

Introduction

Michael Wiitala

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most widely read and influential texts in medieval Europe. The philosophical vision Boethius presents therein can be seen in medieval philosophical works as diverse as Thomas Aquinas' treatise on happiness in the *Summa theologiae* and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, not to mention its impact on medieval literature. Boethius wrote the *Consolation* circa AD 523, while in prison in Ticinum (now Pavia) awaiting his eventual execution. Born into the wealthy and influential Anicii family, Boethius' father died when he was young. He was then adopted by, and later married into, the family of Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus, a man of considerable influence who served as consul in 485. Boethius had a highly successful political career, serving as senator, consul, and eventually in the powerful position of *magister officiorum* for the Ostrogoth King Theodoric the Great. As we learn in Book I of the *Consolation*, however, Boethius' political enemies accused him of treason and sacrilege. As a result, Theodoric had him imprisoned and eventually killed. Of course, Boethius was not only an influential political figure but also a scholar. He wrote on music, mathematics, and Christian theology, and produced commentaries on philosophical texts by Porphyry, Aristotle, and Cicero. His life goal was to translate the complete works of both Plato and Aristotle into Latin, accompanied by commentaries that would show how their respective and sometimes opposed philosophical views could be harmonized (2IN 79.9–80.6). In part inspired by Plato, Boethius wrote the *Consolation* as a philosophical dialogue. Unlike a Platonic dialogue, however, Boethius makes himself the main protagonist and has Lady Philosophy – philosophy personified – as his interlocutor. The dialogue opens with Boethius the character bemoaning his misfortune. Lady Philosophy, however, appears and begins to comfort and heal

him of his spiritual malaise. She employs a variety of remedies – poetry, rhetoric, as well as rigorous philosophical argumentation. The text of the *Consolation* as a whole alternates between sections of prose and sections of poetry, as Philosophy seeks to treat the whole of Boethius' soul – his mind, imagination, and passions. The conversation between Boethius and Philosophy covers, among other things, the events that led Boethius to his political fall, the ups and downs of fortune, the nature of true happiness, God's Providence, and human freedom.

Given its literary features and the practically relevant range of topics covered, the *Consolation* has always been a popular and respected work. The philosophical importance of the *Consolation* is recognized today, as evinced by its regular inclusion in undergraduate courses on medieval philosophy.¹ Unfortunately, however, not as much attention is paid to the *Consolation* in contemporary scholarship on medieval philosophy, although there has been a good deal of recent work on the *Consolation* by scholars of literature, medieval studies, and classics.² The content and literary form of the *Consolation* in part explains why it has received relatively little attention from recent scholars of medieval philosophy. The dialogue form, alternating prose and poetry sections, and wealth of references to classical literature and mythology contrast sharply with the sort of texts on which most contemporary scholars of medieval philosophy focus, such as the works of Thomas Aquinas, al-Ghazali, or Moses Maimonides. Add to this the direct influence of Plato and late antique Neoplatonism on Boethius, what seems to be his idiosyncratic way of reconciling them with Aristotle, and the unclear relationship between Lady Philosophy and Christianity. Scholars are faced with a relatively short philosophical text with significant interpretive challenges.

The chapters in this volume tackle these interpretive challenges and reveal some of the rich philosophical insights the *Consolation* offers when approached in a serious way. Chapters 1–3 directly address the literary features of the *Consolation* and their significance vis-à-vis its philosophical content. Chapters 4 and 5 consider the relationship between the *Consolation* and Boethius' Christianity, an issue of discussion even during the Middle Ages that has become a matter of significant controversy over

¹ The *Consolation* is included, at least in part, in recent medieval philosophy textbooks such as Foltz 2019; Hyman, Walsh, and Williams 2010; Klima, Allhoff, and Vaidya 2007; Bosley and Tweedale 2006.

² E.g., Hoenen and Nauta 1997; Foehr-Janssens and Métry 2003; Kaylor and Phillips 2007; Gleib, Kaminski, and Lebsanft 2010; Kaylor and Phillips 2012; Phillips and Kaylor 2016; Donaghey et al. 2019.

the past eighty years. Chapters 6–8 offer three different takes on the philosophy of selfhood, or philosophical anthropology, offered by the *Consolation*. Chapters 9–13 deal with the more standard metaphysical and theological issues in the *Consolation*, such as time, eternity, and God's being, goodness, and foreknowledge.

I.1 Overview of the Chapters

One of the first things that anyone who has even a little familiarity with the history of philosophy will notice about the *Consolation* is its unusual literary features, such as its prosimetric structure – that is, the alternating segments of prose and poetry – its dialogue form, and its use of personification. The first three chapters in this volume focus on these literary features of the work and draw out their philosophical significance.

Chapter 1, “Boethius' *Philosophiae consolatio*: The Intersection of Literary Form and Philosophical Content,” by John Magee, argues that the literary features of the *Consolation*, as well as its more strictly philosophical modes of expression, were carefully crafted by Boethius to serve his overall philosophical goal of leading the reader from identifying with external goods such as political freedom, good fortune, wealth, honors, worldly power, fame, and bodily pleasures to identifying with what is more fundamental and stable: Fate, Providence, and the metaphysical freedom and power of God or the Good. To this end, Magee brings into focus the philosophical weight of the *Consolation*'s more literary features and sections, as well as the literary significance of its more transparently philosophical arguments and references. Since some scholars have argued that the *Consolation* is an incomplete work with a rushed composition and confused structure due to Boethius' untimely death, Magee clears the ground by laying that view to rest. He then demonstrates the overarching ring structure of the *Consolation*, with the poem of III.m9 at the center, as exhibited by the dazzlingly complex distribution of metrical forms in the verse sections. Moreover, he explains why the dialogue fades to soliloquy at V.4 and why the philosophical content of both verse and prose sections changes as the *Consolation* progresses.

While Magee focuses especially on the prosimetric structure of the *Consolation*, Siobhan Nash-Marshall, in Chapter 2, “The Ascent from Π to θ , or On Philosophy's Teaching a Blind Man to See,” explores what the dialogue form tells us about the nature of the philosophy enacted in and by the *Consolation*. She notes the parallels between Boethius' and Plato's use of dialogue, focusing especially on the similarities and points of contrast

between Plato's *Phaedo* and the *Consolation*. Nash-Marshall argues that Boethius writes the *Consolation* as a concrete dialogue between himself and Lady Philosophy in order to point to the difference between really *being* a philosopher and merely mastering the technical aspects of philosophy. Boethius as author presents Boethius the character as someone who had mastered the technical aspects of philosophy – with its axioms and abstract problems – but who is unable to see its value or practical benefit as he sings his lamentations at the beginning of Book I. Despite his technical prowess, Boethius the character is incapacitated when circumstances force him to confront the problem of evil in his own life. Nash-Marshall argues that the *Consolation* portrays the transformation of a philosophical technician imprisoned by the painful experience of injustice into a genuine philosopher who sees and experiences Providence at work not only in creation but in his own life as well. To truly philosophize is not simply to engage in sound reasoning. Instead, it is to practice that reasoning in response to the concrete situations in which one finds oneself in a way that enables one to come to see concretely what reality and goodness are, and thereby to ascend the ladder from Π to θ – from practice to theory – that is pictured on Philosophy's dress.

Wendy Elgersma Helleman, in Chapter 3, "Lady Philosophy as a Feminine Personification of Wisdom," probes the significance of Boethius' personification of philosophy as a character in the dialogue of the *Consolation*. Helleman addresses the often-conflicting interpretations that contemporary scholars give of Lady Philosophy by highlighting two of her most basic features as a character in the dialogue, namely, (1) that she is an allegorical personification and (2) that she is a feminine character. Helleman argues that understanding Lady Philosophy as an allegorical personification is critical for appreciating her positive portrayal in the *Consolation*. Allegorical interpretation in Late Antiquity provided an ongoing role for Greek and Roman deities that were no longer worshiped but still played an important role given their place in Greco-Roman literature, culture, and education. Since Philosophy is an allegorical personification, we can conclude she is not cast as a pagan goddess. Instead, she has an ambiguous status, as described when she first appears in Book I – sometimes keeping "herself within common mortal limits" and at other times seeming "to strike at the heavens with the crown of the top of her head" (I.1.1–2).³ Furthermore, Helleman shows how reading Philosophy as an allegorical personification allows us to make sense of the seeming

³ Relihan's (2001) translation.

Introduction

5

tensions in her various roles: nurse, physician, poet, rhetorician, teacher, and expert in Socratic dialectic. Understanding the way Philosophy embodies those various roles, however, also requires a careful consideration of her feminine presence. Helleman establishes that Philosophy's feminine gender is tied up with her role as a consoler, who combines logic and compassion to meet Boethius the character in his troubled state at the beginning of the poem, and then nurses him, treats his wounds, teaches him, and eventually fully cures him through rigorous and intellectually demanding philosophical inquiry.

With the first three chapters' reflections on the most prominent literary features of the *Consolation* in place, Chapters 4 and 5 highlight the *Consolation's* religious features, focusing on the relationship between pagan philosophy and Christianity in the *Consolation*. The question of the *Consolation's* Christianity was raised during the Middle Ages and over the past eighty years has become central to debates on interpreting the work as a whole, with some scholars going so far as to argue that Boethius the author is, as a Christian, satirizing the pagan Lady Philosophy (e.g., Relihan 1993, 187–94; 2007; cf. Marenbon 2003a, 159–63). Chapter 4, “Boethius' Christianity in the *Consolatio*: A History of the Debate,” by Claudio Moreschini, recounts the course of scholarly discussion concerning the apparent lack of specifically Christian doctrines in the *Consolation* and Lady Philosophy's seeming endorsement of doctrines from pagan Platonist philosophy, such as the World Soul and the existence of human souls prior to embodiment (see C III.m9). Moreschini begins by discussing the handful of arguably Christian references in the *Consolation*, such as Lady Philosophy's apparent paraphrase of Wisdom 8:1 in *Consolation* III.12.22. He then recounts the history of debate about Boethius' Christianity. After discussing some tenth-century commentaries that worry about Lady Philosophy's presentation of pagan ideas, Moreschini turns to early modern and contemporary scholarship, focusing especially on the various positions staked out by scholars from the mid-twentieth century to the present. He concludes by arguing that much of the debate, especially in the twentieth century, rested on the anachronistic assumption that there is a sharp dichotomy between Greco-Roman philosophy and Christianity. Once we realize that in Boethius' late antique Roman world no such dichotomy existed, the arguments of scholars who want to interpret Lady Philosophy's views as somehow in opposition to Christianity become untenable.

In Chapter 5, “The Blending of Pagan and Christian Elements in Book III of the *Consolatio*,” Renato de Filippis argues that Boethius skillfully and

deliberately weaves together ideas from pagan philosophy and Christianity in the *Consolation* so as to better enable his readers to catch sight of the one truth revealed in different ways by each. As Boethius tells us in his second commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation* (80.1–6), he thought that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle were, if properly interpreted, complementary expressions of one truth. De Filippis proposes that Boethius took a similar view regarding pagan Platonist philosophy and Christianity: although on the surface there might be some disagreement, both can be harmonized in such a way as to offer complementary expressions of the one truth. De Filippis begins by considering the roles Boethius' sources come to play in this project of harmonization. He then turns to Lady Philosophy's talk of "becoming gods" in III.10.23–5 and to the careful way that Boethius words the important poem in III.m9 such that its claims inspired by pagan philosophy, especially the *Timaeus*, can be seen in their harmony with Christian theology. De Filippis' considerations of both the pagan and Christian references in Book III support the conclusion that the *Consolation* enacts a harmonization of pagan Platonist philosophy and Christianity without distorting either.

Chapters 6–8 deal with what is arguably the central philosophical issue of the *Consolation*: the nature of the human person or of the self that each of us is, a theme that, beginning with Lady Philosophy's diagnosis of "the greatest cause" of Boethius' spiritual sickness in I.6.17, runs through the whole of the *Consolation*. Chapter 6, "The Human Person in the *Consolation of Philosophy*," by Mark K. Spencer, takes Lady Philosophy's various claims about what it means to be human and synthesizes them into a unified theory. Spencer begins with an overview of the *Consolation*'s account of human nature, offering a taxonomy of human powers. He then draws out the implicit account of personhood in the *Consolation*, with reference to Boethius' more explicit discussions of the nature of personhood in the *Theological Tractates* and commentaries. Next Spencer tackles the way in which the *Consolation* portrays humans as either something more than or less than human. Spencer shows how Boethius can consistently hold that although humans have their own nature, they can nevertheless become gods by participation or life forms less than human by falling short of their rational nature through vice. This leads Spencer to reflect on how, for Boethius, to be human is to be a microcosm of the cosmos – the sort of being that through its rational life unites within itself divine intelligence, animal life, and nonliving material things. Finally, Spencer sums up all these themes by focusing on how the *Consolation* presents the human person in terms of beauty (*pulchrum*, *splendor*, *claritas*, etc.).

Introduction

7

Chapter 7, “Self-Investigation, Self-Knowledge, and Inner Conflict in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*,” by Antonio Donato, argues that Boethius follows the Neoplatonists in presenting the human being as having a dual self. On the one hand, we have a “material self.” This includes the body and one’s “biographical identity” that suffers the ups and downs of fortune. On the other hand, however, we have a “divine self,” which is unaffected by events in the material world because it is the unchanging knowledge of the “intelligible realm,” which is to say, the unchanging knowledge of the nature of what is. Although the *Consolation* at first appears strangely constructed in terms of both its literary style and the labyrinthine way its argument proceeds, Donato demonstrates how these features of the *Consolation* make sense if read as a form of self-examination grounded in Neoplatonic philosophy. The meandering way in which the text expresses its message and the various literary forms employed illustrate Boethius’ inner conflict brought about by his sudden political fall. The root cause of his conflict is an unresolved tension within the Neoplatonic account of the human soul: the difficulty of reconciling our material self with our divine self. The text is written as a dialogue where Lady Philosophy represents the divine self and Boethius represents the material self. Donato shows how in contrast to earlier Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Proclus, who, although identifying with the divine self, left behind a material self still in possession of honors and respect, the dramatic nature of Boethius’ fall enabled him to bring into sharper relief the existential challenge posed by the reconciliation of the material self and divine self.

Donato’s focus on the Neoplatonic “dual self” of human beings is taken up and applied to Lady Philosophy’s account of Providence, Fate, punishment, and reward by Paul DiRado in Chapter 8, “What It Means to Be a God: Providence and Punishment in the *Consolation of Philosophy*.” DiRado considers the way that Providence and Fate are two different stances human beings can take toward themselves and the world. From the perspective of Fate, I am a rational mortal animal that is causally connected with all other spatiotemporal beings and that persists through time, with my wants, needs, memories, and hopes. From the perspective of Providence, in contrast, what I am is the manifestation of God’s Unity, Goodness, and Divinity in the unique set of circumstances in which the rational animal that I am finds itself. DiRado argues that my self as interpreted from the stance of Fate sees happiness in terms of preference satisfaction, while my self as interpreted from the stance of Providence sees happiness in terms of participation in Happiness itself and the Goodness,

Unity, and Divinity that are one in substance with it. Being a rational animal is more than being an individual living thing that can reason about its life. Being a rational animal is also, and more importantly, an opportunity to manifest divine goodness in the world. DiRado shows that seeing the human potential for divinity – for manifesting and participating in God's Goodness – allows us to make sense of two perplexing arguments in Book IV: that those who are justly punished are happier than those who escape punishment and that it is possible to escape from Fate by attaching ourselves to Providence.

Chapters 9–13 turn from considerations of selfhood to the more standard metaphysical and theological themes of the *Consolation*. In Chapter 9, “A Consolation through Philosophical Insight? Boethius' Practical Philosophy,” Thomas Jürgasch considers the metaphysical underpinnings of Boethius' practical philosophy in light of his main philosophical predecessors: Plato, Aristotle, the Neoplatonists, and Augustine. Jürgasch focuses on how these various thinkers characterized the relationship between the first principle of practical philosophy – εὐδαιμονία, *beatitudo*, happiness – and the metaphysical first principle of all things. For Plato, Jürgasch argues, the Ideas are metaphysical principles of things and the Idea of the Good is the first principle. Yet importantly, the Ideas are not just metaphysical principles, but principles for action and living as well. Jürgasch claims, however, that Aristotle's critique of the Idea of the Good had the effect of separating the first principle of practical philosophy – human happiness – from the metaphysical first principle, which for Aristotle is God understood as thought thinking itself (ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις). Although this metaphysical first principle was still, for Aristotle, connected with happiness by the fact that happiness consists in noetic contemplation – the divine activity in which God is always engaged – human happiness also requires external goods and is affected by circumstances. Plotinus critiques Aristotle's metaphysical first principle and argues that self-thinking thought is secondary while the unnamable and unknowable One is first. Augustine adapts the basic Plotinian or Neoplatonic view of the first principle, but by Christianizing it and making it Trinitarian, reasserts something of its knowability: It is knowable insofar as it reveals itself to us through Jesus Christ. This self-revelation is also practical, in that it shows us how concretely to live: in imitation of Christ. Jürgasch argues that Boethius inherits the Augustinian view, but, unlike Augustine, articulates in the *Consolation* the possibility of a purely philosophical or rational insight into the first principle as both a

Introduction

9

metaphysical and practical principle: as both Divinity itself and Happiness itself, a happiness completely secure and unaffected by external goods.

My own contribution, Chapter 10, "Being and Existence in the *Consolation of Philosophy*," examines the notion of being found in the *Consolation* and argues that it should be sharply distinguished from typical modern notions of existence. I show that the notion of being or *esse* in the *Consolation* differs from typical modern notions of existence in two significant ways. First, unlike typical modern notions of existence, according to which there are things that do not exist – for instance, centaurs – the notion of being in the *Consolation* has no contrary. Although certain categorial determinations of being have contraries – for example, *being* large and *being* small are contrary to one another – according to Boethian metaphysics there is nothing that completely *is not*. Second, the notion of being in the *Consolation*, as in Aristotle, is "said in many ways." In this it differs from standard modern notions of existence, which tend to be univocal. I argue that the notion of being in the *Consolation* should be understood as intelligibility: something *is* insofar as it is the sort of thing that can in principle be understood. Moreover, I show that Boethius' notion of *existere* does not correspond to typical modern notions of existence. Instead, the notion of *existere* in the *Consolation* should be understood as "to be manifest." I conclude that understanding the notions of *esse* and *existere* in these ways enables us to see how the metaphysical assumptions that underlie Lady Philosophy's arguments in the *Consolation* are philosophically rigorous and highly plausible.

Chapter 11, "Circle and Sphere Metaphors for God's Nature and Providence in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and Dionysius' *On Divine Names*," by Vladimir Cvetković, explores the Neoplatonic metaphysics behind the account of God's nature and relationship to the world in *Consolation* III–IV. In order to do this, he compares the way circle and sphere metaphors are used by Boethius to represent God and his relation to creatures with the way they are used by Boethius' Greek contemporary, (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite, the anonymous fifth- or sixth-century author of the *Corpus dionysiacum* who seems to have been a Syrian monk who studied Neoplatonic philosophy with Proclus. Although Boethius and Dionysius are rarely compared, Cvetković shows that the similarities between the two are highly instructive. While it does not seem that Boethius and Dionysius influenced one another, both are Christian Neoplatonic philosophers, heavily influenced by Proclus, writing around the same time, who see no incompatibility at all between Christianity and

Neoplatonism. Cvetković shows how Dionysius' reflections on God's essence (οὐσία) and activities (ἐνεργεῖαι) shed light on Boethius' account of God's substance (*substantia* = οὐσία) and what we would today call God's "attributes" – Goodness, Unity, Happiness, Being, and so on. Moreover, he demonstrates how Dionysius' account of the circular, linear, and spiral motions of the soul in *Divine Names* enables us to understand the metaphor of concentric spheres in *Consolation* IV.6.15–17 and what that metaphor tells us about how the soul can escape Fate and become united to Divine Providence.

Chapter 12, "Time and Eternity in the *Consolation of Philosophy*," by Jonathan Evans, examines Boethius' theory of time and eternity. Evans begins with an idea accepted by most philosophers of time: time is dimensional in the sense of being extended. Yet in what way does Boethius think time is extended? Evans works through the main passages where time and eternity are discussed in the *Consolation* and considers how the account offered there relates to various theories of time found in contemporary metaphysics. He starts by bringing J. M. E. McTaggart's influential distinction between A-series (past, present, future) and B-series (earlier, simultaneous, later) ways of speaking about and conceptualizing time to bear on Boethius' claims. Then he considers how Boethius' account pertains to four-dimensionalism, presentism, eternalism, and the growing-block theory of time. Evans argues that the growing-block theory, according to which the past and present exist but the future does not yet exist, is what we find in the *Consolation*. A challenge to this interpretation of the *Consolation's* theory of time is that Boethius affirms that God knows the future infallibly. Yet how can God know the future if the future does not yet exist? Evans addresses this concern by pointing to the Boethian claim that divine knowledge depends not on the thing known but on the power of the knower (V.4.25, V.6.1). The existence of the future is not what makes God's knowledge of the future possible. Instead, God knows time by knowing his own nature, and his Providence is what makes all of time the way it is.

Chapter 13, "Boethius on Human Freedom and Divine Foreknowledge," by Katherin Rogers, closes the volume with an exegesis of Boethius' theory of God's knowledge and its compatibility with human freedom. Rogers argues that the theory of free will Boethius defends is a version of theistic compatibilism, according to which God causes everything, including human free choices. Rogers locates Boethius' concern about the compatibility of God's causal power and human freedom within the overall project of the *Consolation* and the question of why God lets bad