential version was the prose rendering by Jean de Meun, *Li livres de Confort de Philosophie*, completed around 1300 (Jean de Meun [1952](#)). Jean's translation is more faithful to the *sentence* of the Latin than any previous version, but incorporates information from the commentators, most often an augmented version of William of Conches, as well as original additions of his own.^{[12](#)} Jean addresses a non-Latinate audience, and renders Boethius' Latin sentences *plainement*, substituting simpler and more straightforward constructions for their compact syntax. His preface, addressed to Philip IV, sets the pattern for his successors, emphasizing repeatedly the value of the *Consolation* as a guide to distinguishing true from false goods, and praising Boethius as a champion of the common weal in the face of the tyranny of Theodoric.

Early in his massive continuation of the *Roman de la Rose* (1270s), Jean had declared that a translation of the *Consolation* would be a great service to laymen,^{[13](#)} and his version clearly aims to accomplish this task. Nonetheless the author of the most popular French translation, the *Livre de Boece de Consolacion* (Anonymous [2004](#)), evidently produced in the 1350s, carries still further the simplifying of the Latin begun by Jean, portions of whose version he found "too hard to understand." Boethius' meters are rendered into octosyllabic couplets, often dropping classical allusions and learned details in the process. Like all medieval versions the *Livre* incorporates into the text material from the commentary tradition, and by the 1380s it had been augmented with a set of glosses of its own, drawn from a version of the commentary of William of Conches, and the great majority of the more than sixty known manuscripts preserve the glossed version. In general the glosses aim to explain Boethius' language and identify people mentioned, and where they address the philosophical substance of the *Consolation*, it is in order to summarize and simplify, rather than analyze, Boethius' argument.^{[14](#)}

Though Dante remarks in the *Convivio* that the *Consolation* was "not known to many" in the Italy of his day,^{[15](#)} eight Italian translations were made over the course of the fourteenth century.^{[16](#)} Some are scrupulous in preserving the structure of the original, but all edit the text freely, simplifying or simply omitting passages of dense argumentation, especially in Book 5, ignoring classical allusions, or even altering Boethius' classical *exempla* to emphasize a moral point. (Orpheus in his excessive grief for Eurydice becomes a comic figure; Ulysses is reduced to a beast by Circe together with his crew.)

Chaucer's Middle English *Boece*, written in the early 1380s, was almost certainly produced with a copy of Jean de Meun's *Livres de Confort* at his elbow, along with the very full commentary of Nicholas Trevet and probably a text of the *Consolation* itself that included glosses in the tradition of Remigius.^{[17](#)} It is a more consistently literal translation than Jean's, and clearly aims to engage the Latin as closely and thoughtfully as English will allow. There is no evidence that the *Boece* was commissioned, but while

Chaucer's reasons for undertaking his translation may have been largely personal,¹⁸ it is clear that he regarded the vernacularizing of this authoritative text as a serious undertaking, and that it was received as such. As with the *Livres de Confort* and the *Livre de Boece*, there exist manuscripts which present Chaucer's English and the Latin original together, and in some the English text is accompanied by Latin glosses.

The Boethian tradition in medieval poetry

Making the *Consolation* accessible to a vernacular readership was clearly seen as important, but it hardly suggests the importance of Boethius for medieval literature. Whereas the translations and their borrowings from the commentary tradition emphasize the positive content, ethical and spiritual, of Boethius' dialogue, the major poets who appropriate the *Consolation* to their own purposes tend to respond to its existential quality, its psychological complexity, and the difficulties Boethius' Prisoner encounters in his attempts to assimilate Philosophy's teaching. Jean de Meun emphasizes this aspect of the dialogue in the preface to his translation, noting that the role of the Prisoner is largely to give voice to "his woes and the causes of his woes," and, as Peter Dronke has observed, his struggle to get beyond these preoccupations, to achieve a genuine realization of Philosophy's Neoplatonic vision, is the *Consolation*'s essential theme.¹⁹

From the late eleventh century forward dialogue, as a vehicle for exploring spiritual psychology and dramatizing the quest for understanding, becomes an increasingly important ingredient in literature of all sorts, from emergent vernacular romance to the innumerable Latin *Streitgedichte* or debate poems.²⁰ Perhaps the most ambitious and influential works of twelfth-century Latin literature are two *prosimetra*, the *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Silvestris (1147) and the *De planctu Naturae* of Alan of Lille (1160–70). Both can be read as rewritings of the *Consolation*, and, as I will show, Alan in particular had a formative influence on the "Boethian" tradition in later vernacular literature. Before tracing this important chain of influence it is necessary to recognize features of the *Consolation* which are not apparent from the work of commentators and translators.

The *Consolation* is usually seen as solidly grounded in the tradition of late antique Latin educational writing, a repertory of moral and epistemological dilemmas with the appropriate solution for each. Boethius' distillation of Platonic and Stoic themes into a narrative of intellectual and spiritual evolution would seem to conform perfectly to the views of critics like Macrobius, for whom the *mythos* of mental pilgrimage constitutes the latent content of virtually all classic literature, or Martianus Capella, in whose allegorical *De nuptiis* this same Neoplatonist myth wholly displaces the traditional *fabula* of war or voyage.

But the *Consolation* is more profoundly dialogic than its Neoplatonic models, whose idealism it both invokes and challenges.²¹ From the outset the Prisoner's sense of wrong

and his need to attain a rational perspective on his situation are in conflict, and though he comes at length to recognize that happiness depends on a belief in providence, the process is punctuated by doubts and anxieties which leave their mark on the philosophical themes of the dialogue. Throughout the early books, moreover, the delineation of nature, providence, and cosmic law is pervaded by ambiguities and contradictory formulations, and we are made continually aware of the tension between the relentless movement of Philosophy's argument and the doubts of her all-too-human interlocutor, whose view of the natural order is clouded by a sense of powerlessness.

Nature and the laws of nature, Boethius suggests, bear an ambiguous relation to human behavior. On the one hand the *machina mundi* is a paradigm of order and continuity which humanity must seek to comprehend: by so doing we participate in the divine wisdom and become as gods (C 3.10). But this cosmic machine is fuelled by an irresistible *amor*, the catalyst of those drives and appetites whereby humanity sustains and perpetuates its existence; as such it imposes a kind of determinism that exploits our natural "intention" toward self-preservation, and binds us to the cycle of nature (3.11).

The contradictions to which these two views of man's relation to the natural order give rise appear in the complex second *metrum* of Book 3, which shows *Natura potens* "providentially" sustaining the life of the universe by imposing her unbreakable law:

Quantas rerum flectat habenas
Natura potens, quibus immensum
Legibus orbem provida servet
Stringatque ligans inresoluto
Singula nexu . . .

How powerful Nature plies the reins of creation, by what laws she sees to the preservation of the universe and draws all things together, binding them with an unbroken bond . . .

The power of natural law is then illustrated by the images of captive lions, a caged bird, and a sapling trained to bend as it grows. Curiously, in each example the power corresponding to nature's providential discipline is represented by the image of an *artificial* constraint, imposed by men and at odds with an impulse to self-fulfillment whose naturalness is clearly implied by Boethius' language and imagery. Only when tamed lions throw off their bonds and turn on their master do they express their natural bent: they "recall themselves," *meminere sui*, a Platonic characterization of the recovery of one's proper nature. No amount of pampering can efface the captive bird's instinctive desire for freedom, a common image for the Platonic soul's memory of its origin and true home. Force can make a young tree bend its top downward. But should the hand that compels it release its grasp, the tree will stand erect once again and "behold the sky" – still another recurring Boethian image for self-realization. In all three cases language that would seem to express the very essence of Boethius' Neoplatonism, its visionary epistemology and its lofty notion of the origins and destiny of the soul, is set at odds with

images illustrative of a coercive and constraining *natura* which is yet presented as providential, and as ensuring that each created thing realizes its proper end, within the larger scheme. The poem's diction expresses the dilemma: *remisit*, used of the hand that releases the young tree and allows it to stand erect, recalls Nature's firm grip on the reins in the poem's opening image, and echoes the *remiserit* of the famous hymn to cosmic love that ends Book 2 (C 2.m8.16). The granting of free rein there is a hypothesis; it would lead to the dissolution of the cosmic *machina*. But the parallel diction and imagery point to the irony in Boethius' representation of cosmic order: the divine *amor* that tames the elements and the *natura provida* that gives orientation to the lives of creatures seem equally opposed to individual self-realization.

In the prose that follows Philosophy draws a positive moral from the lyric (C 3.3.1):

You too, oh earthly creatures, dream of your origin, though you can hardly imagine it, and you look toward that happiness which is your proper goal with some notion (*qualicunque cogitatione*), however imperceptive, of what it is. Natural intention draws you toward the true good, but manifold error turns you away from it.

But it is hard to know how decisive a function to assign to this "intention," and the "manifold error" that resists it is all too apt to be a function of the larger natural order. Man's tenuous sense of his divine origins and destiny can seem little more than a fantasy, at the mercy of the disorienting power of appetite and random attraction. How far our reading of the *Consolation* as a whole should be influenced by this element of irresolution is beyond the scope of this chapter, but anxiety and doubt are an important part of the dialogue. Boethius' response to the Plotinian ideal of human perfectibility that structures Philosophy's argument is darkened by a lurking awareness of something like original sin, and in the major works that constitute the Boethian tradition man's relations with nature become an important consideration.

A pioneering Boethian exercise is the *De querimonia et conflictu carnis et spiritus* of Hildebert of Lavardin, written toward the end of the eleventh century, and perhaps the first wholly original work inspired by the *Consolation*.²² It is noteworthy both in its skillful use of the *prosimetrum* form, and in that it assumes an audience sufficiently familiar with Boethius to appreciate a parody of his dialogue. Hildebert's Philosophy-figure is a dishevelled, high-strung *domina* who is eventually identified as the poet's inner self, but who first complains bitterly about a dwelling-place where she is exposed to the effects of his worldly preoccupations, and, like Boethius' Philosophy, rebukes him for having failed to recognize her. When Hildebert blames the *domina* herself for their common plight, since he is but her slave or instrument, she responds with a long discourse on human nature and its history and the lesson that the betterment of their situation depends on his willingness to obey her.

The verse *Elegia* of the Latin poet Arrigo da Settimello (1193) (Arrigo da Settimello [1949](#)) was widely read throughout the medieval period and translated twice into Italian. It begins with a diatribe against Fortune, who then appears and engages in an irresolvable

debate with the poet before giving way to *Phronesis* or Philosophy, a lady “more Solomonic than Solomon,” who provides him with an extended lesson in morality, Christian and Stoic, before departing for Paris, the site of her “palace.” Here too there are hints of parody: the poet seems often on the point of hysteria, so that even Fortune finds it necessary to offer him stabilizing counsel, and Philosophy repeatedly makes us aware of her limited trust in his powers of understanding.

By far the most influential Latin imitation of Boethius, and the first to emulate the full range of the poetry and vision of the *Consolation*, is the *De planctu naturae* of Alan of Lille.²³ The problem posed by the power of Boethius’ *natura potens* is the very theme of the *De planctu*, a dialogue between the poet and the goddess *Natura* centered on the problems of communication between them. The goddess, who commiserates with the poet over the plight of sinful humankind, and lectures him on the disastrous consequences of abandoning her laws, is very much the cosmic legislator of the *Consolation*, but she is also a Philosophy-figure, formidable in her refusal to acknowledge the chronic frailty that renders humanity incapable of a fully integrated response to the appeal of her beauty and power. What she asks of humankind is what Philosophy had asked of Boethius: a return to that primordial dignity which consists in a full understanding of the nature of things, and active participation in the natural continuum defined by her laws. The twofold challenge gives rise to similar contradictions: fallen humanity is psychologically unable to both “possess” Nature, in the sense of embracing and comprehending her cosmic significance, and simultaneously fulfill its self-preservative and procreative role in the natural economy.

The dialogue of the *De planctu* consists mainly of Nature’s attempt to reindoctrinate the poet with a sense of the place of human art and sexuality in the cosmic scheme, but as she proceeds she is forced to acknowledge that man’s dislocation involves more than willfulness, and exceeds her power to control, an admission which undermines the theory of poetic language essential to her appeal. Noting her use of myth in condemning human behavior, the poet asks why humanity alone should be condemned, since mythology shows the gods committing similar excesses. Nature responds that such stories about the gods, where not simply scurrilous, are mere *fabulae*, an elegant overlay that veils deeper, philosophical meanings. But as the dialogue proceeds she is forced to acknowledge that these surface fables are as true to the nature of things as any inner meaning they may harbor. In spite of herself she reveals the sorry history of her betrayal by Venus and Cupid, and it becomes clear that natural desire itself, as well as the language of myth in which she seeks to represent it, are pervaded by contradiction, their sacred purpose inseparable from a long history of intrigue, betrayal, and violence.

Seeking to deal with the impasse thus defined, Nature summons her “priest,” Genius, the cosmic agent of the orderly union of form and matter, and the principle of procreative human sexuality, who excommunicates from Nature’s “Church” all who refuse to obey her sexual laws. This is clearly an unsatisfying resolution, and it is significant that the introduction of Genius marks the end of the dialogue: the discord between Nature and humanity, it is suggested, cannot be resolved by natural or rational means. The shift

recalls the final silencing of Boethius' Prisoner, early in Book 5 of the *Consolation*, after he has vented his frustration at the uncertainty of his freedom of will within a scheme governed by divine Providence. But the problem in the *De planctu* is complicated, as Nature's mythic discourse obliquely acknowledges, by history. To introduce Genius, an essentially subliminal principle, is to acknowledge that the "unnatural" element in human life is not just a failure of rational knowledge or moral will, but a chronic condition of the human psyche.

Amid the anarchy of human desire there remains, however, a vestigial impulse to regeneration. Degenerate mankind pursues perverse desires while allowing naturally fulfilling kisses to "lie untasted on virgin lips," but the poet can still imagine enjoying such kisses, and making himself immortal through them:

Spiritus exiret ad basia, deditus ori
Totus et in labiis luderet ipse sibi,
Ut dum sic moriar, in me defunctus, in illa
Felici vita perfruar, alter ego.

My spirit, wholly committed to my mouth, would issue forth in response to such kisses, and delight itself in playing about her lips; hence, though I should thus die, once dead unto myself I should enjoy a happy life, a new state of being, in her.

This intuition of an ideal significance in feminine beauty is dislocated within the argument of the *De planctu*, like humanity's vestigial sense of its inherent divinity in the *Consolation*. The blending of the erotic and the religious in these lines is a *tertium quid*, a synthesis resembling the primal integration of values that Nature seeks to restore, yet wholly "other" relative to the economy of Nature. But the lines are not just an isolated fantasy. We may here see Alan, and in his person the Latin literary and pedagogical tradition, acknowledging a new literary mode, a new way of speaking about love that is for him the most striking property of the vernacular courtly poetry of the twelfth century.

Alan has made plain that the betrayal of Nature by anarchic desire is simultaneously an invalidation of his allegorical hermeneutic: Nature and the cosmic harmony for which she stands can still inspire awe, but they constitute an impossible standard for the corrupted sensibility of fallen humanity. Nature and humankind, Nature and that "Genius" who figures humanity's inherent capacity for renewal, must communicate across the barrier of the Fall. But that they can so communicate suggests a way of transcending their cosmological relationship and evading the mythological disasters which have corrupted this relationship. This rapport corresponds to the "new being," the *felix vita* imagined by the erotic idealist of the *Proemium*, and shows Alan tentatively assigning to the aesthetic of courtly poetry a role corresponding to that of the now discredited aesthetic of the Neoplatonist tradition.

The intrusion of "courtly love" into the domain of Latinate *auctoritas* is carried further in the *Roman de la Rose*, which strongly invokes the Boethian tradition but

makes plain the impossibility of any real dialogue between that tradition and the courtly sensibility of the poem's lover-narrator. Guillaume de Lorris (c. 1230) begins by portentously introducing the name of Macrobius, and defines a crucial turning point in the career of his lover-hero by making him reenact the classical myth of Narcissus, yet never provides an authoritative basis for developing the moral-spiritual reading of his experience that these allusions to ancient authors would seem to imply. The Lover's quest clearly has its archetypal, Edenic, aspect, but it is also largely an erotic fantasy. The experience that claims him at the fountain of Narcissus is preconditioned by his fascination with his own adolescent awareness of desire, and though it is also the means through which he is first drawn to attach his feelings to something outside himself, his failure to win the Rose leaves him, like Boethius' Prisoner, morbidly preoccupied with his own misfortune.

In Jean de Meun's continuation (c. 1270) the sexual *telos* of Guillaume's tentative quest becomes the dominant concern, and the resurgence of a "naturalistic" view of desire is marked by a reversion to a Latin tradition that is unmistakably Boethian. The courtly tone and structure of Guillaume's vision are disrupted, and the narrative is recast on the model of the dialogues of Boethius and Alan. Jean begins by subjecting Guillaume's *amant* to the discourse of *Raison*, who plays the role of Philosophy and attempts to dissuade him from his fruitless love-quest by offering herself as a worthier object of love. The Lover demurs, citing among other difficulties the coarseness of *Raison*'s use of the myth of the castration of Saturn by Jupiter to explain the peculiar relation of human love to the natural economy. *Raison*'s defense is based on the radically Platonist argument that all things derive from God, and she echoes the Nature of the *De planctu*, arguing that the myth of Saturn's castration must be read allegorically, as one of those *integumentum* that conceal an acceptable philosophical truth. But the Lover cannot understand the terms in which *Raison* appeals to him – what he refers to as her "Latin" (5810); he is too involved by the existential urgency of his situation to apprehend it allegorically, and at the same time his protest against *Raison*'s down-to-earth sexual language shows him incapable of a stable, "natural" relation to language. His dilemma constitutes Jean's critique of the courtly aesthetic, its liability to reduction to the level of mere euphemism and decoration. Jean's lover is neither fish nor fowl: Nature and courtliness are at odds in him, leaving him cut off both from the ideal world to which the "Latin" of the *poeta platonius* gives access and from the natural continuum of desire and procreation which the myth of Saturn in its historical aspect announces.

In the narrative which follows the Lover's rejection of *Raison*, the God of Love assumes the ascendancy, finally drawing Nature and Genius themselves into the action. It is the exhortation of Genius, preaching Nature's "gospel of procreation" to the "barons" of the God of Love, that precipitates the battle which ends with the impregnation of the Rose. Genius claims the authority of Nature for his preaching, but he preaches in vestments provided by Cupid and Venus, and his audience are the forces of unregenerate desire; the net effect of his sermon is a wholly subliminal appeal to sexual appetite. His message, moreover, is that procreation at the bidding of Nature is the sole and necessary

means to the attainment of the joys of Paradise – a doctrine that confirms both the archetypal implications of the Lover’s initiatory experience in Guillaume’s quasi-paradisaal garden of *Deduit* and Genius’ own role as a vestige of the primal dignity of unfallen humankind, but remains oblivious to the historical causes of humanity’s present disordered state. In effect the love-cult of courtly poetry and the cosmic idealism of the Latin tradition have in Jean’s development of the *Rose* become terms in a broader dialectic, subject to the law of a “nature” which has lost the power of direct appeal exerted by Alan’s goddess, and reassumed some of the dark complexity of the Boethian *natura potens*.

The *Rose* stands at the head of the long French tradition of the *dit amoureux*, dialogic poems in which a role much like that of the Boethian Prisoner is assumed by a lover-narrator or his surrogate, helpless in the face of the forces, social and natural, which prevent the realization of his desire, advised and consoled by an authority figure. Perhaps the most influential of the *dits* of Guillaume de Machaut, the great master of the form, is his overtly Boethian *Remede de Fortune*; but all of his love-visions contain Boethian elements, and the famous *Prologue* to his collection of poems, in which Nature is shown endowing Guillaume with the art of poetry, is an affirmation of his adherence to the Boethian tradition.²⁴

Machaut provided the model for Chaucer’s early poems, but Chaucer’s debt to the Boethian tradition is more extensive and more complex. Jean de Meun is probably the single author to whom his poetry owes most, but Boethius himself is his exemplar of moral seriousness, and reminiscences of the *Consolation* are perceptible in virtually any reflective passage of his poetry. The *Parliament of Fowls* (1380?) is an extended reflection on the Boethian tradition and its bearing on Chaucer’s poetics. Though its direct borrowings from Boethius are insignificant, it is deeply Boethian in its use of Neoplatonist cosmological allegory, debate, and lyric to represent the confusing experience of a narrator for whom, as for the Prisoner of the *Consolation*, human desire seems to be chronically at odds with the cosmic love that preserves the harmony of the natural order. As such it anticipates central concerns of Chaucer’s major poems.

In Book 2 of the *Consolation* Philosophy speaks for a time in the voice of Fortune, affirming the absolute power of this “goddess” in earthly life. Tragedy itself, she declares, is nothing more than a staged lamenting of her ruthlessly destructive effects (C 2.2). The tragedy of fortune was a powerful idea for Chaucer,²⁵ and in his most deeply Boethian works, *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight’s Tale*, he attempts to give it literary form. Both works are commonly dated to the 1380s, and it is reasonable to assume that their composition coincided with, or followed closely upon, Chaucer’s translation of the *Consolation* itself. In the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, a sustained and largely ironic parallelism with the themes and structure of the *Consolation* is basic to the poem’s meaning. Though Pandarus is obviously a very different teacher from the Philosophy with whom he is allusively compared at several points, both appeal strongly to the inherent idealism of their disciples. As Boethius is led to a vision of the universe as pervaded and sustained by God’s benevolence in the central portions of *Consolation*, so

Troilus' experience climaxes in the consummation of a love which seems to participate in the divine harmony, and which he celebrates in a song which is a version of *Consolation* 2.m8. But in both cases this climactic experience is only the midpoint on a line which leads to an engagement with new problems. Troilus, after his separation from a Criseyde who is in many respects an embodiment of Boethian Fortune, soliloquizes in explicitly Boethian terms on just those questions about free will and determinism that vex Boethius in the later books of the *Consolation* (*Troilus and Criseyde* 4.956–1078; cf. C 5.3); and though the pressure of subjective feeling inhibits his understanding, he is posthumously “consoled” by a vision of the blindness and misery of the world in comparison with the felicity seemingly implied by the larger order of things. But like Boethius' Prisoner, Troilus attains only an uncertain realization of this felicity. In his final laughter there is a hint of bitterness, even self-mockery, which suggests that philosophical understanding has left the finest elements in his nature unfulfilled, and which provides a foil to the religious affirmations with which *Troilus and Criseyde* concludes.

In the *Knight's Tale* the challenge posed by the tragic possibilities of life to the ordering and affirming power of philosophy is again set off by a largely Boethian structure. The action expands from an initial focus on the fortunes of love and war to the point at which, with Arcite's death, human life seems to be at the mercy of random natural forces. In the somber final stages Theseus, assuming the role of philosopher-king, seeks to reaffirm the benevolence that governs all things by invoking the Boethian image of the chain of cosmic love. The dignity and beauty of the speech temper our knowledge that its force derives wholly from the need to rationalize the fact of our mortality, and that its optimism is the Athenians' sole bulwark against the pressure of despair in the face of the inexplicable and seemingly pointless destruction of youthful virtue. We are left, like Boethius' Prisoner, acutely aware of the tension between the need to affirm a providential order and the seemingly inevitable thwarting of human happiness in the world.

The *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower (1390) (John Gower [1900–1](#)) is framed by a distinctly Boethian concern with the bases of social order, and from the outset its argument is pervaded by Boethian reminders of the elusive character of the stability it seeks to affirm. Moral and political judgments alternate with reflections on the nature of the world and humanity's relation to it which call the judge's assertions into question by suggesting that the influence of nature on human life is essentially destabilizing. Here we may observe Gower balancing philosophical authority with existential doubt, and exploring the implications of this Boethian interplay for his critique of his own society and its values. Because the *Confessio* is less well known than the work of Chaucer and Jean de Meun, I would like to consider its thoroughgoing Boethianism in some detail.

As a rule the contradictory perspectives Gower provides are first expressed obliquely, in the dense syntax of the Latin verses which mark each division of the poem, then spelled out discursively by the vernacular text. But the essential dialectic is expressed first in English, in a brief and deceptively simple characterization of the Prologue's purpose:

What wysman that it underfongeth,
He schal draw into remembrance
The fortune of this worldes chance,
The which noman in his persone
May knowe, but the god al one.

(Prol. 68–72)

The contrast between the finite viewpoint of the human individual “in his persone” and the all-embracing vision of God, “al one,” is a concise formulation of the problem of perspective that creates so much anxiety for Boethius’ Prisoner in the later books of the *Consolation*, as he grapples with the question of human freedom. And in Gower’s text as in Boethius’ own the problem is not clearly resolved. It is the paradox here enunciated, a wisdom that confounds the wise, that links the Prologue to the *Confessio* proper, whose “end,” Gower prophetically suggests, will be to express the similarly confusing power of love.

The main body of the Prologue is then introduced by six Latin couplets which reflect on the decline of human life from an earlier state of harmony:

Tempus preteritum presens fortuna beatum
Linqvit, et antiquas vertit in orbe vias.
Progenit veterem concors dileccio pacem,
Dum facies hominis nuncia mentis erat:
Legibus unicolor tunc temporis aura refulsit,
Iusticie plane tuncque fuere vie.
Nuncque latens odium vultum depingit amoris,
Paceque sub ficta tempus ad arma tegit.
Instar et ex variis mutabile Cameliontis
Lex gerit, et regnis sunt nova iura novis:
Climata quae fuerant solidissima sicque per orbem
Solvuntur, nec eo centra quietis habent.

The fortune of the present day has forsaken the blessed life of the past, and diverted the world from its ancient course. Harmonious love produced peace in days of old, when a man’s face declared the state of his mind. In that time the wholly “golden” character of life shone forth in laws, then the paths of justice were easy to follow.

Now lurking hatred presents a loving face, and in a feigned state of peace the world makes ready for war. The law in its inconsistency behaves like the ever-changing Chameleon, and for new kingdoms there are new kinds of law. And so throughout the world boundaries that had seemed wholly firm are dissolved, and no longer possess a centered stability.

(Prol. ii)

If a line like “the fortune of this worldes chance,” in the English passage quoted above, is formidably dense, the phrase *antiquas vertit in orbe vias* in the first of these Latin couplets is more or less untranslatable, and virtually obliterates any distinction between the “orb” of the world and fortune’s wheel. The lines that follow recall lyrics in Boethius’ *Consolation* that contrast the Golden Age with the violence and treachery of the modern world, and, more broadly, the stable concord of the universe at large with the instability of human life. The emphasis here is seemingly on the failure of human institutions, but the passage ends by declaring that the once firmly fixed *climata* of the world itself have been unmoored, and now lack a stable center, language which suggests, without fully articulating, a link between cosmic disorder and human folly. And as the Prologue moves forward, the uncertain relation of human and cosmic life becomes a recurring theme. In the course of an extended review of the estates of society, the volatility of the “comune” is compared to the violence of elemental forces in a state of imbalance:

Si caput extollat et lex sua frena relaxet,
 Ut sibi velle iubet, Tigridis instar habet.
 Ignis, aqua dominans duo sunt pietate carentes,
 Ira tamen plebis est violenta magis,

if [the commons] rears its head, and the law relaxes its hold on the reins, the people’s will dictates for itself, and becomes like a wild beast. Fire or water, grown too powerful, is wholly without mercy, but the rage of the commons is more violent still.

(Prol. iv.3–6)

The message seems clear enough, but the language once again suggests that the problem of social violence is grounded in a larger complex of forces. The image of law plying the reins recalls the famous hymn that concludes Book 2 of the *Consolation*, where cosmic *amor* itself reins in the potentially unruly elements. The English verses that follow assert repeatedly that “man is overal / His oghne cause of wel and wo” (547–8; cf. 528, 581–4), but intersperse these assertions with reflections on the treacherous character of the world itself, in effect reducing the calculated ambiguity of the Latin to simple contradiction. Both fortune and the chronic instability of the world are firmly linked to the unstable behavior of man, “Which of his propre governance / Fortuneth al the worldes chance” (583–4); yet the world, too, “of his propre kynde / Was evere untrew” (535–6). The use of “propre” (Latin *proprium*, *propria*) links the two couplets, and conveys a disturbing suggestion that instability is in fact “proper” to human nature in an absolute sense, and so prompts us to consider the historical dimension which such a formulation of the human predicament excludes, while the coined verb “fortuneth,” used here to characterize the unruliness of humanity, shows the vernacular blurring the complex perspective of the Latin in the process of assimilating its concepts.

The final section of the Prologue considers man as the image of the world and of history. The Latin verses that introduce this theme inveigh against the treachery of the

immundus mundus, and sum up the ambiguous relationship of man to the world and its evolution in a final couplet:

Sicut ymago viri variantur tempora mundi
Statque nichil firmum preter amare deum.

Like an image of man are the times of the world as they change; nothing remains constant but the need to love God.

(Prol. vi.5–6)

The problem of ceaseless change and “division” is traced to man’s loss of his original lordship over creation. Storms, floods, the alternation of seasons, night and day, all are due to “the disposicioun / Of man and his condicioun” (943–4), and the elements, warring against him, “axen alle jugement” for his sins (959–61). But then, by a sudden shift, change and division are presented as something imposed on man himself by his natural condition,

The which, for his complexioun
Is mad upon divisioun
Of cold, of hot, of moist, of drye,
He mot be verray kynde dye . . .

(Prol. 975–8)

Here, for a moment, the relations of man and cosmos are seemingly reversed: man’s divided state, rather than disrupting nature, appears determined by nature. Gower reinforces this suggestion, imagining a man whose composition would be uniform and so incorruptible, and contrasting his state with man’s actual mortality (983–0):

Bot other wise, if a man were
Mad al togedre of o matiere
Withouten interrupcioun,
Ther scholde no corrupcioun
Engendre upon that unite:
But for ther is diversite
Withinne himself, he may nought laste . . .

(Prol. 983–90)

But again the moral and historical implications of this naturalistic view of human frailty are left undeveloped.

Gower’s perspective is close to that of Alan of Lille, or Alan’s great predecessor Bernardus Silvestris, whose *Cosmographia* ends by contrasting the wasting of human life to the perpetual self-sufficiency of the universe at large:

Influit ipsa sibi mundi natura superstes,

Permanet et fluxu pascitur usque suo

. . .

Longe disparibus causis mutandus in horas,

Effluit occiduo corpore totus homo.

Sic sibi deficiens, peregrinis indiget escis,

Sudat in hoc vitam, denichilatque dies.

The nature of the universe outlives itself, for it flows back into itself, and so survives and is nourished by its very flowing away . . .

But man, ever liable to affliction by forces far less harmonious, passes wholly out of existence with the failure of his body. Unable to sustain himself, and wanting nourishment from without, he exhausts his life, and a day reduces him to nothing.

The irresolution of the Prologue as a whole, its seeming failure to provide a single coherent view of the place of man in the natural economy, is an essential part of Gower's design, and the ambiguities of his Latin express the ambiguous authority of the Boethian tradition in this area. There is in fact no clear theological consensus regarding the effect of the Fall on the relations of man and nature, or the effect of this relationship on the course of human history; thus the fundamental Boethian issues of human freedom and the significance of good and ill fortune remain chronic concerns.

Chaucer offers ample evidence of the urgency these issues could have for a poet of the later fourteenth century, and we may note that, in raising such questions and leaving them open, Gower expresses a "Boethianism" that is very close to Chaucer's. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* a mock-serious reflection on the question of whether Chauntecleer's dream, rightly understood, could have averted his encounter with the fox is couched in terms of the ongoing medieval debate over the Boethian questions of whether divine foreknowledge constrains human free will, and where "conditional" necessity gives way to "simple" or determinative necessity. The Nun's Priest leaves the question open, and, as B. L. Jefferson remarks, his doing so is a characteristic Chaucerian gesture, for Chaucer "never expresses a complete acceptance of the Boethian doctrine of the reasons for the existence of evil or of his doctrine of free will," though he often discusses these questions and invariably cites the *Consolation* in doing so.²⁶ As Jefferson further remarks, Chaucer is remarkable among the medieval writers who dealt with these issues (including Jean de Meun and Dante, as well as the Nun's Priest's Augustine and Bradwardine) in his refusal to adopt a definite position.

Gower's Prologue expresses a similar reluctance, and in a similarly Boethian spirit. For Boethius himself provides no explicit confirmation that the doubts of the Prisoner of the *Consolation* about these problems are ever finally resolved, and we may perhaps see in both poets' suspicion of the Boethian world order a measure of their responsiveness to the message of the *Consolation*. What is clear is that it is the irresolution of the "wisdom" conveyed by the Prologue that defines the larger dialogic framework within

which the principal business of the *Confessio* is transacted.

Dante

Dante's thorough knowledge of the *Consolation* and his deep sense of affinity with Boethius are beyond question. He could almost be speaking of himself when, in the opening book of the *Convivio*, he asserts that through the *Consolatio* Boethius aimed "to defend himself against the perpetual infamy of exile" (1.2.13). *Convivio* 2 tells of how reading Boethius inspired his philosophical studies, and echoes of the *Consolation* appear in his writing from the *Vita nuova* forward. The great Neoplatonic hymn "O qui perpetua" (C 3.m9) helped to shape the great *canzoni*, and informs the cosmology of the *Paradiso*.²⁷ Boethius' arguments for the freedom of the will in *Consolation* 5 underlie Vergil's treatment of this theme in *Purgatorio* 16–18 as well as Beatrice's declaration in *Paradiso* 5 that free will is God's greatest gift to humankind.²⁸

But the influence of the *Consolation* also takes broader forms. The initial descent of Beatrice to Vergil, "suspended" within the confines of Limbo, and Vergil's ensuing apparition to Dante, clearly evoke the opening episode of Boethius' dialogue. The Pilgrim, like the Prisoner, has been so demoralized by ill fortune that he can no longer pursue the destiny that his inherent abilities and the uplifting influence of a uniquely empowering patroness had seemed to promise. Like Boethius' Prisoner, Dante's Pilgrim will be guided to the threshold of a new spiritual awareness, but for both the journey will be fraught with uncertainty and frustration. Dante's doubts will of course be authoritatively resolved, but his progress will be far less orderly than that of the Prisoner.

Much of his difficulty, like that of the Prisoner, will be caused by the intellectually and emotionally demanding nature of his experience, but much of his difficulty will have to do with the limitations of the guidance Vergil is capable of providing. Philosophy had begun her ministrations to Boethius by banishing the Muses of poetry, whose persuasions, sweet unto death, had only intensified his grief by inviting him to indulge it. But Vergil as he first appears to Dante is in effect poetry itself, and perhaps the greatest challenge Dante faces is that of learning how to integrate poetry in its full power and complexity into the larger scheme of the *Commedia*.

It is a lesson which must be learned again and again. The Pilgrim's dream of the Siren in *Purgatorio* 19 again takes us back to Boethius' opening scene, in which Philosophy rebukes the Prisoner for indulging in self-pitying poetry, and banishes the wanton Muses from his chamber. And the temptation she represents is foreshadowed by his encounters in the *Vita nuova* and *Convivio* with a *donna gentile* who may or may not represent simply the charms of philosophy. The opening of the *Consolation* is again powerfully invoked in *Purgatorio* 30 and 31, where Beatrice, appearing for the first time in the *Commedia*, rebukes Dante's failure to remain firm in his devotion to her and his susceptibility to the song of Sirens. The stern exhortations of Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* 15–17 are charged with Boethian wisdom, and Dante's version of his ancestor's earthly

life is modelled on that of the Boethius who “came from martyrdom and exile to peace” (*Paradiso* 10.128–9; cf. *Par.* 15.146–8).²⁹

In Canto 26 of the *Paradiso* the Pilgrim encounters the figure of Adam, whose discourse on the perishability of human language amounts to an acknowledgment of the status of his poem, a product of merely human art and so destined to pass from human memory. Dante’s amazement on learning that he is in the presence of Adam is carefully described:

Come la fronda che flette la cima
nel transito del vento, e poi si leva
per la propria virtù che la sublima,
fec’ io in tanto in quant’ ella diceva.

As the bough which bends its top at passing of the wind, and then uplifts itself
by its own virtue which raises it, so did I while she was speaking.

(*Par.* 26. 85–8)

At the heart of this simile is a clear allusion to Boethius’ ode on *Natura potens* (C 3.m2):

Validis quondam viribus acta
Pronum flectit virga cacumen;
Hanc si curvans dextra remisit,
Recto spectat vertice caelum.

Compelled by great strength a sapling bends its top downward; but if the
bending hand releases it, it looks to the sky with head erect.

(C 3.m2.27–30)

As noted above, the tree which reasserts its inherent impulse to stand erect and “behold the sky” is for both poets an image of self-realization. Dante, uplifted by *la propria virtù*, is instinctively responding to the idea of human perfection associated with Adam. For a poet this perfection is represented most fully by the language of Eden, where Adam’s every word had an archetypal significance expressive of his perfect knowledge.

All the more significant, then, is the meditation on language which Adam now offers. Language, like any human resource, is finite, transitory, and to attempt to exceed its limits is to undertake an *ovra inconsummabile* like that of Nimrod. Adam understands this desire, and the *trapassar del segno*, the overstepping of the boundary which led to his banishment from Eden, has important implications for Dante. The *segno* can be broadly defined as marking the limits of human possibility. Adam’s transgressing of the limit imposed by God to eat of the forbidden fruit had been provoked by a prideful desire to achieve an “excellence,” a degree of perfection, beyond the power of flesh and blood to attain. Despite Dante’s privileged status he repeatedly indicates his awareness of having sought to push beyond the limits of language in an attempt to record the impact of

heavenly glory on his overtaxed sensory powers, to make human *signi* mean more than they can mean, to achieve a work of greater excellence than that of any previous poet.

The impulse that gives rise to his fantasy of a perfect language is for Dante what the imagining of the unifying power of the divine principle is for Boethius' Prisoner, the desire for possession of a tantalizing and ever-elusive truth. Dante, like Boethius' Philosophy, will go on to declare his recognition of how all things are contained in God, but in both cases we are made aware of the limits of this recognition. The Prisoner's silence in the final stages of the *Consolation* is a reminder that philosophical reason is one thing and human certainty another. Dante, having glimpsed all reality "bound by love in a single volume," must fall back into the *letargo* of mortal existence, able to convey only a scant and feeble impression of what he has seen to us, who, like Boethius' Prisoner, must continue to yearn for certainty.

The late Middle Ages

After Chaucer there is no more great poetry in the Boethian tradition I have defined, but the *Consolation* remains an important text. The French tradition of the *dit amoureux*, with its constant themes of thwarted love and ethical *consolatio*, is extended by Froissart, Chartier, and others, and its English counterpart, carried forward by Lydgate and a number of anonymous disciples of Chaucer, is still alive in the "Pastime of Pleasure" of Stephen Hawes (1509). Royal and noble libraries often contain several copies of the *Consolation*, and Boethius is the inspiration for a proliferation of works on the "fall of princes" theme.³⁰ Translations into English, French, and Italian continue to appear, and by 1500 sixty printed editions had been published.

The Italian Humanists expressed various reservations regarding the literary quality of Boethius' prose style, and Lorenzo Valla strenuously denounced the "pagan," rationalistic character of his treatment of fate, divine foreknowledge, and free will,³¹ but the *Consolation* was evidently the most widely studied school text in later medieval and early Renaissance Italy.³²

I will conclude by recalling the philosophizing fallen angels who, in the second book of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, are shown debating the questions of "providence, foreknowledge, will and fate." Milton adds that they "found no end, in wandering mazes lost," as befits their hellish situation, but he would surely have concurred with Dante and Chaucer in viewing their dilemma as profoundly Boethian.

Notes

1. Troncarelli [1981](#), 107–9.

2. *PL* 101.849–54; Courcelle [1967](#), 32–47; Brunhölzl [1965](#), 35–41.

3. *MGH Poetae* 1, 243; Newlands [1985](#), 34–5.

- [4.](#) Brown [1976](#).
- [5.](#) *MGH Poetae* 4.1, 310; Courcelle [1967](#), 29–31; Troncarelli [1981](#), 109–10.
- [6.](#) Notker der Deutsche [1986](#), xxi–xxiv; Courcelle [1967](#), 275–8; Dwyer [1976](#), 4–5.
- [7.](#) Bolton [1977](#); Lapidge [2006](#), 128, 293.
- [8.](#) Dronke [2002](#).
- [9.](#) Donaghey [1987](#).
- [10.](#) Wittig [1983](#), 179–85.
- [11.](#) Dronke [2002](#).
- [12.](#) Minnis [1981](#).
- [13.](#) *Roman de la Rose* (Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun [1965–70](#)), 5009–10.
- [14.](#) Cropp [1986](#), [1987](#).
- [15.](#) *Convivio* 2.12.2.
- [16.](#) Lunardi [2004](#).
- [17.](#) Minnis [1987b](#); Gleason [1987](#); Machan [2005](#).
- [18.](#) Gleason [1987](#), 102–5.
- [19.](#) Dronke [1994](#), 40–6.
- [20.](#) Wetherbee [1972](#).
- [21.](#) Korenjak [2001](#).
- [22.](#) Dronke [1994](#), 47–52; Balint [2005](#); Orth [2000](#).
- [23.](#) Zink [2006](#), 52–71.
- [24.](#) Zink [2006](#), 229–35.
- [25.](#) Gillespie [2005](#), 207–23.
- [26.](#) Jefferson [1917](#), 79–80.
- [27.](#) Durling and Martinez [1990](#), 6–18, 227–36.
- [28.](#) Tateo [1970](#), 655–7.
- [29.](#) Schnapp [1986](#), 47–61.
- [30.](#) Green [1980](#), 145–7.
- [31.](#) Nauta [2003](#); Schmitt and Skinner [1988](#), 641–53.
- [32.](#) Nauta [2003](#), 772; Black and Pomaro, [2000](#).

Appendix: Boethius' works

John Magee and John Marenbon

This Appendix is designed as a user's guide to Boethius' works. It is divided according to the four main spheres of his activity – (A) mathematical subjects; (B) logic; (C) theology; (D) the *Consolation* – with additional sections on (E) lost works and (F) works sometimes misattributed to him. For each work, there is a very brief description, any questions over its authenticity and completeness are considered and a dating given, where possible; the best edition is cited (and any other useful ones) and details of translations and commentaries given, where applicable.

Among the discussions of the chronology of Boethius' works are Usener ([1877](#)), Rand ([1901](#)), Brandt ([1903](#)), McKinlay ([1907](#)), Kappelmacher ([1929](#)), and De Rijk ([1964](#)). There are critical examinations of the tradition of dating in De Rijk ([1964](#)), 1–4, and by Magee in Boethius ([1998](#)), xvii–xxiii.

NB: *AL* = *Aristoteles Latinus*, 1961–75.

(A) Mathematical Works

On Arithmetic (De arithmetica). Adapted translation of a treatise by the Neo-Pythagorean Nicomachus of Gerasa. Edns Boethius ([1999](#)) or Boethius ([1995](#)) with facing French translation; trans. Masi ([1983](#)). Probable dating for the mathematical writings *c.* 500–6 (Brandt ([1903](#)), 152–4; 234–7).

On Music (De musica). The work treats of harmonic theory and is based largely on a lost *Introduction* of Nicomachus of Gerasa and Ptolemy's *Harmonics*; Book IV draws on the pseudo-Euclidean *Sectio canonis* and Nicomachus' *Manual*, while Book V is missing the final eleven chapters of Ptolemaic material (division of the tetrachord, etc.). Probably after *On Arithmetic*. Edn Boethius ([1867](#)); trans. Bower ([1989](#)).

Geometry. Material that may derive from a work on geometry by Boethius is edited in Folkerts ([1970](#)). For evidence that Boethius wrote on geometry see Cassiodorus, *Variae* I.45.4, and Gruber ([2006](#)), 6. On the whole question see Obertello ([1974](#)), I.173–96, and Pingree ([1981](#)).

(B) Logical works

(1) Translations

Porphyry, *Isagoge*. The continuous version differs in some respects from the partially incomplete text furnished by the lemmata to the second commentary; these differences

might be due either to Boethius or possibly to the work of a late antique redactor: see Minio-Paluello in *AL* I, 6–7, xiv–xvi; edn *AL* I, 6–7, 5–31 (the version in the lemmata can be constructed from the apparatus). Probably 511–13 for the continuous version.

Aristotle, *Categories*. Boethius apparently made a first draft, then produced lemmata for his commentary and finally a polished version (cf. Minio-Paluello, in *AL* I, 1–5, xii–xxii). The latter is published in *AL* I, 1–5, 5–41. Minio-Paluello reconstructs the text of a ‘composite version’, widely used in the Middle Ages, which someone (cf. Asztalos (1993), 372) compiled from the draft version and lemmata; it is published in *AL* I, 1–5, 47–79. The polished version is later than 510, when the commentary, and so the lemmata, were written.

Aristotle, *On Interpretation*. Boethius produced three versions, very probably in this order – that found in the lemmata to the first commentary; that found in the lemmata to the second commentary; a continuous version (Minio-Paluello in *AL* II, 1–2, x–xi; xxxvi–xxxviii; Magee, forthcoming). The continuous version will, therefore, date from after *c.* 516. *AL* II, 1–2, 5–38, for the continuous version; the apparatus gives details of the other two versions.

Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*. Two versions, which most probably are a rough and a polished version by Boethius himself (Minio-Paluello in *AL* III, 1–4, xxiii). Edn (both recensions) *AL* III, 1–4, 5–191.

Aristotle, *Topics*. A complete version, and a fragment which seems to be from a revised version, survive (*AL* v, 1–3, xxxvi–xlii; Magee in Boethius (1998), lviii–lxxv). Edn (both) *AL* v, 1–3, 5–185.

Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*. One version only apparently. Edn *AL* vi, 1–3, 5–60.

(2) Commentaries

First commentary on Porphyry, *Isagoge*. In dialogue-form, using Marius Victorinus’ translation. *c.* 504–9 (cf. De Rijk (1964), 159). Edn Boethius (1906), 3–132.

Second commentary on Porphyry, *Isagoge*. Using Boethius’ own translation of the text. After the *Categories* commentary – i.e. after 510 (cf. Asztalos (1993), 369–71). Edn Boethius (1906), 135–348.

Commentary on Aristotle, *Categories*. Using Boethius’ own translation of the text; designed for relative beginners. 510 (cf. CAT201B). Edn Boethius (1847), 159–294. A new edition by M. Asztalos is all but ready, but not yet published.

First commentary on Aristotle, *On Interpretation*. Using Boethius’ own translation of the text; designed to provide a simple reading of the text. *c.* 513–16 (cf. De Rijk (1964), 159; and for further discussion see Magee, forthcoming). Edn Boethius (1877).

Second commentary on Aristotle, *On Interpretation*. Using Boethius’ own translation of the text; gives a very lengthy and sophisticated reading. *c.* 513–16 (cf. references for first commentary). Edn Boethius (1880).

Scholia on Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*. Translations from some Greek source or

sources, variously related to material found in the commentaries of Alexander, Ammonius, Philoponus, Pseudo-Themistius and Pseudo-Philoponus, found in one MS of Boethius' translation. The translator is argued, on stylistic grounds, to be Boethius: see Minio-Paluello in *AL* III, 1–4, lxxix–lxxxviii. Edn *AL* III, 1–4, 295–372.

Commentary on Cicero, *Topics*. Detailed commentary, with some long digressions. Unfinished as it has been transmitted – it is missing the end of the sixth, and the seventh book, which Boethius says he wrote (cf. *De topicis differentiis* I.1.5 (1173D)). c. 520–3, before, and possibly overlapping with, *De topicis differentiis* (cf. 1048D, 1050B; Brandt (1903), 264, and De Rijk (1964), 151–4). Edn Cicero (1833) and Boethius (1847), 1039–1169. Trans. Stump (1988) with notes.

(3) Monographs

The textual tradition of all the logical monographs is connected and goes back to Martius Novatus Renatus, someone who had connections with Boethius' circle in Ravenna: see Van de Vyver (1935), 131–2; Magee in Boethius (1998), lviii–lxi.

On Division (De Divisione). Short treatise, probably based on prolegomena to Plato's *Sophist* by Porphyry (Magee in Boethius (1998), xxxiv–lvii). 515–20? Edn Boethius (1998) with parallel English translation, introduction and commentary.

On the Categorical Syllogism (De syllogismo categorico). Called in the manuscripts *Introductio in categoricos syllogismos*. A two-book work, of which the first gives the preliminaries to understanding syllogistic and the second an introduction to it. Date: 505–6 suggested by De Rijk (1964), 159. The authenticity of Book I is denied in McKinlay (1907), 140–4, but see the discussion in De Rijk (1964), 41–4. Edn Boethius (2008a).

Introduction to Categorical Syllogisms (Introductio ad syllogismos categoricos). Called in the manuscripts *Liber ante praedicamenta*. A one-book work, which explores in greater detail the material covered in Book I of *On the Categorical Syllogism*. Date: after 513, probably c. 523 suggested by De Rijk (1964), 160–2. On relation to *On the Categorical Syllogism* see McKinlay (1938) and De Rijk (1964), 6–44. Edn Boethius (2008b).

On Hypothetical Syllogisms (De hypotheticis syllogismis). Detailed treatise on syllogisms in which one or both premisses are complex (i.e. molecular) propositions. c. 516–22 (cf. De Rijk (1964), 152). Edn Boethius (1969) with parallel Italian trans.

On Topical Differentiae (De topicis differentiis). Detailed treatise introducing the theory of topical argument and contrasting the different schemes of *differentiae* proposed by Cicero and Themistius. c. 522–3 (cf. De Rijk (1964), 154). Edn Boethius (1990), 1–92.

(C) Theology

Boethius' five short *Theological Treatises (Opuscula sacra)* are transmitted as a group,

although two families of manuscripts are without no. IV and one without no. V. See Rand (1901). Details on each treatise follow below. For all, the best edn is Boethius (2005), 165–241; Boethius (1973) has a less good text, with a parallel English translation. Doubts about their authenticity, suggested especially by the explicitly Christian concerns of four of the five, were stilled by the discovery of a fragment from Cassiodorus which confirmed that Boethius had written (at least) OS I and V: see Usener (1877); Galonnier (1996) for a re-edition of the fragment with translation and commentary; and Galonnier (1997) for an exhaustive study (and French translation) of Usener's article.

OS I – *On the Trinity (De Trinitate)* An attempted explanation of how it is coherent to say that God is three and one; quite possibly related to discussions stimulated by John Maxentius in 519 about whether it is true to say that one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh. c. 520–1 (cf. Schurr (1935), 136–227).

OS II – *Whether Father and Son and Holy Spirit are Substantially Predicated of the Divinity (Utrum Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus de divinitate substantialiter praedicentur)*. A short discussion, quite close to Augustine, of material that is further developed in OS I. Perhaps written just before OS I (cf. Chadwick (1981), 211–12). Commentary: Galonnier (2007), 251–81 (with text and parallel French translation).

OS III – *How Substances are Good in that they Exist, when They are not Substantially Good (Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint bonae sint cum non sint substantialia bona)*. Known in the Middle Ages as *De hebdomadibus*. A very concise discussion, preceded by a set of axioms, of the question posed in the title, addressed to Boethius' friend, John the Deacon. Although the work is complete, the opening phrase, 'You ask that I should set out and briefly clarify from our hebdomads the obscurity of the question', can be taken to suggest that it relates to a lost work, *The Hebdomads* (i.e. groups of seven), but that seems unlikely (cf. Marenbon (2003a), 87–8). The unity of the project in OS I, II and III (cf. Marenbon (2003a), 76; 94–5) suggests a date c. 518–20. Commentary: Galonnier (2007), 285–373 (with text and parallel French translation).

OS IV – *On the Catholic Faith (De fide catholica* – but the transmitted text lacks the original preface, and so the title varies in the MSS). A statement of the central dogmas of Christianity. For a possible lost preface see Troncarelli (2000); (2005), 301–36. The authenticity of this treatise has been questioned, partly because its unargued presentation of Christian doctrine is unlike anything known to have been written by Boethius, but most scholars now hold that it is authentic (see Bark (1946); Chadwick (1980); a full survey of the problem is given in Galonnier (2007), 380–409). Usually considered to be the earliest of the *Opuscula sacra*, so before c. 513. Commentary: Galonnier (2007), 375–440 (with text and parallel French translation).

OS V – *Against Eutyches and Nestorius (Contra Eutychen et Nestorium)*. Arguments against the opposed heretical Christologies of Eutyches and Nestorius. Date perhaps 513 or shortly afterwards, if, as has been suggested, the work was written in response to a letter from a group of bishops in the Danube region, under pressure from the Monophysites: cf. Schurr (1935), 108–27; Chadwick (1981), 181–3; Daley (1984), 178–80.

(D) The Consolation of Philosophy (De consolazione Philosophiae)

A prosimetrum in which a personification of Philosophy consoles Boethius after his unjust condemnation to death and renews his philosophical understanding of the world. Date: 523–6. (Suggestions differ according to the time assigned to Boethius' death: e.g. Gruber (2006), 13 suggests that it must have been written by October 524.) It has been argued that the work is unfinished (Tränkle (1977)), but there seems, on the contrary, to be good evidence that the final passage is the intended ending to a tight literary structure (see Magee in this volume, pp. 193–4). Edn Boethius (2005), 3–162. Trans.: there have been very many translations of the *Consolation* into English, going back to the tenth century, with that by King Alfred (cf. Gruber (1998), 205–6). Among modern English translations, the best for accuracy is Relihan. There is also a parallel English translation in the serviceable edition, Boethius (1973), and a good translation of the end of Book 4 and Book 5 in Sharples (1991). Commentaries: Gruber (2006); Sharples (1991) on the end of Book 4 and Book 5.

(E) Lost Works

(1) Mathematical works

Astronomy. There is some evidence that Boethius wrote an *Astronomy*, as well as his introductions to arithmetic, music and (probably) geometry: in the preface (I.1) to the *Arithmetic*, he suggests he will write on all four mathematical disciplines (cf. the reference to Ptolemy at C II.7.4), and Gerbert (end of the tenth century) claims to have seen a manuscript of a work by Boethius on *astrologia* at Bobbio: see Letters 8 and 130 in Gerbert (1889) (15 and 138 in Gerbert (1961)); cf. Courcelle (1942), 86, and Chadwick (1981), 102–7.

(2) Commentaries on logical and other Aristotelian works

Second commentary on Aristotle, '*Categories*'. Boethius announces at the beginning of his surviving commentary (Boethius (1847), 160AB), though in a passage inserted later (see Asztalos (1993), 384–8, where there is a new edition of the relevant passage), that he intends to write a second, more advanced, commentary on the *Categories*. Monika Asztalos ((1993), 379–81) finds further evidence in the second commentary on *On Interpretation* that this commentary was written, and Pierre Hadot (1959) believes that a fragment of the commentary – which he edits – has been preserved anonymously. See Chadwick (1981), 141–3, Ebbesen (1990a), 387–8, and (more sceptically) De Rijk

(1964), 132–41, and Marenbon (2003a), 23.

Commentary on Aristotle, 'Topics'. In *On Topical Differentiae* Boethius twice refers to a commentary or commentaries on Aristotle's *Topics* which he has written (II.8.8 (1191A); IV.13.2 (1216D)). Cf. Obertello (1974), I.229.

Commentary or scholia on Aristotle, 'Physics'. A remark in the second commentary on *On Interpretation* (Boethius (1880), 190:13) may mean that he wrote a commentary or scholia on this work; cf. Chadwick (1981), 139, who cites two further (unconvincing) references.

(3) Other lost works

Explanatory paraphrase of Aristotle, 'On Interpretation'. In the second commentary on *On Interpretation*, Boethius writes (Boethius (1880), 251:9–15): 'To follow these twinned commentaries I am making [or: shall make] a kind of paraphrase (*quoddam . . . facimus breviarum*), in such a way as to employ in certain – indeed, nearly all – respects Aristotle's own words; but what he said obscurely because of his brevity I, by making some additions, will make clearer in its line of argument. This paraphrase will be, as it were, a mean between the brevity of the text and the prolixity of the commentary, collecting together what has been said diffusely and expanding on what has been written in a very compressed way.' De Rijk (1964), 37–8, convincingly rejects attempts to identify this work with one or both of the treatises on categorical syllogisms; cf. Brandt (1903), 257–8.

On the Order of Peripatetic Teaching (De ordine peripateticae disciplinae): In *On division* (Boethius (1998), 6:14–16), Boethius refers to having explained something in a work on the order of Peripatetic teaching 'which I thought it necessary to write'.

On the Harmony of Plato and Aristotle. When Boethius announces his scheme of work near the beginning of the second commentary on *On Interpretation*, he says (Boethius (1880), 80:1–6): 'When I have done these things [translated and commented on all the works of Plato and Aristotle he can find], I shall not omit to bring the views of Aristotle and Plato into a certain harmony, and I will show that they do not, as many hold [assuming an ellipse of *dicunt* rather than *dissentiunt*], disagree on everything, but that they consent in many things, including those which are of most weight in philosophy.'

A bucolic poem. The fragment by Cassiodorus called the *Anecdoton Holderi* (see above, general comment on theological works) refers (Usener (1877), 4:16) to Boethius having written a *carmen bucolicum*.

(F) Works misattributed to Boethius

On Definition (De definitione/De definitionibus). This work – a classification of different sorts of definition, related to Cicero's *Topics* – was usually attributed to

Boethius in the Middle Ages. It is in fact by Marius Victorinus: see Hadot ([1971](#)), 163–78; 331–62.

On Teaching in the Schools (De disciplina scholarium). This work (from c. 1230–40) is a discussion of how a student should go about his studies. The author pretends to be Boethius by referring to writing commentaries on Aristotle and the *Consolation*, and the work was taken to be his until the fifteenth century. See the Introduction to the edition, Weijers ([1976](#)).

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