

**Wiitala, Michael (Ed.),
*Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy:
A Critical Guide*¹**

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Besides the death anniversary of Thomas Aquinas, the year 2024 also marked the passing of two other major Catholic thinkers, namely, Bonaventure (d. 1274) and Boethius (d. 524). This review of a recently published book on Boethius' masterpiece, *Consolation of Philosophy* (along with Joshua Cedric Gundayao's review of a book on Bonaventure in this issue of *Kritike*) is a modest, though belated, memorial to the legacy of these pillars of Catholic thought.

Apart from Augustine, Isidore of Seville and John Scotus of Eriugena, Boethius counts as one among the influential figures who helped shape the medieval Catholic intellectual culture. His works on logic as well as his theological treatises served as source books for scholars long before the introduction of Aristotle to the then emergent European universities. Today, Boethius is known among students and enthusiasts of medieval philosophy for his swan song, *Consolation of Philosophy*. Despite its sustained popularity, however, from the early middle ages down to our time, experts and lay readers alike remain divided as to the real worth and character of this Boethian opus. Many are torn as to whether it is a philosophic text advancing a subtle critique of Christian faith or a Christian literature exposing the pretensions of philosophy. Another disputed topic is whether it is an homage to Neoplatonic thought or a lamentation over its futility in the face of severe adversity. In other words, like all other philosophic greats, the *Consolation of Philosophy* inspires more questions than the answers it offers. This new guide from the Cambridge University Press, edited by Michael Wiitala, intends to shed light on the abovementioned issues and other related interpretive concerns.

¹ Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024, 254pp.

The book is divided into 13 chapters. Chapters 1–3 take up the relation between the *Consolation's* literary elements and its philosophic content. Chapters 4 and 5 weigh in on the question of Boethius' attitude towards Christianity. Chapters 6–8 focus on Boethius' philosophical anthropology and views on selfhood. Chapters 9–13 are devoted to metaphysical and theological themes of eternity, providence, human free will and divine foreknowledge.

The book's initial three chapters attempted to highlight the *Consolation's* merit both as a literary and a philosophic text. In the first essay, John Magee² examined an interesting theory (put forward by Hermann Tränkle in 1977) purporting that the *Consolation* was an unfinished work, which means it had some parts left unwritten by Boethius on account of his untimely death. Tränkle apparently based his reading on the exhortation of Lady Philosophy (Book V, 6.47–8) which he interpreted as a prompt for a potential response from Boethius. In his view, such response, had it materialized, would have given Book V its fitting end similar to the final parts of the three main books of the *Consolation*, Books II–IV, which were all concluded in verse. Tränkle went as far as saying that the *Consolation* was supposed to have been capped by an imagined "Book VI." He saw this suggested by the questions about the soul's immortality and the punishment in the afterlife raised in Book IV, 4.23. The absence of satisfactory answers to these questions led him to conjure the possibility of a "Book VI" which would have laid out their resolution. Magee disputed Tränkle's reading by citing the study made by Joachim Gruber. Gruber's exposition of the *Consolation's* metric distribution as well as its balanced and holistic philosophic architecture refuted Tränkle's erroneous suppositions. Boethius' neat assimilation of the teachings of both Plato and Aristotle, delivered through the counsels of Lady Philosophy, was another factor against Tränkle. His systematic appropriation of the two Greek philosophers was yet another demonstration of the *Consolation's* organic symmetry.

As a literary piece, the *Consolation* took much from Plato's *Phaedo*. Both texts featured (1) heroic philosophers (2) at the final hours of their lives (3) after they were accused and incarcerated (4) on the basis of trumped up charges; (5) both of them likewise viewed their impending death as some sort of philosophic experience. Siobhan Nash-Marshall noted how both Plato and Boethius perceived philosophy (and by extension, immortality) as a passage from Π to θ , that is, from the world of materiality (symbolized by the Greek alphabet Π) to the loftier realm of the metaphysical and divine reality

² John Magee, "Chapter 1, Boethius' *Philosophiae consolatio*: The Intersection of Literary Form and Philosophical Content," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Michael Wiitala (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 12–31.

(represented by the Greek alphabet θ).³ While there were stark differences between the structural features of *Phaedo* and the *Consolation*, as well as between Socrates (the main character of *Phaedo*) and the character Boethius in the *Consolation*, the reader, nonetheless, would readily see the agreement between the two texts on seeing the challenges posed by the world of Π not as hindrances to but as requisites of the attainment of happiness which only θ could bestow. Thanks to these challenges, which are analogous to mental paradoxes and abstract problems, one is able to develop and perfect the habits required by the ascent to philosophic contemplation. As it appears, scaling the philosophical ladder to θ is not just a matter of going beyond but going through the world of Π .

In the third essay, Wendy Elgersma Helleman⁴ explored Boethius' distinct use of *allegorical personification* both as a literary and pedagogical tool to highlight the key attributes of philosophy embodied by the figure of Lady Philosophy. Rather than adopting the more common *allegorical interpretation* popularized by the Stoics, Boethius chose to assign a distinct allegorical feminine persona to philosophy following its antecedents in his Greek and Roman predecessors like Homer, Plato, Cicero, Augustine and Martianus Capella. What made Lady Philosophy's persona peculiar however was her being neither human nor divine. Boethius the author made it clear, from the moment she was introduced at the opening book of the *Consolation*, that she was not an object of worship, like Athena or Minerva, nor some muse who could sway the mind and imagination of an author like Boethius. Had she possessed such power, she would not have had difficult time winning Boethius to her side. When she came in, she was described as wearing torn garments, advanced in age, and with a look that was less than comely. Boethius considered her as his nurse, physician and teacher (akin to Lady Continence in the Book VIII of Augustine's *Confessions*). Some Boethian commentators like Donato considered it problematic that *philosophia* was subordinated to *sapientia* which, according to him, was restricted to Christian theology. This view was contested by Helleman since the text of the *Consolation* did not warrant such reading. She was convinced that in Boethius' mind and the text of the *Consolation* itself, *sapientia* coincided with *philosophia* (represented by Lady Philosophy herself) following the tradition inherited by Boethius from the likes of Cicero and Augustine. Helleman's tangential reference to philosophy's relation with Christianity provided a

³ Siobhan Nash-Marshall, "The Ascent from Π to θ , or On Philosophy's Teaching a Blind Man to See," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 32–45.

⁴ Wendy Elgersma Helleman, "Lady Philosophy as a Feminine Personification of Wisdom," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 46–67.

good transition to the next pair of chapters which dealt with the authenticity of the religious and philosophic character of Boethius and his *Consolation*.

The question of whether or not the *Consolation* is a Christian text and its author, a Christian writer, has attracted the interest of many a scholar since the early medieval period until today. What Claudio Moreschini⁵ did in his paper was to revisit this debate, in particular, the views of those commentators who strongly doubted the Christian stature of either Boethius and his classic opus. Among the medieval commentators, Moreschini cited the works of Bovo of Corvey, Einsiedlensis, and Adalboldus of Utrecht (published in the 1954 edition of Huygens' critical commentary). While these medieval authors did not question Boethius' Christian faith, they nonetheless detected in the *Consolation* certain strands of philosophic views which ran counter to the traditional Christian teachings. The skeptical attitude towards Boethius' Christianity extended up to the modern period, particularly in such commentators like Charles Jourdain (1860) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1860) who considered unChristian not just the *Consolation* but also Boethius' theological treatises. Their contention was opposed to that of François Armand Gervaise (1715) who saw in the *Consolation* certain parallelism between Lady Philosophy and Christ. The general suspicion regarding Boethius' relation with Christianity, including the religious authenticity of the *Consolation*, prevailed until today despite the more moderate and conciliatory testimonies of such scholars like Anna Crabbe ("Literary Design in the *De consolatio philosophiae*," 1981) and Henry Chadwick (*Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy*, 1981). It is important to note that while Chadwick acknowledged the fusion of Christianity and Neoplatonism in the *Consolation*, the text was for him more Neoplatonic than Christian. For their part, critics such as Alain Galonnier and Danuta Shanzer continued to uphold a secular, even anti-Christian reading of Boethius and the *Consolation*. Their brand of hermeneutic originated from Pierre Courcelle who introduced it in the 1960s. An alternative reading could be found in John Marenbon who thought of the *Consolation* as a reproduction of a Menippean satire that was devised to downplay the consoling function of philosophy and play up Christianity's superior efficacy. Moreschini took exception to the secular and anti-Christian readings of the *Consolation* on account of their fundamental oversight. Such secular and anti-Christian interpretations would only hold water if Boethius' philosophic thought could be isolated from his Christian faith. Moreschini pointed out, however, that the divide between philosophy and Christianity attributed to Boethius was simply non-existent; it was probably true for other thinkers but not for Boethius and not for the Greco-

⁵ Claudio Moreschini, "Boethius' Christianity in the *Consolatio*: A History of the Debate," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 68–81.

Roman culture of his time. Scholars such as Fabio Troncarelli and Claudio Micaelli emphasized the same assertion. For Moreschini, any argument about the Christianity of Boethius and the *Consolation* rises and falls on the basis of this normative historical and cultural givens.

Moreschini's conclusion was further bolstered by the insights of Renato de Filippis.⁶ In his study, de Filippis maintained that the *Consolation* was a fine work showcasing Boethius' successful reconciliation of Christianity with Neoplatonism. The harmony between pagan elements and Christian religion was best demonstrated in Book III where Lady Philosophy and the character Boethius turned to the theme of happiness. It thus served as a focal point around which Boethius organized his ideas drawn from various pagan sources such as Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Neoplatonism including the Latin Neoplatonist, Macrobius. He also tapped other Christian authors, especially those who had ably demonstrated in their works the convergence between Christianity and pagan philosophy like Augustine, Apuleius, Calcidius and the Greek Fathers. The Bible itself was cited, albeit only once, in the paraphrase of Wisdom 8:1 towards the end of Book III. de Filippis argued that the singular reference, contrary to the opinions of other critics, did not diminish the Christian merit of the *Consolation*. What mattered, in his view, was the way Boethius used it as a capstone of his argument for the divine governance of the entire creation. Christianity's affinity with pagan philosophy complemented too Boethius' firm belief in the theoretical harmony between Plato and Aristotle. His demonstration of such enabled him to achieve what Marenbon described as Boethius' "unparadigmatic originality."

From the discussion of the *Consolation's* religious character, the succeeding three chapters took up the question of Boethius' notions of philosophical anthropology and selfhood. This was bannered by Mark K. Spencer's essay which reconstructed the general contours of Boethian anthropology based on the *Consolation's* text.⁷ Boethius' anthropological views could be read in the *Consolation* but his more foundational ideas about the human person were actually located in his Trinitarian and Aristotelian treatises. What was significant in Spencer's account was the way he framed his exposition of Boethian anthropology within the context of the problem presented by the *Consolation*, that is, Boethius' forgetfulness of his true nature and his eventual recovery of the same via his union with the source of his being: God. One could readily notice in such intimation the Platonic and

⁶ Renato de Filippis, "The Blending of Pagan and Christian Elements in Book III of the *Consolation*," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 82–97.

⁷ Mark K. Spencer, "The Human Person in the *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 98–115.

Neoplatonic texture of Boethius' itinerary. While he was willing to admit the unity between body and soul, Boethius nonetheless maintained that the human person was primarily a soul and thus, its perfection lies in deification via participation.

Spencer's emphasis on Boethius' espousal of deification via participation is important in understanding the latter's abiding intellectual affinity with Neoplatonic philosophy which he maintained without abandoning his creedal commitment to Christianity. Antonio Donato also made the same argument in his presentation of Boethius' notion of the self.⁸ In Donato's account, Boethius reckoned the self mainly in Neoplatonic terms. For the Neoplatonists, the self is not just an individual, that is, an "I," but a "we." This means that the self is actually a composite of two natures, the higher (the divine) nature and the lower (the material) nature. Between the two, the material nature is more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life and hence, more prone to weakness. Boethius' own bitter fate illustrates the outcome of a material life gone wrong; this kind of tragedy, however, may be overcome via patient self-examination. The act of self-examination opens the path towards the recovery of the divine self. Such philosophic practice harks back to Plato's injunction to "know yourself." The *Consolation* as a text is a performance of Boethius' self-examination. It adopts the Platonic form of dialogue and preserves the character of *consolation* as a philosophic genre. What makes Boethius' *Consolation* unique though is its showcase of self-consolation instead of consolation traditionally offered by another person to someone else. Donato suggested Boethius might have resorted to such literary strategy in order to foreground the personal and mainly interior dynamics of overcoming inner conflicts en route to one's ultimate fulfillment, that is, deification.

The meaning of deification or becoming God was addressed by Paul DiRado in the succeeding essay.⁹ Boethius' problem of forgetfulness as to who he really was or what was his true identity was ultimately resolved when Boethius recalled, through the heuristic intervention of the visiting mistress, that he had a divine nature. In saying so, Lady Philosophy did not mean that Boethius was God himself but that he was a participant in God's own divinity. It took some effort before Boethius accepted the positive impact of this reminder given the inconsolable circumstances he was in. There was really nothing remotely Godlike when one is unjustly punished on account of false accusations. Lady Philosophy had to painstakingly instruct him how

⁸ Antonio Donato, "Self-Investigation, Self-Knowledge, and Inner Conflict in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 116–134.

⁹ Paul DiRado, "What It Means to Be a God: Providence and Punishment in the *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 135–152.

punishment could also lead to happiness and good. The average opinion would not associate punishment with happiness and good; only when one repositions his view, from the plane that is merely human to the level of the divine, that he could appreciate how trials, like Boethius' own, could also be a passage to happiness and good, and ultimately, to God. Happiness, good and unity are primary traits of God which, in DiRado's rehearsal of Lady Philosophy's arguments, could be attained via the therapeutic consolation of philosophy.

That such consolation is attributed to philosophy must be taken with a grain of salt. Thomas Jürgasch¹⁰ explained that while philosophy had a key role in the search for and attainment of the consolation sought by Boethius, it was not itself the source of such consolation. In other words, philosophy was mainly an instrumental resource and not primarily an originary cause. Such cause was none other than God who was described by Boethius as the *summum bonum* or supreme good. The attribute of God as the *summum bonum* had a very rich pedigree dating back to Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and Augustine. The conventional reading often pairs Boethius' philosophic leaning in the *Consolation* with Plato, Plotinus and Augustine. For Jürgasch, however, Boethius' recognition of the instrumental role of philosophy vis-à-vis union with the *summum bonum* puts him in a position closer to Aristotle than any of the three aforementioned thinkers. Boethius followed the lead of Aristotle in asserting that the *summum bonum* as the ultimate principle was not necessarily beyond the reach of human reason. It was in fact through Boethius' own reunion with philosophy that he found the path towards God after momentarily forgetting his innate bond with the divine.

The theological treatment of good, taken as *summum bonum* in Jürgasch's essay, was matched by a philosophical discussion of good in Michael Wiitala's contribution.¹¹ Wiitala's point of departure was Lady Philosophy's demonstration in Book III of the existence of a complete good. The choice of this argument in this particular segment of the *Consolation* is crucial to Wiitala's aim of proving that the meaning of the Latin verbs *esse* / *existere* were not similar to the modern notions of existence which often take it in a binary and univocal sense, that is, as a matter mainly of existing or non-existing. Construing Lady Philosophy's argument for the existence of a complete good in the modern sense would do damage to the cogency of her point. In other words, to ask whether the existence of a complete good is possible when it is in fact already existing makes for a muddled presentation

¹⁰ Thomas Jürgasch, "Consolation through Philosophical Insight?: Boethius' Practical Philosophy," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 153–168.

¹¹ Michael Wiitala, "Being and Existence in the *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 169–185.

of an important claim. To remedy this quandary, Wiitala proposed a retrieval of the meaning of *esse* / *existere* from within the context of Boethian literature, specifically, the *Consolation* and the theological treatises where Boethius took *esse* to mean "to be intelligible" and *existere*, "to be manifest." With that in mind, Lady Philosophy's attempt to convince Boethius of the existence of the complete good would appear more coherent.

Keeping up with the metaphysical and theological themes of the last five essays, Vladimir Cvetković undertook in his paper an imposing comparative presentation of the thoughts of Boethius (specifically in his *Consolation*) and Pseudo-Dionysius.¹² Though the two were near contemporaries, rarely anyone would find studies highlighting their intersection or any evidence indicating that they, in any way, influenced one another. Due to their common allegiance to Christianity and Neoplatonism, however, the affinity between their philosophic and theological grammar, not to mention, their central ideas, is hard to overlook. For one, both of them agreed on the threefold manner of describing God, that is, God as substance; God as his own activity; and God as participated by human creatures. This connaturality was also displayed in their use of linear, circular and spiral metaphors to describe either God or God's relation with his creation. Borrowing the Neoplatonic language popularized by Proclus, they used linear motion to refer to procession, circular motion to remaining, and spiral motion to reversion. Unlike Boethius though, who was devoted to understanding God and his relation to the universe, Pseudo-Dionysius focused his use of spherical metaphors in his contemplation of the nature of God himself. Needless to say, the recognition of the interface between the two is crucial in appreciating the Neoplatonic roots of Christian philosophic and theological traditions.

The last two essays of the book should be read in conjunction with one another. Jonathan Evans' piece dealt with the problem of time as Boethius presented it in the *Consolation*.¹³ He recognized Boethius' contribution to the philosophic discussion of time though he also admitted that the latter's insights on such theme were far from comparable with what could be gathered from either Aristotle or Augustine. Boethius, after all, confronted the question of time neither as a topic of cosmology nor physics but as a corollary of his main interests: human free will and divine foreknowledge. Given the tension between the human temporal domain where everything is subject to change and the realm of divine eternity

¹² Vladimir Cvetković, "Circle and Sphere Metaphors for God's Nature and Providence in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and Dionysius' *On Divine Names*," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 186–201.

¹³ Jonathan Evans, "Time and Eternity in the *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 202–219.

characterized by changelessness, Boethius could not help but wrestle with the puzzle inherent in time; he wanted a better way of explaining how the transitory nature of human affairs could fit in the fixed and eternal laws ordained by God himself. Since Evans limited his discussion mainly to the technical aspect of time based on the textual parameters of the *Consolation*, readers would find the Boethian solution to this problem not in his paper but in the final essay of Katherin Rogers.¹⁴ In her study, Rogers argued for Boethius' version of *theist compatibilism* (which basically means human freedom is not undermined by the human person's causal relation with God) and how this was, all along, the leit motif of the *Consolation*. The theory itself was not named as such by Boethius but it represented the fundamental stance he subscribed to all throughout. Against the contrary reading of Marenbon who suggested that Lady Philosophy's defense of the sovereignty of divine will in Book V weakened Boethius' defense of human freedom, Rogers contended that such defense served as a fitting climax to an argument which Boethius was consciously building up since the early stages of his dialogue with Lady Philosophy.

This critical guide does live up to its title. Besides insightful commentaries and incisive critique, another edge that marks this book is the individual authors' top-notch scholarship and lucid discussion. Anyone aspiring either to be introduced to or be reacquainted with Boethius or his *Consolation* will definitely find this text an indispensable help.

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Reference

Wiitala, Michael (ed.), *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

¹⁴ Katherin Rogers, "Boethius on Human Freedom and Divine Foreknowledge," in *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy: A Critical Guide*, 220–234.