

## **Boethius's Misguided Theodicy:** *The Consolation of Philosophy*

Anicius Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 524) is a bold attempt to reconcile the gravity of the author's imprisonment and impending death with a world governed by a just God. In arguing his classic theodicy, Boethius reiterates the Augustinian belief that evil is really nonexistent. By challenging any capacity that the wicked have for real action, Boethius sidesteps the problem of evil in a just world by disputing its actual influence. Yet the pain and suffering that so poignantly characterize the human condition must refute Boethius's counterintuitive assertion. His abstraction, in fact, describes an ultimately absurd universe because he assembles it with a faulty style of argumentation. Boethius's overreliance upon the equation of dissimilar concepts, for instance, results in a text that is laden with contradictions and often plagued by oversimplifications. More important, though, is his fundamentally flawed understanding of evil. Instead of seriously considering the possible benefits of injustice acknowledged by suffering, Boethius errs in assuming that the existence of evil is necessarily inconsistent with an all-loving, just God. Boethius's dubious mode of argumentation and his fundamental misunderstanding of evil doom the theodicy of *The Consolation* to failure.

The most readily apparent flaw in Boethius's theodicy is his tendency to equate dissimilar ideas. His reliance on equivalency surfaces most disturbingly when his imagined guardian, Philosophy, claims that real happiness is a uniform, undivided amalgam of self-sufficiency, power, fame, and glory. To prove her assertion, Philosophy awkwardly equates all of these components with happiness itself. First, she holds that because self-sufficiency is a state replete with power, the two ideals of self-sufficiency and power are really one and the same. Going further, she prompts Boethius to admit that one would revere rather than despise a self-sufficient being, so that self-sufficiency, power, and respect must all describe the same ideal. Using the same mode of argumentation, Philosophy continues to equate fame and finally true happiness with the other previously equated values. Yet there are two immediately obvious faults with this type of reasoning.

First, the concession that a self-sufficient being would be powerful does not necessarily require that sufficiency and power describe the same idea. In fact, Boethius's equation of self-sufficiency with power is a gross oversimplification. That one condition implies the other does not by any means constrain the two conditions to equality. *Self-sufficiency* is one particular aspect of power, while power itself is a more general idea comprised of constituents (e.g., the ability to help *other* people) that form a whole. Thus, self-sufficiency cannot convey the same concept as power. Rather, it combines with other ideals to form a larger total that more correctly describes power.

The assumption that one would honor rather than disdain a self-sufficient being constitutes another error of overgeneralization. Boethius completely overlooks the other properties of Philosophy's hypothetical being, for self-sufficiency is certainly not the only criterion by which one's character is gauged. For instance, the entity could be self-sufficient, yet cruel and oppressive. To be sure, according to Boethius's depiction of power, Philosophy's tyrannical creature would be feeble by definition, entirely unable to pursue the true course of happiness. While neo-Platonists may refute the assumption that a tyrant can truly be self-sufficient, their objection is irrelevant here because it is exactly this tenet that is under attack. Yet even neo-Platonist moralists would agree that Philosophy's being could be entirely self-sufficient and benign, yet reclusive and unknown. Therefore, the merits of Philosophy's creature would be unsung. It does not follow, then, that a self-sufficient being must inevitably be accorded honor. Much less must it be that self-sufficiency and honor be one and the same. Indeed, it is nonsensical to assert that honor, self-sufficiency, power, and the like are really identical in nature. That these ideals are frequently observed in concert is simply a characteristic of Creation, not a demonstration of their equality.

However, Boethius's equivalence of evil with nothing is his most serious error. He arrives upon this mistake after Philosophy argues, "But there is nothing that an omnipotent power could not do?" (81: III, xii). After Boethius agrees, Philosophy asks, "Then, can God do evil?" To this, Boethius makes the fatal mistake of replying, "No." Accordingly, Philosophy goes on to conclude, "... [then] evil is nothing, since that is what He cannot do who can do anything." As a consequence of the conclusion that evil is nothing, Philosophy denies that evil has any real manifestation in the world, for she plainly asserts that the wicked

can do nothing and that the ability to do evil is not a form of power. To arrive at her conclusion, Philosophy explicitly claims that the wicked cannot exercise evil if they retain the power of doing good. (According to Boethius, good men are able to discern the true path to happiness, or righteousness, while bad men by nature cannot recognize truly just action.) By definition, then, she claims that the wicked can do only evil. From this conclusion, Boethius states that if evil is nothing, and if wicked men can do only evil, then the wicked can do nothing. The problem with Boethius's conclusion is that it is based upon a false premise. It is certainly plausible that God can, in fact, do evil: he has the capacity to effect malevolence, but his nature merely refuses to do so. Just as good men are capable of committing gross injustices but refrain from doing so, God refuses to engage in any wrongdoing whatsoever. The all-encompassing benevolence that characterizes God's nature does not constrain His freedom. Rather, God's goodness and His liberty are in accord, for one does not restrict the other. The two characteristics coexist harmoniously; the one reinforces the other.

In attempting to refute the idea that evil men can have any real influence on the lives of good men, Boethius inadvertently exposes an inconsistency within his own argument. At the same time that he claims God cannot do evil, he asserts that human beings can. In general, then, he contends that men can do that which God cannot. This, of course, is a fallacy. On the other hand, Boethius's definition of power seems to have remained consistent. While he asserts that men can do evil, though God cannot, he also asserts that evil is not a true form of power. Thus, the apparent discrepancy is removed, at least temporarily, for Boethius's evil is no true feat at all. In consequence, God's omnipotence seems preserved at least formally. In the context of real human experience, however, evil is still an action, a means of bringing about some form of a real, often tangible change in the world. To claim, under any set of intricately arranged definitions, that human beings can effect such changes while God cannot, is absurd. Boethius's equation, then, proves to be ludicrous when tested against real human experience. Common sense reasoning must disqualify the set of definitions on which Boethius's abstraction relies. In order to maintain the consistency of his argument, Boethius would be forced to assert that evil and wrongdoing—in every form—are entirely absent from God's creation. Of course, the human condition has long refuted this strange idea.

Proponents of Boethius's philosophy, however, may reject such a straightforward attack on his equation of evil with nothing. Since Boethius's philosophy is abstract and remote, rather than personal and pragmatic, it can be argued that his equation should be examined from a "philosophical" perspective instead of a practical one. Yet, as American pragmatist William James asserts, the value of any philosophy is determined by its application to reality. In this sense, philosophy closely resembles mathematics. Both fields often delve deeply into abstraction, but that which is learned must be applied to the real world—if it is to be useful beyond the challenge of an academic exercise. In "The Stimulation of Science," historian and mathematician Howard Eves compares mathematics with the giant Antaeus, who lost his great strength only after being lifted from the earth and held in the air (781). Eves relates that mathematics, like Antaeus, draws its force from the "solid ground of its birth," or from the concrete foundation of real human experience. Similarly, philosophy must coincide somewhat with the human condition to maintain its value and to renew its strength. Any competent philosopher can formulate an abstraction that is consistent within itself, but the real test of any philosophy should be its application to human experience. This is not to say, however, that any philosophy which is counterintuitive or which contrasts with human experience is necessarily flawed. Rather, when a construct sharply contradicts intuition and experience, the abstraction must be argued for vigorously with at least some reference to its consistency with the real world.

Yet Boethius remains reluctant to concede the manifestation of evil in the world. In Book II, for instance, Philosophy convinces Boethius that his seemingly undesirable misfortune is not really "bad" fortune after all. Philosophy contends not only that the wealth and status which Boethius has lost were not truly his own, but also that worldly concerns with affluence and political office are, in themselves, worthless. What is more, she asserts that Boethius's circumstances have enlightened him, for he has discovered those of his companions whose friendship is genuine. Philosophy further claims that one should actually *expect* to endure failure after delighting in accomplishment. For she has Fortune declare, "Yes, rise up on my wheel if you like, but don't count it an injury when by the same token you begin to fall, as the rule of the game will require" (25: II, ii). At the same time,

however, Philosophy cites the circular motion of Fortune's wheel as cause for hope that Boethius's grave situation may give way to better circumstances. Boethius seems reluctant indeed to acknowledge the imminence of his impending torture. Philosophy proposes that he still has many "outstanding blessings," including the health of his father-in-law, Symmachus; the love of his wife; and the success of his two consular sons. Rather unsympathetically, Philosophy continues, "... 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. . . . It is the nature of human affairs to be fraught with anxiety . . ." (30: II, iv). It seems that Philosophy altogether ignores the severity of Boethius' situation. To describe the anxiety that Boethius expresses as a histrionic outburst is certainly callous, particularly when one considers the merciless execution that awaits him. Clearly, Boethius tries to escape the reality of his hopelessness. In Book II, he vigorously preserves some hope that he may somehow escape his execution. Later, perhaps after his hope has faded, Boethius ignores the fact that his executioners can truly do him any evil. The gruesomeness of Boethius's death, however, dramatically rebuffs this contention.

It has been rigorously asserted that *The Consolation* relies upon an erroneous equation of evil with nothing. Indeed, the fundamental flaw in Boethius's philosophy is his failure to recognize that the existence of evil and suffering do not necessarily contradict the belief in a just, omnipotent God. Boethius's faulty account of evil misleads him into claiming that evil is absent from the world, rather than that suffering, while indeed present, serves some higher purpose. Consequently, Boethius never realizes that the value of spiritual purification justifies the existence of wrongdoing and suffering. Yet he surely understands the Christian ideal of meaningful suffering. Boethius has Philosophy declare, "So a wise man ought no more to take it ill when he clashes with fortune than a brave man ought to be upset by the sound of battle. For both of them their very distress is an opportunity, for the one to gain glory and the other to strengthen his wisdom. This is why virtue gets its name, because it is firm in strength and unconquered by adversity" (113: IV, vii). Indeed, this world would be meaningless if we passed through it untested. It is one of the principal tenets of Christianity that this life is nothing but a spiritual trial. It is an opportunity to exercise one's free will in order to overcome an arduous

succession of tribulations. Boethius, however, fails to recognize that seemingly undeserved pain is not truly unjust, nor is it necessarily unfortunate. By overlooking the value of adversity as a justification of evil, Boethius inadvertently deals the *coup de grâce* to his own theodicy, *The Consolation*.



### Works Cited

- Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans. Victor Watts. London: Penguin Books, 1969.
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