The Consolation of Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BOETHIUS

Boethius was born to an aristocratic Christian family in Rome, sometime between 475 and 477. Although the Roman Empire fell around the same time, in 476, his family's privilege and the internal dynamics of Roman society were not drastically affected, and Boethius had many doors open to him from early childhood. He went on to spend his entire adult life as a bureaucrat in the service of the Ostrogoth King Theodoric, who presided over a hollowed-out version of the previous Empire. Boethius became a Senator at 25 and a consul—one of the Senate's two leaders—at 33. Nevertheless, Boethius likely passed most of his days reading and translating philosophy, and made it his personal project to translate all of Aristotle and Plato's works from Greek to Latin. He also sought to demonstrate that their schools of thought "in every way harmonize." However, a set of political conflicts cut his life tragically short. When one of Boethius's colleagues, Albinus, found himself accused of treason, Boethius stepped in to defend Albinus and was accused of the same crime. He was subsequently arrested and executed. During the year between his arrest and execution in 524, Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which remains his most popular work. However, Boethius is arguably more important for his role in popularizing and translating Ancient Greek philosophy in Rome and the early Middle Ages.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Boethius lived and wrote in the shadow of the long-dominant Roman Empire. After reaching its greatest extent under Trajan in 117, the Empire gradually declined for a variety of reasons over three centuries. Germanic tribes sacked (pillaged and plundered) Rome in 410 and 455 C.E., and officially conquered the Western Empire in 476, roughly the same time as Boethius was born. This event is usually interpreted as marking the beginning of the Middle Ages. Boethius grew up mostly under the reign of Ostrogoth King Theodoric, who controlled all the territory formerly under the Western Roman Empire. He left in place most of Rome's class hierarchies and the political structures that used to govern the empire, like the Senate and the Consuls who ran it, but completely deprived them of power. Accordingly, Boethius played a largely symbolic role in a rapidly-disappearing form of government. Meanwhile, Theodoric dedicated his energies to overthrowing the Eastern Roman Empire, too. This is why the paranoid Theodoric persecuted Boethius for purportedly corresponding with the Eastern Roman Emperor, Justin I, and executed him for his role in an alleged conspiracy involving the Eastern Empire. Understanding the motivations for and effects of Boethius's *Consolation* also requires an outline of Roman philosophy and its relation to its predecessors. While Greek ideas were incredibly influential in Rome and retain their place at the foundation of Western philosophy today, very few Roman scholars were capable of reading Ancient Greek directly, and this made Boethius—one of the last to learn the language—all the more important as a translator and interpreter of the "original" Greek philosophers. After his death, most Greek primary texts became inaccessible to scholars in present-day Europe for several hundred years, until at least the 12th century, and so Boethius's *Consolation* can be seen as a means of both pointing out and attempting to remedy the gradual disappearance of Greek philosophy in the Roman world after the Western Empire's collapse.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Boethius references Aristotle's *Physics* in his *Consolation*, but his book is actually far more indebted to the works of Plato, particularly the *Timaeus*, in which Socrates sets out a theory of the physical and eternal words, put in place by an eternal God (or demiurge). He also cites the *Gorgias* (which portrays evil as a weakness and sickness) and the *Meno* (which theorizes education as the recovery of innate knowledge). Moreover, Boethius's personal justification for entering government service comes straight from Plato's *Republic*. Throughout Boethius's *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy frequently mentions Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Boethius also cites a select few fellow Romans, especially Cicero, who invented the "wheel of fortune" metaphor, and to whose *Dream of Scipio* and *De Officiis* Boethius repeatedly turns for historical examples. Boethius's arguments about evil resemble his Christian predecessor Augustine's in the *Confessions*, and Boethius significantly influenced innumerable Christian thinkers after him, including Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*) and Sir Thomas More (whose prison memoir *A Dialogue of Comfort* was largely modeled after Boethius's *Consolation*). Poets like Chaucer and Dante also took inspiration from Boethius: Chaucer translated and based his *Trolius and Criseyde* on Boethius's *Consolation*, and Dante put Boethius in heaven in *The Divine Comedy*. In contemporary literature, one of the most noteworthy references to Boethius appears in John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, in which the main character, Ignatius Reilley, bases his worldview on *Consolation* and the "wheel of fortune" concept.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Consolation of Philosophy (De consolation philosophiae)
- **When Written:** 523-524
- **Where Written:** Pavia (present-day Italy)
- **When Published:** 524
- **Literary Period:** Classical Roman Literature; Medieval Literature
- **Genre:** Medieval Philosophy; Philosophical Dialogue; Prison Writing; Prosimetrum (combination of prose and poetry)
- **Setting:** Boethius's room or prison cell
- **Climax:** At the end of Book III, Lady Philosophy convinces Boethius that "true happiness" and "perfect good" are the same thing as God. This means that Boethius must stop dwelling on his misfortune, and instead dedicate himself to prayer and the contemplation of God.
- **Antagonist:** Fortune; Evil; Ignorance
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Translators. Boethius's importance as a translator of Greek philosophy to Latin, combined with the notorious circumstances surrounding his death, made *The Consolation of Philosophy* a very influential and widely-read text in the thousand years after his death. As a way to prove their wisdom and fitness to rule, numerous monarchs, including England's King Alfred (886-889) and Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603), translated the *Consolation* from Latin into vernacular languages.

Long-Awaited Revival. The poems that comprise an important portion of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* were originally intended as songs, to be performed with accompanying music. However, in the medieval tradition, directions for *how* to perform such songs were mostly passed down orally, and only vague outlines were written down as memory aids. However, using these aids and a lost document discovered by chance in 1982, a Cambridge University researcher managed to reconstruct the music that would have accompanied Boethius's poems. In 2016, he finished his reconstruction and an ensemble performed the songs, for the first time in more than a thousand years.

PLOT SUMMARY

Written in sections of alternating prose and poetry, *The Consolation of Philosophy* begins with Boethius describing the conditions in which he actually wrote the book in the year 524: he is sitting in a prison cell awaiting execution for a crime he did not commit. Having spent his life working in the highest echelons of government in Rome, he is miserable at the misfortune that has brought him to his current predicament.

Boethius calls on the Muses, the Greek goddesses of the creative arts, to help him write poetry that adequately captures his despair. But an "awe-inspiring" female figure suddenly shows up and kicks the Muses out of his room. She wears a beautiful but neglected dress, which has been "torn by the hands of marauders" and has the letters Pi (Π) and Theta (Θ) woven into the hemline. She reveals herself to be Philosophy and reminds Boethius that he used to be her attentive student, but that he has since forgotten the wisdom and happiness he gained from her. Weeping, Boethius sings that Philosophy's reappearance in his life is like **sunlight** peering out of the sky after a thunderstorm.

Philosophy declares that the wise have always been persecuted "by the forces of evil" for their beliefs, and that now the "wicked and unprincipled men" who control Rome are doing the same to Boethius, who is honest and virtuous. Philosophy promises Boethius that she will heal his misery, and tells him that the "cure" he needs is *truth*. At the end of Book I, Boethius and Philosophy briefly establish that "God the Creator watches over" the universe, including human beings, who are "rational and mortal animal[s]" with a place in God's plan. This means that Boethius's misfortune is "not the haphazard of chance."

In Book II, Philosophy and Boethius discuss Fortune, whom they personify as a sadistic goddess who gleefully turns a "**wheel** of chance" that randomly propels people upward to success or downward to ruin. Since fortune is random, Boethius should not take his condemnation and death sentence personally: change is inevitable, and "wealth, honours, and the like" really have nothing to do with people's happiness. Boethius actually retains all his most important possessions: his family and friends still stand by him, and he has lived a life of prominence, esteem, and honor. Despite these "outstanding blessings," his perspective is distorted because he "never experienced adversity" until now. Philosophy declares that real happiness lies "within" and briefly explains her argument: humans' greatest gift is their capacity for reason, because the human soul (or mind) is immortal while the body is temporary. Accumulating inanimate things, pursuing political power, and seeking fame are "puny and insubstantial" distractions compared to the heights that the mind alone can reach. So Fortune and the material things she brings are simply irrelevant to the actual achievement of happiness—they are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but only useful to remind people "how fragile a thing happiness is."

In Book III, Boethius and Lady Philosophy break down the nature of happiness in more depth, and they ultimately determine that true happiness is based on a person's relationship to God. First, Philosophy explains that every human being wants to be happy, and that happiness "leaves nothing more to be desired" because it "contains in itself all that is good." In their quest for happiness, people pursue five

things—"wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure"—but these do not actually make people happy. Wealth does not solve people's deepest anxieties, and in fact "makes [people] dependent" and greedier than they were before. Political office lets people turn their worst instincts into law, and bad politicians "discredit" the offices they hold. The powerful become paranoid about losing their power, which is more like a curse than a blessing. Fame is usually based on "false opinions" and goes to the most "shameful" people, not the most virtuous. And finally, pleasure-seeking is a lowly, animalistic pursuit that leads people to "great illness and unbearable pain." In short, people who pursue these five goals are actually seeking after "false happiness." "True happiness," Philosophy reminds Boethius, requires complete "self-sufficiency." A completely self-sufficient being would have some "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure," but only as a *unity*—the happy would not pursue these goals individually. After all, pursuing one of them can throw people out of balance and lead them to give up the others.

What does it take to achieve this unified, "true" kind of happiness? As Plato argued, God is the "supreme good" in the universe, and the supreme good is the same as the sum of absolute "sufficiency, power, glory, reverence[,] and happiness." So God *is* these things, and therefore he *is* "perfect happiness." People, in turn, can become happy through "the possession of divinity," or by unifying themselves with God. In a song, Philosophy explains that people must take "refuge" in God's "shining light" and seek to understand the truth about Him. God "regulates all things" in the universe, which act "in harmony and accord" with Him. And so people naturally desire happiness, goodness, and oneness with God because they want to fulfill their role in His plan for the universe.

Boethius is "very happy" about Philosophy's picture of the universe, which explains why he can still be blessed and happy, despite his misfortune. But in Book IV, Boethius raises a doubt about God: if He is really all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely benevolent, why is there evil in the world? After all, Boethius is sad precisely because evil people have taken control of Rome, while virtuous people like him are sitting in prison.

Philosophy begins her answer by explaining that evil is the same as weakness, because it is unnatural and contrary to God. In fact, wicked people have no power: they have "weakness rather than strength," because if they were strong (like God) they would do what is good (like God). Humans are evil not because God has made them that way, but because they are less powerful than God, so they sometimes make mistakes and errors. In short, evil is not a real thing that exists in the world: rather, it is the sum of the errors people make when pursuing goodness and happiness in the wrong ways. As a result, Philosophy concludes, "evil is nothing," and evil people are subhuman. In fact, when the evil are free to "achieve their desires," this makes them *less* happy. But when punished, God sets the evil on "the path to right," making them happier and more virtuous.

But Boethius asks Philosophy why God lets people err in the first place, and why he lets this create chaos that harms virtuous people. Philosophy responds by distinguishing between God's plan or blueprint for the universe, or Providence, and the way that plan actually plays out in time, or Fate. People can only see the world from the temporal perspective of Fate, so they forget that disagreeable turns of Fate can actually be part of God's purely benevolent Providence. For example, God can teach the virtuous "self discovery through hardship," or reward the evil so they learn to "abandon wickedness in the fear of losing happiness." When people see others do evil, in fact, they can decide "to be different from those they hate […] and become virtuous," so God can cancel evil out with evil, just as two negatives cancel one another out. Everything God does to people, therefore, "is meant to either reward or discipline the good or to punish or correct the bad." Therefore, Philosophy concludes, "all fortune is certainly good."

In Book V, Boethius poses another question about God: if He is responsible for everything and has foreknowledge of everything that people will do, do human beings really have free will? Philosophy clarifies that God's foreknowledge of events would only prevent humans from having free will if it *caused* those events to happen. But in reality, Philosophy continues, God's can know about things that are going to happen without causing them, or without it being necessary that those things are *going to* happen. This is because God's capacity for knowledge is greater than humans'. He is capable of divine intelligence, but humans only have reason (in addition to imagination and sense-perception). Because of His higher capacity, God can know what people are going to choose before they have chosen it.

But how is it possible for God to see the future if he does not control it? According to Philosophy, God's existence is "eternal," which means He lives *outside* time. While people see a past, present, and future, God sees all things "as though they are happening in the present." So He can see human actions without determining them, and without them being uncertain, because such acts are conditionally necessary. This means that, if someone is walking, it is necessary that they're walking simply *because they are walking*, and not because anything forced them to walk against their free will. Therefore, God is like "an eye that is present to watch" the whole universe at the same time.

Having fully assuaged Boethius's concerns about the nature of evil and human free will, Philosophy encourages him to pray to God, "avoid vice," "cultivate virtue," and "be good," since God is "a judge who sees all things."

CHARACTERS

Boethius – The protagonist of *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a slightly-fictionalized version of the author. Born in 477 C.E. just after the fall of the Roman Empire, Boethius was a philosopher who came to be seen as an intermediary between classical Greek philosophy and medieval Christianity. In the *Consolation*, Boethius is in prison contemplating his misfortune, writing sad poetry, and awaiting his execution when Philosophy visits to help him make sense of what has happened to him. Although he spent most of his life in service of the Ostrogothic King Theodoric, Boethius has now been accused of a treasonous conspiracy against Theodoric and sentenced to death. Similarly, although Boethius spent countless years studying Philosophy and learning her wisdom, he has seemingly forgotten her lessons and lost track of his "true nature." Throughout the *Consolation*, Boethius dialogues with Philosophy as a student with a teacher, and through their conversation he remembers that he should tie his happiness to his spiritual fulfillment and relationship with God, rather than the whims of Fortune. After working with Philosophy to resolve the problems of evil and free will in the last two Books, Boethius ends the *Consolation* with a renewed sense of self and purpose.

Lady Philosophy – Boethius's "awe-inspiring" interlocutor in *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a benevolent female teacher, part human and part divine, who embodies the wisdom of Ancient Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. Philosophy leads Boethius through a process of intellectual rediscovery, reminding him that his relationship to God and possession of reason are more important contributors to his happiness than the ups and downs of Fortune. Boethius explicitly connects Philosophy to the Greek philosophy and Paganism that his Roman contemporaries were rapidly forgetting—knowledge of Ancient Greek had essentially disappeared by Boethius's time, and Plato and Aristotle were only known partially, through hearsay and biased intermediaries, rather than in their original wholeness. To symbolize this erosion of wisdom, Boethius depicts Lady Philosophy wearing a beautiful, intricately-woven dress that has been forgotten and torn apart. She wears the Greek letters Pi (Π) and Theta (Θ) on her hemline, which stand for practical and theoretical philosophy, respectively. For the majority of the book, in alternating verse and prose, she assumes the same role in her dialogue with Boethius that Socrates always assumed in Plato's works: through leading questions, counterarguments, puzzles, and flashes of insight, she helps him make sense of his misery and confusion, and then leads him to the truth that promises to liberate him. As a character, then, Philosophy reveals Boethius's deep respect for and trust in Greek philosophy, and his well-founded worry about its disappearance, which ultimately provides him with the consolation he seeks. Whether a mystical vision, real person, a figure of Boethius's conscious imagination, or an allegorical personification of philosophical tradition, Philosophy has shown centuries of readers how to address profound personal questions and doubts through objective philosophical investigation. Endless references to her have appeared in art and literature since the Middle Ages.

God – The eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and absolutely benevolent creator of the universe, whom Boethius and Philosophy praise, pray to, and profile in detail throughout the *Consolation*, particularly in Books IV and V. Although the book strays from identifying this God in terms of specific religious doctrines, He clearly fits the Christian depiction of God, and also closely resembles the "craftsman" creator, or "demiurge," that Plato writes about in works such as the *Timaeus*. Philosophy first explains that "God the Creator watches over" the world and everything in it, then suggests that, because God is the greatest thing that can be imagined, nothing can be greater, more powerful, or happier than Him. Indeed, God is identical to goodness and happiness themselves, as well as the superlative forms of happiness's five elements: pleasure, power, honor, sufficiency, and glory. In Book IV, Philosophy establishes that God has a plan for the universe, Providence. While humans and other mortal beings sometimes err in their attempts to fulfill Providence, God sets them right by providing appropriate consequences that return them to the track of virtue. God is able to do this because He is "eternal," outside time, and looks onto the whole world (and all of what humans see as the past, present, and future) from an outsider's perspective. Therefore, as Philosophy explains in Book V, God can have foreknowledge of all human events without necessarily causing those events to happen. Ultimately, God becomes the principal solution to Boethius's woes, as Philosophy promises that faith and contemplation will free Boethius from relying on the whims of Fortune.

The Muses – A group of nine goddesses who, in the tradition of Ancient Greece, inspired people to create art. Boethius wrestles with the Muses at the very beginning of the *Consolation*, as he struggles to write a poem about his recent misfortunes, but Philosophy soon shows up and kicks the Muses out of Boethius's room, declaring that "Reason" must triumph over "Passion." The Muses represent Boethius's integration of both prose with poetry, and of Greek tradition with his contemporary Roman Christianity.

Fortune – As depicted by Philosophy, Fortune is the moody and cruel goddess of fortune or chance. Fortune enjoys crushing humans' dreams by "seduc[ing]" them with good luck and then taking everything away, as though sending them around a **wheel** that "bring[s] the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top." Because Fortune is untrustworthy and fickle, Philosophy implores Boethius and his readers not to trust her with their happiness, and instead tells them to turn to God.

Plato – Along with his student Aristotle, one of the two central philosophers of Ancient Greece. In many ways considered the

principal founder of European philosophy, Plato's approximately 30 works mostly take the form of philosophical dialogues between the famous Socrates (Plato's own teacher) and various Athenian contemporaries. His ideas permeate virtually all subsequent philosophy, including Boethius's *Consolation*. Boethius's theory of knowledge, depiction of God's power, definition of evil as weakness and "nothing," and distinction between the "eternal" and "perpetual" worlds, among other arguments, come straight from Plato.

Aristotle – Considered one of the two principal Ancient Greek philosophers, alongside his teacher Plato. Throughout his life, Boethius's primary scholarly project was the interpretation and translation of Aristotle, whose ideas deeply influence the arguments presented in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Although Boethius only explicitly cites Aristotle a few times, such as when he explains how chance is possible in a universe governed by God, much of Boethius's thought is deeply indebted to Aristotle (including, for instance, the distinction between simple and conditional necessity).

Zeno – A Greek philosopher who lived in the 5th century B.C.E. and is best known for formulating a series of paradoxes. The most famous is the classic puzzle about how anything can reach its destination if it has to get to the halfway point first, and so on. Boethius cites Zeno as an important part of his early education, and he specifically cites the circumstances around Zeno's death—Zeno relentlessly mocked the men who tortured him to death, while they were doing it—as proof that truth and wisdom should not bend to power and tyranny.

Odysseus – The protagonist of Ancient Greek poet Homer's legendary *Odyssey*, the second-oldest surviving work of European literature (after Homer's *Iliad*). The *Odyssey* recounts Odysseus's circuitous, 10-year journey home to the city of Ithaca after the Trojan War. Boethius cites legendary stories about Odysseus and his crew to illustrate Lady Philosophy's arguments about the nature of virtue and evil.

Nero – The notoriously corrupt and tyrannical emperor of Rome from 37-68 C.E., who allegedly set Rome ablaze and used the ensuing catastrophe to justify persecuting, torturing, and killing Christians. Philosophy uses Nero's "frenzied lunacy" as an example of why power does not necessarily make people virtuous, but in fact often leads them to evil.

TERMS

Providence – **God**'s plan for the universe, considered from the perspective of God's "divine reason itself." This contrasts with Fate, which is the same plan, viewed from the temporal perspective of the material world. In practice, this means that Providence is the overall order of things, like an unchanging blueprint, whereas Fate is the actual, constantly-changing process of construction itself. Providence is absolutely benevolent and perfect, even if Fate sometimes takes a roundabout path to manifesting it.

Fate – The temporal events and processes that, together, enact **God**'s Providence, or His plan for the universe. Whereas Providence exists outside time and is an unchanging order, Fate is the "ever-changing web" of events that unfold in time, and can include the errors and mistakes of beings, like humans, that have free will. However, **Philosophy** emphasizes that, over and through time, the tumultuous unfolding of Fate eventually brings the universe in line with God's Providence.

Foreknowledge – Knowledge of future events, which **Philosophy** believes that **God** must possess by virtue of being all-knowing and all-powerful. In Book V, she and **Boethius** try to determine if there is a contradiction between God having foreknowledge of events and humans having free will over their actions. Ultimately, Philosophy argues that God does not truly have knowledge of the "future" because God is "eternal." This means that he can "embrace and comprehend [the] whole extent [of the universe] simultaneously." So what human beings consider the future is, to God, actually more like part of the present, and God can know things that lie in human beings' future without infringing on people's free will.

Human Free Will – People's capacity to make free, autonomous decisions about what to do, rather than being compelled to act by some external force. **Philosophy** and **Boethius** worry that human free will, which Philosophy considers a logical requirement of human reason, might contradict with **God**'s foreknowledge about what will happen in the universe. However, by explaining that human actions are conditionally necessary (because people have freely chosen them) and not simply necessary (or based on humans' inherent nature), Philosophy is able to show that God's foreknowledge and human free will can both exist.

Sense-Perception – Knowledge about "shape as constituted in matter," obtained through the senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing). According to **Philosophy**, sense-perception is the lowest of the four ways of knowing, below imagination, reason, and intelligence. It is common to all animate beings, from "mussels and other shellfish" to other animals, humans, and even **God**. It is included in all these higher ways of knowing. In one of Philosophy's songs, she notes that some philosophers compared sense-perception to the way a seal makes an impression on a piece of wax.

Imagination – The second of the four ways of knowing, which lies above sense-perception but below reason and intelligence. Imagining something captures the object's "shape as constituted in matter," but does not require that the imagined object is actually present. Because the imagination lets a knower "survey all sensible objects," **Philosophy** argues, it includes the insights of sense-perception. Philosophy concludes that many animals have imagination, which they use

to make predictions and take actions pertaining to the future.

Human Reason – The second-highest of the four ways of knowing, and the greatest one available to human beings. **Philosophy** argues that reason includes the insights of imagination and sense-perception, because the universal concepts that reason formulates "can be both imagined and perceived by the senses." Philosophy also emphasizes to **Boethius** that reason is human beings' best tool for knowing the world, since it looks at universal patterns rather than particular instances. Therefore, for humans, reason should supersede imagination and sense-perception. However, Philosophy emphasizes that **God**'s divine intelligence is still greater than reason, and therefore holds that "human reason [should] bow before" it.

Intelligence – The highest form of knowledge, which **Philosophy** argues is available only to **God**. To an extent unfathomable by human beings, this ability allows God to grasp "the simple form" of things, including humans themselves, through "pure vision of the mind." It gives God knowledge of "universals," "shape," and "matter"—the proper objects of reason, imagination, and sense-perception, respectively—and is also the means by which God is capable of certain foreknowledge about human events with "no certain occurrence," which (according to humans' worldly perception of time) have not yet happened.

Simple Necessity – A necessity inherent in the nature of things: for instance, someone is mortal simply by virtue of their humanity. This contrasts with conditional necessity. **Philosophy** answers the question of how **God**'s foreknowledge is compatible with human free will by explaining that foreknowledge is about *conditionally* necessary things. While foreknowledge would be incompatible with free will if foreknowledge made things *simply* necessary (and therefore outside humans' control), in fact God just knows what people will *decide* to do, and these decisions are only *conditionally* necessary.

Conditional Necessity – In contrast to simple necessity, conditional necessity relies on some information beyond the nature of things. For example, it is not conditionally necessary that someone is walking because they are a human being, but if it is known than that person is walking, it is *conditionally* necessary that the person is walking. (The knowledge that they are walking is the condition that makes the statement necessary, because it is impossible for humans to *know* something that is not certain to be true.) **Philosophy** uses the concept of conditional necessity to explain why **God**'s foreknowledge of human events is compatible with humans having free will: God knows what people will *decide* to do, which makes these actions necessary only *conditionally*. Such actions are not simply necessary, and so have "no necessity in [their] own nature." Therefore, people can still freely choose what to do, and their decisions are now *conditionally* necessary—necessary only because the person is, in fact, doing what they have decided to do. God can know about these actions because they are conditionally necessary, but this does not mean that people did not freely choose them.

THEMES

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CLASSICAL PHILOSOPHY AND MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

Born in 477 C.E. just after the Roman Empire collapsed, Roman philosopher Boethius lived in an era of profound transformation at the very beginning of the Middle Ages. Christianity had officially displaced Paganism as Rome's dominant religion, and knowledge of Greek was rapidly disappearing, leading scholars to gradually forget the work of Ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Although Boethius remains best remembered for *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which he wrote while awaiting his execution for treason in prison, he actually spent most of his life trying to preserve and revive interest in these Greek philosophers. As a result, Boethius is often considered the link between two philosophical traditions: the philosophy of the classical (Greek and Roman) world and the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages. As a Christian scholar of Pagan philosophers, Boethius sought to help European Christians remember the influence of their Pagan past, and his *Consolation* is no exception. Both stylistically and argumentatively, in the *Consolation*, Boethius tries to combine classical Greek philosophy and medieval Roman Christianity into a unified body of thought in order to show that reason and faith are compatible, and to thereby make the Greek tradition palatable to a Christian audience.

In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius highlights his contemporaries' neglect of Greek philosophy and makes a concerted effort to rescue it. When he first meets Lady Philosophy at the beginning of Book I, Boethius presents her as mistreated and forgotten. Her dress is embroidered with Greek letters, unquestionably marking her as Greek, but has been neglected and "torn by the hands of marauders," which represents how Roman scholars forgot and misinterpreted their Greek predecessors. Indeed, even Boethius himself has forgotten them: although he has been Philosophy's disciple his whole life, he has forgotten her and does not even recognize her when she first visits him. But Philosophy tells him not to fear: "wisdom has been threatened with danger by the forces of evil" repeatedly throughout history, but always fought back by

speaking truth to power. Now, facing a death sentence, Boethius has the chance to do precisely that, just as the Greek philosopher Zeno laughed at his executioners, and the more famous Socrates insisted on speaking the truth to the jury that decided to execute him. And Boethius's arguments in *Consolation* consistently come from the Greeks, most of all Plato and Aristotle. For instance, his arguments about the weakness of evil and the innateness of knowledge are based on Plato's dialogues *Gorgias* and *Meno*, and his analysis of random chance is based on Aristotle's *Physics*. He also explicitly cites Plato's *Timaeus* a number of times. Clearly, Ancient Greek philosophy inspires Boethius, who incorporates it into his own work in an effort to revive it.

The *Consolation*'s eclectic form and style are also important parts of Boethius's attempt to resuscitate Greek philosophy for his Christian audience. The *Consolation*'s form closely resembles Plato's philosophical dialogues, in which a wise teacher reveals the truths of the universe to a curious student. In the second half of the book, Boethius starts actively participating in the process of argument, which shows how he learns through this dialogue (and the dialogues of earlier philosophers). Lady Philosophy also alternates between poetry and prose throughout the book: while she argues that philosophical inquiry leads people to the truth, she thinks that "sweet-tongued rhetoric" can help that truth sink in. In this book, logic and art—the tools of religious worship and philosophical inquiry, respectively—work together to uncover and package the truth about God. Indeed, the book frequently references both the multiple Greek gods and the singular Christian God without contradiction. For example, Philosophy sings about the glories of all-powerful God but also tells stories about Greek gods like Circe, Hermes, and Hades. These references show how Boethius believed the Pagan past and the Christian present could peacefully coexist and be productively combined, without a clean break between the two belief systems.

Finally, Boethius also tries to show how the specific beliefs of Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine are compatible. He focuses on their ontologies (notions of what exists in the universe) and epistemologies (conclusions about how things can be known). Boethius cites philosophical arguments, rather than religious faith, to posit that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and absolutely benevolent—he thinks reason should *support* faith, rather than working in contradiction to it. Furthermore, he tries to show that both philosophy and Christianity provide a single, consistent picture of the universe: the eternal, foundational, and all-knowing nature of God; the immortal soul's origin in and eventual return to God; and the nature of learning, which involves the soul recovering forgotten knowledge through reflection on the divine. All of these conclusions are central to both Platonic and Christian understandings of the universe. If Greek and Christian thinkers really believed in the same things, then medieval Christian philosophers should cherish, not ignore, Greek philosophers' contributions. But Boethius also emphasizes that humans cannot know *everything* about God: humans are limited to reason, whereas God possesses superior intelligence. Still, since reason is the highest form of understanding that human beings can attain, structured argument (philosophy) is the best way for people to uncover universal truths about the world. But this does not disprove God's superiority, transcendence, and (to some extent) unfathomability. So, for Boethius, Greek philosophers and Christians are both right about the form and limits of human knowledge.

Just as Boethius was always Philosophy's disciple but forgot her teachings in his misery over his prison sentence, he thinks Roman society must uncover its own buried memories of Greek philosophy. Some worry that, since Boethius never explicit references Christian doctrine in the *Consolation*, he abandoned or never truly believed in it; however, all biographical sources indicate that he was a devout Christian until the day of his death. Rather, he likely avoided these topics simply because, in his title, he promised to remain within the bounds of *philosophy*. But while Philosophy is the one who consoles Boethius, she does so through arguments fully consistent with his Christian faith.

WISDOM, FORTUNE, AND HAPPINESS

Boethius's title is deceptively literal: he dialogues with Philosophy in this book not because he seeks wisdom about the universe, but because he is sad and wants *consolation*. Having suffered a cascade of misfortune, Boethius is ultimately accused of plotting to overthrow Ostrogothic King Theodoric and awaits an unjust execution ordered by the very ruler Boethius spent decades serving. He craves some deeper understanding of his situation and wants to determine if he can still live his final days with a sense of genuine purpose and peace. And Philosophy successfully gives Boethius the consolation he seeks: she shows him that his downfall does not affect his *true* happiness, since "God is the essence of happiness" and one's fortune in life has nothing to do with it. Rather, wise people recognize the futility of searching for happiness in earthly pleasures rather than in "the sum of happiness" that is attainable through God.

At first, Boethius is miserable and confused because he wrongly ties his sense of self and happiness to his fortune in the world. He has fallen from a remarkable position as one of the king's closest personal advisors to an unenviable place in jail, awaiting execution for a crime he did not commit. The poem Boethius recites at the very beginning of the *Consolation* demonstrates his misery, and he blames Fortune for destroying the perfect happiness he used to possess. Luckily, Lady Philosophy shows up to serve as Boethius's "nurse" and emphasizes that Fortune is *not* the same as happiness. She

personifies Fortune as a trickster goddess who cruelly "seduces" people and then gleefully crushes them, sending them up and down as though on a **wheel**. Because fortune is always unstable, anyone who bases their happiness on it—like Boethius—is bound to be disappointed. But Philosophy declares that, despite Boethius's imprisonment and impending senseless death, he "still possess[es] outstanding blessings." While good fortune, "wealth, honours and the like" are not true possessions, since they can be given or taken away, Boethius possesses the "precious" things that are really his own: loyal family and friends, sharp and infallible reason, and knowledge of God. According to Philosophy, wise people focus on these possessions, the stable elements that really compose happiness, rather than "hop[ing for] and fear[ing]" the Wheel of Fortune.

Philosophy explains that people usually seek five things in their quest for happiness through Fortune: "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure." This is Boethius's error, since pursuing each of these things actually leads people to misery, rather than happiness. Philosophy affirms that these five things are important, but only to an extent: someone who is truly happy will have a balance of all five. Wealth is only important because it leads to self-sufficiency, position because it gives people their due respect, power because it ensures people are not "weak and impotent" to fulfill their desires, fame because it is a sign "of great excellence," and pleasure because people always want "delight" rather than "suffering." However, pursuing these goals independently of one another is dangerous. For example, the pursuit of wealth is pointless because people are "superior" to the inanimate things they hope to possess, which have no value in themselves. In fact, the rich tend to become cruel, evil, selfless, unempathetic, and gluttonous, so pursuing wealth leads to misery, not happiness. Philosophy makes similar points about position, power, fame, and pleasure: the pursuit of each is self-undermining, and can even lead people to sacrifice the others (like when, in the pursuit of pleasure, someone spends all their money and loses others' respect). Real happiness, Philosophy explains, is not about these five "puny and fragile" pursuits, which are subject to the whims of Fortune. While a happy person has all of them, happiness "has no parts," so "seeking the sum of happiness" is the only legitimate strategy.

In order to find "the sum of happiness," humans must turn away from the material world and focus on developing a relationship to God. First, Philosophy explains that "the sum of happiness" must be at once absolutely self-sufficient, absolutely powerful, absolutely "worthy of veneration," "unsurpassed in fame and glory," and finally, "supremely happy." The five dimensions of happiness—"wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure"—are "differ[ent] in name, but not in substance." Since nothing is greater than God, Philosophy's argument continues, nothing can be more powerful, "worthy of veneration," or "supremely happy" than God himself. Therefore, "God is the essence of happiness," and happiness's five dimensions are actually just material "shadows of the true good." But this raises a question that scholars of Boethius have debated for centuries: to achieve true happiness, what relationship should people have to God? First, Philosophy explains that people can become happy "through the possession of divinity," which is about taking "refuge from distress" in prayer. Taking this idea further, the last two books of the *Consolation* focus on what can be known about the nature of God, which suggests that knowledge of God is an important part of achieving absolute good. Finally, Philosophy and Boethius agree that the human soul is immortal and returns to God after death, which implies that one should achieve happiness in the process. Therefore, Philosophy's teachings lead Boethius away from his false happiness (based on Fortune) and toward true happiness (based in God) on a handful of levels: she reminds him to pray and think of God; she teaches him about God's true nature, the knowledge of which is a form of divinity and happiness; and she reminds Boethius that, when he does die, he will return to God and get the opportunity to be truly happy, despite the profound injustice that has tainted his final days on Earth. Boethius's misfortune, Philosophy suggests, is actually good for him: it is the world's way of reminding him about God, the only truly absolute good that exists. But even if Boethius did not accept Philosophy's arguments about God, her lessons about fortune still remind Boethius about the futility of his worldly pursuits, and therefore console him in his darkest hour.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

How can an all-powerful, all-knowing, absolutely benevolent God allow evil to exist? In addition to potentially challenging Philosophy's arguments about the nature of God, this question is personally significant for Boethius, who struggles to make sense of why wicked men now have power in Rome and are punishing the virtuous (including himself). Philosophy solves this problem by arguing, first, that evil is not a real thing that God has positively brought into existence, but is rather a *lack* of goodness, and, secondly, that God gives everyone the consequences they deserve. In effect, Philosophy posits that Boethius is wrong about whom God rewards and punishes: while Boethius thinks that evil people in Rome are being rewarded and he himself is being punished, in reality it is the other way around, as it should be in a world controlled by a benevolent, all-powerful creator.

To explain how there can be evil in the world, Philosophy first determines that evil is weakness, and therefore evil is nothing. This means that God has not created evil and can still be absolutely good. Philosophy first argues that evil is weakness. She says this because evil is contrary to the natural way of things—everyone naturally wants happiness, and the good are powerful enough to achieve it, while the evil are so powerless that they cannot. So the good act naturally and powerfully, and

the evil act unnaturally because they are powerless to do what is natural. Therefore, the good are strong and the evil are weak, and evil's power comes "from weakness rather than strength." Because evil is weakness, it is possible for people to be evil even though God is not evil. Weakness (evil) is simply a lack of strength (good). So while good people succeed, the evil fail in their "search for the good" because they make "mistake[s] and error[s]." But it's not an evil part that makes them fail—the problem is the good parts they *do not* have. Therefore, people are capable of doing evil in a world ruled by a perfect God, who "can only do good," simply because people themselves are not perfect and often commit errors. Accordingly, Philosophy concludes, "evil is nothing," and evil people can only "do nothing." In fact, because they go against nature, she says, evil people are not true human beings, in the same sense as a corpse is not fully human. An analogy that could be used to understand this concept is filling up a glass with water from a pitcher. Although the pitcher only contains water and only puts water in the glass (like God is absolutely good and only imparts His good on the world), it is possible to only half fill the glass, in which case the top half of the glass contains nothing. This empty space is like the evil that Boethius is talking about: "evil is nothing," but it is still present, in the way that a glass can be half-empty (even though the emptiness does not exist, and so cannot technically "be"). While water is the only thing in the glass, the glass is not fully a glass of water, just as an evil person is not fully a human being. In the book, Philosophy explains the way "evil is nothing" by referencing the distinction between Providence and Fate. In short, while God's plan (Providence) is perfect, sometimes imperfect things (Fate) happen during the fulfillment of that plan, when an error (evil) is made by imperfect humans, but then corrected.

The second half of the problem of evil concerns how God doles out consequences to the wicked and virtuous. If God is completely benevolent, He should theoretically never reward the wicked—and yet Boethius sees immoral, deceptive men winning power and respect in Rome. However, Philosophy concludes that the evil are never rewarded, and always punished: their fortunes and fates are *always* a means of correcting them and encouraging them to be virtuous. First, evil people's "very wickedness" is a punishment in and of itself: the wicked have lost their humanity and grown miserable by pursuing the wrong goals. Indeed, when people realize they are miserable because they are wicked, they sometimes decide to try and become virtuous, so wickedness can course-correct on its own. Secondly, although Boethius complains that God has imprisoned him while letting the wicked run free, Philosophy says that freedom is actually a form of punishment for the wicked, because it lets them enact their wicked desires and grow more and more rotten and unhappy in the process. And thirdly, while Boethius worries that punishing the wicked is itself a form of divine cruelty or evil, Philosophy contends that actually punishment makes "the wicked [become] happier." Punishment "correct[s]" the wicked, making them more virtuous, and shows bystanders "the path of right" by instilling them with "fear of punishment." Accordingly, when the wicked are punished by God, they become more benevolent, and when they are not, they only become *more* wicked, which is its own punishment. So even when the wicked do not appear to be overtly punished, they are always punished on some level for their wickedness. Finally, God sets wicked men out to punish each other: when the wicked "suffer injustice," they decide "to be different from those they hate [...] and become virtuous." As a result, God has "evil men making other evil men good." He eliminates evil through evil, just as two negatives cancel each other out. Therefore, Philosophy can contend that God is still absolutely good despite evil's presence in the world. All stays in line with God's Providence and "all fortune is certainly good" fortune: everything in the world naturally tends toward the good.

HUMAN FREE WILL AND GOD'S FOREKNOWLEDGE

In Book V of his *Consolation*, Boethius raises a classic philosophical problem: how can people freely choose their actions if God knows everything that will happen beforehand? If there is no free will, then everything Boethius believes in crumbles: God's rewards and punishments are meaningless, because people do not choose the behaviors that merit them; God is responsible for the evil in the world; and "hope and prayer" lose their power. Philosophy solves this problem by explaining that there is no contradiction between God having perfect foreknowledge of the world and humans having free will. Technically, her argument is that God's foreknowledge relies on what she calls conditional necessity, and human free will is violated only if human actions are determined by what she calls simple necessity. In practice, what she means is that, because God exists on a higher plane of the cosmos, with a greater capacity for knowledge and a different relationship to time, human distinctions among past, present, and future don't exist for God—everything is part of the present. Therefore, He can know things that humans consider to not have happened yet, and He can do so without causing those things to happen.

Because God is a superior being, Philosophy argues, He has a greater capacity for knowledge than human beings, which means He can know about human action in a way that would not be knowable to people. First, Philosophy argues that knowledge depends on the knowing agent, not the thing that is to be known. She separates out four kinds of knowledge: sense-perception, imagination, reason, and intelligence. Sense-perception (knowledge through senses like sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing) tells the knower about the material form of the thing they are investigating. Imagination can tell them about the "shape [of a thing] alone without [reference to

physical] matter," and reason looks at the universal characteristics of a type of thing. Intelligence, which only God has completely, is "pure vision of the mind," which gives Him complete insight into everything. Since only God has intelligence and humans do not, He can know things—including things about the future—that humans cannot know through their reason, imagination, or sense-perception. The apparent problem with foreknowledge is that, if God already knows what someone will do, then that person is not truly free to do it, because they could not choose the opposite. However, this problem only exists if knowledge is rational—meaning that one can only know things that are certainly true (since anything else would be opinion). Since God's knowledge is through intelligence, he can know things that "ha[ve] no certain occurrence."

God also has a different relationship to time, which allows Him to see things that have not yet happened according to the human perception of time. By definition, Philosophy explains, God created the universe, which means he "is eternal"—something Philosophy defines as "the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life." He is not just old, but lives outside the dimension of time entirely. This contrasts with temporal things like humans and the physical world, which experience time in terms of the past, present, and future. Following Plato, Philosophy suggests that God is "eternal," while the world—which extends infinitely into the future—is "perpetual." Because of God's "eternal presence," He can see "all the infinite recesses of past and future [...] as though they are happening in the present." So what looks like the future to humans is already visible to God, and what looks like foreknowledge to humans is really just God looking at (what is to him) the present. Therefore, because God exists outside of time, he can know what humans have freely decided to do, but not infringe on humans' free will by having this knowledge.

In technical terms, Philosophy concludes, God's foreknowledge does not infringe on human free will because this knowledge is about *conditional* necessity, not *simple* necessity. Simple necessity refers to something that must be true because of the very nature of what something is. For instance, it is simply necessary that any human body is mortal, and will not exist forever. Nobody can ever choose to deny simple necessity through free will (i.e., a human cannot simply decide to be immortal, because this would go against their nature). On the other hand, conditional necessity refers to something that is necessarily true, but only because of "a condition which is added." For instance, "if you know someone is walking, it is necessary that [they are] walking." But the person could freely choose to stop walking, which means conditional necessity *can* be changed through free will. The kind of free human actions that God knows about are instances of conditional necessity. It is not necessary that they *will* happen, but once they *have* happened, it is necessary that they *did* happen. God does not force people to choose, but rather sees all the choices people have made and will ever make. This is how He knows what humans see as the future. His foreknowledge is like "an eye that is present to watch" from outside the bounds of time, which is capable of knowing in ways not accessible to human beings.

The history of philosophy after Boethius has seen a wide variety of often-conflicting answers to this common problem of free will, but Lady Philosophy's argument clearly explains how this free will is compatible with God's foreknowledge of human events. Most importantly, it follows directly from the picture Boethius paints of the cosmos: the universe has been created by God, who directs everything from a stance outside of time through Providence, and then watches as Fate runs its course. Although it might be difficult for contemporary readers to accept notions of God existing outside of time or knowing things in unfathomable ways as a result, at the very least, this argument should challenge readers' preconceptions about the apparent contradiction between determinism and human free will.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SUN AND SUNLIGHT

In their songs, Boethius and Lady Philosophy repeatedly mention the Sun, the stars, and the appearance of sunlight after nighttime or adverse weather. These references represent the purpose of wisdom and philosophy in humans' tumultuous lives. Much like the sun sheds light onto the darkness, philosophy helps people recognize the greater truths of the universe (as governed and planned out by God) and break out of their comparatively small and biased perspectives.

First, sunlight represents wisdom or truth, which radiates from a faraway source but still reaches and influences all worldly things. Philosophy specifically cites Homer's use of the Sun with this metaphorical significance in his *Iliad*, which further shows how she sees wisdom as inherently tied to the Greek tradition. She also refers to people's own knowledge of the truth as "inward light" and talks about her own task as helping "the resplendent light of truth" break through the fog of ignorance.

Secondly, the appearance or disappearance of sunlight represents the balance of opposite elements in nature (like light and dark), and the way that this balance requires constant change within the world itself. Much like the sun rises and instantly bathes the world in light, people's lives can change rapidly because of the whims of Fortune. "The world stays rarely long the same," Philosophy argues, so it is wrong for

people to "put [their] faith in transient luck."

Finally, the Sun represents the universe's inherent, mathematical order: the Sun always rises every morning, and the stars move in an astronomically predictable way. In Boethius's time, it was believed that the Sun and other stars rotated around the Earth, but this does not change the fact that the motions of the planets are governed by what Philosophy calls "the law observed in heaven" and "the great plan of the universe."

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Although perhaps best known to contemporary audiences through the television show of the same name, the concept of a "wheel of fortune" has appeared in art and literature for at least 2,000 years, since well before Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The goddess Fortune and her treacherous wheel are a symbolic representation of Philosophy's argument about true versus misleading sources of human happiness. While in popular culture the "wheel of fortune" is usually associated with the promise of winning a "fortune" through gambling or random chance, its meaning was rather different for Boethius. It rotates vertically like a Ferris wheel, and everyone is subject to it all the time: as Fortune moves her wheel, people move up and down, going from success to ruin and back again. Because "the top [go] to the bottom and the bottom to the top," all luck—good and bad—is temporary and changeable. Through this metaphor, then, Philosophy explains why Boethius should not agonize over the series of events that have led him to a prison cell and death sentence.

In addition to directly explaining why Fortune is an untrustworthy master—and why people should not tie their happiness to their material success or reputations—the "wheel of fortune" metaphor also shows how, according to Boethius's portrayal of Philosophy, even seemingly-random events actually follow the universe's deeper, more fundamental order. While individual human beings experience the ups and downs of their fortunes as random, unpredictable, and disorderly, in reality Fortune is turning her wheel constantly and mechanically. So the apparently random turns of Fate that people suffer are still part of a greater plan (God's Providence), and what throws one person off-balance might be God's way of maintaining balance in the world as a whole.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Consolation of Philosophy* published in 1999.

Book I, Part I Quotes

❝ While with success false Fortune favoured me
One hour of sadness could not have thrown me down,
But now her trustless countenance has clouded,
Small welcome to the days that lengthen life.
Foolish the friends who called me happy then:
For falling shows a man stood insecure.

Related Characters: Boethius (speaker), The Muses, Fortune

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

At the very beginning of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius sits in his prison cell and laments the horrible turns of fortune that have led him to his present, sorry state. Although he used to be one of the highest-ranking officials in Rome's government, he has since been falsely accused of treason and sentenced to death by the same emperor he spent his whole professional life serving. Here, he declares that he used to be happy during this period—when "with success false Fortune favoured" him, he "could not have [been] thrown [...] down" by unfortunate events, but now that his overall fortune has grown far drearier, he has no interest in "the days that lengthen life" and wants to get them done with as soon as possible. He concludes that, because his old happiness was "insecure" and based in unstable fortune, he was never truly happy. And, by opening the book with this poem, he shows precisely what is at stake in his dialogue with Philosophy: whether it is possible to be happy and live well in the worst imaginable circumstances.

This opening verse, which Boethius sings before Lady Philosophy shows up to try and console him, reveals that he already understands some of the insights she will offer to him—but tragically misses some others. Namely, his experience has shown him that Fortune (seen by the Romans as a goddess) is untrustworthy and unstable, so people should not expect their good or bad fortune to continue forever. It is true that all people "st[and] insecure" in their fortune all the time, and can do nothing to change it. But Boethius is wrong to invest so much of his identity and happiness in Fortune: since he cannot control the turns of fate that Fortune gives him, Lady Philosophy later tells him, he should simply not care whether he finds success or ruin. Rather, his true happiness and self-worth should depend on internal factors.

❝ She was of awe-inspiring appearance, her eyes burning and keen beyond the usual power of men. She was so full of years that I could hardly think of her as of my own generation, and yet she possessed a vivid colour and undiminished vigour. It was difficult to be sure of her height, for sometimes she was of average human size, while at other times she seemed to touch the very sky with the top of her head, and when she lifted herself even higher, she pierced it and was lost to human sight. Her clothes were made of imperishable material, of the finest thread woven with the most delicate skill. (Later she told me that she had made them with her own hands.) Their splendour, however, was obscured by a kind of film as of long neglect, like statues covered in dust. On the bottom hem could be read the embroidered Greek letter Pi, and on the top hem the Greek letter Theta. Between the two a ladder of steps rose from the lower to the higher letter. Her dress had been torn by the hands of marauders who had each carried off such pieces as he could get. There were some books in her right hand, and in her left hand she held a sceptre.

Related Characters: Boethius (speaker), Lady Philosophy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

When Lady Philosophy first appears to Boethius in his room, he scarcely recognizes her, even though he has been her student throughout his life. Instead, he is shocked by her "awe-inspiring appearance," which establishes her as somewhere between human and divine: she looks human but appears to have superhuman powers, is at once impossibly old and still in her prime, and alternatingly has her head in the human world and in the heavens, as though she is literally mediating a conversation between Boethius and God. All these dimensions of her appearance point to the way that, for Boethius, reason—which achieves its fullest expression through the practice of philosophy—is the means by which human beings are capable of understanding the cosmos and personally connecting with God.

Philosophy's dress is also significant in a number of ways. First, its "imperishable material" shows how philosophy's wisdom is timeless, and its "finest thread woven with the most delicate skill" shows the excellence and value of that wisdom. The "film as of long neglect" specifically shows that Philosophy's contributions have been forgotten—both by Boethius himself, who has not seen his old teacher for some time, and by the Roman world that Boethius saw as failing to give Greek philosophy the respect it was due. Indeed, the letters Pi (Π) and Theta (Θ) conspicuously mark Philosophy as Greek, associating her with masters like Plato and Aristotle, and these letters specifically stand for the two branches of *practical* and *theoretical* philosophy, respectively. And finally, the way that her "dress had been torn by the hands of marauders" shows how the thinkers who followed the Greeks not only ignored their contributions, but in fact actively distorted and intentionally misinterpreted them for their own ends, rather than following them in their true purpose: the discovery and promotion of truth.

Book I, Part VI Quotes

❝ Now I know the other cause, or rather the major cause of your illness: you have forgotten your true nature. And so I have found out in full the reason for your sickness and the way to approach the task of restoring you to health.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Book I, Lady Philosophy repeatedly reminds Boethius that she has the power to overcome evil with wisdom and has done so repeatedly throughout history. After establishing her authority in this way, she begins looking at the situation that Boethius has fallen into—she hopes to diagnose his "illness" so that she can ultimately offer a "cure" and help him live in peace and happiness, even if he has few days left before his execution.

In this passage, Philosophy concludes that Boethius's illness comes from "hav[ing] forgotten [his] true nature." While this might seem cryptic, in fact Philosophy means it quite literally: he is a human being, but he has forgotten what it truly means to be a human being, and what human beings must do in order to live happily. Namely, she thinks that humans are first and foremost rational beings, whose essence lies in their eternal minds rather than their material bodies, and whose existence in the world has been guaranteed by an all-powerful God that watches over them. Boethius "ha[s] forgotten [his] true nature" because he has become overwhelmed with grief and sorrow about events that only affect him in the material world—his fall from grace and imprisonment—when, in reality, his mental freedom and relationship to God are the things that affect the wellbeing of his "true nature." His problem is not the misfortune that has befallen him, but rather his *response* to that misfortune: he has turned away from the soul and sacrificed his spiritual and moral health by letting his relationships with Philosophy and God deteriorate.

Book II, Part II Quotes

❝ Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I turn my wheel in its ever changing circle, filled with joy as I bring the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy, Fortune (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In Book II, Philosophy makes the case to Boethius that he should not bet his happiness on the twists and turns of fortune (which are governed by the goddess of the same name, Fortune). Here, she speaks in the voice of Fortune herself, who proclaims that she is "filled with joy" by the chance to destroy the stability in people's lives and force them to adapt to new circumstances they have neither chosen nor necessarily brought upon themselves. To talk about the motion of Fortune, Philosophy uses the metaphor of the Wheel of Fortune—like a Ferris wheel, it rotates vertically, shuffling people's fortunes so that everyone gets a taste of both prosperity and failure.

In "bring[ing] the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top," Fortune works cyclically and predictably—so someone with the wisdom to understand her workings through reason should understand that their good fortune will not necessarily last, and their misfortune will eventually come to pass. Nevertheless, these cyclical motions of fortune look random and abrupt to the people they affect, who feel suddenly and often unfairly displaced by the unanticipated changes. Even the learned Boethius could not avoid falling into this trap, as he let his sudden decline unsettle his happiness and convince him that the world is corrupt and meaningless. The way out of this trap is, of course, philosophy, which allows Boethius and his readers to understand the true nature of Fortune and the cosmos as a whole—to see the pattern that underlies apparent chaos, as it were—and therefore refashion their lives and senses of self around the wisdom they have gathered.

❝ You should not wear yourself out by setting your heart on living according to a law of your own in a world that is shared by everyone.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy, Fortune (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

As she continues to speak on behalf of the cruel, seductive goddess Fortune, Philosophy implores Boethius and his readers to recognize the limits of their wills. Relentlessly pursuing material things in the belief that one can achieve everything one dreams about is like trying to follow "a law of [one's] own in a world that is shared by everyone" because it means forgetting that the world is full of obstacles to the individual will, which are stronger than it and outside one's control. Other people, the forces of nature, and of course Fortune herself all stand between people's imaginations and their realities.

So, just as living in a society requires recognizing that one's "world [...] is shared by everyone," learning to see "everyone" as equally deserving of rights and good treatment, and therefore agreeing to a common law that protects their interests as well as one's own, living wisely in the world at all requires admitting and recognizing the limits to one's own will.

Specifically, Philosophy wants Boethius to see that the things he laments losing—like his wealth, power, and reputation—are actually not valuable because they are outside the limits of his will: they are not things he controls or truly possesses, and so he should not be surprised when he loses them. In fact, they are not his at all, but rather Fortune's: she can offer them and take them away at will. Therefore, instead of growing attached to them, Boethius must reflect on where the true limits of his will are, figure out what he actually does have within his control, and learn to base his happiness on those things rather than external objects that are not truly his.

Book II, Part IV Quotes

❝ I can't put up with your dilly-dallying and the dramatization of your care-worn grief-stricken complaints that something is lacking from your happiness. No man is so completely happy that something somewhere does not clash with his condition. It is the nature of human affairs to be fraught with anxiety; they never prosper perfectly and they never remain constant.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Even though Boethius is literally on death row because of a false accusation, Philosophy gets fed up with his despair and complaints after a couple dozen pages. She is supposed to be a patient, benevolent, consoling source of wisdom—but apparently her patience has its limits, and around the midpoint of Book II, she essentially tells Boethius to stop wallowing in self-pity like a child and move on with his life.

Beyond helping pick up the pace and push the argument along, this speech allows Philosophy to concisely make the point that people should not worry about situations they cannot change. Rather, they must accept and make the most of the fortune they receive, because nothing will ever make (worldly) human life perfect. Although she spends much of the following section of the *Consolation* talking about what perfect happiness does entail, she ultimately concludes that it is equally achievable for everyone, no matter their material circumstances, because it is entirely based on the health of the mind or soul. While Boethius's situation is extreme, the principle still holds: Philosophy argues that success and failure are in the eye of the beholder, and people who base their happiness and sense of self entirely in their mind—the only thing over which they have complete control—are able to withstand any imaginable degree of hardship without losing their happiness.

Book II, Part V Quotes

❝ From all this it is obvious that not one of those things which you count among your blessings is in fact any blessing of your own at all. And if, then, they don't contain a spark of beauty worth seeking, why weep over their loss or rejoice at their preservation? If Nature gives them their beauty, how does it involve you? They would still have been pleasing by themselves, even if separated from your possessions. It isn't because they are part of your wealth that they are precious, but because you thought them precious that you wanted to add them to the sum of your riches.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Fortune, Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining in general why Fortune and the gifts she inconsistently provides actually have nothing to do with happiness, Philosophy tells Boethius to look specifically at the things he used to think made him happy in his own life. The first is his wealth, but Philosophy insists that having things like money, "precious stones," fancy clothes, and servant laborers does not make a person any happier or better than a person who does not have these advantages. This is because a human being's essence is the rationality of their mind, which is inherently superior to all other things.

Therefore, if the value of human life is about the mind, then the value of inanimate physical things—if they really have any value at all—can never possibly approach the far greater value of humans themselves. When looking at a human and their pile of gold and jewelry, then, the human's value is far greater than the jewelry's, which cannot affect the human's value in any way because it is an inferior kind of thing. As a result, Philosophy concludes, people only consider material things like money and jewels to be valuable because those people are ignorant and misguided. And since his wealth was never valuable to begin with, Boethius did not lose anything of any real value when Fortune took it all away.

Book II, Part VI Quotes

❝ You creatures of earth, don't you stop to consider the people over whom you think you exercise authority? You would laugh if you saw a community of mice and one mouse arrogating to himself power and jurisdiction over the others. Again, think of the human body: could you discover anything more feeble than man, when often even a tiny fly can kill him either by its bite or by creeping into some inward part of him? The only way one man can exercise power over another is over his body and what is inferior to it, his possessions. You cannot impose anything on a free mind, and you cannot move from its state of inner tranquillity a mind at peace with itself and firmly founded on reason.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Zeno, Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

When she turns to the second advantage that Boethius regrets losing to Fortune—his political office in the Roman government, and the "power and jurisdiction" that it

brought him—Lady Philosophy decides to use a humorous allegory to help Boethius and his readers see things from the kind of objective, removed perspective that she is able to take in relation to human beings. Philosophy sees humans, she explains, with the same kind of objective distance as humans see mice. So to Philosophy, watching humans choose leaders and divide up territory is just as ridiculous as if a human were to see mice doing the same thing. The effect of this allegory is to show the meaningless of political power, which has no inherent good or bad in it: rather, political authority is based entirely and exclusively in rulers' capacity to commit physical violence and threaten people's "feeble" bodies. In contrast, "a free mind" is superior to the body and dedicates itself to higher, more important pursuits. When "firmly founded on [philosophical] reason," such a mind sees politicians and their governments like the comical assembly of mice. The implication for Boethius is clear: although he has been imprisoned by a rogue, tyrannous regime, he maintains his freedom of mind and is therefore still free in the only way that really matters.

Book III, Part II Quotes

❝ In all the care with which they toil at countless enterprises, mortal men travel by different paths, though all are striving to reach one and the same goal, namely, happiness, beatitude, which is a good which once obtained leaves nothing more to be desired. It is the perfection of all good things and contains in itself all that is good; and if anything were missing from it, it couldn't be perfect, because something would remain outside it, which could still be wished for. It is clear, therefore, that happiness is a state made perfect by the presence of everything that is good, a state, which, as we said, all mortal men are striving to reach though by different paths. For the desire for true good is planted by nature in the minds of men, only error leads them astray towards false good.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In Book III, Philosophy explains what happiness really is and what it requires. But before getting into specifics, she must first explain why happiness matters at all, and that is her purpose in this passage. She does so with an argument that is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and looks a lot like Aristotle's argument in the *Nichomachean Ethics*: happiness matters because it is the ultimate end goal of all human action. When people act for the sake of some smaller goal—like their health or virtuousness, for instance—that smaller goal only matters because it promises to make people happy.

In short, everyone is always acting for the sake of their happiness, which has a few important consequences for the next part of Philosophy's argument. First, every human being has an inalienable natural desire to be happy. And secondly, since everyone does the things they think will make them happy, people who end up *unhappy* do not *want* the wrong things, but rather do not understand *how* to get the happiness they truly want. They are ignorant, not malicious, for "only error leads them astray towards false good." Both of these conclusions play important parts in Philosophy's explanation of how evil can exist in the world, and of where human beings originate from and end up after death.

❝ The sun into the western waves descends,
Where underground a hidden way he wends;
Then to his rising in the east he comes:
All things seek the place that best becomes.
Each thing rejoices when this is retrieved:
For nothing keeps the order it received
Except its rising to its fall it bend
And make itself a circle without end.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this verse, Philosophy sings about the constant, cyclical changes that govern everything in nature, and then explains how everything tries to fill its natural role in the world, or find "the place that best becomes." While after fulfilling this role "each thing rejoices" in happiness, this role is—paradoxically—not the same as "the order it received," or the place where things started. So, in their attempts to fulfill their natures, things supersede and transcend themselves. Specifically, because they are always seeking happiness, people will always go above and beyond "the order [they] received" and strive for improvement—namely, they will want to get more of what they think will make them happy.

But this same fundamental drive never can or will change: everyone will always seek happiness and improvement, and so in *this* sense will start in the *same* place as their ancestors. This verse allows Philosophy to show how change and constancy are two sides of the same coin (which comes in handy later, when she needs to explain the distinction between Providence and Fate). Just as it is the Sun's nature to forever repeat the same cycle of change—to set in the West every night and rise again in the East every morning—it is human nature to constantly strive for change and improvement as part of the pursuit of happiness.

Book III, Part V Quotes

What sort of power is it, then, that strikes fear into those who possess it, confers no safety on you if you want it, and which cannot be avoided when you want to renounce it?

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Philosophy spends much of Book III emphasizing that, although true happiness includes adequate measures of "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure," pursuing these five goals on their own actually leads people to undermine their quests for happiness. She goes through each of these five turn, and this quote about the uselessness of power summarizes her argumentative strategy: she shows that these common goals do not necessarily make people any happier, wiser, or more virtuous. In fact, on the contrary, they tend to make people double down on their misconceptions about happiness: people do not realize that money, power, fame, status, and pleasure have nothing to do with happiness, but instead convince themselves that they actually *still do not have enough* of these things, which they start pursuing even more avidly and viciously.

Philosophy's argument about power is especially short, sweet, and convincing. Essentially, she says that kings are not happier than commoners because kings are constantly paranoid about the possibility of *losing* the throne (which means that power "strikes fear into those who possess it") and are actually in *more* danger than they would be otherwise because people probably *do* want to steal their throne (which means that power "confers no safety on" those who have it). As though to add insult to injury, kings can never take the targets off their own backs; they can't "renounce" their power even if they want to. To Philosophy, then, their power is really more of a burden than a blessing, and this is clearly not a necessary or even helpful ingredient in a happy life.

Book III, Part IX Quotes

Human perversity, then, makes divisions of that which by nature is one and simple, and in attempting to obtain part of something which has no parts, succeeds in getting neither the part—which is nothing—nor the whole, which they are not interested in.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining why the "puny and fragile" goals of "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure" have no inherent worth for human beings and do not help people become happy, Philosophy makes the rather confusing point that these five things are actually all crucial parts of a "supremely happy" existence. How can this be?

Philosophy carefully distinguishes between people who pursue these five goals *separately*, one at a time, and those who pursue *the unity of* these goals, which she proves to be the same thing as God, because He is the highest thing in the universe in terms of all five: he is absolutely powerful, "unsurpassed in fame and glory [position]," joyous, and completely self-sufficient (which is the real goal of wealth). Therefore, achieving true happiness requires contemplating and praying to God, and people can achieve the five parts of happiness through Him. But "mak[ing] divisions of that which by nature is one and simple"—meaning separating out the five goals and pursuing them one at a time, like someone who spends their life trying to accumulate wealth or power, become famous, or feel thrills and pleasure as much as possible—is an error that leads people to a worse place than where they started. Beyond serving as practical advice for Boethius and his readers, this argument also begins to show how evil enters the world through human folly, and how rationally analyzing the universe can help illuminate the nature of God.

> O Thou who dost by everlasting reason rule,
> Creator of the planets and the sky, who time
> From timelessness dost bring, unchanging Mover,
> No cause drove Thee to mould unstable matter, but
> The form benign of highest good within Thee set.
> All things Thou bringest forth from Thy high archetype:
> Thou, height of beauty, in Thy mind the beauteous world
> Dost bear, and in that ideal likeness shaping it,
> Dost order perfect parts a perfect whole to frame.
> [...]
> Grant, Father, that our minds Thy august seat may scan,
> Grant us the sight of true good's source, and grant us light
> That we may fix on Thee our mind's unblinded eye.
> Disperse the clouds of earthly matter's cloying weight;
> Shine out in all Thy glory; for Thou art rest and peace
> To those who worship Thee; to see Thee is our end,
> Who art our source and maker, lord and path and goal.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66-7

Explanation and Analysis

This poem is the most famous one in the whole *Consolation*, and it is sometimes cited as the climax of the entire book. This is because Philosophy presents the overall thesis of her book-long argument here: she offers a complete picture of the universe; tells Boethius, his readers, and humankind in general what to do to find happiness; and even provides a demonstration of it by structuring this song as a prayer addressed directly to God.

First, Philosophy provides a picture of the universe in this poem. She explains how God created everything in the universe, extends into everything, and continues to control it all through the force she later defines as Providence. She states that God contains perfect goodness and happiness, and in the long middle section that has been omitted here, she asserts that all souls return to God upon death. These arguments are crucial to resolving the problems of evil and free will, respectively, in Book IV and Book V.

But these arguments are also important because Philosophy stresses that properly understanding God and the universe He has created is one of the most important ways to reach the absolute goodness and happiness that He represents and can provide to human beings. By explaining everything that can be rationally known about God and His universe in this hymn, Philosophy at once tells the reader what they need to know in order to give themselves up to divinity, shows them what worshipping and appreciating the order of the universe looks like, and explicitly explains why it is so important to do so (in the poem's last lines). In this sense, philosophy—the practice of rational inquiry that uncovers universal truths—is necessary to know and appreciate God. It is, indeed, a form of *worship*, like prayer or the creation of religious art (including this poem, which Lady Philosophy uses to accompany the worship-through-argument that she has just finished).

Book III, Part X Quotes

> It is the universal understanding of the human mind that God, the author of all things, is good. Since nothing can be conceived better than God, everyone agrees that that which has no superior is good. Reason shows that God is so good that we are convinced that His goodness is perfect. Otherwise He couldn't be the author of creation. There would have to be something else possessing perfect goodness over and above God, which would seem to be superior to Him and of greater antiquity. For all perfect things are obviously superior to those that are imperfect. Therefore, to avoid an unending argument, it must be admitted that the supreme God is to the highest degree filled with supreme and perfect goodness. But we have agreed that perfect good is true happiness; so that it follows that true happiness is to be found in the supreme God.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), God, Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In the last three sections of Book III, Lady Philosophy makes a number of complicated and often unclear arguments in an attempt to shed light on the nature of God. Fortunately, this argument that "true happiness is to be found in the supreme God" is relatively straightforward in comparison. Essentially, it only has two parts. First, Philosophy establishes that, because nothing can be imagined as having more goodness than God Himself, He must have the highest good of all—or be "to the highest degree filled with supreme and perfect goodness." And secondly, "perfect good is true happiness," which is true for a similar reason: "true happiness" requires having *everything* that is good and *nothing* that is evil because, if any good is lacking or evil is included, then this happiness could be made better and more "true." As a result, the truest happiness consists of all

good things and nothing but good things—or "perfect good." By combining the two halves of this argument (God is "perfect goodness" and "perfect goodness is true happiness") by a simple syllogism, Philosophy concludes that God is true happiness. This implies that humans can achieve true happiness by uniting themselves with or taking (what Philosophy calls) "possession of" God's goodness.

Book III, Part XII Quotes

❝ Then I said, "I agree very strongly with Plato. This is the second time you have reminded me of these matters. The first time was because I had lost the memory through the influence of the body, and this second time because I lost it when I became overwhelmed by the weight of my grief."

Related Characters: Boethius (speaker), Lady Philosophy, Plato

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

As Philosophy continues to teach Boethius about the nature of God and the universe, he realizes that he is recovering "lost" knowledge rather than learning it for the first time. He says that this has happened twice because he is talking about both the literal sense in which he forgot Philosophy's teachings because of his misery over his death sentence and the sense in which Plato famously believed that *all* learning was about recovering deep-seated, hidden knowledge from the deepest recesses of the soul. These two examples show the danger in letting oneself be absorbed by bodily and worldly concerns.

In this passage, Boethius the author has Boethius the character reference Plato in order to make it explicit to the reader where his influences come from. It is significant that he does so specifically in this context, because Boethius's main goal in life—and one of his most important goals in this book—was to help his Roman contemporaries recover their buried, "lost" knowledge of thinkers like Plato. This knowledge (or memory) was "lost" (or forgotten) because people were not learning and reading Greek, but the ideas were still buried in Roman culture thanks to the influence of the Neoplatonists, a diverse group of thinkers who interpreted and commented on Plato in the nearly 1,000 years between his writings and Boethius's.

Book IV, Part I Quotes

❝ But the greatest cause of my sadness is really this—the fact that in spite of a good helmsman to guide the world, evil can still exist and even pass unpunished. This fact alone you must surely think of considerable wonder. But there is something even more bewildering. When wickedness rules and flourishes, not only does virtue go unrewarded, it is even trodden underfoot by the wicked and punished in the place of crime. That this can happen in the realm of an omniscient and omnipotent God who wills only good, is beyond perplexity and complaint.

Related Characters: Boethius (speaker), Lady Philosophy, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

After Philosophy tells Boethius about God's glory, unlimited power, and absolute benevolence, it seems the argument of the *Consolation* should be complete: Boethius now knows that he should not worry about his fortune, but instead dedicate his last days to worshipping, praying to, and rationally reflecting on the nature of God the Creator. However, the *Consolation* continues for two more books because it is a work of philosophy, not of faith: there are legitimate counterarguments against Lady Philosophy's position, and she needs to defeat them in order to show that God is truly the all-powerful and loving force she claims him to be.

The objection that Boethius raises here, which is the subject of Book IV and the first of the two questions that Philosophy has to answer before she and Boethius are satisfied with their picture of the universe, is a question conventionally known in philosophy and theology as the *problem of evil*: as Boethius puts it, how "can [wickedness] happen in the realm of an omniscient and omnipotent God who wills only good?"

However, this objection is not *only* relevant because it challenges the notion that God truly is all-powerful. It is also an important personal issue for Boethius, since for him the most devastating part about his misfortune has been the fact that Rome seems to have been turned on its head: now, evil tyrants are ruling and the virtuous are "trodden underfoot" by them. So there are two interrelated problems of evil here: first, how can evil exist *at all*, and secondly, how can the evil be allowed to rule over the good?

Book IV, Part II Quotes

Men who give up the common goal of all things that exist, thereby cease to exist themselves. Some may perhaps think it strange that we say that wicked men, who form the majority of men, do not exist; but that is how it is. I am not trying to deny the wickedness of the wicked; what I do deny is that their existence is absolute and complete existence. Just as you might call a corpse a dead man, but couldn't simply call it a man, so I would agree that the wicked are wicked, but could not agree that they have unqualified existence. A thing exists when it keeps its proper place and preserves its own nature. Anything which departs from this ceases to exist, because its existence depends on the preservation of its nature.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Philosophy answers the problem of how evil can exist in a world ruled by a benevolent God by saying, perhaps counterintuitively, that evil does not technically *exist*: it is not something that God has ever positively put into the universe, but is instead a *lack* of *goodness*. And then she proceeds to make a parallel argument about evil *people*. They also lack goodness, and people's human nature or "proper place" is to be good and pursue goodness (an argument from Book III, Part III). Therefore, evil people go against their nature (which is to be good) and lose the essence of what they are.

Philosophy does not mean to say that these evil people suddenly pop out of material existence or lose their human features or abilities. Rather, she thinks that they become subhuman becuase they go *against nature*. (In the 21st century, of course, this kind of argument about the demands of nature and different people's degrees of human worth is quite dangerous, and often used as a tool of oppression.)

But the implicit assumption in all of this is that everything must have a natural place in the world and should fulfill that place. Of course, Philosophy considers this true because she believes that God has created the entire universe and given everything a proper role within it. But this just raises another problem, the problem of free will that she and Boethius address in Book V: if God has put everything in its proper place in the world, and God is all-powerful, then how can things stray from their proper places?

Book IV, Part IV Quotes

This is why among wise men there is no place at all left for hatred. For no one except the greatest of fools would hate good men. And there is no reason at all for hating the bad. For just as weakness is a disease of the body, so wickedness is a disease of the mind.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), God, Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

When she finishes analyzing evil people, although she determines them to be subhuman animals, Philosophy also encourages Boethius and his readers to pity rather than hate them, because their evilness is not their own fault. In short, Philosophy thinks that evil is a deviation from nature, since humans naturally seek what is good and what leads to happiness. But this deviation is a kind of weakness, she says, because the evil *would* do what is truly good if they were strong enough to do it.

Beyond offering a deeply optimistic and sympathetic worldview, in which people should do God's bidding by wishing the best to even their worst enemies and oppressors, Philosophy also reveals the basis of her own strategy throughout the book: she has addressed Boethius with pity and treated his misery as a "disease." And she has successfully led him toward goodness through patience and reason. But this also introduces a potentially disturbing corollary: if Philosophy has taken pity on Boethius in an attempt to cure him of his errant ways, then it is impossible to deny that *Boethius is himself a wicked man*! Or at least he was at the beginning of the book, before his dialogue with Philosophy reminded him of what is good and set him back on the road to virtue. Since readers may feel sympathy for Boethius throughout the book, the book itself becomes a tool for helping readers do exactly what Philosophy recommends: feel pity for the wicked.

Book IV, Part VI Quotes

The relationship between the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence is like that between reasoning and understanding, between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), God, Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

After she explains that God's benevolence is compatible with the existence of evil because *evil is nothing* and God uses some instances of evil to cancel out others, Philosophy clarifies her theory by referring to the distinction between Providence and Fate. Although possibly confusing at first glance, this distinction allows Philosophy to explain that evil can exist in time (Fate) even though God's timeless plan (Providence) is absolutely benevolent and leaves no space for it. And the difference between Providence and Fate is also very useful for conceptualizing God's relationship to human affairs.

Put simply, Providence is God's total plan for the universe: everything has a proper place, all elements are in balance, and there is only goodness—and no evil. The same plan, when viewed from the perspective of the mortal things that live *in* the universe, is Fate: things constantly change and do things that we might not necessarily expect, but the overall balance of everything (Providence) is maintained. Philosophy compares this to reasoning and understanding because *reasoning* is the process of getting to a conclusion through time, which can involve errors and confusion, just like Fate eventually brings things to their proper place through a gradual process of refinement and apparent chaos. Meanwhile, *understanding* is the static, overall achievement of proper reasoning, just like Providence is the overall state of the world. For instance, even if it takes someone a month to work toward comprehending a concept, they can still achieve a perfect *understanding* of this point by the end, which is analogous to how people can find a perfect place in Providence despite going through the twists and turns of Fate. Philosophy's other examples also elaborate on this distinction between the process of reaching some final state and that final state itself, as understood from a perspective that is not located in any particular temporal moment.

Another example that may be useful for conceptualizing this distinction is the solar system. Providence is like a model of the solar system, of the sort used in a science class: it shows all the planets' places, sizes, orbits, and day and year lengths, in relationship to one another and the Sun. All the essential information about the system is included here, and all the planets are depicted as though they are in the same portion of their orbit. But everyone knows that this perfect depiction of the system is an abstraction from the reality at any given moment: Jupiter might be on one side of the Sun and Saturn on the other, an asteroid might strike Mars and shift it ever-so-slightly from its normal path until it course-corrects, etc. These inconsistencies throughout time are part of *Fate*, which is the actual position of the whole solar system at any given moment. Just as planets change positions constantly throughout time, but the whole system will remain in balance, Fate constantly changes while Providence never does. But they are both ways of depicting the same system. And just as humans can err and commit evil, planets always vary slightly from their theoretically "correct" orbits without changing the essential nature of these proper positions.

Book IV, Part VII Quotes

"All fortune is certainly good."
"How can that be?"
"Listen. All fortune whether pleasant or adverse is meant either to reward or discipline the good or to punish or correct the bad. We agree, therefore, on the justice or usefulness of fortune, and so all fortune is good."

Related Characters: Boethius (speaker), Lady Philosophy, Fortune

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Book IV, having completed her argument about the nature of evil, shown that God uses rewards and punishments to promote good in the world as a whole, and explained that good and evil people always receive the treatment they deserve, Philosophy comes to the astonishing conclusion that "all fortune is certainly good." Even though Fortune, the goddess of (lowercase-f) fortune, is sadistic and cruel, in fact her influence is always good for humans because it drives them closer to God. In a sense, from a modern perspective, Philosophy's argument *itself* begins to look kind of cruel: in many cases it is good for people to suffer and be oppressed, she seems to believe, because this means they will stop caring about their worldly fortunes and begin trusting in God instead. Critical readers might also note that Philosophy's argument is remarkably self-serving because she only looks at the positive dimensions of any turn of fate, but forgets that what "punish[es]" the evil might make them more evil and what "discipline[s]" the good might make them give up on

goodness. (Boethius might have ended up in such a position, had he not been saved by Philosophy's visit.)

Of course, Philosophy's conclusion about fortune also contrasts starkly with Boethius's common-sense attitude toward fortune at the beginning of the *Consolation*—which his readers were likely to share at that stage in the argument. But this conclusion shows how far he has come by dialoguing with and learning from Philosophy. Now, he can see his misfortune not as a sign of his own failure or proof that the world is meaningless, but rather as a form of "discipline" aimed at bringing him to God and goodness precisely by making this conversation with Philosophy possible.

Book V, Part III Quotes

❝ The question is, therefore, how can God foreknow that these things will happen, if they are uncertain?

Related Characters: Boethius (speaker), Lady Philosophy, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Boethius devotes Book IV to resolving the classic philosophical problem of evil—how an all-powerful, benevolent God allows there to be evil in the world—in Book V he looks at a similar doubt that, unless explained away, threatens to show that Philosophy's entire picture of the world and its workings is based on a fundamental contradiction: if God knows the future with absolute certainty, then how can humans have *free will* over their actions in that future? For instance, if God knows what someone will choose to eat for breakfast tomorrow, is this breakfast *really a choice*, or has their decision been determined by some outside force (most likely, by God Himself)? This problem of free will, like the problem of evil, has troubled philosophers and theologists for as long as their disciplines have existed.

Philosophy's answer is complex and multifaceted, but the essence of her point is that there is a difference between having *certain knowledge* of something and a thing being *certain to happen*. Therefore, God can have *certain* knowledge of events in the human future that are *uncertain* to humans, because He lives outside time and is capable of a form of intelligent knowledge that is unfathomable to human beings.

Book V, Part IV Quotes

❝ We all agree that we cannot deduce a proof firmly founded upon reason from signs or arguments imported from without: it must come from arguments that fit together and lead from one to the next.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

As they grapple with how to resolve the problem of God's foreknowledge—specifically, how to show that God can foreknow things that are not necessary, and therefore could not be rationally known with certainty—Philosophy and Boethius ask if God's knowledge can be a "sign" of that future event without being its *cause*. For instance, if we *know* that someone is walking (because we see them walking, for instance), our knowledge is a *sign* that they are, in fact, walking—but our knowledge is not what *makes* them walk (their free will does). God's knowledge, Philosophy proposes here and ultimately proves to Boethius, is like this human knowledge of someone walking in the past—only directed toward the future.

So Philosophy and Boethius's axiom about how to "deduce a proof" is interesting for two reasons. First, it specifically points out the structure of the arguments that Philosophy has used to persuade Boethius—and, hopefully, the reader—throughout the *Consolation*. After all, Boethius spent most of his life studying and commenting on Aristotle's writings about logic, so it is not surprising to see questions and principles about *how* to prove something true through argument appearing here. So this explanation of what sound argument requires is also part of Boethius's defense of philosophical reasoning: he makes it clear that, rather than taking things on faith or instinct, people should only believe things they can show to follow "from arguments that fit together and lead from one to the next." The basis of such an argument must, of course, be a principle already agreed to be true—in the case of Philosophy and Boethius's deliberation about the nature of the world, this first principle is the notion that nothing can be greater than God, the Creator.

But this picture of logical reasoning is also significant because Philosophy is about to introduce to Boethius the four different ways of knowing, which she ties to the preceptive and reasoning capacities of different kinds of beings. Specifically, she argues that reason is the highest

form of knowledge available to human beings: it allows them to access irrefutable truths about the universe's overall workings and general principles. Of course, this includes truths about God. But God has a *greater* form of knowledge, *intelligence*, which allows Him to understand all the insights of reason (and much more) through "pure" understanding, without linking together arguments like humans have to. Therefore, this analysis of logic is Philosophy's way of both demonstrating why reason should be the central tool in humans' pursuit of truth, and also showing that reason has clear limits: it is not the end-all-be-all of the universe, and there are more powerful forces out there—including ones that humans cannot even fathom.

❝ Therefore, all those things which happen without happening of necessity are, before they happen, future events about to happen, but not about to happen of necessity. For just as the knowledge of present things imposes no necessity on what is happening, so foreknowledge imposes no necessity on what is going to happen.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

As she tries to explain how God can have foreknowledge of events that are determined by human free will, Philosophy must distinguish between two kinds of necessity: there is the necessity *that known facts are true* and the necessity *that things happen*. It is possible to have the first without the second, she argues, because it is possible to know things that "happen without happening of necessity." For instance, if someone is presented with a cheesecake, it is not necessary that they eat it: they can choose to dig in, or restrain themselves and not eat. But if they do choose to eat, although it was *not necessary* that they *would* eat *before* they began eating, *now* it is necessary that they *have* eaten because they *did*, in fact, choose to eat. This is why "the knowledge of present things imposes no necessity on what is happening." Again, the things are not *happening necessarily*, but it is *necessary that* they are happening. Philosophy explains God's foreknowledge by applying exactly the same principle to the future: the things God foreknows are "future events about to happen" because of human free will, and "not about to happen of necessity." This is possible because God's knowledge is of a different sort, a supreme intelligence that is unfathomable to human beings.

Book V, Part V Quotes

❝ In the same way, human reason refuses to believe that divine intelligence can see the future in any other way except that in which human reason has knowledge. This is how the argument runs: if anything does not seem to have any certain and predestined occurrence, it cannot be foreknown as a future event. Of such, therefore, there is no foreknowledge: and if we believe that even in this case there is foreknowledge, there will be nothing which does not happen of necessity. If, therefore, as beings who have a share of reason, we can judge of the mind of God, we should consider it most fitting for human reason to bow before divine wisdom, just as we judged it right for the senses and the imagination to yield to reason.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), God, Boethius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Having explained the supreme powers of God's divine intelligence, Philosophy admits that they are completely unfathomable to human beings, who are blessed with infallible reason but still fall far short of God's far superior capacity for knowledge. However, people must realize that they are far from the most powerful thing in the universe, and that there is much they have yet to understand. Therefore, the notion that nothing without a "certain and predestined occurrence" can "be foreknown" relies on humans wrongly assuming that all knowledge must work in the same way as their own. While humans can only know things that are certain—either because they are necessary or because they have already happened—God lives outside of time and so is capable of seeing things that have not yet happened according to the human perception of time, and so can be certain about events that humans have let to undertake. However, Philosophy argues, if people truly follow their reason rather than simply assuming it is the only way to know things, they will ultimately realize precisely that God's knowledge must superior, and choose to "bow before" it.

Book V, Part VI Quotes

Eternity, then, is the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life; this will be clear from a comparison with creatures that exist in time. Whatever lives in time exists in the present and progresses from the past to the future, and there is nothing set in time which can embrace simultaneously the whole extent of its life: it is in the position of not yet possessing tomorrow when it has already lost yesterday.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), Boethius, God

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Having explained that God can know what people will do in the future because His capacity for knowledge is superior to humans', in the final section of the *Consolation*, Philosophy turns to the question of exactly *how* He manages to have this mystical, otherworldly capacity. She concludes that the reason is that He lives *outside of time*: the past, present, and future all look like the present to Him because He is *eternal*. He does not change or move "from the past to the future"—He simply *is*, and the whole universe unfolds itself before Him.

Imagine having a video of everything that ever has happened, is happening, and will happen—and then being able to watch the whole thing in a single moment. According to Philosophy, this is the kind of knowledge that God has about His universe: He sees everything all at the same time, for He is not "located" anywhere in time, like people happen to be.

God has foreknowledge and rests a spectator from on high of all things; and as the ever present eternity of His vision dispenses reward to the good and punishment to the bad, it adapts itself to the future quality of our actions. Hope is not placed in God in vain and prayers are not made in vain, for if they are the right kind they cannot but be efficacious. Avoid vice, therefore, and cultivate virtue; lift up your mind to the right kind of hope, and put forth humble prayers on high. A great necessity is laid upon you, if you will be honest with yourself, a great necessity to be good, since you live in the sight of a judge who sees all things.

Related Characters: Lady Philosophy (speaker), God, Boethius

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Boethius dedicates Book V to Philosophy's argument for why God's perfect foreknowledge of everything that will ever happen does not in any way contradict people's free will over the decisions they choose to make. She concludes that He is like "a judge who sees all things," not a commander who forces humans to act. Having established this by reference to God's superior capacity for knowledge through *intelligence*, rather than just *reason*, which comes from His position in the *eternal* realm outside human time, Philosophy seems to have fully justified her picture of God as all-knowing, all-powerful, completely benevolent, and identical with perfect happiness, perfect goodness, perfect unity, and absolute self-sufficiency, supremacy, glory, and joy.

Therefore, Philosophy concludes the *Consolation* with this brief passage that, like Part IX of Book III, begins to detail what it means to become good and happy by developing a relationship with God. Because God answers people's "hope[s]" and "prayers," Philosophy explains, these are good ways to get in touch with Him. And it is essential to act virtuously and "avoid vice." But, perhaps troublingly for Boethius and those of his readers who want to understand what they really *need to do* in order to live the best possible kind of life, Lady Philosophy remains somewhat vague: how should one hope and pray? In what form and how often? Is this the only way to become good and one with God? Most of all, what is the status of *philosophy itself* in relation to the goodness of God, which exceeds but is (to an extent) understandable through reason?

While Boethius's silence may be frustrating and it is not possible to answer these questions definitively, he does leave some hints. Clearly, the purpose of *The Consolation of Philosophy* is in large part to show how this information about God can be grasped through human reason, which suggests that rationality is either *part of* or an *important prerequisite to* the proper worship of God. So Boethius's clear belief in prayer shows that developing the correct relationship to God requires a *combination* of reason and faith. To these two, he adds *action*: precisely because people have free will, whether they choose to act out of goodness or evil will determine if people are fulfilling their natural place in God's universe. Although Boethius probably has no more important decisions to make for the rest of his life—he is awaiting execution, after all—fortunately, he has generally

acted virtuously in the past, and so persistent prayer and reflection on the structure of the universe are all that he needs to live out his remaining days in peace, tranquility, and unity with God.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK I, PART I

Boethius sings that he has fallen from his usual "joyful zeal" into a "weeping mode," accompanied by the Muses who have inspired him since his "happy youth." But now he is an elderly "worn out bone-bag hung with flesh," and has to confront his own imminent death. Fortune has turned against him, which shows him that he—like all humans—was fundamentally "insecure" when he thought himself incorrigibly happy.

Medieval readers would have likely already known of the events that led Boethius to misery: although he previously held the high rank of magister officorium *under the paranoid emperor Theodoric, the same emperor has now accused Boethius of treason and sentenced him to death because of his diplomatic work in Constantinople. Accordingly, Boethius's "weeping mode" reflects his despair after this sudden fall from grace and his struggle to cope with his mortality. Although he depicts himself as very old, he is scarcely 40, and his lifelong project of translating Aristotle into Latin is about to be cut short. His reference to the Muses, the Greek goddesses of the creative arts, demonstrates the centrality of Ancient Greek philosophy to his worldview.*

Switching to prose, Boethius notes that he finds "a woman standing over [him]" while he writes these lines. She is "awe-inspiring" because she is both impossibly old and full of youthful energy. She is somehow both "of average human size" and impossibly tall, and her clothes are made of "the finest thread woven with the most delicate skill," but are old and neglected. On her hemline, Boethius sees the Greek letters Pi (Π) and Theta (Θ), with "a ladder of steps" between them, as though "her dress had been torn by the hands of marauders." And she holds books and a scepter.

Boethius intentionally depicts his visitor—the illustrious Lady Philosophy—as somewhere between mortal and divine, a mediator between human experience and God's realm, the cosmos. This reflects the way he believes reason and argument—the tools of philosophy—can help human beings understand the greater universe, as well as the esteem in which he holds the original Greek practitioners of philosophy. The letters Π and Θ unmistakably mark philosophy as a Greek endeavor and stand for its two halves: practical and theoretical reason, respectively. And Philosophy's neglected and "torn" dress stands for the way those who came after the Greeks misinterpreted and misused their thought, taking pieces of it when it served their purposes rather than embracing its search for truth as a whole.

When she notices the Muses talking to Boethius, this woman grows furious and accuses them of making his illness worse by elevating "Passion" above "Reason." Worse, Boethius isn't a regular person, but rather a scholar "nourished on the philosophies of Zeno and Plato." She calls the Muses "Sirens" and they leave the room, ashamed.The mysterious woman sits at the edge of Boethius's bed.

Lady Philosophy's conflict with the Muses symbolizes a conflict between art and philosophy, and specifically recalls Plato's belief that art is a mere imitation of the truth, whereas philosophy grasps the truth directly. By reminding Boethius of his past philosophical study, Lady Philosophy both reminds him that his turn to art is a sign of weakness and establishes his authority to write on the subject of Greek philosophy in this book.

BOOK I, PART II

The mysterious woman who has appeared to Boethius in his room sings that life's trials and tribulations lead people away from their "inward **light**." Although Boethius "once was free" when he studied astronomy and uncovered the mysteries of nature, now he "lie[s] prostrate [as a] prisoner of night."

Despite proclaiming the superiority of reason over art at the end of the previous section, now Lady Philosophy uses song to comfort Boethius and redirect him from his sorrow, which suggests that art can be a legitimate tool for helping transmit the truth, when it is supported by philosophy rather than opposed to it. Her rhetoric about Boethius losing the "light" of truth and becoming a "prisoner of night" is a clear reference to the allegory of the cave from Plato's Republic, *in which people are born "prisoner[s]" in a cave and live most of their lives mistaking shadows of the real truth for reality itself, until they are able to see the light, leave the cave, and understand the truth. Philosophy clearly suggests that she will guide Boethius—and, by extension, the reader—on such a journey from ignorance to enlightenment.*

In prose, the woman reminds Boethius that she has taught, nurtured, and protected him—but he "threw away" these advantages. She knows that he recognizes her, so asks why he does not respond to her—she knows that it is out of astonishment, not shame (even though she "prefer[s] it to be shame"). Seeing that Boethius literally cannot speak, she holds him and promises that "he will soon remember" who he really is. With her dress, she wipes "the tears that filled" Boethius's eyes and obscured his vision.

Unable to recognize his lifelong teacher, Boethius has clearly lost his former insight, probably because his misfortune and despair are clouding his judgment. Philosophy's promise to heal his devastation shows that, as a field of knowledge and a practice of inquiry, philosophy serves for more than just the discovery of truth: it also has the practical capability to help people shape their senses of purpose, relationships to mortality, and obligations to others.

BOOK I, PART III

In a song, Boethius compares the way his despair disappeared through his meeting with the mysterious woman to **the Sun** re-emerging after a storm.

Boethius establishes a metaphorical correspondence between the sunlight that literally illuminates the world, on the one hand, and the wisdom and consolation offered by Philosophy, which makes the world intelligible to humans' rational nature, on the other.

Boethius realizes that his visitor is "Philosophy," who has taken care of him since he was young. He asks if "she has come [...] to suffer false accusation along with [him]," but she declares that she is not afraid of accusations.

Boethius shows that the Roman government's attack on him (the "false accusation" mentioned here) is also an attack on philosophy and everything it stands for: reason, wisdom, and truth, which will nevertheless always be stronger and more resilient than even the most powerful of tyrants and the most evil of human beings.

Philosophy reminds Boethius that "wisdom has been threatened with danger by the forces of evil" many times, like when "Socrates was unjustly put to death," and during the centuries of infighting since, among various philosophical "mobs." These mobs "tore off little pieces from" her dress, and those who stole the pieces acted as though "they had obtained the whole of philosophy." And numerous true philosophers have been rejected, tortured, and killed because they spent their lives "displeas[ing] wicked men" who blindly followed their ignorance. When these "wicked men" strike back with their "superior numbers," Philosophy continues, philosophers must "withdraw […] to a strong point" and save their "citadel" from "the assaults of folly."

Philosophy explains how her reappearance for Boethius is also a reappearance in the Roman world that has forgotten and abused her, manipulating pieces of the Greeks' wisdom for personal gain rather than engaging its totality to find enlightenment. She also clearly labels Boethius as the next iteration in the long tradition of philosopher-martyrs, who refused to sacrifice their beliefs and dedication to the truth, even when they had to pay with their lives. This sacrifice, she suggests, allows truth and philosophy to survive even in the darkest of times, when it is relegated to the margins. Because they have truth, reality, and God on their side, she implies, philosophers always have "a strong point" to hold onto until the ignorance of "wicked men" runs its course.

BOOK I, PART IV

Philosophy sings to Boethius. She implores people to stay composed and stable in the face of "fortune good and bad." Wise people courageously abandon "hope and fear," which means they are not affected by the angry and evil actions of others, especially "tyrants."

Having connected philosophy's purpose to its practitioners' resilience in the face of "tyrants," now Philosophy begins connecting this to the misfortune Boethius has experienced and encourages readers to do the same, looking beyond "fortune" for their sense of self and maintaining their composure when faced with oppression and deceit.

Philosophy asks Boethius if he understands and implores him to explain his tears. He responds that she already knows about "the severity of Fortune's attack on [him]." In fact, this came about despite his best efforts to follow Philosophy's teachings: since Plato argued that governments should be led by philosophers rather than the "wicked and unprincipled men" who often seek power, Boethius joined the government and spent his life trying to defend justice, even though it earned him many enemies.

Through his misfortune, Boethius raises the question of philosophy's value in the face of evil: what power does truth have before people who do not take it seriously? Is it possible to do what is right and wise, but never be rewarded in the material world? Boethius entered government service because he was inspired by Plato's idealistic teachings, but was only able to do so much; the unjust world far exceeds the power of his individual will. So he faces the classic despair that nearly every activist experiences, and in turn confronts the dilemma of how to pursue justice in an unjust world.

Boethius explains that a particular, grave accusation has landed him where he is now. Allegedly, he "prevented an informer from delivering certain papers with which [this informer] intended to show the [Roman] Senate guilty of treason." Boethius admits that he hoped to protect the Senate, but insists that he is innocent. His treatment by the Senate he has always tried to defend, Boethius insists, has been "nothing short of monstrous." In fact, Boethius has been sentenced to death and stripped of all his titles, properties, and rights. As though to boost the case against him, the Senate has also accused Boethius of "sacrilege," which he considers ironic because he has learned from Philosophy to always "Follow God." Nevertheless, the Senate cites Boethius's interest in Philosophy as evidence of his godlessness and unworthiness.

Again, Boethius goes into relatively little detail about the accusation that has led to his imprisonment and impending execution, and after more than a thousand years, historians still have not been able to assemble a definitive account. To an extent, it is up to the reader to take him at his word—an uncharitable interpreter might see him as a corrupt official trying to defend himself publicly and clear his name for posterity's sake—but it remains clear that there was no definitive proof against him. According to Boethius, this accusation is all the more preposterous because he was in fact trying to do the opposite of the accusation that he faces—he wanted to defend *the integrity of Rome's political system, which has been formally taken over by the forces that defeated the Roman Empire in 476, but has been accused of* undermining *it instead.*

Boethius laments that people blame the unfortunate for their own misfortune, and that the innocent are not only punished for crimes they did not commit, but also "are believed to have deserved all that they suffer." All around him in Rome, Boethius notes "wicked" people celebrating his condemnation and planning further attacks on the innocent, while "good men" live in terror.

The tendency to look down on the unlucky, Boethius clearly thinks, is a product of ignorance that can be corrected through philosophical inquiry and the wisdom it brings. He depicts the sorry state of Rome as further evidence of how ignorance reverses the proper order of things, elevating the "wicked" above the "good."

BOOK I, PART V

In song, Boethius praises God's power over the stars and seasons—indeed, over everything *except* "human acts." So why, he asks, does God let Fortune rule so much of what happens to humans, and why does He allow innocent people to be punished like criminals? Government is controlled by "corrupted men" who oppress the virtuous. Since God is all-powerful, Boethius thinks, He should put human affairs back in check and bring peace to all the world's lands.

Boethius's mention of God is sudden and may be jarring to those who instinctively see reason and faith (especially Greek philosophy and Christianity) as inextricably opposed. And Boethius does draw out the clear tension between the Christian belief that a benevolent, perfect God controls the universe and the clearly unjust and irrational state of the world. However, Boethius was a lifelong Christian and considered his beliefs fully consistent with the teachings of Greek philosophy. Here and particularly in the second half of the Consolation, *he seeks to show how reason leads people to the same place as blind faith, and indeed can explain and clarify the workings of God and the universe to an extent that pure adherence to scripture cannot.*

After Boethius finishes reciting his poem, Philosophy turns to him and declares that he has "not simply [...] been banished far from home," but rather has banished himself. The home she speaks of is not Rome, but the realm ruled by God, in which "submitting to His governance and obeying His laws is freedom." Nobody can leave *this* place except by their own volition. But the state of Boethius's mind worries Philosophy—she summarizes back everything he has told her so far, then declares that his mind has "become swollen and calloused" and proposes a "gentle" treatment for his illness, followed by "a sharper medicament" later on.

Boethius has literally been exiled—he is imprisoned somewhere in present-day northern Italy, far from his native Rome—but Philosophy again emphasizes the supremacy of mental over physical realities and argues that he has estranged himself *from his rightful home and true nature by turning his back on the truth. Although her message might seem cryptic now, particularly because she sees freedom as requiring submission, it makes much more sense when analyzed in the context of her arguments about the nature of evil: people who turn their backs on God, reason, and wisdom ultimately contract a kind of illness of the soul, and must be treated as sick rather than malicious, even though this sickness is the root of all evil. So Philosophy's attitude toward Boethius also provides guidance for Boethius's readers, who may wonder what it means to take an ethical stance toward injustice and its perpetrators.*

BOOK I, PART VI

In verse, Philosophy explains that one must cooperate with nature and follow the seasons to reap a bountiful harvest, for nothing can really interfere with God's natural order.

Just as she argued at the end of the previous chapter that humans achieve "freedom" by "submitting to" God, here she again suggests that humans are only free when they fulfill the natural order that is set out for them. Clearly, the function of philosophy as a discipline (and Philosophy as a character) is to help remind people of what that natural role actually is.

Philosophy begins planning her "cur[e]" for Boethius by asking him a series of questions. First, she asks if he thinks that "life consists of haphazard and chance events, or [...] is governed by some rational principle." He replies that "God the Creator watches over" the world, which means that the world is rational. Philosophy points out that this contradicts his earlier monologue about humans existing separately from God's rule and asks *how* God "guides" the world. Boethius says he does not know, and Philosophy affirms that his mind really *has* fallen ill.

Boethius's lack of clarity about God's role in the world is evidence of this ignorance, which is the illness that Philosophy plans to "cur[e]" by returning him to the truth. The contradiction between God's guidance and humans' errors and misdeeds actually raises one of the most classic, important problems in philosophy and theology: how can evil be possible if God is all good, and how can humans be free if God controls everything? Clearly, these doubts are not only Boethius's—they are probably near-universal in 5th-century Rome, and remain crucial for anyone who hopes to reconcile philosophical reason with belief in a higher power.

Philosophy asks if Boethius remembers what nature's end goal is, but he responds that he has forgotten. So Philosophy tells him to take a step back and think about his humanity. She asks him what defines a human being, and he replies that it is being a "rational and mortal animal." But she declares that humans are "something more." Indeed, Boethius's illness comes from "hav[ing] forgotten [his] true nature." He resents his oppressors because he does not truly remember how "the world is governed," namely by "divine reason and not the haphazard of chance." Philosophy promises to help him break through his ignorance, which she compares to a fog, and find "the resplendent **light** of truth."

After talking about where the universe comes from, Philosophy continues helping Boethius get his bearings by turning to where it is headed. She concludes that the universe's original and final causes, or its source and end goal, are both God *Himself: he creates everything at the beginning and takes it back at the end. This means that humans are "something more" than mere "rational and mortal animal[s]" because of their inherent relationship to God and the rational universe as a whole. This portrayal of God resonates not only with the Christian tradition, but also with Plato's belief in a "demiurge," or original craftsman, which he outlines in the dialogue* Timaeus. *Notably, Philosophy also returns to the metaphor of truth as light, which again recalls Plato's allegory of the cave.*

BOOK I, PART VII

Boethius sings about abrupt changes in nature: clouds obscuring **sunlight**, a storm disturbing the calm ocean and muddying the water, and a fallen boulder redirecting a stream. He compares this to how people must liberate their minds from the confining forces of "joy and fear," and "hope" and "grief."

These natural changes specifically reference the way Philosophy's wisdom promises to save Boethius from his despair, but they also metaphorically point to the way opposite forces actually work together and balance one another out, when the universe is considered on a broader scale. What appear to be contradictions are actually complements, when viewed on a cosmic scale. So, rather than falling into one or the other of these complementary forces (i.e. being overtaken by "joy [or] fear"), Boethius suggests that wise people should learn to see both halves at the same time, and therefore always see people, objects, and events in relation to the entirety of God's greater, rational, balanced universe.

BOOK II, PART I

Boethius now begins in prose. After a long pause, Philosophy tells him that his problem is his "longing for [his] former good fortune." Fortune frequently "seduces" and then turns against people—but fortune has no value in itself. Nevertheless, bad fortune usually causes mental distress. Boethius needs soothing, Philosophy insists, so she calls for "sweet-tongued rhetoric" and music. In fact, because fortune always changes, "in the very act of changing" it has stayed the same for Boethius. And now, he has the benefit of understanding Fortune and being able to "turn away and have nothing more to do with her dangerous games." Rather than letting Fortune control him, Boethius must plan for and accept its "**wheel** of chance."

Having diagnosed Boethius's suffering and promised to "cure" it in Book I, in Book II, Philosophy now begins her remedy by telling him not to trust in Fortune, whom the Romans considered a sadistic goddess. Again, because Boethius sees the Greek and Christian traditions as compatible, there is no contradiction between Fortune's malevolence and the absolute benevolence of "God the Creator." Here, Philosophy also further justifies her use of verse and song to help express and reemphasize the arguments she originally makes through logic. By truly understanding Fortune, she argues, people can learn to accept and prepare for her ahead of time, adjusting their expectations rather than being devastated when, as is inevitable, she crushes them.

From this point onwards, each part of each book ends in song. Here, Philosophy tells Boethius of Fortune "mov[ing] the turning **wheel**," which overthrows empires and individual lives alike, with a complete indifference to people's unhappiness. In fact, Fortune "laughs" at the havoc she wreaks, which is her way of "test[ing] her strength."

The image of the Wheel of Fortune actually predates Boethius by at least a thousand years. It should be imagined as vertical, like a Ferris wheel that sends people upwards to prosperity and then drops them downwards to failure. Although the people riding the wheel are surprised at all their individual turns of fate, in fact the entire process is systematic and operates according to a fixed law of nature, which reflects the way Philosophy sees apparently cruel and meaningless events in people's everyday lives as ultimately playing an important role in God's overall plan for the universe.

BOOK II, PART II

Philosophy proposes that Boethius consider "Fortune's own arguments." Fortune would contend that she is not at fault for people's ruin, since their possessions are not really theirs. This includes things like money, status, and power, and Fortune's nature is to give them and then take them away—to "turn [her] **wheel** in its ever changing circle," which "bring[s] the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top." Speaking as Fortune, Philosophy offers some examples from history and suggests that, knowing the nature of Fortune, people can have hope for the future. But they must not insist on "living according to a law of [their] own in a world that is shared by everyone."

Philosophy spends this whole section speaking in the voice of Fortune, who points out that the things under her *control are—by definition—*not *under the control of the people who think they "possess" them. Therefore, like nearly every major religion and most of the major Greek philosophers, she insists that wisdom requires relinquishing one's expectations for things that are not truly under one's own control. When she distinguishes between people's individual "law[s]" and the "world that is shared by everyone," Fortune makes a similar argument in different terms: people must recognize the limits of their will and not try to interfere with other people's autonomy or the workings of nature and the cosmos.*

In song, Philosophy continues to speak for Fortune, who announces that people will always complain, no matter how successful they are. Their greedy desires cannot be satisfied—so people must control these desires themselves, for it is neither noble nor happy to live "convinced that [one always] needs more."

Having shown why attachment to good fortune leads people to disappointment and ruin, Philosophy now looks at the other half of the equation and suggests that even those with *good fortune are not truly happy, if they begin to measure themselves by their fortune rather than the things that are truly under their control. This is, of course, a classic trope from art and literature: the wealthy and powerful often grow greedier and crueler, not satisfied and wise, as they amass more wealth and power.*

BOOK II, PART III

Philosophy implores Boethius to formulate a rebuttal to Fortune's arguments, as she presented them in the previous section. Boethius declares that, while Philosophy's monologues have soothed him, they have not cured his misery. Philosophy agrees but promises to offer a more serious "cure" later on.

Philosophy tries to rope Boethius into the philosophical dialogue, but he is not yet ready: he remains too wounded and overwhelmed by his misfortune. Notably, although Philosophy has insisted that attachment to Fortune is a sign of vice, she sees that it is a trap even the learned Boethius can fall into.

Philosophy then tells Boethius to stop focusing on his current unhappiness and instead to remember all the good fortune he enjoyed throughout his life—he was adopted by a family of high status, was beloved by much of Rome, and had an ideal family of his own, including two sons who became co-consuls (high-ranking leaders in Rome). So his current streak of bad luck is "the very first time [Fortune] has turned an unfriendly eye upon [him]." So Boethius must consider himself lucky, because he had good fortune for most of his life. And if he thinks this past luck does not count, then neither does his present misery, which also will eventually come to pass. Finally, Philosophy points out, everyone loses Fortune when they die—there is no difference between "quit[ting] her by dying or [Fortune] quit[ting] you by desertion."

In short, Philosophy forces Boethius into a dilemma: either he has to judge his life based on the totality of his fortune (which, on balance, is good), or he has to discount all fortune because it is only temporary (which means his present misery does not count for anything). Her argument that people lose all fortune when they die might sound like a mere way of adding emphasis, but actually she means it: Boethius believes the soul is eternal, which means that whatever fortune people receive in life will ultimately become irrelevant to their status in the afterlife. What does *matter is what a person makes of their fortune, and particularly whether they let it throw them off balance or use it as an excuse to engage in vice. This is because people have free will over their reactions, and should only be judged on things over which they have control.*

In verse, Philosophy again sings of a series of changes in nature: **the Sun** bathing the world with light and drowning out other stars, flowers growing in the spring and wilting in the winter, and a storm unsettling the sea. She says that because the world is always changing, it is pointless to "put your faith in transient luck / And trust in wealth's morality!" Truthfully, she adds, "from change [nothing] is ever freed."

These changes in nature clearly parallel Fortune's instability, which makes her unpredictable and surprising to human beings, even though she operates according to fixed and unchanging laws. Similarly, while it might seem like an incredible transformation when the Sun rises or a flower grows, these events are merely parts of a continuous, eternal cycle, like the motion of Fortune's wheel. Philosophy uses these two examples of cyclical change to make an even more general point about the workings of the universe, in which change *is a* fixed *law.*

BOOK II, PART IV

Boethius tells Philosophy that she is right about his good fortune in the past—but that *this* is actually the thing that causes him the most pain. There is nothing worse than "once to have been happy." But Philosophy says that Boethius's beliefs are still wrong, because he "still possess[es] outstanding blessings." Boethius's father-in-law and wife are virtuous, loving, and devastated by what has happened to him. These blessings, she says, are immeasurably precious.

Whereas Philosophy argues that Boethius should remain grateful for his past good fortune, which should give him a sense of perspective on his present misfortune, instead he fixates on the magnitude of his fall from success. Even if it is logical, Philosophy's argument has failed to convince Boethius, so she tries another: he actually still has *good fortune, as the most important things that fortune can give someone—a loving family and community—remain intact, and he has treated this family nobly and thereby proven his moral worth.*

Boethius continues to lament his condition, but Philosophy tells him to stop "dilly-dallying" and get it through his head that his life has been good enough. Nobody is completely free of worries or anxieties, everyone wants Fortune to treat them better, and "the most happy men are over-sensitive" because "they have never experienced adversity." If they were even a fraction as lucky as Boethius in life, the vast majority of people would "believe themselves almost in heaven." People's success or misery is all in their heads, Philosophy promises: "nothing is miserable except when you think it so, and vice versa." Instead of looking for happiness from external factors, she insists, humans should look "within," to where it really resides.

In the 21st century, we might say that Philosophy reminds Boethius of his privilege and the way it has made him "over-sensitive" to discomfort. Readers might wonder if this line of argument—in which Philosophy implies that some of Fortune's gifts do *matter—contradicts her argument at the beginning of Book II, in which she implored Boethius to "have nothing more to do with [Fortune's] dangerous games." This is a valid concern, but by the end of this section it becomes clear that Philosophy believes that Fortune's gifts do not* truly *matter to happiness, for people with the right mindset can remain wise, stable, and thus happy through even the worst hardship. She means to say that, even* if these gifts did matter, *Boethius would* still *have the best of them, so he* really *has no right to pity himself and complain about his life.*

Philosophy clarifies her argument to Boethius: nothing is "more precious to [him] than [his] own self," which is "something [he] would never wish to lose and something Fortune could never take away." She explains that "happiness is the highest good of rational nature," and that the highest goods are those that "can't be taken away." Therefore, because Fortune is changeable, she will never lead to happiness. Anyone who thinks their good fortune makes them happy is simply blind to the reality that their fortune is changeable, and nobody can be happy *and* ignorant. And those who *do* understand that their fortune is changeable are often so afraid of losing their good fortune that they cannot be happy.

Now, Philosophy shifts from speaking in examples and platitudes to making a structured, rational argument. Although it is dense, it allows her to definitively show that nobody *who bets their happiness entirely on Fortune can* ever *be truly happy. She believes her premises are self-evident: people's* own selves *are the most important to them because, without themselves, they would be nothing; all rational creatures want nothing more or less than complete and perfect happiness, which is the best thing they can be; and, of all good things, certain things can disappear while still leaving other good things that "can't be taken away," so the latter category must be more important. Her conclusion—that the highest goods are those of the true self and not of Fortune—logically follows from these three premises, if we accept them.*

But some people, those who recognize the "unreliability" of fortune, will not care about losing it. Instead, they base their happiness on something else. These people have the right idea—like Boethius, they also know that "the human mind cannot die," and therefore see that the pleasure and happiness of their physical bodies are nothing compared to the more profound happiness of the mind, or soul.

Here, Philosophy makes it clear that the "own self" she has been talking about is the human soul, *as opposed to the body. It is important to recall that Boethius believed in the strict division between the immortal soul and the mortal body, an idea essentially popularized by Plato, which remains central to many (but not all) religions. This idea is the alternative to betting on Fortune—but Philosophy has not yet explained what this requires people to do.*


In her next song, Philosophy uses a metaphor to show what it means to choose one's internal mental or spiritual happiness over external material happiness. Someone "careful," she writes, will build their house away from beautiful sites that are exposed to dangers like strong winds and the stormy ocean. Rather, they will choose a modest site "secure on lowly rock." In their safety, they will "lead a life serene / And smile at the raging storm."

This metaphor shows readers that wisdom requires overlooking short-term excitement—like the prospect of having a beautiful view by building one's house on a precarious stretch of shore—for the sake of long-term tranquility. If such a storm represents the unpredictable luck that governs the material world, then the best stance one can have towards Fortune is building an immunity to her. Indeed, this metaphor closely recalls Philosophy's message about the strategy of the wise in Book I, Part III, when she said that philosophers should build a "citadel" on "a strong point" that allows them to withstand their enemies' "assaults of folly." She indicates that philosophers and the wise have no need to strike back against these "assaults" because they recognize them as meaningless, and the soul as the seat of everything that is truly valuable.

BOOK II, PART V

Philosophy next asks Boethius what is actually good about "the gifts that Fortune offers." For instance, while some people think that money is inherently valuable, generosity wins people popularity—so *giving away* money is inherently valuable too. Hoarding wealth is evil, but one becomes poor by giving away all of one's wealth, which is also undesirable. Similarly, "precious stones" are shiny but not as complex or beautiful as human beings themselves, and while "the countryside [is] beautiful," it does not make the person who *looks* at it any better. Neither do Boethius's beautiful clothes and numerous servants make him any better or more blessed of a person. People accumulate possessions to evade poverty, but actually waste their lives protecting their things and accumulating more. Philosophy concludes that people should "measure[] wealth according to the needs of nature, and not the excesses of ostentation."

The apparent goodness of both having and giving away money shows, first, that there is nothing inherently good or bad about money in itself, *except when it is in a particular social context and* humans *give it value. By extension, Fortune's other "gifts" are equally meaningless—these things' value comes from the people who use them and the ways they do so, and not from the things themselves. Secondly, this example shows that what popular opinion considers good and bad in different social contexts has very little to do with what is* actually *good and bad in an objective sense. Of course, contemporary readers can and should ask if there is a true difference between such socially-determined values and supposedly "objective" good and evil based on "the needs of nature."*

Philosophy tells Boethius that, although he has "a godlike quality in virtue of his rational nature," he wrongly "thinks that his only splendor lies in the possession of inanimate goods." He is a "superior" being but is obsessed with "adorn[ing his] superior nature with inferior objects." And this makes him treat himself as though he were less than an animal. Material things are like decorations: even if they are beautiful, they do not change the nature of the underlying object they decorate. So wealth, Philosophy concludes, is not inherently good at all—it is just a decoration, and in fact it "often does harm to its owners," for instance by making them targets for thieves and robbers.

Philosophy completes her argument about the worthlessness of "inanimate goods," which is parallel to her belief in the ultimate irrelevance of people's good or bad fortune. It is curious that she considers humans' "rational nature" to be "godlike," for she later argues that God's powers of knowledge far exceed those of humans. What she appears to be saying is that humans' rationality is what separates them from lower kinds of beings like animals and plants, and also lets them understand the cosmos, up to and including God, who is intelligible to humans only because of human reason. Therefore, she is beginning to explain why true *happiness has something to do with knowledge and the contemplation of God.*

In song, Philosophy praises "that long lost age" when people only consumed and used what they needed, rather than obsessively overeating, chasing beautiful things, and "plunder[ing] all the world" for personal gain. Now, they fight pointless wars and spill endless blood, motivated simply by "the passion to possess."

Philosophy's song refers to the notion of people living in alignment with nature in some mystical past before the rise of highly-organized human civilizations. This passage might seem quaint or even ironic to contemporary readers, for whom Boethius himself lives in a "long lost age" that only resembles our own in a few ways—one of which is, of course, the greedy, heartless "plunder" that continues around the world.

BOOK II, PART VI

Philosophy turns the conversation to government, which she tells Boethius he does not truly understand. Lots of people wrongly think that holding "high office" and having power are inherently virtuous. But actually, "wicked" rulers create "disaster[s]," and "honest men" are good rulers because of their personal virtues, which means that high office is virtuous only "because of the virtue of the holder."

Now that she has proven that Boethius's fortune made him no more nor less of a man, and no happier nor more miserable, Philosophy turns to his other most prized possession: his high status in the Roman government. Like material goods, these kinds of titles get their moral importance from the people who have them, and therefore have no value of their own. Even though many people spend their entire lives pursuing power, it is just another unimportant distraction that Fortune uses to tempt people.

Philosophy points out how ridiculous it is for people to rule over one another, comparing it to watching "one mouse [giving] himself power and jurisdiction over" other mice. People's minds are inherently free, and so political power can only act on their bodies and belongings. She recalls the philosopher Zeno mocking his torturers and coming out with the upper hand, and murderous kings who were subjected to the same end they used to dole out.

This example allows people to think about their societies from a comfortable distance—the same kind of distance illustrious Lady Philosophy and God himself have when they contemplate the comparatively insignificant workings of human society. Again, Philosophy's argument about the true human self hinges on the distinction between the mortal body and the immortal soul or mind—which is free no matter what other humans do to someone's body. So Zeno offers an example of the value in philosophy, which liberates people's minds and refuses to let them be enslaved, regardless of what happens to those people's bodies. Philosophy clearly wants Boethius to take the same attitude toward his current punishment and upcoming execution: the government can take away his physical freedom, but they can never take away what is truer and more fulfilling—his freedom of thought.


In fact, most rulers are evil, and they actually win the most of "fortune's gifts." This shows that neither power nor fortune is "intrinsically good," but both are actually are closer to evil. Philosophy contends that this is because "it is the nature of anything to perform the office [function] proper to it," rather than its opposite. But wealth, power, and government attract their opposites: greedy, power-hungry, and "unworthy" people, respectively. So these three things—like "Fortune as a whole"—are not inherently good at all

The fact that evil people are rewarded might seem like a profound injustice to most contemporary readers, as it did to Boethius. It is important to clarify that Philosophy believes that "fortune's gifts" (things like money and power) are neither *good nor bad in and of themselves, but are closer to evil than to good because they likely* signal *that their bearer has done some evil in order to obtain them. If things naturally "perform the office proper to" them, and if evil people are consistently getting wealth and power, then wealth and power are "proper to" evil people, and someone's possession of wealth or power can suggest that they might be evil. Of course, this argument is unlikely to persuade anyone who rejects Philosophy's belief in a law of fundamental natural attraction. After all, readers might ask, if power and wealth are human creations, do they have a true "nature" or "proper" function at all?*

In verse, Philosophy recounts the destruction wrought by the murderous emperor Nero, whose "high power" did not "check [his] frenzied lunacy."

The murderous emperor Nero's crimes would have been widely known among literate people in the Middle Ages, particularly since their victims were predominantly Christians. This example shows that power did not make Nero noble; instead, Nero used his high office to spread and multiply evil.

BOOK II, PART VII

Boethius tells Philosophy that he was never motivated by ambition, but rather joined politics in order to exercise and win praise for his virtue. Philosophy points out that it is ridiculous for intelligent people" to pursue the "puny and insubstantial [...] fame" of being glorified by others. She reminds Boethius that, in relation to the cosmos, the earth is miniscule, and humans only live on a small part of it, which means one's fame does not go very far. Plus, each person's fame is unlikely to extend to societies beyond their own, which means that worldly fame is "cramped and confined" at best.

Boethius is half-right, half-wrong here. He is clearly calling on Plato's argument in the Republic*: the most virtuous and wise people should be called to govern human societies, but only out of a sense of obligation, because a desire for power indicates that one will likely misuse power. Boethius insists that he was wise and virtuous, but also admits that he was consciously seeking fame and recognition for his good character. Readers should ask if this desire for fame undermines his claim to have been virtuous. After all, Philosophy's response clearly sets fame alongside wealth and power as meaningless worldly pursuits, which are unrelated to true happiness.*

Philosophy continues, explaining that innumerable once-famous people have been forgotten "because there were no historians to write about them," and much of what *is* written down gets lost forever through the ages. People hope for "a kind of immortality" through fame, but fame is meaningless when compared with the true scope of eternity. So Boethius is incredibly "shallow[]" to put popularity above virtue itself, when in reality popularity is an earthly obsession that has no bearing on the immortal soul, which "in the experience of heaven [...] will rejoice."

Here, Philosophy's monologue operates on three different levels at the same time. On a literal level, she is telling Boethius that it is worthless to do things for the sake of fame, because most people who do so are forgotten anyway, and even people who are *remembered do not get remembered forever. But they* do *end up as souls in the afterlife forever, so people should focus on that instead. At the same time, by pointing to the way that important events from history are forgotten throughout time, she also explains both the motivation for Boethius's lifelong focus—the preservation of the works of Ancient Greek philosophers who were rapidly being forgotten in his time—and the ultimate insignificance of this project, for him, in relation to the far greater and more personal question of what to do in the face of impending death. And finally, when we encounter this monologue as contemporary readers, we should also wonder what has been left out of the historical record about Boethius's own life, works, and reception: indeed, nobody has ever conclusively proven whether he was innocent or guilty of the crimes with which he was charged, and it is impossible to recover many of the most important details about his life and death.*

In verse, Philosophy sings of people whose ambitions are limited to praise and fame, telling them to contemplate "the width and breadth of heaven" and remember that everyone is mortal, destined to die no matter how important they were in life. Fame is merely "inscribed in stone, / A line or two of empty reputation," but cannot "lengthen life," and itself eventually gets erased.

This song simply recapitulates Philosophy's argument in a more literary form. It offers an opportunity to reflect on why Boethius would choose to alternate between philosophical argument in prose and these lyric verses, especially since he frequently talks about the infallibility of human reason and began the book with an attack on the Muses of art. There are many possible answers: they show his versatility as an author, they allow him to communicate his ideas to audiences who might resist straight logical persuasion, they offer a rest from the dense and difficult prose sections, and they give readers images and aphorisms that they may be more likely to remember and reflect on later.

BOOK II, PART VIII

In closing, Philosophy emphasizes that she is not "rigidly opposed to Fortune," because sometimes Fortune is helpful—but only *bad* fortune, which teaches people the truth and "enlightens" them about "how fragile a thing happiness is." In Boethius's case, misfortune has shown him who his real friends are—the ones who have stood by him during his public persecution.

While Philosophy has already emphasized that Fortune is neither good nor bad, but merely irrelevant, here she appears to start saying the same thing and then suddenly turn around and say the opposite: misfortune *is good for people because it leads them to wisdom. While her argument makes sense in and of itself, readers might wonder whether this reversal of common sense indicates that Philosophy might have gone too far—and that either Boethius has missed an important flaw in her reasoning, or logic and argument are not as infallible as he hopes them to be.*

In verse, Philosophy sings of a series of paradoxes that demonstrate how "constant change" and "harmony" are two sides of the same coin. For instance, "the tides […] confine the greedy sea." She sees this as proving that the universe is held together by Love. Love "holds peoples joined" together and is also the basis of true friendship. If only, she exclaims, people were "rule[d]" by love, like the world is!

Just as the metaphor of Fortune's wheel relies on opposites complementing one another in the grand scheme of things, this set of images reminds readers that what humans experience as "constant change" is really the repetition of established cycles in the world. Philosophy calls this complementarity "Love," and suggests that it has something to do with true wisdom.

BOOK III, PART I

After Philosophy finishes singing, Boethius praises her for comforting him and preparing him to "fac[e] the blows of Fortune." He is ready for her "cures." She promises that her "remedies" will take him to "true happiness," which he cannot yet understand. Before she explains these remedies for Boethius, Philosophy insists on "sketch[ing] an idea of the cause of happiness."

In fact, although she has spent many pages explaining the problems with Fortune, Philosophy has so far only explained what false happiness *consists of, and all she has said about "true happiness" so far is that it has something to do with the soul. So while Boethius now understands what he has done wrong—and, specifically, why he is wrong to be so miserable about his misfortune—he still has no idea what he* should *feel or believe in.*


In verse, Philosophy sings that an area must be cleared for crops to grow, that food is sweeter after one "taste[s] bitter food," and that the stars seem brighter after the rain. Similarly, having known the false good of material things, Boethius is ready to understand "true good."

These metaphors allow Philosophy to explain her method and, more generally, suggest that false beliefs must be shown incorrect before people can learn the truth.

BOOK III, PART II

After a pause, Philosophy declares that everyone naturally wants the same thing: to be happy. Happiness "leaves nothing more to be desired," because it is perfect "and contains in itself all that is good." However, most people pursue mistaken versions of happiness, specifically by chasing "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure." Philosophy agrees that all these things are good in their own ways. *Wealth* brings self-sufficiency. Good things win "respect and veneration," and status or *position*. *Power* matters because superior things can't be weak. *Fame* is important because excellent things almost always tend to become famous. And finally, *pleasure* is plainly desirable because everybody wants to feel positive emotions rather than negative ones.

Although Philosophy's analysis about the nature of happiness might seem circular or perplexing, there is an easy way to test and prove her argument that everyone wants nothing more and nothing less than their own happiness. If people had everything they truly wanted, by definition they could not want anything more. And they would be as happy as possible, precisely because there is nothing they could add to their lives to make themselves any happier, or remove from their lives to make themselves less miserable. In practice, of course, Lady Philosophy sees a huge problem with this: people do not know what they really *want. They think they want "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure," but actually these things will not make them happy. Indeed, in Book II, she already explained why wealth, power, and fame have no role in happiness and are unimportant products of Fortune. But is it a contradiction that, now, she is emphasizing why they are important? Not at all: she is making a distinction between having a* sufficient level *of these five things, and constantly seeking* more and more *of them. For instance, everyone needs enough money to survive, but people lose their identities and become miserable through the constant pursuit of more and more money—similarly, everyone needs enough food to survive, but constantly overeating is likely to make people less happy than eating an adequate amount. So while happy people will have these five things, they will not necessarily pursue them—indeed, they would only do so when these things are severely* lacking *in their lives.*

Philosophy again sings about the order of nature, noting how a lion who is tamed can still recover its natural instincts and rise up against its tamer, or a caged bird will inevitably remember its freedom and try to escape. She concludes that all things look for the ways of being that suit them best, constantly changing in an attempt at self-fulfillment. Indeed, things' striving to supersede "the order [they] received" is part of the natural order, turning them into "a circle without end."

In this song, Philosophy essentially returns to the principal that things stay the same by changing, but gets to this conclusion by a new path: now, she offers examples of things fulfilling their inner nature—just as it is humans' inner nature to pursue happiness—and realizes that, in fact, it is the inner nature of the world as a whole to be constantly improving (or "supersed[ing]") itself. It could even be said that she is presenting a theory of evolution here. The image of a "circle without end" is interesting and open to interpretation—it likely suggests that things are constantly going in circles, as they fulfill themselves and return to their starting points over and over for all eternity. Later, she argues that God is this starting and ending point.


BOOK III, PART III

Philosophy tells Boethius that he and other "earthly creatures […] dream of your origin," pursuing their happiness through instinct but without a clear picture of what this requires. She asks whether the ways people try to achieve happiness—meaning money, status, power, fame, and pleasure—actually get them there. If not, then people are actually "snatching at a false appearance of happiness" by pursuing these things.

Philosophy contrasts two tendencies that she considers natural for human beings: on the one hand, they have an innate drive for happiness and fulfillment, which comes from their "origin" (God). On the other hand, their attempts to fulfill this natural drive almost inevitably fail because people usually pursue the wrong goals. The exception would be goals chosen through wisdom—meaning reasoned philosophical reflection—which are actually aligned with what truly makes humans happy.


Philosophy asks Boethius a series of questions. First, she asks if, when he was wealthy, he was worry-free. He responds that he has never been entirely worry-free, and agrees with Philosophy that his life was either missing something, or had something he did not want. Philosophy explains that this means he was never self-sufficient, and so his situation proves that money doesn't actually free people from wanting more. In fact, money makes people "need outside help"—the help of a government that protects their money against others who might want to take it. So, in reality, "wealth […] in fact makes [people] dependent," while having little money frees people of needs to be satisfied. Everyone has to eat and drink—money temporarily satisfies, but does not eliminate, these needs. And so "riches create a want of their own," rather than making people genuinely self-sufficient or leading to true happiness.

In the next part of Book III, Philosophy goes through each of the five mistaken human goals—"wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure"—and explains what makes each unworthy of human pursuit. Here, her argument against the pursuit of wealth depends on her previous argument that happiness implies self-sufficiency—if someone has happiness, they would not need to add anything else to their lives in order to live the best possible life. Here, she clearly shows that money is never enough to make people self-sufficiently happy—rather, it is a means to the fulfillment of basic human needs, and has no value beyond this.

In a short verse, Philosophy sings about how "the rich" can never satisfy their greed and spend their lives pursuing "fickle fortunes" that disappear when they die.

Although the fact that money can't buy happiness is repeated so often that it often loses its power to persuade, here Lady Philosophy tells her readers in slightly-less clichéd terms that, if their life goals revolve around accumulating money—like so many people in the 21st century—they are probably going to live disappointing and unsatisfying lives. They should take note of this and change course as soon as possible.

BOOK III, PART IV

Now, Philosophy asks if "high office" leads to self-sufficient happiness. In fact, she says, "high office[s]" do not make people virtuous, but rather indulge and expose their worst vices. So people are worthy of office because of their *virtue*, not virtuous because they hold office. And therefore high offices are in no way intrinsically good. Indeed, when given power, "wicked men [...] discredit" their offices, and someone's high office will not win them any favor "among foreign peoples," which also proves that high office does not inherently confer respect. Plus, the "dignity" of different positions or kinds of social status can change throughout history, depending on popular opinions. So high offices themselves aren't desirable.

"Position" is the second of Philosophy's five false paths to happiness. She repeats her argument from Book II: like money, offices have no moral value in themselves, but are given their moral value depending on who occupies them. This was Plato's basis for arguing that only the virtuous and wise should take office—even though, because of their virtue and wisdom, they are unlikely to seek it out or want the great responsibility it entails. And the apparent social value of leadership roles, too, is based on context and history. For instance, Boethius served under Theodoric, who was technically the Emperor of Rome, but who had won that title by murdering the previous Emperor and taking the Roman government hostage, rather than through birthright, like previous rulers. As a result, he devalued the office he held, and the state over which he presided is no longer considered to have even been a continuation of the Roman Empire. (Accordingly, although he does not name Theodoric specifically, there is no doubt that Boethius was thinking about him when he wrote this passage.)

In another short verse, Philosophy remembers how Nero's fancy clothes did nothing to win him favor, and how it was actually considered a *dis*grace to serve in his government.

No matter how many kings declared themselves chosen by God, Nero—like Theodoric—revealed the hollowness and arbitrariness of political office, which Philosophy would probably say is almost never given to the people who most deserve it.

BOOK III, PART V

While "being a king" or a king's friend bestows power, Philosophy notes, it does not necessarily lead people to happiness. Indeed, many "kings [have] exchanged happiness for ruin" and constantly worry about losing their power. Kings' friends have an even less certain road to power: theirs can be lost not only when the king loses his, but also if he turns against them. So kingly power does not make people happy, but rather "strikes fear into those who possess it, confers no safety on you if you want it, and [...] cannot be avoided when you want to renounce it."

Although she continues talking about kings, Philosophy has switched from explaining the moral worthlessness of "position" to explaining that of "power." Like the other false roads to happiness, she seems to conclude that it is more likely to bring people to misery: whereas happy people would never *be afraid because they keep their freedom of* thought, *even under adverse circumstances, kings (or at least those without training in philosophy) are* always *afraid because their* physical *well-being is constantly under threat. Indeed, power is closer to a curse than a simple bad decision, because people cannot even "renounce it" in many cases!*

In a short song, Philosophy proclaims that only moderate and virtuous people should become kings, for arrogant and power-hungry kings actually become "slave[s]" to their own power.

Again, Philosophy takes this insight from Plato's Republic, *and she again turns false paths to happiness on their head, showing how what people think will give them freedom actually turns them into "slave[s]" and* prevents *them from fully using their reason and free will.*


BOOK III, PART VI

Philosophy turns to fame, which she considers "shameful" and often achieved through deceit. People often become famous only because of the public's faulty opinions, and philosophers know that true happiness depends on "[one's] own conscience" rather than the perceptions of other people. Plus, being famous in one part of the world does not make one famous in other places, and having "nob[le]" birth and family says nothing about one's own character.

Like her arguments against wealth, position, and power, Philosophy's polemic against fame follows a logic that is probably relatively familiar to contemporary readers, since the problem is timeless: famous people, Philosophy says, are attention-hungry liars who spend their energy cultivating a persona at the expense of actually improving themselves. *Such people are, of course, not only often famously unhappy, but also notoriously good at exploiting their unhappiness to make themselves even more famous.*

Philosophy sings that God is the true creator of all the universe, and therefore it is pointless for people to care so much about their "kin and ancestry."

By bringing up God and saying that "kin and ancestry" have nothing to do with a person's true worth, Philosophy essentially makes the point—radical in Roman times—that all humans are inherently equal, because they have all been created by God and presumably have the same capacities for rational thought and happiness, regardless of their families and backgrounds. This does not mean that everyone is equally virtuous or happy, but that everyone has an equal capacity and right to reach virtue and happiness.


BOOK III, PART VII

"Bodily pleasure," Philosophy argues, actually leads its seekers to the opposite of happiness: "great illness and unbearable pain." Plus, if physical pleasure is enough for happiness, then animals would be considered happy because their only goal in life is "the fulfillment of bodily needs." For instance, even the most "honest" of bodily pleasures—having and enjoying one's family—can lead to pain, as some children "torment[]" their parents.

Pleasure, the fifth and final of the false routes to happiness, is also self-undermining, according to Philosophy. Philosophy's argument about family is curious, since earlier in the book she argued that Boethius was fortunate precisely because of *his loving family. However, it is worth recalling that she thinks that "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure" are not inherently bad, but only* worthless *beyond the certain amount that is necessary for humans to pursue the things that* do *make up true happiness. Therefore, she has no need to argue that it is wrong for Boethius to have a loving, supportive family—it simply will never be enough to make him truly happy, because it is merely one of Fortune's gifts.*

In a brief song, Philosophy compares bodily pleasures to bees, which first provide honey and then sting people.

Although Philosophy makes her point quickly and claims it to be obvious that the pursuit of pleasure leads people to be stung later on, in many ways this part of Book III might be the most controversial today. Indeed, it even would have been in Boethius's time, since a prominent group of Greek philosophers (led by Epicurus) came to precisely the opposite conclusion. And what might Philosophy say about non-bodily pleasures—like the sense of wonder long associated with doing philosophy itself? Where would this fit in?

BOOK III, PART VIII

Summarizing Book III so far, Philosophy declares that she has debunked the five most common "roads to happiness," which all lead people to danger, evil, and folly. When humans strive for "puny and fragile" goals like power and pleasure, they miss the profound beauty of the heavens. Meanwhile, the physical beauty of the human body is superficial and can always be erased quickly by simple illness.

Returning to her central point about the five "roads to happiness"—they may be good for some limited purposes, but are not inherently good in and of themselves—Philosophy again makes it clear that these "puny and fragile" interests contrast with the mind's more far-reaching, universal ones. Clearly, because she and Boethius believe the mind (or soul) to be eternal and the body to be only a temporary vessel, true happiness must involve pursuits of the mind.

Philosophy sings of the "wretched ignorance" that makes people seek riches and power, while forgetting where to *really* find "the good they seek." When their worldly pursuits fail, they can finally learn to "see the tru[th]" and pursue real happiness.

It is worth noting that Philosophy does not blame malice or bad intentions for evil: the culprit is ignorance, *a lack of knowledge rather than a form of conscious wrongdoing.*

BOOK III, PART IX

Now that Philosophy has taught Boethius about "false happiness," she will explain genuine happiness. First, she argues that "self-sufficiency" implies power: anything with "some weakness [...] need[s] the help of something else," whereas anything powerful would not need outside support. Then, she asks Boethius whether a self-sufficient and powerful being is "contempt[ible], or [...] supremely worthy of veneration." He agrees that it is the latter, and also that a revered, powerful, self-sufficient thing would "be unsurpassed in fame and glory" and, most of all, "supremely happy." Philosophy concludes that "sufficiency, power, glory, reverence and happiness" are all one and the same: they have different names, but the same underlying meaning. Boethius agrees.

At long last, Philosophy gives Boethius the answer he has been waiting for all along. Having considered the five false paths to happiness separately, now she looks at them together and explains why they all imply one another. She has already explained that perfect happiness requires self-sufficiency (because no perfectly happy person would ever need anything they do not already have). She explains here that self-sufficiency comes with "veneration" and "fame and glory," which means that perfect happiness—by virtue of requiring self-sufficiency—also comes with these things. Therefore, a "supremely happy" person will have all the things that pursuers of "wealth, position, power, fame, [and] pleasure" were seeking all along—and yet, this person will do so without ever pursuing any of these five goals. (Although Lady Philosophy does not explicitly mention pleasure here, she soon begins talking about "joy.")

However, Philosophy argues, "human perversity" separates out these five goals and tries to pursue them separately. But because these things are really an indivisible whole, humans are "attempting to obtain part of something which has no parts." This throws them off balance: for instance, someone might sacrifice self-sufficiency and glory in their quest for power, and thereby sacrifice the very power they seek. Boethius realizes that, in contrast, one must pursue these five things together, which Philosophy confirms would mean "seeking the sum of happiness." Boethius ecstatically declares that he now understands: "true and perfect happiness is that which makes a [person] self-sufficient, strong, worthy of respect, glorious and joyful."

There is a striking parallel between Philosophy's analysis of "human perversity" here and Boethius's comments on Philosophy herself at the beginning of the book: people pursue false versions of happiness by tearing the five goals apart from one another, just as Roman society has mistreated Lady Philosophy by tearing pieces off of her dress—which symbolizes their tendency to take specific, convenient ideas from Ancient Greek philosophers without considering those thinkers' overall conclusions and insights. Like happiness, the wisdom of Philosophy truly "has no parts," and to try and take just part of it is to destroy the integrity of the whole. In fact, philosophy's purpose is precisely to help people achieve *happiness—and, since Philosophy soon argues that "the sum of happiness" involves philosophical reflection, in fact these two metaphors are two versions of the same story. That is, "perversity" separating out happiness's parts is* the same thing *as "marauders" destroying Philosophy's dress.*

Philosophy praises Boethius's insight, but tells him that he needs to "add one thing." She asks whether "these mortal and degenerate things" can lead to what they have described as "perfect happiness," and Boethius agrees that they cannot. Philosophy argues that the physical world can "offer [humans] only shadows of the true good" and asks Boethius where he thinks this "true happiness" can be found. She notes that "Plato was pleased to ask for divine help even over small matters" in the dialogue *Timaeus*, and Boethius agrees that he should "pray to the Father of all things."

Philosophy now explicitly tells Boethius that true happiness is about the activity of the immortal soul or mind alone, and unrelated to the body's actions in the physical world of "mortal and degenerate things." She references Plato not only by citing the Timaeus, *but also by citing his famous allegory of the cave from the* Republic, *in which he argued that what people experience in the physical world consists of mere "shadows of the true good," which resides in a higher realm of "Forms" or "Ideas." While it may seem strange that Philosophy transitions immediately from discussing a (Pagan) Greek philosopher to discussing "the Father of all things," who appears to be the Christian God, in fact Plato believed in some version of the same deity, whom he called the "demiurge" (meaning "craftsman" or "creator"). Although Rome has gone from persecuting Christians to outlawing all other faiths in just a few centuries, which might make it seem that there is an eternal conflict between reason and faith, in fact for Boethius there is no clear distinction between the conclusions that people will reach through Christianity and the ones they will reach through philosophy.*

Philosophy tells Boethius that he is correct and starts singing a hymn based heavily on Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*. She praises God, whose "everlasting reason" and absolute power allowed Him to create the world out of nothing. She sings that God contains the "highest good," is the "height of beauty," and turns "perfect parts [into] a perfect whole" by combining opposites harmoniously. As "soul," God permeates nature and controls everything, sending "souls and lesser lives" out into the world before eventually receiving them back. She asks God to give His worshippers a clear picture of him and the "true good" that he embodies.

This poem, widely considered the most beautiful of the Consolation *as well as the book's central turning point, is in fact an elaborate prayer to God—both the God of Plato and that of the Christians. Philosophy returns to a number of previous motifs that she has already introduced into her discussion with Boethius—like the complementarity between opposing "perfect parts," the soul's circular return to its origin, the "everlasting reason" that humans have received from God, and most of all the nature of the "highest good." But now, she explicitly connects all of these to God and makes it clear that the "highest good" comes from people somehow connecting themselves to God—presumably, through hymns and prayers (like this one), but also through argument and reflection (like in the rest of the book). Accordingly, with its combination of poetry and argument, the* Consolation *itself can be seen as documenting and enacting (the author) Boethius's worship—it is his attempt to attain happiness through prayer to and reflection about God.*

BOOK III, PART X

Having explained "perfect good," Philosophy now hopes to indicate how "perfect happiness is to be found." First, she notes that all the good things she has talked about thus far are "imperfect" goods that take their limited "proportion of perfection" from perfect good, which can only be possessed by God (because "nothing can be conceived [as] better than God"). Next, she tells Boethius that God's "supreme good" *cannot* come "from outside Himself," because that would mean that the outside source of this good would be superior to God. Indeed, the "supreme good" cannot be "logically distinct from [God]," or else the essence of this "supreme good" would be *greater* than God. Since "supreme good is the same as happiness," Philosophy concludes, "God is the essence of happiness." And there cannot be "two supreme goods," for "neither could be perfect when each is lacking to the other."

Both by argument and by demonstration, in the previous song Philosophy began to indicate what humans should do to achieve the "perfect happiness" that God (the "perfect good") can offer them. But here, she takes up the question explicitly, now using the philosophical method of inquiry. Her potentially confusing point about things' "proportion of perfection" is merely a way of saying that things besides God are only good because they come from and resemble Him, and is a means of reaffirming that all good in the world comes from God (which later raises the question of where evil comes from). By the end of this passage, then, Philosophy suggests that the following things are all one and the same: God; happiness; the supreme good; and the sum of perfect sufficiency, power, respectableness, glory, and joy.

Philosophy reestablishes that "supreme happiness is identical with supreme divinity," and then offers a "corollary" of this conclusion: since happiness and divinity are one and the same, people grow happy "through the possession of divinity," and divine by possessing happiness.

Philosophy's "corollary" (meaning a conclusion that follows from what she has already proven) nearly explains what people should actually do to become "supremely happy," but falls short of clarity. She says that people should try to "possess […] divinity," but what does this actually mean? There are some things that can be definitively known from what Philosophy has argued so far. First, one cannot "possess[]" God like a material object, and secondly, true happiness must be "possess[ed]" in a way such that it cannot be taken away, because it is of the highest order of good. This means that one cannot give up divinity once one possesses it. Thirdly, Philosophy has previously established that true happiness involves the workings of the mind, and not the body. So taking these points together, it appears that happiness or divinity must involve God forming an inalienable part of someone's mind or soul. But it remains to be seen precisely how this is possible.

Philosophy promises Boethius that she has one more "beautiful" conclusion to reveal. First, she asks whether the five things they have equated with happiness—pleasure, power, honor, sufficiency, and glory—are "like parts combining to form a single body," or if "goodness [is] something superordinate to which they belong." Since "these [five] things have been proved to be identical," she concludes, "they are not like limbs," but rather "are classed under good." That is, people want these things because of their goodness—indeed, nobody desires anything that does not either have, or appear to have, some semblance of goodness. She concludes that "goodness" motivates all pursuits, and people only desire things "for the sake of the good in them." Since she has already established "that the reason for desiring things is happiness," this is another reason to believe that goodness is the same thing as happiness and God.

When she concludes that "goodness [is] something superordinate" to the five dimensions of happiness, Philosophy is just pointing out—as she has already suggested before—that these things are not good in and of themselves, but only good because of their connection to something else, "goodness." These things are good in the same kind of way that something is red: they do not make up the concept of goodness, just as all the red things in the world do not make up the concept of redness. So redness is "superordinate to" red things, just like goodness is "superordinate to" the five dimensions of happiness. And this is why pursuing them on their own actually leads people to misery: they have no value except through their relationship to goodness—which, in Philosophy's terms, means God.

Philosophy sings that those held "captive" by their "false desire" should take up refuge in God, who will offer peace and solace. Riches and worldly pursuits distract people from the divine, but anyone who "see[s God's] shining **light**" will immediately see His greater truth.

Philosophy again clearly calls on her and Boethius's readers to pray to and meditate on God, as she does precisely through this song. The "shining light" continues to represent truth, but is this truth sent down by *God, or is it* part of *(or even* identical to*) God? This matters because it could help determine if wisdom properly counts as "the possession of divinity," which is what Philosophy has said is necessary for people to achieve perfect happiness.*

BOOK III, PART XI

Boethius expresses his agreement with Philosophy's argument and says that he hopes to "be able to see God." Philosophy reminds him that "full and perfect good" requires the unity of "sufficiency […], power, reverence, glory and pleasure." Indeed, these five things only "become good" when they are united, but everything is only good "through participation in goodness," which means "unity and goodness are identical."

Philosophy's argument about unity and goodness is somewhat roundabout and can be quite confusing at first. To fully understand what she is doing here, her points must be broken down in more detail. First, she uses a premise she has already proven: "perfect good," meaning God, has all five dimensions of happiness, all united together. Secondly, when they are not all united, these five things are not good and lead to misery instead. So these things only "become good" when they have "unity." But, her third premise goes, all things only become good when they have "goodness." The term "participation" is a difficult concept from Plato, but essentially, when Boethius says that anything is good only "through participation in goodness," he means that every good thing is good because it "has" some abstract quality called "goodness." Since this argument applies to everything *that is good, it also applies to the five dimensions of happiness, which must also only be good if they "participate in" or* have goodness. *But Philosophy has already argued that these five dimensions of happiness become good because they* have unity. *If these five things are good* when they have unity *and* when they have goodness, *then having unity and having goodness are simply the same thing, which leads to her final point here: "unity and goodness are identical."*

Having explained why unity is the same as goodness, Philosophy argues that "everything that is" exists only when "it is one," and by "dissolv[ing …] ceases to be one." She explains this point through the metaphor of the body and soul: they constitute "a living being" when united, but this "living being perishes and no longer exists" when body and soul are separated. She holds that everything is like this: existing only as long as it has unity. Everything living—including "plants and trees"—seeks to maximize its life and reproduce. Stone, water, air, and fire are like this, too, Philosophy argues: stone resists being broken, water and air "reunite" when separated, and fire cannot "be[] cut at all." For all beings this self-preservation is a natural *instinct*, not a conscious decision.

According to Philosophy, unity is not only goodness, but also the essence of all existence itself, from living beings like humans to inanimate things like rocks and fire. And this essence of existence is also equivalent to the desire to reproduce or otherwise create more of one's own kind. The fact that this desire for unity and reproduction is an instinct *means that it is something already built into things' inherent nature from the beginning—it is not a matter of free will. Since it is a natural instinct, in turn, it is inevitable: everything has it. Philosophy implies (but does not yet say outright) that God put this instinct in things, since He supposedly created everything. Luckily for the reader, the purpose of all this seemingly circular argumentation will soon become clear.*

Next, Philosophy combines her previous arguments. First, as she has just argued, existing means being in unity, and everything desires its self-preservation, so therefore "all things desire unity." Moreover, "unity is identical with goodness," and so "it is goodness itself which all things desire." Boethius agrees, and Philosophy tells him that he has found "the central truth" about the final goal of everything that exists: "goodness" itself.

Although this argument might appear even more cryptic and disconnected from reality than before, what Philosophy eventually wants to say—and will soon make clear—is that everything naturally desires a return to God, the Creator of all things, whom she has already shown to be the same as "goodness itself." But, for now, her point answers two important contextual questions that Boethius never knew he needed to ask: what do "all things" want, and why should things be good rather than evil? The answer to both these questions is that everything that exists has a natural instinct to desire goodness.

Philosophy sings that anyone who "deeply searches out the truth" will ultimately find that truth "hidden deep within" oneself, in one's natural instincts. Through philosophical "teaching," one can "recall" this buried truth.

Philosophy's song directly refers to her above conclusion—through her "teaching," Boethius has learned to "recall" his inherent desire for goodness, which he shares with everything else in the universe. But this song is also another direct reference to Plato, who believed that the soul already has complete knowledge of everything before it enters the body, but needs to be reminded of that knowledge and forced to "recall" it through education (specifically, through philosophical dialogues). In fact, much of the opacity and confusion in this section of Boethius's text comes from his attempt to closely follow Plato's train of thought.

BOOK III, PART XII

Boethius tells Philosophy that he "agree[s] very strongly with Plato," and that he has learned this same lesson for the second time. Once, he forgot the truth because of "the influence of the body," and now, he forgot it because he was so preoccupied with his misfortune. Philosophy promises that he is ready to remember how the world really works. Boethius explains what he already knows: the world is "ruled by God," who is the only "power capable of holding together" its diversity.

Boethius's insistence that he is relearning Philosophy's wisdom directly responds to her last song, in which she explained Plato's belief that people "recall" knowledge that they have forgotten. Because his misery involved turning his focus to the worldly workings and effects of Fortune, this also counts, in a way, as forgetting because of "the influence of the body." So far in Book III, Boethius has re-learned that God is the same thing as absolute happiness, unity, and goodness, and that all beings naturally desire all of these (synonymous) things.

Philosophy builds on Boethius's point: they already know that self-sufficiency is part of happiness and "that God is happiness itself." Therefore, God self-sufficiently "regulates all things." Next, since "God is the good itself," He regulates the world "by goodness." He is like both a ship's "helm" (its steering wheel) *and* its "rudder" (the piece of metal controlled by the steering wheel that actually directs the boat left or right). Philosophy reminds Boethius that "all things [...] have a natural inclination towards the good," and that all things therefore act "in harmony and accord" with God. Anything that tried to "go against God" would lose its battle because God is "supreme in power," and so nothing can act contrary to Him. In conclusion, Philosophy declares, "it is the supreme good, then, which mightily and sweetly orders all things." Boethius says he is "very happy" about Philosophy's conclusion.

Philosophy builds out her picture of God by turning to a few of the numerous concepts she has already shown to be equivalent to God. In short, because God is self-sufficient, He cannot rely on anything else, so everything has to rely on Him. Since He is good, so is His influence on things, and since He is all-powerful, He controls everything. This is all she needs to reach her conclusion that God, or "the supreme good [...] mightily and sweetly orders all things." Although she puts the metaphor of "helm" and "rudder" first, in fact this is just a way of illustrating the ultimate conclusion: God is both the intelligent force that directs the world (the "helm") and the medium by which the world is directed (the "rudder"). Of course, she and Boethius already took this conclusion for granted—all the way back in Book I. The only difference is that now they have proven it through logical argument, which Boethius considers necessary because this is a work of philosophy. *But this extended proof of God's nature also further supports Boethius's insistence that philosophical reason can be a legitimate route to truths about the universe, and an all-powerful God can control that universe at the same time.*

Philosophy decides to complicate things, so that God's supreme power will guide their thinking. If God is omnipotent, she asks, "can God do evil?" Boethius says no, but Philosophy says that this means "evil is nothing." Confused, Boethius summarizes Philosophy's argument and notes that her whole chain of argument is based on "one internal proof grafted upon another." Philosophy replies that, since God is self-contained and independent of external influences, her arguments have come from "within the bounds of the matter we have been discussing."

Having proven whatever they can about the omnipotence, benevolence, natural desirability, and absolute unity of God, Philosophy turns to a glaring issue with the belief system that she has outlined, which has also been a central concern of Boethius's since the beginning of the book: if God is so powerful and so good, why is there evil, and could He be responsible for making it? Philosophy actually ends up sticking by her answer that "evil is nothing," but spends the entirety of Book IV offering a proof of this conclusion. In addition to pointing at his lifelong obsession with formal logic, Boethius's reply about the structure of Philosophy's argument affirms that he recognizes the necessity of proving God's existence and nature through philosophy, rather than merely through faith.

In a lengthy song, Philosophy recounts the myth of Orpheus, a musician who begins to sing after his wife Eurydice dies. Although his powerful song attracts everything in the world, animate and inanimate, it does not soothe his grief. He goes to the underworld to try and save Eurydice and beguiles its residents with his song. Hades, "the monarch of the dead," agrees to let Orpheus take Eurydice back, on the condition that he must not look at her until he leaves the underworld. But love is its own "law," Philosophy sings, and cannot be caged: Orpheus looks upon Eurydice and so loses her forever. Philosophy concludes that this is a metaphor for how people must seek God: they should not turn around and look "back to darkness from the sky," because that will lead them to lose all their progress.

Although she continues to proclaim that God is singular and all-powerful, now Philosophy recounts a classic tale from (polytheistic) Greek mythology. The tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice is a reminder of Boethius's own impending execution, but it also encapsulates the problems of evil and human free will that occupy Boethius and Philosophy during the rest of the book: Orpheus errs and loses Eurydice by letting his emotion (his love for Eurydice) supersede his reason (his knowledge that he must not look at her). This error—a free act in defiance of divine orders—defines him forever, and yet it is merely the tragic product of an all-too-common human flaw. At the end of this song, Philosophy's comparison between Orpheus and seeking God suggests that humans should also principally follow the evidence of their reason—namely, the arguments that Philosophy has just provided—and never again forget the secrets they have learned about the nature of God and the universe.

BOOK IV, PART I

Boethius interrupts Philosophy to praise her wisdom and explain "the greatest cause of [his] sadness," which is the existence and impunity of evil. In fact, evil people gain power and use it to punish the virtuous. How is this possible, Boethius asks, "in the realm of an omniscient and omnipotent God?"

Philosophy did formally introduce the problem of evil at the end of Book III, but now Boethius explains its personal significance to him: he is one of the good people who is being punished for his virtue (namely, his attempts to defend Rome's Senate). The problem of how God and evil can both exist in the world is a classic problem in philosophy and theology, which many philosophers before Boethius—most notably Augustine—had already addressed at length.

Philosophy tells Boethius that he is misinterpreting the reality: God does not reward the evil above the good. In fact, the existence of God implies that the virtuous receive the rewards they are due and the evil their punishments. She promises Boethius that she will guide him to the comforting truth.

Here, Philosophy explicitly names the conclusion that she will aim to prove throughout the rest of Book IV: if God is truly *totally benevolent and all-powerful, after all, then good people should receive good consequences and evil people should get evil ones. Essentially, she is promising Boethius that she will show that either the people he thinks are good are* really *evil (including himself) and vice versa, or, more likely, that in fact the consequences he sees as evil (including his punishment) are really good, and vice versa.*

Philosophy sings about the power of her ideas, which she compares to "wings" that people can put on to ascend toward the heavens. People's souls can pass by the stars and the planets, ascending to the outer reaches of God's realm, which is actually a means of returning to their "source."

Beyond offering the metaphor of people reaching God through rational reflection on the truth, here Philosophy also offers a specific, step-by-step depiction of the cosmos as it was understood to exist in Boethius's time—it was viewed as a set of concentric circles, beginning with the Earth, the Moon, and the planets (including the Sun, which was thought to revolve around the Earth), and then proceeding to God himself, who presumably lay just beyond the bounds of our solar system.

BOOK IV, PART II

Boethius expresses his surprise "at the magnitude of [Philosophy's] promises," and she begins her argument. She notes that, if good is shown to be strong, by implication evil is proven to be weak. So only one side of this equation needs to be proven. But Philosophy thinks she can prove both!

Readers are likely to share Boethius's surprise: how can Philosophy possibly believe it—never mind prove *it—to be just that tyrants have seized power in Rome and begun deposing, arresting, and executing dedicated civil servants like Boethius?*

Philosophy states that human action requires two things: free will, which spurs people to take actions, and power, which gives them the capacity to follow through with actions. Importantly, one's power can be measured by what one is capable of doing. She reminds Boethius that everyone desires (or instinctively wills) happiness, which is the same as "the good itself." Good people successfully attain this goodness, and "the wicked" clearly fail to attain it. Since good people are capable of attaining the goodness they want, but wicked people are not, and power is defined by people's capacity to attain what they want, then clearly the good are more powerful than the wicked.

Fortunately, this argument is rather more straightforward than Philosophy's arguments about God at the end of Book III. Her analysis of human action as the combination of will *and* power *allows her to equate evil with weakness: both the evil and the good have the same* will, *so if the good achieve their goal and the evil do not, then only their* power *must differ. Therefore, she encourages Boethius and the reader to see evil people as impotent fools: they want to be happy but are ignorant, weak, and confused, so they cannot fulfill their dreams. But readers might ask if this argument does justice to the devastation that evil causes: is it enough to tell the victim of a crime or other act of evil that the person who injured them was simply too ignorant to understand what they were really doing? And don't evildoers, by definition, necessarily need physical power to carry out the evil they do?*

Philosophy compares the difference between good and evil people to the difference between someone who walks "natural[ly]" on their feet and someone who cannot, and instead "tries to walk on [their] hands." The person who walks on their feet is more powerful than the one who walks on their hands. Similarly, good people who pursue happiness through "a natural activity—the exercise of their virtues" are more powerful than evil people who seek happiness "by means of their various desires, which isn't a natural method of obtaining the good." In fact, the wicked are so weak that they fail even though "their natural inclination leads them" toward the good. But how is this possible?

The underlying assumption of Philosophy's argument is the point she made at the end of Book III: everyone's "natural" orientation is toward the good, and the natural way of pursuing the good is though reflection and prayer rather than indulgence in worldly pursuits. One might ask what makes these things more "natural" than their alternatives; Philosophy would likely respond that their naturalness somehow comes from God, who is himself absolutely good and makes all things follow him in being good. Yet, as she notices at the very end of this passage, this fact opens up another philosophical conundrum: how can things go against their own nature, if God is all-powerful? This is a version of the problem of free will that Philosophy and Boethius take up in Book V.

Philosophy considers various reasons for why people might go against nature and choose vice over virtue. Some suffer the profound weakness of ignorance and "do not know what is good." Others know what is good but give into their instincts for "pleasure" because of a "lack of self-control." And others, who "knowingly and willingly" choose evil over goodness, in fact "cease to exist." Being wicked is like being dead: both lack "absolute and complete existence." One cannot "simply call [a corpse] a [hu]man," and neither can one call a wicked person fully human. These people have strayed so far from their natural inclinations that they can't even be said to exist anymore.

Philosophy has left open the question of how people can freely disobey the nature put into them by God—she will address it later. Now, assuming that she will successfully prove it doable, *she asks* why *people would do this. People who "knowingly and willingly" choose evil are less human than those who do evil out of ignorance or a "lack of self-control" because they understand that they are doing what is wrong and do so anyway. Philosophy is not saying that they literally disappear or cease to exist on the Earth—only that they lose their essential humanity, which revolves around their goodness. Still, Philosophy does not need to show that this category is truly independent of the others, for this would mean that it is possible to be evil without being ignorant or weak After all, if someone knows that they are doing something wrong, what could possibly make them do it anyway, besides a "lack of self-control" (as in the case of addiction, for instance) or excessive desires for material things (wealth, power, position, and the like), which go against nature and ultimately boil down to moral weakness?*


While some think that evil people can be powerful, Philosophy replies that their power "comes from weakness rather than strength," and that if they were really strong, they would be able to do good. In fact, "evil is nothing," so the wicked have only the power to "do nothing."

This argument may seem quite paradoxical: how can power "come from weakness?" The answer is that Philosophy is not talking about literal physical *weakness, but rather about the moral and mental weakness that she believes makes people choose evil over good. However, her conclusion might also seem paradoxical for an entirely different reason: there is no question that there are evil events, people, and things in the world. So in this sense, evil does exist. But then how can Philosophy argue that "evil is nothing?" What she really means is that evil is not a real, positively existing thing, like a physical object. Rather, it is a* lack, *weakness, or incapacity: evil is the gap between something's current level of goodness and a perfect level of it. Just like a glass of water can "be" half-empty even though emptiness is not a "real" thing with positive existence, a person can be evil even though evilness does not technically* exist, *but is only a* lack of goodness. *So evil is "nothing" in the same way as an evil person lacks "absolute and complete existence." Both lack the goodness that would make them complete, or in Philsophy's terms, fully real.*

So how can evil exist if God is supremely good, and nothing is more powerful than God? Indeed, God is good because He is supremely powerful and therefore "can only do good." Humans, in contrast, are not supremely powerful, and so "can also do evil." In closing, Philosophy summarizes that goodness is power, and evil is weakness. As Plato argued, the good achieve goodness and while the wicked pursue pleasure, but this gets in the way of them truly reaching "the good they desire."

Since evil is simply a lack of goodness (and goodness is the same thing as God), things are evil simply because they fall short of the perfection that God embodies. People have no extra ingredient or component that makes them stray from God's perfect goodness—rather, they stray simply because they are not as perfectly good as *God. Therefore, even though God is only good, "can only do good," and has only made people out of pure goodness, it is still possible for the people he creates to "be" evil. In fact, this argument is nearly identical to the view of good and evil presented by the Christian philosopher and Saint Augustine of Hippo, who predated Boethius by about a century and was also heavily influenced by Neoplatonic philosophers.*

Philosophy sings of "savage" kings whose uncontrolled passions overtake them, distance them from happiness, and "enslave" them.

Philosophy returns to this example of how even people with great power, position, and intentions can fall into evil simply because their goodness or evilness (and, as a corollary, their happiness) depends fundamentally on their internal *lives, not their* external *possessions and status.*

BOOK IV, PART III

Philosophy asks what rewards good actions, and she realizes that the answer is goodness or happiness itself. The good already have their reward, and so they can maintain it forever, even when they are affected by "the wickedness of others," unless they cease to be good. And because "those who attain happiness are divine," being good allows people "to become gods," whereas the wicked get punished by and through their own wickedness. Indeed, through their wickedness "they also [lose] their human nature" and become subhuman. She compares various wicked people to various kinds of animals, to whose level they have fallen through their wickedness.

Having established what good and evil are made of, now Philosophy wants to show that God fairly rewards good and evil alike. Of course, since the best thing to be rewarded with is goodness, *her argument is self-consciously circular: since it is by definition good to do something good, when someone chooses to do something good, they reward themselves by doing that good thing. This is all she needs to show for her argument to work, but there could also be other levels to it: for example, taking good actions makes people* better as people, *acting with goodness is likely to make others respond to one in kind, etc. The supremely happy are like "gods" because, by definition, God is supreme happiness. And Philosophy seems to mean this literally: the souls of happy people become one with God when they die.*

Philosophy sings about Odysseus getting lost on the island of the goddess Circe, who begins turning his crew into animals that threaten him. Odysseus's crew has changed in every way except for their minds, which remain aware of their terrible situation. But this mind or soul is also the source of their strength, and so Philosophy notes that threats to "man's true self" are more dangerous than afflictions that merely "harm the body."

Again, in a way that might seem counterintuitive to contemporary readers but was perfectly consistent in Boethius's time, Lady Philosophy uses polytheistic Greek myths to explain the way people should relate to the singular God. Here, she sees Odysseus's encounter with Circe as evidence for the mind's superiority over and independence from the body. In other words, people's happiness and goodness are entirely under their own control precisely because *they pertain exclusively to the mind.*

BOOK IV, PART IV

Boethius agrees that being wicked turns people into animals, and laments that these people have the freedom to act out their desires. But Philosophy insists that, actually, this "freedom" is wicked people's "punishment," for "achiev[ing] their desires" actually makes wicked people less happy by multiplying their wickedness. Fortunately, she concludes, wicked people overcome "their misery" when they die, because otherwise their misery would be eternal and "infinite."

Although Philosophy's argument again looks counterintuitive, it still has internal logic: since reward simply means gaining more goodness and punishment means gaining more wickedness (or losing goodness), "freedom" is a form of "punishment" when it allows people to continue choosing to worsen (punish) themselves. Philosophy's claim about the wicked leaving "their misery" is specifically a reference to the fact that good things are those of the soul or mind, and wicked things are those of the body. Therefore, for the wicked, death constitutes a liberation from the material things they have used to imprison and enslave themselves.

Philosophy offers another seemingly "strange" conclusion: "the wicked are happier if they suffer punishment." And this is not just because punishment corrects and discourages wickedness. Instead, because "the punishment of the wicked is just, when the wicked receive punishment they receive something good." Boethius asks if the wicked might be punished after death, and Philosophy confirms that they may, but that she does not plan to discuss that at the moment.

This "strange" argument that "the wicked are happier if they suffer punishment" is simply a corollary of the point Philosophy has just made, and might look more intuitive if contextualized through a concrete example: for instance, it is a worse "punishment" in the long run to let a thief go on committing crimes (and moving farther from happiness) than it would be to arrest the thief and compel them toward better behavior that would lead to increased happiness over time.

Philosophy summarizes her argument: although they appear powerful, the wicked have "no power at all," and although they seem to have "freedom from punishment," in fact they're constantly being punished, and being "unjustly absolved from punishment" would only make them "more wretched."

Philosophy has now fully responded to Boethius's initial complaint: in Rome, the wicked who have taken over the government without suffering the proper consequences of their wickedness are, in reality, powerless and suffering more *due to their "freedom" and avoidance of punishment. Therefore, according to Philosophy, it makes sense that people gain more power and "freedom from punishment" (but not real freedom) the "more wretched" they become, because this power and impunity simply make them more and more miserable. Meanwhile, the innocent who suffer in the material world maintain their goodness—and possibly amplify it because they are forced to turn to God for salvation.*

Boethius notes that "ordinary [people]" would never believe Philosophy's argument, and she agrees, noting that they are blind to the truth, for they are so caught up in "their own desires" that they forget "the order of creation." But rewards and punishments, she emphasizes, are internal: goodness is a reward for focusing on "higher things," and wickedness a punishment for rejecting them.

While Boethius's note about "ordinary [people]" might be taken as a reminder that common opinion is a terrible guide to wisdom and truth, it could also be read as a sign that Philosophy is guiding Boethius further and further away from the obvious truth everyone already knows (that evil is real), and is using convoluted arguments to try and justify the unjustifiable situation that has befallen him.

Philosophy even argues that the perpetrators of crime are the real victims of their own acts, since they are "more wretched." The court should be "kind and sympathetic," and the perpetrators' guilt "cut […] like a malignant growth." And the guilty should correct course and dedicate themselves to "acquiring goodness" through punishment. Accordingly, wise people don't feel hatred toward the wicked. The wise should have "sympathy" and "pity" for the wicked, "who suffer an evil more severe than any physical illness."

Interestingly, this passage outlines exactly how Philosophy has been treating Boethius throughout the entire Consolation *so far. Just as evil should be seen as a disease or "malignant growth," she saw his despair as evidence of his fall from wisdom into ignorance. But what Philosophy curiously leaves out of this passage is how, exactly, evil people might choose to dedicate their lives to "acquiring goodness." Since their evil comes from ignorance or insufficient self-control, the process of punishment must correct these faults in order to make them desire goodness. And, in fact, this is precisely what her dialogue has done for Boethius.*

In her song, Philosophy asks why people act on their frivolous emotions, risking death and attacking one another for petty, meaningless reasons. Rather than indulging in "blood and savageness," people should "love the good, [and] show pity for the bad."

In this song, Philosophy shows the steadfast pacifism in her moral picture of the universe—indeed, since she believes that God is absolutely benevolent, she clearly wants people to imitate Him in helping multiply the goodness in good people and bring evil people to goodness through "pity" (rather than retaliation, which would multiply their evilness).

BOOK IV, PART V

Boethius doubts that Philosophy's depiction of good and evil fully explains "good and bad in the actual fortune of ordinary people." But he sees in Rome that bad people are often rewarded while good people are punished, and he wants to understand how "this very unjust confusion" can be part of all-powerful God's plan. Why would God satisfy the evil at the expense of the good, and how can one tell the difference between God and simple chance?

Just like many readers, Boethius continues to wonder whether Philosophy's worldview, which is based largely on a theory of God, the soul, and the cosmos, should really be used to make everyday decisions. Like many Medieval Christian thinkers, Philosophy seems to believe that people should let themselves be oppressed because it will bring them closer to God.

Philosophy replies that Boethius simply does not yet see "the great plan of the universe," but will soon do so, and she sings about the greatness of "the law observed in heaven," which explains mysteries like the workings of **the Sun**. While some natural phenomena are seen as easy to explain, other phenomena confound people, until they let "the clouds of ignorance give way."

Philosophy does not answer Boethius's question except by referring him back to the picture of God that she has offered and promising that wisdom will clarify his doubts. Again, she sees people as mostly ignorant of the truth, which lies in God and the soul.

BOOK IV, PART VI

Boethius begs Philosophy to explain the roots of evil, and she replies that his question is incredibly complex, but she will attempt to outline the answer to it before "weav[ing] together the close-knit arguments" later on.

Philosophy has already presented a theory of how and why people become and do evil. Now, Boethius is trying to answer a slightly different question: why does God let *His creations stray from His perfect benevolence?*

Philosophy begins by explaining that the development and motion of everything begins with "the unchanging mind of God," who has "a plan for the multitude of events," which is also known as "Providence" or "Fate," depending on the perspective. "Providence" refers to "the divine reason itself," God's total plan for the world, as considered from God's own perspective. In contrast, "Fate" refers to "the planned order inherent to things," which change throughout time, in line with God's total plan of Providence. Providence is like an artisan's mental blueprint of the work they seek to create, while Fate is like the whole process of making it. Namely, Providence is a "simple and unchanging plan of events," but "Fate is the ever-changing web […] of all the events which God has planned."

As becomes abundantly clear in Book V, Philosophy's complex distinction between Providence and Fate essentially hinges on time*: Providence is a snapshot of perfect order, and Fate is the way that order is actualized and fulfilled through time. Essentially, this means that God's Providence is completely and absolutely good, with nothing lacking, and therefore no evil whatsoever mixed into the universe's perfect order. However, it is possible for evil to come in and out of existence over time, and in fact it can even be part of God's way of* fulfilling *the complete order of Providence. This idea is similar to how the universe remains in order through constant change and the balance of opposites, and it explains how individual instances of evil can exist despite the universe being under God's control.*

As a result of the distinction between Providence and Fate, Philosophy continues, some things are below Providence but above the changing events of Fate. Namely, these things are "close to the supreme Godhead," and do not change much during the unfolding of Fate. Humans are incapable of seeing the order in the universe because they are caught up in the changes of Fate, but in fact everything tends "towards the good." However, evil people and things falter and stray from "the good" through "mistake and error." Yet they are still caught up in an overall "search for the good."

The universe's unchanging laws and characteristics, which are not ordinarily noticed by humans because they are simply always around and never come into or out of existence, are examples of things that are below Providence" but not quite within Fate. Clearly, one of Greek philosophy's main purposes as a discipline was to help people grasp and understand these laws, so that they could see the true nature of God and the universe and better orient their "search for the good." Now, the sciences study these laws, but they were part of philosophy in Boethius's time.

Philosophy returns to Boethius's initial question about why the good seem to get punished and the wicked rewarded. First, humans cannot fully know "who is good and who is bad." And secondly, they forget that different kinds of sickness require different kind of remedies, and by extension different kinds of wickedness need different kinds of treatment from "God, the mind's guide and physician." So what Boethius sees as the good being punished and the wicked rewarded is actually "a knowing God act[ing] and ignorant men look[ing] on with wonder at his actions." Philosophy offers a number of examples: much apparent injustice is actually God's way of "bring[ing people] to self discovery through hardship," for instance, and when the wicked prosper, this can be His way of teaching them to "abandon wickedness in the fear of losing happiness."

The discussion of Providence and Fate allows Philosophy to slightly update the argument she has already made, that everyone always gets their due because of God. Nothing is evil in Providence, but in Fate, God sometimes has to introduce evil to keep things in balance. Here, Philosophy makes something of a power move: since God is superior to humans, humans sometimes will fall short of understanding what He is trying to do. But because they are capable of knowing that *he exists and has this power, they should trust in His Providence. This is not a reason to reject reason and choose blind faith, but rather only a reminder that reason—although infallible about what it* does *cover—ultimately has its limits.*

In short, the answer to Boethius's question is this: through Providence, God has "evil men making other evil men good." When evil people are treated unjustly, they want to be better themselves. God knows how to use evil to create good—to use Fate to bring things that stray from Providence back in line with it. While people cannot understand this process completely, they can know that "God [...] orders all things and directs them towards goodness," and that Providence does not include any evil at all.

Because Fate unfolds through time and undergoes change, it will never be static or perfect, like the absolute, eternal order of Providence. So matching evil with evil and good with good is, in fact, God's way of maintaining the absolutely good order of Providence, because it gives everyone what they deserve. Therefore, having "evil men making other evil men good" is God's way of cancelling out two negatives to create a positive—he is merely eliminating the kinks or imperfections in His system.

Philosophy notes that Boethius looks tired and sings a song to console him. She sings of God's perfect order, which He conducts from "the highest point of heaven" and which can be seen through the timely motions of the stars. God creates order by combining opposite elements, like wet and dry, hot and cold, lightness and heaviness. God sets things into motion and "when they wander brings them back." All things "would fall apart" without His "love," and "repa[y]" this love by returning to Him upon their deaths.

The order that Philosophy sings about here is clearly divine Providence, and again she uses the consistent laws of the universe as proof that, although everything is constantly changing and moving around, in reality the laws that underlie *that motion are fixed and perfect. Fate is the means that "brings [things] back" to the balance of Providence after "they wander" away, and it is only in this world of Fate—the temporal world in which humans live—that evil appears.*

BOOK IV, PART VII

Philosophy tells Boethius the conclusion of all her thinking in this chapter: "all fortune is certainly good" fortune, because it "is meant either to reward or discipline the good or to punish or correct the bad." Boethius asks what it means when people talk about "bad fortune," but Philosophy clarifies that people only use this term to describe situations when the evil are punished, which is actually an opportunity for them to find and pursue the path off virtue. In reality, the virtuous constantly striving to make sure fortune does not get in the way of their virtue, and to choose to learn "discipline and correction" from what might seem to be their own bad fortune.

Essentially, in Book IV, Philosophy has made two primary arguments: first, she has shown that evil is merely an absence of good, and therefore should be considered as "nothing." And secondly, she has explained that this evil (or lack of perfect good) only appears in the world of Fate, which is how it is compatible with God's perfect goodness. Fortune *is the mechanism by which God keeps Fate in balance with Providence. But this does not contradict Philosophy's first depiction of fortune, as the goddess Fortune turning a wheel that drives people to face constantly-changing circumstances, because here Philosophy shows that this* process *of constant change in fact has a purpose, no matter the circumstance: when good people meet good fortune, it is a "reward"; when evil people meet good fortune, it is a means of "correct[ing]" them; when good people meet bad fortune, it is a form of "discipline"; and when evil people meet bad fortune, it is a form of "punish[ment]."*

Philosophy sings of the king Agamemnon, who fought the Trojan War to avenge his brother's broken marriage and sacrificed his daughter to the gods so that he could go to Troy. Then she sings of Odysseus defeating the cyclops Polyphemus, and of the great labors of Hercules, which won him "a place in heaven as his reward." She implores the "strong" to follow "the exalted way / Of great example," to move beyond "earth" to "the stars."

These "great example[s]" of Greek heroes show how bad fortune provides challenges that force the virtuous to prove their worth and their dedication to goodness. The implication for Boethius is clear: he should see his misfortune as an opportunity to prove his wisdom to God and encourage others to follow in his footsteps.

BOOK V, PART I

Boethius interrupts Philosophy to ask whether she believes that chance exists. She suggests that this question might be distracting, but Boethius insists that he wants to know. Philosophy explains that, "if chance [means] random motion without any causal nexus," it does not exist, because "God imposes order upon all things" and nothing happens without a cause. But chance *can* be explained through "Aristotle's definition" of when an action produces "something other than what was intended." She offers the example of someone digging in the dirt in order to cultivate the land and finding a trove of gold instead, which *does* have a set of causes: the fact that one person dug where another person had buried gold. Chance, Philosophy concludes, is "an unexpected event due to the conjunction of its causes with action which is done for some purpose" under God's Providence.

Although Philosophy is right that Boethius's question about chance has essentially no bearing on the course of the rest of the Consolation, *there are still a few reasons why the author might have chosen to include it at the beginning of Book V. It might be simply an attempt to show off his knowledge of Aristotle or his gradually-improving ability to engage Philosophy in a genuine philosophical dialogue, rather than merely listening to her extended arguments. Additionally, Boethius may have thought that his readers would raise this doubt, as it certainly does have some tangential relevance to the rest of Book V. Namely, if things can be shown to happen somehow randomly, in a way that does not include God as a "causal nexus," then humans can clearly have free will—but Philosophy's argument about God's nature is challenged. So by showing that chance* is, *in fact, created by God, but merely unanticipated by humans, Philosophy points to the limits of human intention and knowledge, which is an important part of her argument about the nature of human free will.*

In her song, Philosophy envisions the mighty Tigris and Euphrates rivers reuniting downstream, and describes how "ships would meet […] and mingling streams would weave haphazard paths" there. But these outcomes, while products of apparent "random chance," are also governed by various physical laws and causes.

In this song, Philosophy repeats her conclusion that chance is in the mind of beholder, and that if all things are viewed in terms of the eternal physical laws that they actually follow, then nothing will look accidental. Of course, contemporary science is founded on essentially the same belief.

BOOK V, PART II

Boethius asks Philosophy if she believes in "freedom of the will." She says she does: it is necessary "for any rational nature to exist," because reason is based on people's ability to decide "what to avoid and what to desire." Some beings, like "celestial and divine" ones, have greater freedom than "human souls," which expand in freedom when they consider God and lose it when they focus on worldly things or succomb to wickedness. This incorrect orientation turns people into "prisoners of their own freedom," but God recognizes this and metes out "rewards according to each man's merit."

Philosophy begins by explaining why it is important to prove that free will exists: if it does not, and people do not truly make their own decisions, then they are not really *rational and cannot* really *be rewarded or punished for their actions. At the same time as she insists that humans have freedom despite the existence of God, Philosophy also suggests that people become freer the more they dedicate themselves to God. In this sense, subjugating oneself to God in the pursuit of happiness does not mean relinquishing one's freedom. This recalls the notion that true freedom is the freedom of the mind and soul, rather than that of the body, because it is only through the mind that people can dedicate themselves to God.*

Philosophy sings of the poet Homer, who in turn sang of **the Sun** in the *Iliad*. The Sun illuminates much of the world, but fails to reach some places, like underground or deep into the ocean. In contrast, God sees everything, the whole world in addition to the past, present, and future all at once.

Interestingly, now Philosophy uses the metaphor of the Sun to show the limits *of truth, knowledge, and reason: there are places that light cannot reach, just as there are things that humans can never fully know, understand, or perceive. She appears to be saying that God's power is even greater than anything people can imagine, and so despite their freedom, humans should focus on respecting and honoring Him.*

BOOK V, PART III

Boethius raises another doubt: isn't there a contradiction between "God's universal foreknowledge and freedom of the will?" That is, if Providence has determined the future, how can people truly control their actions? Philosophy notes that some argue that "the necessity of events [...] cause[s] the foreknowledge" of them. But, she continues, it would be "absurd" to think that humans' limited actions in the physical world *cause* or *determine* God's eternal plan. If "God foreknow[s] that these things will happen," He must be right, which creates a serious "disruption of human affairs." If people do not choose their good and wicked actions, then rewards and punishments are meaningless, or even unjust. And this would mean that God is even responsible for human evil, and "hope and prayer" lose their meaning and power. How could people be deeply connected to God under such circumstances?

Boethius now explicitly poses the central question of Book V, which is a classic philosophical problem of the same magnitude as the problem of evil from Book IV: how can people have free will in a world that, from top to bottom, is designed and known in advance by God? The second of these traits—which Philosophy calls "God's universal foreknowledge"—is actually the focus of this discussion. (Presumably, since God has all forms of power including freedom, there is no contradiction in him giving His creations some measure of it.) In common language, the dilemma is this: how can God know with absolute certainty what everyone will do, before they decide to do it? When she cites the "disruption of human affairs," Philosophy reminds the reader—this time in more depth—why it is so important for her theory of the universe that humans truly be free.

Philosophy asks how there can be "such enmity" between God's Providence and the human will. How can the mind, she sings, yearn "to learn the secret signs of truth" unless it already knows them? And how could people learn anything if they "search / in ignorance?" The mind once knew the truth of God, she sings, seeing "sum and separate truths" at once, and in life it continues to retain that memory: "the many separate truths are lost, yet still / [the mind] holds the sum." In other words, knowledge-seekers are neither knowledgeable nor "wholly ignorant" of the truth, but rather add new information to the elements of the truth they always already know.

Philosophy's song about knowledge references the structure of her dialogue with Boethius: he has forgotten the truths of her wisdom due to his misery and preoccupation with material things, but he still "holds the sum" of truth somewhere deep in his mind, and learns to recover it over the course of their conversation. In fact, her argument—that people somehow have "the sum" of truth inscribed somewhere in their souls, but forget it through the bodies until they are able to relearn it through philosophy—comes straight from Plato's theory of knowledge in the dialogue Meno*, and is essentially a statement of philosophy's purpose for its disciples.*

BOOK V, PART IV

Philosophy tells Boethius that his doubt is "an old complaint about Providence," but accuses his argument of lacking "care and rigour" and admits that "human reasoning" will never fully grasp Providence because it cannot "approach the immediacy of divine foreknowledge." She starts by considering the stance that God's foreknowledge might not constrain human free will, or even determine events in advance. This foreknowledge would count as "a sign" of what will happen, but does not *cause* these things to happen.

Philosophy claims to only be considering one line of argument, but in fact this ends up being the *argument she makes to refute Boethius's "complaint about Providence." In short, she believes that God can know what people will eventually decide to do because he is capable of knowing in ways that transcend time because they are "immedia[te]"—they see the future as though it were the present. So God can have "sign[s]" of what people will do that people themselves do not even recognize, because He made people and knows precisely how they work.*

But could God have foreknowledge of things that do not happen out of *necessity*—things that aren't inevitable? This would resolve the apparent contradiction between God's foreknowledge and human free will. But Philosophy notes that many people would take issue with this solution because, "unless it is certain," foreknowledge is not truly *knowledge*, but rather "only clouded opinion." And yet Philosophy concludes that these people are wrong, for they think that their knowledge depends on the nature of the things they know. But in reality, knowledge depends on "the ability to know of those who do the knowing."

Again, Philosophy emphasizes how rational knowledge ordinarily works for people—no human being can know anything "unless it is certain." (Although she claims that those who hold this view are wrong in general, Philosophy does *consider this true of humans.) By redirecting the reader toward "the ability to know of those who do the knowing," Philosophy shows why God's superior capacity for knowledge matters so much: while humans are limited to knowing only things that are certain and having "clouded opinion" about things that are not, God supersedes this limitation. In other words, He can know things that* are not *certain.*

Philosophy gives an example to explain why knowledge depends on the knowing subject's methods, and not the objects that are known. For instance, one can determine that a shape is round by seeing it *or* by touching it. Similarly, one can understand human beings through four different methods: "sense-perception, imagination, reason and intelligence." *Sense-perception* looks at humans' "shape as constituted in matter," *imagination* at their "shape alone without matter," *reason* at the truths "individual instances" reveal about humanity as a whole, and *intelligence* at "the simple form" of humanity through "the pure vision of the mind."

Although it may seem dense and confusing because she is talking about how it is possible to know about *human beings, Philosophy's four-part taxonomy of knowledge is actually fairly straightforward. It is possible to know things through the* senses *(sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste), which tell people about one particular object. People can* imagine *the "shape alone" of things, "without [having] matter" physically present in front of them, and they can also logically* reason *about things, which tells them about those things' general or universal traits. "Intelligence" is the only unfamiliar aspect of knowledge, because this is what makes God superior to humans. It lets him somehow understand humankind in a "pure" way. Fortunately, Philosophy soon explains what this entails in more depth.*

Philosophy continues by arguing that each progressively "superior" way of knowing "includes [all] the inferior [ones]." Intelligence is the highest of all. So through intelligence, one can understand "universals," "shape," and "matter"—the domains of reason, imagination, and sense-perception, respectively—all through "the single glance of the mind." Similarly, reason includes the insights of imagination and sense-perception: for instance, rationally one can know that "man is a biped rational animal," which "is a concept which can be both imagined and perceived by the senses." And through the imagination one can "survey all sensible objects" and imagine how they would feel, smell, sound, etc.

Although her argument about intelligence might remain opaque, it should be remembered that intelligence is by definition *outside of humans' capacity for comprehension, and that Philosophy will eventually explain it better. Still, readers can understand the principle that each particular form of knowledge "includes [all] the inferior [ones]" by taking a straightforward example. People can* know *certain things about apples, as a universal category (they are kind of round, they are red or green, they have stems and thin skin, etc.). Using this* rational *knowledge, it is possible to* imagine *an apple, and by using this imaginary mental picture of an apple, it is possible to learn what an apple would look and feel like. So* rational *knowledge of an apple gives people the capacity to know about apples through the imagination and senses, too. Following this principle, God's intelligence will include all three of the lower forms of knowledge, which Philosophy will eventually show is the reason that He can know what humans do before they do it.*

Although her argument remains incomplete, Philosophy interrupts it with a song praising the Stoic school of philosophers, who believed that sense-perception involved an object making an impression on the human mind much like a seal makes an impression on a piece of wax, or a stamp on paper. But the body is not just "passive to receive" these "imprint[s]"—it can also analyze and combine the things learned through the senses in order to "progress" and form true beliefs. This requires "the power of the mind," which in turn "calls forth the species from within" and makes sense of the received sense-impressions by combining them with "forms it hides within."

Philosophy nods to another important group of her disciples, whose works Boethius also studied throughout his life, and adds more context to the taxonomy of kinds of knowledge that she has just laid out. Because the Stoics analyzed sense-perception as a purely "passive" form of knowledge, this means that it does not require free will or enable active decision-making, which humans have specifically because they are rational, *able to separate out and weigh propositions, ideas, and principles—in other words, universal "forms"—and then decide what to do on the basis of them.*

BOOK V, PART V

Philosophy suggests that, for humans, sense perception comes before before the mind actively "judges [sensory experiences] of its own power." But, for some kinds of knowing subjects, perception can happen without this kind of input from the body. Indeed, different beings are able to know in different ways: animals without "power of movement, like mussels and other shellfish," can only know through sense-perception, while other animals have sense-perception and imagination, and only humans have reason in addition to these. "Intelligence," in turn, "belongs only to divinity." And, again, each higher form "transcends the others"—for instance, if reason were to conflict with the imagination and sense-perception, humans would trust reason over them. Because "divine intelligence" is the highest form of knowledge, Philosophy continues, "human reason [should] bow before" it. And this "supreme intelligence," she hopes to show, can have foreknowledge of things that aren't certain to occur.

After summarizing the conclusions of the Stoics she cited in the last song, Philosophy explains how her hierarchy of ways of knowing corresponds to a hierarchy of forms of being. Humans are the second-highest, after God, and this lets Philosophy restate her earlier claim that God can know things unavailable to humans in a more clear and specific way: God has intelligence, but humans do not, so while He can know things that aren't certain to occur, humans cannot imagine this form of knowledge because they are not capable of it. Therefore, the problem of divine foreknowledge is solved. However, Philosophy has still done little to explain how God's "divine intelligence" actually works (to the extent that humans can know it), so this is the subject of the Consolation*'s final section.*

Philosophy sings about the different ways that life takes shape on earth. There are animals that slither on the ground, others that fly, and others still that walk across the earth—but all of these kinds of life "look […] downward to the ground." In contrast, only humans can look upwards rather than downwards. They should also "raise up" their minds and "thoughts."

Philosophy's ode to the diversity of being is a reminder that numerous, diverse kinds of knowledge are possible, but it also implies that humans have supremacy over the rest of the animal kingdom because of our capacity for reason. This argument, long taken for granted, is in turn a justification for humans' attempts to control and shape nature. And clearly, the "rais[ing] up" of the mind refers to humans looking to heaven, where they can encounter God, His "divine intelligence," His perfectly-ordered Providence, and the perfect wisdom and happiness he promises.

BOOK V, PART VI

Philosophy repeats that a thing "is known" based on "the nature of those who comprehend it," and then asks how something divine will comprehend and know things. First, humans know "that God is eternal," and being eternal means "the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life." A temporal being has a past, present, and future, but it cannot "embrace simultaneously the whole extent of its life"—instead, it lives through a series of "fleeting and transitory moment[s]." This means that even something immortal which exists "in time" is not "eternal" in the sense that God is, because it still exists from moment to moment—its past has already happened, and its future has yet to happen.

At last, Philosophy begins to investigate what God's intelligence actually looks like, to the limited extent that rational argument is capable of doing so. She identifies God's relationship to time *as the crucial difference that allows Him to have "eternal" and "simultaneous[]" knowledge of the past, present, and future. An easier way of thinking about this is that, because He constructed the universe and its timeline, God lives* outside of time, *and is capable of looking at any different moment in His universe, whenever He wants. Meanwhile, humans live inside this world that God looks upon from the outside, and so experience things as happening linearly in time.*

Philosophy clarifies that God is not exactly older than the world, but rather has a completely different way of relating to time, by virtue of his very nature. Changing throughout time, the world tries to join God in his "presence of unchanging life." But it can never do this, and so instead it mimics God's presence "by attaching itself to some sort of presence in this small and fleeting moment." This gives the world the appearance of being like God. In short, as Plato argued, while "God is eternal, the world is perpetual."

This passage is Philosophy's attempt to explain that what Plato called the world of "Forms" or "Ideas"—the absolute truths and qualities that give all things their meanings and qualities—is eternal and outside time, with God. It would not quite be correct to say that God lives in *this world, nor that he* is *this world, but they clearly exist on the same plane of "unchanging life." Therefore, when people receive true knowledge (which, Plato argued, is always knowledge of the Forms), they are "attaching [themselves] to some sort of [Godly] presence"—which is why philosophy and the wisdom it brings are means by which people can connect to God and take part in divinity.*

Because God has "eternal presence," God knows through "the immediacy of His presence." This means He sees everything, including the past and future, as if it's happening in the present, and His foreknowledge is really "the knowledge of a never ending presence," which Philosophy calls "providence or 'looking forth' [rather] than prevision or 'seeing beforehand.'"

Because God looks on from outside time, he can know what lies in humans' future, even though humans build their own futures through their free will. This is how his superior intelligence resolves the seeming contradiction between free will and foreknowledge. Philosophy reminds the reader that "providence" simply is *the timeless totality of the universe, as God has created it, and so it is correct to say that Providence is the cause of Foreknowledge (which is only ever knowledge of Fate, since it is knowledge of things that happen in human time).*

Boethius asks why, just because God sees something, that thing "becomes necessary." For instance, people can see things without making them necessary, so God should be able to have "divine foreknowledge [without] chang[ing] the nature and property of things." He should see *whether* things are necessary, but not everything He sees will be necessary.

Boethius is clarifying that the kind of knowledge God has about the future is like the kind of knowledge that humans have about the past. One can know that the Roman Empire fell, for instance, without it having been necessary *(or unavoidable) that the Roman Empire fell.*

Philosophy replies that something can be "necessary when considered with reference to divine foreknowledge," but not necessary at all "in itself." She explains this by distinguishing between two kinds of necessity: "simple" necessity, like the fact that people must be mortal, and "conditional" necessity, like "if you know someone is walking, it is necessary that [they are] walking"—even though walking is not part of the "nature" of a human being, but rather results from "a condition which is added" (the knower's knowledge). So the person is walking "of [their] own free will," but because they *are in fact* walking, it is *necessary that they are* walking.

Philosophy introduces the distinction between "simple" and "conditional" necessity, which comes from Aristotle, in order to show how God's knowledge is still true knowledge *of things, rather than the "clouded opinion" that is the best anyone else can achieve about events that are not completely certain to happen. Essentially, something is conditionally necessary if it is definitely true, but could have been otherwise. This conditional necessity means that it is* necessary that a thing is true, *but not that this thing* is necessarily true *(i.e., that it had to have been true no matter what). If something* did *have to be true no matter what, then it would be an example of simple necessity. To continue with the previous example, while humans can know that it was* not simply necessary *that the Roman Empire fell—because it* could *have* not *fallen—it is* conditionally *necessary that it* has fallen—*because, in fact, it* did *fall.*

So something's place in Providence, or God's plan for all things, is conditionally but not simply necessary, because although it will definitely happen, "it has no necessity in its own nature." When God foresees "future events which happen of free will," like someone choosing to walk, He actually perceives them as happening in the present. His "divine knowledge" does not *cause* these events, which means that they're still examples of freedom. So while everything that God sees "will without doubt happen," not all of these things are products of "the [simple] necessity of things [in themselves]"—some are products of human free will. These actions of free will can be taken as conditionally necessary, "with reference to divine foreknowledge," but not necessary when "considered by themselves." This is similar to how any sense-perception looks "universal if considered with reference to [human] reason, but individual if considered in itself."

Philosophy's response to Boethius's objection is now complete. First, because God's knowledge is conditionally necessary, He knows what people will do not because these people have to *do these things (which would mean they have no free will over their choices), but because He simply knows that people* will definitely choose *to do them. Secondly, He can have this knowledge because He is "eternal" and lives outside time; He sees past, present and future as one. Therefore, in conclusion, God has perfect foreknowledge* and *humans have free will. There is no contradiction between the two. Philosophy's reference to sense-perception offers an analogy for human beings. Say that someone looks at a red rose; they can think about this rose rationally, in terms of the "universal" property of redness that it possesses, or "in itself," in terms of the specific properties of that individual rose. Similarly, a human action is necessary within God's universal plan—because it is conditionally necessary—but* not *necessary on its own, from the perspective of the person taking the action, because it is freely chosen and* not *simply necessary.*

While people have the power to make choices, Philosophy continues, they cannot do so without God foreknowing it, "just as [they] cannot escape the sight of an eye that is present to watch." God knows about all the decisions people will make, purely through "His own immediacy," and not *because* of people's decisions. Therefore, people still have their freedom of will and are responsible for their decisions, which means that God doles out punishment and reward based on people's actual moral worth. People's hopes and prayers will be heard, and it is still worthwhile and noble to "avoid vice […] and cultivate virtue." In conclusion, Philosophy tells Boethius, he has immense reason to be a good person, since God is always watching and judging.

In conclusion, Philosophy tells Boethius and his readers how to think about their relationship to God: He is always "present to watch" what people do. He does not decide for *them, but He* does *reward and punish them for what they do ultimately choose. Therefore, Philosophy's arguments about the importance of being good and virtuous still carry all their weight, for it is through goodness combined with prayer and philosophical reflection that people can achieve the happiness that God promises for them, and reunite their souls with Him when they die.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

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Jennings, Rohan. "*The Consolation of Philosophy.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Dec 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

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Jennings, Rohan. "*The Consolation of Philosophy.*" LitCharts LLC, December 23, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-consolation-of-philosophy.

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Boethius. The Consolation of Philosophy. Penguin Classics. 1999.

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Boethius. The Consolation of Philosophy. New York: Penguin Classics. 1999.