



Boethius on Free Will

Overview

Background Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

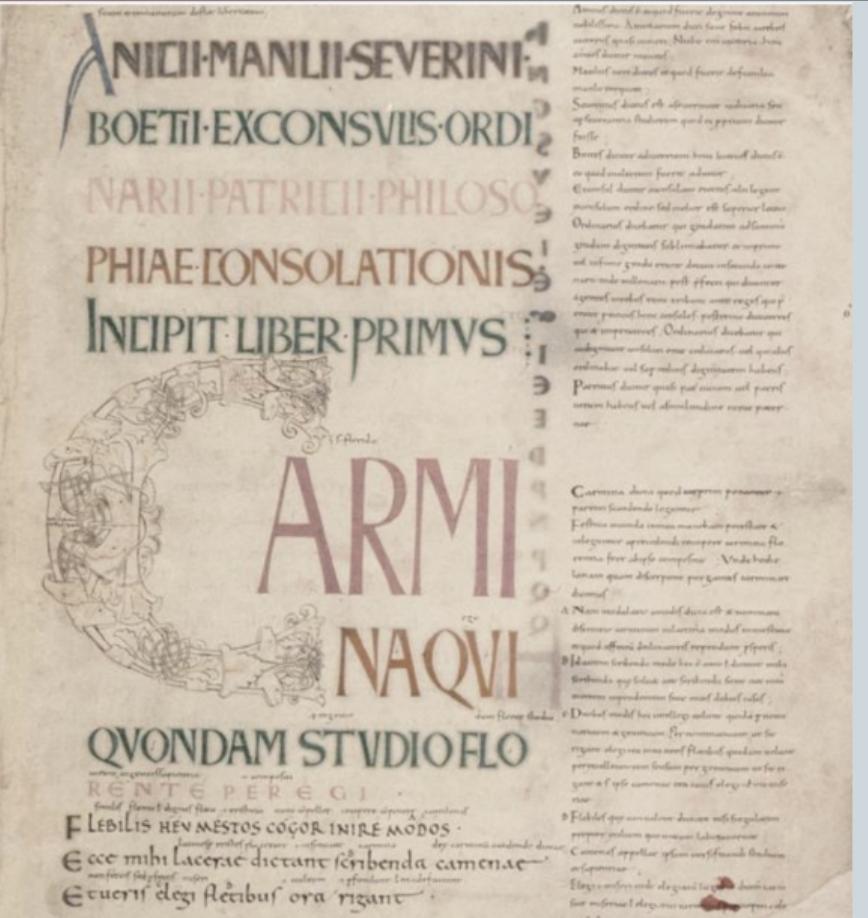
Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge



Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. 475–525?)

- Roman aristocrat family
- 500 Boethius enters Theodoric's service
- 503 *Rules of Arithmetic*, *Rules of Music*
- 510 Consul; *On Division*
- 521 *Hebdomads*, *On the Trinity*
- 522 Master of Offices; his sons serve as Consuls
- 523 Imprisoned; charged with treason and magic
- 523 *The Consolation of Philosophy*
- 524/5 Executed



Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Boethius as Translator

Translated a *lot* of works, mostly in logic:

- (504) Porphyry's *Isagoge* with lesser commentary;
- (507) Porphyry's *Isagoge* with greater commentary;
- (510) Aristotle's *Categories* and *On Interpretation (Hermeneutics)* with commentary;
- (518s) Aristotle's *Topics*; Cicero's *Topics*, with commentaries

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge



The Consolation of Philosophy

A death-row dialogue with Lady Philosophy.
Basic question: Why do bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people?

Outline:

- ① Boethius's problem: life is miserable
- ② The nature of happiness
- ③ Solves the problem: providence
- ④ Addresses the problem of foreknowledge



Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Initial Assumptions

- God rules the universe with reason (1.6);
- He, Boethius, is a mortal, rational creature (1.6);
- Everyone wants to be happy, a goal naturally implanted in human minds (3.2).

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Can Philosophy Help?

Cf. Stoic Cognitive Therapy – *prosokhe*

CP 1.3

“In just this way the clouds of my melancholy were dispelled. I drank in the clear air of heaven; recovery of my wits had enabled me to identify my healer’s face. ... I recognized ... my nurse Philosophy.”

Philosophy can heal by showing us the true nature of happiness.

- ① American: “Strive and Succeed!”
- ② Stoic: Critique of success
- ③ Aristotle: Critique of *apathia*; moderation
- ④ Augustine: detachment

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Happiness ≠ Gifts of Fortune

"If happiness is the highest good of a rational nature, and if what can be taken from you in any way cannot be the highest..., it is obvious that the fluidity of Fortune cannot hope to win happiness." (CP 2.4.25)

"The man who embarks on this transitory happiness either knows or does not know that it can change. If he does not know, how can he be happy in his state of ignorance? If he does know, he must inevitably fear the loss...and therefore his enduring anxiety does not permit him to be happy." (CP 2.4.26)

"[T]he minds of men are in no wise mortal; and since it is obvious that the happiness which chance brings ends with the body's death, there can be no doubt...that when death signals the end the whole human race is plunged into misery." (CP 2.4.28–29)

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Happiness

So, now we know what happiness is *not*: it's not money, offices/honours, power, fame, or pleasure. **But what *is* it? How to be happy?**

"Why, mortal men, do you pursue happiness outside yourselves, when it lies within? ... Is there anything more precious to you than yourself? Nothing, you will reply. Well then, as long as you are in command of yourself, you will possess what you would never wish to lose, and what Fortune can never withdraw from you."

True happiness:

- is self-sufficient (vs. wealth)
- evokes due respect (vs. office)
- self-preserving (vs. power)
- joyous (vs. physical pleasures)

Happiness is the goal of a well-ordered life, in which our distinctively human capacities are realized. Everyone seeks it!

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Supreme Happiness

CP 3.10.6-9

Now it cannot be denied that the perfect good exists, and that it is, so to say, the source of all goods, for everything said to be imperfect is so described because it is less than perfect. The logical conclusion is that if in any class of objects something imperfect appears, that class must also contain something perfect; for if such perfection is removed, one cannot even imagine how that which is called imperfect has come into existence. The universe does not take its rise from things which were curtailed or incomplete; rather it issues from things which are intact and fully developed, and it disintegrates into this parlous and sterile world of ours. Now if, as we demonstrated a little earlier, there is what we may call imperfect happiness in a good that is brittle, there can be no doubt of the existence of some unalloyed and perfect happiness.

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Taking Stock

What Boethius has shown so far:

- Happiness does not consist in the gifts of Fortune; it does not come about by wealth, high office, power, glory, or pleasure
- Everyone seeks happiness
- The true goods can only be had together
- There is one, supreme happiness, which is God

What's coming:

- Evil is a privation
- The good are rewarded and the wicked punished (providence)
- Free will is compatible with divine providence

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Evil as Privation

Cf. Augustine

- ① God has power over all things (3.12.1-22).
- ② Therefore, there is nothing God cannot do.
- ③ God cannot do evil [since God's substance is goodness].
- ④ Therefore, evil is nothing.

(Lots of assumptions, but Boethius argues for them elsewhere.)

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Good vs. Wicked

- The good are strong, and the wicked are weak (4.2) (the good, just by being good, flourish as human beings, while the wicked don't)
- Actually, the wicked don't even exist!

CP 4.2.33–36

This claim of ours may perhaps sound surprising ... wicked men, who form the majority of mankind, do not exist, but that is the actuality. I am not denying that evil men are evil, but I am claiming that in the pure and simple sense they do not exist. You could say that a corpse is a dead man, but you could not call it a man pure and simple; in the same way, I grant that corrupt men are wicked, but I refuse to admit that they exist in an absolute sense. Whatever maintains its due order and preserves its nature exists; if it abandons its nature, it ceases also to exist, for its existence is bound up in its nature.

Background
Consolations
Outline
Assumptions
Happiness
What happiness is not
What it is
Providence
What is evil?
Good vs. wicked
Beneficial punishment
Foreknowledge

Punishment is Beneficial

- Tribulations strengthen the good by allowing them to exercise their virtue.
- Sometimes people punished are restored to the right path by fear of punishment.
- Adds an element of goodness – namely, justice to the situation of the wicked.
- Prevents the wicked from making their situation worse, by adding injustice.
- Therefore “there is no place for hatred in the minds of the wise.”
- All in all, the good are rewarded, corrected, or exercised; the wicked are punished or corrected.

The Puzzle:

If everything is so well ordered by providence, does that leave space for creaturely freedom?

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not
What it is

Providence

What is evil?
Good vs. wicked
Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Preliminaries: Chance

Objection: if things happen by chance, they don't happen according to providence. If they happen necessarily, then there's no free will.

Response:

- chance is not a random motion (since there isn't such in a well-ordered universe)
- cf. Aristotle; it is an unexpected outcome, arising from confluent causes (e.g., running into a friend in a crowded market). – This is not opposed to providence!



Background
Consolations
Outline
Assumptions
Happiness
What happiness is not
What it is
Providence
What is evil?
Good vs. wicked
Beneficial punishment
Foreknowledge

Necessity and Foreknowledge

Aristotle, *Hermeneutics* 9 (tr. Ackrill)

“[I]f every affirmation or negation is true or false it is necessary for everything either to be the case or not to be the case. For if one person says that something will be and another denies this same thing, it is clearly necessary for one of them to be saying what is true; for both will not be the case together.... What is, necessarily is, when it is; and what is not, necessarily is not, when it is not.... Everything necessarily is or is not, and will be or will not be; but one cannot divide and say that one or the other's necessary. I mean, for example: it is necessary for there to be or not be a sea-battle tomorrow; but it is not necessary for a sea-battle to take place tomorrow, nor for one not to take place.”

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge

Necessity and Foreknowledge

- ① God knows that there will be a sea-battle tomorrow. [assumption]
- ② When someone knows *A* will happen, then *A* will happen. [self-evident]
- ③ (2) is true as a matter of necessity; it is impossible to know that which is not the case. [self-evident]
- ④ If God knows that there will be a sea-battle tomorrow, necessarily there will be a sea-battle tomorrow [2,3]
- ⑤ There will be a sea-battle tomorrow necessarily. [1,4]

The same argument can be run about every single contingent event or free choice; the result is that everything happens necessarily!

Boethius wants to resist this conclusion; he thinks that free will is opposed to necessity, and all rational creatures have it.

Background

Consolations

Outline

Assumptions

Happiness

What happiness is not

What it is

Providence

What is evil?

Good vs. wicked

Beneficial punishment

Foreknowledge