

HAPPINESS ACCORDING TO BOETHIUS' *CONSOLATIO PHILOSOPHIAE*

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Abstract. As a philosopher or a lover of philosophy, one wonders whether this area can also be useful in everyday life; whether philosophy also has a reason that leads to happiness. Boethius tried to find the answer to this question in the 6th century through his writing *Consolatio Philosophiae*. The Lady Philosophy helps the prisoner Boethius see true goodness and choose authentic happiness. In this essay we try to analyze the text of the *Consolatio Philosophiae* and show how a happy life is possible through philosophy. We go through all the books and analyze the key passages of the *Consolatio*. At the same time, we follow the state of mind of Boethius and see how far he understands the prospect of happiness. From diagnosing Boethius (as established by Lady Philosophy) as banished in his existence, through understanding *Fortuna* as an ever-changing goddess, to true happiness, we accompany Boethius in his sorrows and doubts. The last questions of books four and five, the questions of the theodicy, refer to the justification of the philosopher to believe in a God who allows evil in the world and who supposedly does not predestine creation in his foreknowledge. The conclusions are partially redundant. It is up to the individual to decide whether philosophy can be a good companion on the way to eternal happiness. Some prerequisites of Boethian philosophy and theology could be established here.

Keywords: *Boethius, happiness, philosophy, theology, Consolatio*

“The beauty of earth changes.
Enjoy it but never think to trust it.
As with the fleeting pleasures
of men, a stern law decrees
that nothing in life lasts” (Boethius II 3, 2008, 37)

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Introduction

The question of whether philosophy can provide a mental state that can lead to a happy life was answered positively by the great philosophers of antiquity. However, the question “What is meant by happiness?” reflects also not negligible relevance. Most ancient philosophers seem to reject the notion of happiness as a hedonistic collection of goods or a casual attitude toward ephemeral life. We think at just one example. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) speaks of *θεωρία* as a lucky divine vision² long before Christian thinkers such as Dionysius Areopagita (most probably 6th century A.D.)³ or Maximus the Confessor (580-662 A.D.)⁴. Aristotle does not deny that material goods are necessary for a healthy and good life. However, these are only means to an end which don't bring happiness, for the true goal is the divine contemplation (cf. Aristotle 1999, 176-177). If one looks at the origin of the term *theoria* and split it into the two building words that lead to the formation of its meaning, one concludes that it is about Seeing (ὁράω) God (θεός). To see God implies no bodily eyes, but a special cultivation of the soul because this kind of pleasure involves “no pain or appetite” (Aristotle 1999, 122), but it concerns divine matters beyond the senses. Those, who see God, are to be named *θεωρός*, viewers of God (Wolfgang Pfeifer et al 2003, 1429).

Leaving Aristotle, we ask ourselves: What if one is already fallen in this life, in its boundaries and material limits? Does one have the chance to escape it through philosophy?

Many thinkers did not learn it only by theory, but also by living. In the stoic philosophy, for instance, there is a close bond between the philosophy as the study of virtue and the philosophy as living the virtue itself. This interdependency is defined by Seneca (1 B.C. – 65 A.D.) as follows:

“For philosophy cannot exist without virtue, nor virtue without philosophy. Philosophy is the study of virtue, by means, however, of virtue itself; but neither can virtue exist without the study of itself,

² “Happiness extends, then, just so far the contemplation does [...] Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation.” (Aristotle 1999, 176).

³ Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite I, 4, 1857, Vol. 3, 592D.

⁴ Cf. Maximus the Confessor, 1052A.

nor can the study of virtue exist without virtue itself. [...] the path by which one reaches virtue leads by way of virtue itself; philosophy and virtue cling closely together." (Seneca 1920, *Letter 89*, 8, 569)

Seneca sees the gaining of virtue in the acts of contemplation and conduct, which correspond to the study of philosophy (contemplation) and the practice of the same (conduct) (Seneca 1920, *Letter 92*, 45, 649). Gaining the virtue itself presupposes a low state of mind at the beginning of the process. That's why one can conclude that the real form of contemplation is a form gained after empirical failures. Recognizing the Hight of philosophy as the striving to seeing God (Seneca 1917, *Letter 65*, 23, 323)⁵, and the bottom upon one finds himself, the contemplation reshapes itself in the form of consolation. One cannot directly embrace the philosophical pureness, but firstly recognize it by measuring the deepness of own fall. The discrepancy between the philosophical life as, for instance, understood by Aristotle and the real life, full of decadence and weakness, is compensated in our context by the term *consolation*.

Consolation is what could be not gained from the very beginning, but first after a kind of loss.

The kind of consolation one might find in philosophy, be it as a free initiative or forced by the context, is uniquely described in the history of philosophical thinking by the Latin philosopher and theologian of late antiquity Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480-524 A.D.) as the looking for happiness. This essay attempts to show how philosophy can bring consolation or happiness, using the example of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*. A few introductory words about his person, his life context, and his general contribution to the history of ideas are mentioned here before the Boethian consolation of philosophy.

1. Boethius: life context and relevance

Boethius lived during the reign of the Ostrogoth king Theodoric (454-526 A.D.), at whose court he embraced high offices as Roman senator and consul.

⁵ Seneca speaks here about the contemplation of the nature created by God.

“By 522 he had risen to the position of Master of Offices at Theodoric’s court in Ravenna.” (Boethius 2008, xii)

Despite his position and rising career as politician Theodoric suspected him of supporting a conspiracy together with the Eastern Roman Emperor against the rule of the Ostrogothic reign. He was arrested on Theodoric’s orders and executed after several months in prison. His sentence to death took place without any proof of his guilt of treason (cf. Fried 2015, 28). Historians hold that Theodoric suffered from paranoia during this period and believed any rumor of betrayal (Boethius 2008, xii).

During the years of his burgeoning career Boethius endeavored to realize ambitious projects. He intended to translate and comment all the works of Plato and Aristotle, and make them accessible in Latin:

“I shall translate into Latin every work of Aristotle’s that comes into my hands, and I shall write commentaries on all of them; [...] And I shall also translate and comment upon all Plato’s dialogues and put them into Latin form. [...] I shall bring the thought of Aristotle and Plato somehow into harmony and show that these two philosophers are not at odds in everything as a great many people suppose.” (Boethius 2008, xiii)⁶

He could not fulfill these projects because of the sudden sentence to death. Nevertheless, he left many writings, commentaries and translations in which Aristotle and Porphyry are of paramount importance (Marenbon 2003, 164-182)⁷. Boethius wrote also as a theologian. In his four Theological Tractates he dealt in particular with the two natures of Christ. Here Augustine’s theology played a decisive role for him (cf. Lerer in Boethius 2008, xiv).

Although the monumental projects remained unfinished because of his death, he became the most important mediator of Greek logic,

⁶ Boethius expresses this intention in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Perihermeneias*.

⁷ Marenbon offers in ninth Chapter “Boethius’s Influence in the Middle Ages” the main works of Boethius and their reception in the Middle Ages. The main logical translations, commentaries and treatises as well as the *Opuscula Sacra* and the *Consolation* are here displayed and commented.

mathematics, and music theory to the Latin-speaking world from the Middle Ages to the 12th century.

“Boethius’s translations of the logical texts were used universally in the medieval universities, and they were copied in hundreds of university manuscripts.” (Marenbon 2003, 165)

His translations and commentaries on Aristotle and Porphyry will constitute the fundamental basis for logic schools and universities in the West until the late Middle Ages. Marenbon says in this respect:

“The *Isagoge*, *Categories* and *On Interpretation*, in Boethius’s translations, formed, along with Boethius’s textbooks, the syllabus of the early twelfth-century logical schools. [...] Boethius’s translations of the logical texts were used universally in the medieval universities, and they were copied in hundreds of university manuscripts.” (Marenbon 2003, 165)

Nevertheless, his work *Consolatio philosophiae* (*The Consolation of Philosophy*), which he wrote while he was in prison, had the strongest impact on the future Western philosophy. Alcuin, Abelard, and Aquinas (cf. Marenbon 2003, 173, 176-179) are just a few names of Western thinkers and theologians, who were massively influenced by Boethius’ work *Consolatio*. Even if the *Consolatio* is read less after the year 1200, it continues to remain a source for many thinkers, poets, and philosophers. Relevant influences can be seen at many later thinkers such as Dante, Boccaccio, or Chaucer (cf. Marenbon 2003, 173).

If one is to say a few words also about the sources and influences which determined Boethius to formulate his *Consolatio* as he did, the conclusion is not a simple one. By analyzing special passages of his *Consolatio*, one would assume that Boethius was working like a Cicero, Seneca, or Augustine when he wrote the *Consolatio*, and might see his consolatory text passages as a collection of material for one’s own work (cf. Gruber 2006, 40-41). After he was suspended from his offices and taken to Pavia, Boethius misses in prison especially his library. Therefore, he must quote from memory. This fact makes it difficult to

identify the sources for the *Consolatio*. One can prove the Neoplatonic interpretation of Platonic (*Timaios*) and Aristotelian (*Physics*) thoughts by comparing them with corresponding passages from Neoplatonic commentaries. Beyond Plato and Aristotle, an influence from Cicero (*De Divinatione and Somnium Scipionis*) can also be claimed, but nowhere can it be shown that a specific passage of these texts is the exact and only source (cf. Gruber 2006, 42).

Consolatio philosophiae, which can be described as his main work, was written under the influence of his sad situation in prison at the time and presents his main ideas on ethics and metaphysics. The fall from his previous promising position moved him, in his current state, to think about authentic life and its true goods. In *Consolatio* Boethius combines the Platonic *conspectus* with the Aristotelian method, developing “the pedagogic dialogue found in the works of Plato, Cicero, and St. Augustine into a dramatic narrative of self-awareness.” (Lerer in Boethius 2008, xv). In both forms, poetry and prose, the work is written as a dialogue between the imprisoned Boethius and the Lady Philosophy (the personified philosophy), who is supposed to comfort and teach him, leading eventually to his soul healing. The title of the work, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, indicates its literary genre as consolation. The genitive “*philosophiae*” can be either possessive or subjective. As possessive the consolation belongs to the realm of philosophy and comes from it; as subjective the philosophy gives consolation, also in the meaning that the Lady Philosophy comforts the imprisoned (cf. Bechtel 2006, 266). Both meanings indicate the philosophy as a source of comfort for wounded souls.

2. *Fortuna labilis* and its deceptive consolation

Despite the title “*Consolatio Philosophiae*” Boethius does not use the word “*consolatio*”. He questions instead the term “*beatitudo*”⁸ as a specific synonym for consolation. Therefore, we use alternative the terms “happiness” and “consolation” (the striving for happiness) also as synonyms.

⁸ Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, Book III, 2, 2-3, in Bibliotheca Augustana, available at: https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost06/Boethius/boe_con2.html, last time accessed on April 29, 2022.

The main references to happiness and its false understanding as good of the material world and as consolation of the goddess Fortuna can be found in the first two books of *Consolatio Philosophiae*. In the first book the prisoner laments his sad fate and the unfaithfulness of the fortune that once favored him (cf. Boethius 2008, 1-2). In the process of his lamentation philosophy appears to him as a venerable female figure (cf. Boethius 2008, 3). Malicious slanderers would have plunged him into misfortune. The Senate, for which he selflessly campaigned, had let him down, and the ill-informed public considered him guilty (cf. Boethius 2008, 13).

In the second book, the two interlocutors deal with Fortuna, the goddess of fortune and fate. The prisoner accuses Fortuna of his misery and shows that she has changed her attitude towards him. The Lady Philosophy warns him about the changeable being of Fortuna, who is by nature fickle and treacherous (cf. Boethius 2008, 28). Exactly this variability is her essence and the only reliable thing about her. Furthermore, the Lady Philosophy deepens these thoughts by describing the individual goods in their dubiousness. The culmination point of the second book is reached in the conclusion that possessions are not real and a real good can never harm its owner (cf. Boethius 2008, 47).

Boethius recognizes from the very beginning the value of Lady Philosophy, who is "ancient and nobody would mistake her for a creature of our time" (Boethius 2008, 3). This recognition provides a good start for the treatise, because the philosophy finds in him the good will to listen to her and to converse with her. Her quality as "ancient" is confirmed by saying that she has been doing the battle of consolation forever against "proud stupidity" (Boethius 2008, 8); long before Plato's (428/427 – 348/347 B.C.) time.

Here arises the question: Why is the consolation necessary?

Philosophy establishes a diagnosis about Boethius. She says he suffers from lethargy and depression because he no longer knows who he is (cf. Boethius 2008, 6, 24). She seems to know exactly how to cure him. The cure bases on the fact that he used to know her. She just needs to clear "the mist that beclouds his vision" (Boethius 2008, 6). The mist which should be cleared is the banishment, in which Boethius thinks he finds himself. This kind of banishment is according to the Lady Philosophy no real danger for Boethius. He just judges it wrongly. More important is that the banishment is not merely geographical, but especially an inner thing:

“You have been banished from yourself, and one could even say that you are therefore the instrument of your own torments, for no one else could have done this to you. You seem to have forgotten what your native country is. It is not a democracy like old Athens, but as Homer (8th century B.C. says, ‘There is one rule, the one king,’ (*Iliad*, 2204-205) and he is a friend to his subjects and never sends them into exile. To obey his justice is the only freedom.” (Boethius 2008, 20)

The banishment from oneself is the consequence of not knowing anymore who one is. The Platonic motive of reminding marks here the finding to the real self. Lady Philosophy connects the finding of the self with the “native country”, the place where is neither unjustness nor exile. The ruling king requires through his justice the kind of obedience which brings the real freedom.

The role of this dialogue is to get Boethius in the right mood of recognizing his own inner attitude as false. Even if he was sincere in his attitude to Senate or Theodoric, his attitude was still untruthful to himself. There remain a few questions still open: What did Boethius wrong? How did he move away from his own self and from his “native country”?

The Lady Philosophy argues that Boethius relied on someone who is never reliable: Fortuna. This goddess “spins the wheel (of luck), and one or another number comes up lucky, while the only constant is change” (Boethius 2008, 30). Trusting her can only bring misery (Boethius 2008, 29). As a demonstration the Lady Philosophy plays the role of Fortuna herself and addresses Boethius:

“I gave you all kinds of affluence and luxury, whatever was in my power, and you took it as if it were your right. Now that I have taken it back, you ought to thank me for the use of what was always mine anyway rather than complain of the loss of what was never yours.” (Boethius 2008, 31)

The principle of chance or having by chance is strongly questioned in this context. Boethius himself is supposed to have known that there is no constancy in human affairs and Fortuna works always with the time which brings change inevitably (cf. Boethius 2008, 36). A parallel with

the text of Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians is obvious. Paul says: "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"⁹. Consequently, having goods or luck, and being happy or comforted because of it, makes someone not different in his being. The only difference, which might bring unhappiness and misery, is made by embracing the false state of mind.

Interestingly, the Lady Philosophy offers Boethius the other side of Fortuna, which might bring consolation by her very characteristic of changeability:

"You are unhappy because you have lost those things in which you took pleasure? But you can also take comfort in the likelihood that what is now making you miserable will also pass away." (Boethius 2008, 36)

In connection with this thought Lady Philosophy draws an extreme conclusion at the end of the second book. She shows that misfortune is more instructive and better for the human soul because through it fortune shows its true face from the very beginning. In this respect she says:

"The fact of the matter is that ill fortune is better for men than good. When Fortune smiles, she is always false. But when she is inconstant and whimsical, she shows her true self. The first aspect of Fortune will deceive people, but the second is instructive. The first blinds while the second opens men's eyes to how fragile the happiness of mortals really is." (Boethius 2008, 56-57)

3. The true happiness (consolation)

At this point of the second book the Lady Philosophy problematizes the nature of happiness and implicitly of its consolation. Is happiness relying on the real Fortuna?

⁹ I Cor. IV, 7 in English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible. Available at: <<https://www.esv.org/>> last time accessed on April 29, 2022.

Firstly, she argues that there is no such thing as happiness based on material possession and high positions. Even those who seem to have everything miss something, which makes them unhappy (cf. Boethius 2008, 39). Therefore, good fortune is not something that one possesses entirely or forever. If good fortune, understood as being wealthy and embracing high positions in the society, can not provide happiness, then one should not look outside of himself, but inside. Being in possession of yourself is the most precious thing and the only one Fortuna cannot take away (cf. Boethius 2008, 48-49). In this respect, Lady Philosophy argues:

“If happiness is the highest good of a rational man, and if whatever can be taken away cannot be the highest good (because that which can’t be taken away must be a higher good), then it makes no sense to say that good fortune can supply happiness.” (Boethius 2008, 49)

Conclusively, the happiness is not what it seems to be and it cannot be gained through Fortuna. Furthermore, authentic happiness does not belong to the category of impermanence and death. It is a matter of the soul that cannot be satisfied by material and time-affected goods:

“[...] the bodies of men are subject to happenstance and in any event are mortal and will die. If you still hold that position, it is difficult to see how you would argue that bodily pleasure can bring happiness, if every kind of mortal thing is fated to descend into misery and death.” (Boethius 2008, 42)

At this point the Lady Philosophy talks about the deceptiveness of possessing money and wealth, showing that someone who finds value in himself does not need external trinkets (cf. Boethius 2008, 46). The real discovery of the self in its pureness implies no attachments to ephemeral means like money, whose possession harms not only the possessor by inducing the false state of mind, but also the others because “it cannot be shared with many men, and it cannot be possessed without making others poorer” (Boethius 2008, 44). With this assertion, Boethius not only problematizes the possession of money in itself, but also the ethical dimension in relation to others. He assumes that the quantity of goods in

this limited world is also limited, which logically means that the wealth of one leads to the poverty of another.

Furthermore, the Lady Philosophy warns Boethius against a false attitude, which one might embrace even when he is independent of material goods or money. It is a question of a wrong approach to philosophy in which one claims to be a philosopher “not from a dedication to truth and reason, but out of vanity, as a way of enhancing his reputation” (Boethius 2008, 54-55). When somebody suggested that such a “philosopher” is a fraud because he does not adopt a patient manner by bearing in silence the insults and injuries of life, the “philosopher” claimed he would embrace such attitude. After months or years of practicing the philosophy in silence the “philosopher” asked his challenger: “Now do you admit that I am a philosopher?” (Boethius 2008, 55). The challenger replied: “I would have, if you had kept silent” (Boethius 2008, 54-55)¹⁰. It seems that this well-known saying (if you had remained silent, you would have remained a philosopher) has its roots in *Consolatio Philosophiae*.

However, the main question of this context is: What is the content of real happiness? Or what is the consolation of Boethian philosophy?

The third book deals mainly with this matter. The starting point of the third book is that happiness constitutes itself as the main and only goal of the human being (cf. Boethius 2008, 61). The Lady Philosophy understands happiness as a union of all goods that can never be lost. Wealth, power, fame, honor, pleasure, material advantages etc., are not really defining happiness because they push one to need more, producing fear and worry (cf. Boethius 2008, 63). At this point, Lady Philosophy and Boethius conclude that the origin of all things is God.

Happiness can only be called real happiness if it leaves nothing to be desired. The absolute claim of happiness¹¹ as the absolute fulfilment of the being and the highest good assumes that nothing can be missing when one has it. All men strive for this inborn condition of being happy, but many of them are misconducted und look for it at wrong places such

¹⁰ Cf. the Latin text: “Intellexeram, inquit, si tacuisses”, Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, Book II, 7, 21, in *Bibliotheca Augustana*, available at: <https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost06/Boethius/boe_con2.html>, last time accessed on April 29, 2023.

¹¹ “So happiness is necessarily that state that is perfect and that includes within it everything a man could want.” (cf. Boethius 2008, 61).

as: wealth, high office, power, fame, and pleasure (cf. Boethius 2008, 63). This thirst, which is falsely quenched, will never end because bodily needs just produce more needs. Boethius never defines the happiness as a need because it belongs to another category of being. It rather refers to a state of mind regarding the soul of man. The main difference between need and happiness is that the first is marked by fear and worry (cf. Boethius 2008, 72), while the second represents the inner value, which is not compelled by necessity (cf. Boethius 2008, 175)¹². Even glory and reputation, which seem to be inner values, are nothing more than vulgar and deceptive needs, which do not last and depend on the “whimsical judgments of the mob” (cf. Boethius 2008, 74).

After these dialogues with the Lady Philosophy Boethius seems to have understood what happiness is not. The connection to the content of happiness and real consolation is made by the Lady Philosophy through reminding of *Timaeus*, where Plato says that “we ought to ask for God’s help even in the smallest matters” (Boethius 2008, 83)¹³. Therefore, both conclude to call God for help. At this point the Lady Philosophy begins to sing:

“O Lord, you govern the universe with your eternal order: you brought time itself into being, and all that marks its changes in the heavens and here on the earth, both moving and also in stillness. Nothing but your love could have prompted you to bring forth the matter and forms that together make up the world. From within yourself, ungrudging, you brought out the pattern of all that is good, inasmuch as it partakes of your own goodness. [...] To the

¹² See Book V. Freedom is a subject we will return to.

¹³ Boethius refers here most likely to the passage where Socrates speaks about the “duly calling upon the Gods” and *Timaeus* concludes: “All men, Socrates, who have any degree of right feeling, at the beginning of every enterprise, whether small or great, always call upon God. And we, too, who are going to discourse of the nature of the universe, how created or how existing without creation, if we be not altogether out of our wits, must invoke the aid of Gods and Goddesses and pray that our words may be acceptable to them and consistent with themselves”. See *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett. E-texts for this edition by Antonio Gonzalez Fernandez, *Timaeus*, 1857, available at: <https://www.academia.edu/26973388/The_Dialogues_of_Plato_428_27_348_47_BCE> last time accessed on April 29, 2022.

blessed who alone behold it, you are the sole serene goal in which we may rest, satisfied and tranquil, and to see your face is our only hunger, our only thirst, for you are our beginning, our journey, and our end." (Boethius 2008, 84-86)

The song of the Lady Philosophy goes beyond calling God for help and names him the beginning and the end, the origin and the purpose of all things and beings. The answer Boethius is about to get is already given in the song.

God, the creator of all things as good things, is the only one who can encompass all goods the human nature is longing for, be it named consolation or happiness. The Father of all things cannot receive his goodness from outside, but only from inside. Receiving it from outside would imply a better source than he is. This would also lead to a god who is missing something (cf. Boethius 2008, 87). That's why he must be the most excellent of all things. This kind of rationalism leads Boethius to assert that "the author of all things is inherently and, in his substance, the highest good" (cf. Boethius 2008, 88). The further remark of the Lady Philosophy, that the highest good, they were talking before, is the happiness as goal of every man, conducts to the only possible conclusion: "Then happiness is itself God"¹⁴ (cf. Boethius 2008, 88). Moreover, since the content of happiness is the divinity itself, the "men in the pursuit of happiness are actually in the pursuit of divinity. But as in their efforts to pursue justice they become just, and in the pursuit of wisdom they become wise, this logic would lead us to conclude that in the pursuit of divinity they would become gods, which is awkward because God, by his nature, is singular. Still there is nothing to prevent the acquisition of divinity by participation in his divinity" (Boethius 2008, 89). Over 800 years before Gregor Palamas (1296-1359) Boethius speaks of men as gods by the grace of God and not by substance. The

¹⁴ Cf. Latin text: "Igitur, inquit, deum esse ipsam beatitudinem necesse est confiteri". Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, Book III, 10, 17, in *Bibliotheca Augustana*, available at: <https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost06/Boethius/boe_con2.html>, last time accessed on April 29, 2022.

term he uses is “participation”¹⁵. In Palamas’ theology, in the sacramental events of the Ekklesia, man becomes god by grace, as Palamas puts it in his dialogue Theophanes: “all become gods in their entirety, without coinciding with the nature of God” (PG 150, 936C)¹⁶. Therefore, the Lady Philosophy talks about a participation in God’s divinity, that means in God himself. There is no talk about an outer reality of God produced by God, but of the inner being of God. This conclusion can also be drawn from the idea that the substance of God is the goodness itself (cf. Boethius 2008, 91).

As one who misses nothing, God has all goods in himself together. That’s why he is the only source corresponding to the seeking for the highest good. As *summum bonum*¹⁷ God himself is the unity of all things par excellence. The efforts of living beings to keep their own unity and to avoid dissipation are an expression of their striving for the highest unity and the universal good, and this is God Himself (cf. Boethius 2008, 102).

4. Two matters of theodicy

The answer that God is the only fulfilment of human happiness and consolation is for Boethius not a closed matter. It arises new questions regarding some theological issues which are discussed in the last two books of *Consolatio Philosophiae*.

In the fourth book Boethius arises the question of theodicy. He problematizes how God allows evil and let it flourish, while virtue goes unrewarded (cf. Boethius 2008, 106). Lady Philosophy answers that everyone strives for the good. Attaining the good means becoming good yourself (cf. Boethius 2008, 110). Thus, only certain who are good themselves can attain the goal. The wicked can only either give up their wickedness or

¹⁵ Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, Book III, 10, 25, in Bibliotheca Augustana, available at: <https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost06/Boethius/boe_con3.html>, last time accessed on April 29, 2022.

¹⁶ „Ολοι διόλου γινόμεθα θεοί, χωρίς τῆς κατ’ οὐσίαν ταυτότητος”.

¹⁷ Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, Book III, 10, 20, in Bibliotheca Augustana, available at: <https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost06/Boethius/boe_con3.html>, last time accessed on April 29, 2022.

fail in their endeavors. If he succeeds in realizing his intentions, this will only sink him deeper into misery (cf. Boethius 2008, 124).

In the fifth book it is questioned the free will of man. This question is a kind of continuing the matter of theodicy because it is put in connection with the foreknowledge of God (cf. Boethius 2008, 152). Boethius problematizes here the foreknowledge as predestination. Lady Philosophy's answer goes in the direction of dividing the foreknowledge from anticipation (cf. Boethius 2008, 168-170).

This part of our essay deals mainly with these two theodicy questions: the existence of evil and the free will of man.

a. The existence of evil

The problem of evil mentions Boethius already at the end of the third book. The reasoning behind Boethius' assertion that the evil does not exist is announced by the dialogue with the Lady Philosophy about God as source of everything that is good. If God is omnipotent and can do everything, but he can not do evil, it results that evil is not a category of being. Evil is nothing "because God cannot do it and there is nothing he cannot do"¹⁸ (Boethius 2008, 102). Also in the Greek thinking of the time was the evil the lack of participation in being, which means no participation in hypostatic form (being a person). In this respect Dionysius the Areopagite (5th-6th century A.D.) denies evil's hypostatic quality and calls it "parhypostasis"/ "παρυπόστασις" (PG 3, 732C, lat. *substantia simulacra*), a kind of parasitic subsistence.

At the beginning of the fourth book Boethius needs to hear a pertinent vindication of God regarding the existence of the evil in the world:

¹⁸ The good as the cause of being itself can be traced back to Plato, whose idea of the good takes a special position as the cause of creation. In the sixth book of the Republic Plato states: "In like manner the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power." See *The Dialogues of Plato, Republic*, 1390, available at: <https://www.academia.edu/26973388/The_Dialogues_of_Plato_428_27_348_47_BCE>, last time accessed on April 29, 2022. Cf. also Szlezák 2003, 111.

“even though there is a ruler of the universe who is good, there is nonetheless evil in the world, even evil that passes unpunished. [...] And there is a further question, too, which is that when wickedness rules, virtue not only goes unrewarded but is even overthrown and trodden under the feet of bad men. Virtue pays the penalty, rather than vice.” (Boethius 2008, 106)

Returning to an explanation already established, The Lady Philosophy reminds Boethius that all men, good or bad, seek the good. However, they differ because some think that evil is good and confuse virtue with evil deeds and bodily pleasures. This difference leads to the next one, which is definitory for the context:

“But since they are both seeking the good, but the good obtain it while the wicked do not, can there be any doubt that the good are powerful and the evil are weak?” (Boethius 2008, 111)

While the good exercise the virtues in order to obtain and maintain the good, the wicked try to gain the good by falling into the sinful deepness of their own desires. More than that, “vices are never unpunished, and virtue is never unrewarded” (Boethius 2008, 107). The weakness of ones and the power of the others are rewards in themselves. Participating in divinity by doing good practicing virtues leads to the nearness to the happiness itself, namely Got. The wicked men, on the other hand, participate in evil desires and acts, which provide no goods, and they move away from God. Boethius uses alternatively the terms “weak” and “wicked”. The first one means the weakness of the body, the second one means a disease of the mind (cf. Boethius 2008, 127). Nevertheless, they become a pray of their own never-ending desires and their reward is the nothingness (cf. Boethius 2008, 114), because they do whatever they want, believing that through those things that they enjoy they will achieve the good they desire. “But they can never attain that good because wicked deeds do not lead to happiness” (Boethius 2008, 115). Therefore, one, who knows the good, should not ask for human justness and punishment for the weak and wicked. They should be treated as sick people, namely with pity and sympathy (compassion) (cf. Boethius 2008, 127).

The fourth book ends with the Lady Philosophy advising that fortune is not bad in herself, but the ways in which she is perceived by man. Here is the fortune vindicated in some way. Her task is not just to manage the realm of the ephemeral, but also to strengthen the virtues by testing men. For some is she just, for others is she instructive and useful (cf. Boethius 2008, 142). If one understands this fact, that she is not supposed to bring happiness because it is not her purpose to do it, and acts accordingly, one will also understand the righteousness of God, which does not belong to the perishable.

b. The free will of man

The providence of God rules in the entire creation, asserts the Lady Philosophy already in the fourth book:

“It is providence that orders the motions of the stars, arranges the elements of matter with one another in proper proportion, and changes them in predictable ways. It renews the species of living things [...]” (Boethius 2008, 134)

Due to the divine providence nothing is left to chance. In this context, at the beginning of the fifth book, Boethius asks about the measurability of chance and whether the chance contains a part of random or coincidence (cf. Boethius 2008, 146). Lady Philosophy explains to him that “coincidence” is an empty word since all events are classified in causal chains (cf. Boethius 2008, 148). Only the ignorance of people who do not know the connections leads to the belief that something unexpected happened by accident. The term accident defines here something that happens presumably without any clear cause and purpose. Such a reality is not possible in a creation governed by divine providence. The Lady Philosophy defines therefore “chance” as “the unexpected result of causes that come together of things that were done for some other purpose” (Boethius 2008, 148). Having no knowledge of these causes and purposes or not understanding them does not mean that they are random or results of chaos. Their connection is the result of providence.

At this point Boethius puts the main question of the fifth book: “[...] but in all this closely linked series of causes, is there no room for

free will? Or does the chain of providence also constrain the motions of men's minds?" (Boethius 2008, 150). The answer that all rational beings must have free will to take decisions seems not to be good enough for Boethius. Therefore, he deepens the question returning partially, even if not naming it, to the issue of theodicy. God looks into the future and knows what is to come without error. Thus, there is no freedom of human will (cf. Boethius 2008, 152) if God's "certainty compels all thoughts and actions to happen" (Boethius 2008, 155). According to this assertion there are neither wicked nor good men, neither vices nor virtues because nobody can be punished or rewarded for acts he did not do freely.

The Lady Philosophy argues that the terms "foreknowledge" and "predestination" should be understood separately in their meanings. The fact that God knows in advance what men will do and how the story of creation will end does not mean that he predestines them. However, there remains one fact which is unsatisfactory. Even if God does not predestine man and creation, and "[...] even if foreknowledge is not the same as predestination, it is a sign that the future will happen inevitably in a certain way" (Boethius 2008, 159). In this case, even if one excludes foreknowledge, one can speak of predestination, insofar as the future has inevitably a predetermined path and is deprived of its dynamism (cf. Boethius 2008, 159).

Moreover, the interlocutors come back to God's foreknowledge. The Lady Philosophy introduces here an argumentation which bases on the ontological difference between divine and human nature. She explains that everything that is known is not known according to its own nature, but according to that of the knower. Thus, the divine knowledge corresponds to the nature of the divine substance (cf. Boethius 2008, 166-168). Therefore, God knows the flowing time of creation according to his divine nature. Since God's being cannot be encompassed by time because he is eternal, it is not appropriate to operate with empirical terms coming from human reason or experience.

Furthermore, "the eternity is the whole, simultaneous, perfect possession of limitless life, [...] It is in an eternal present and has an understanding of the entire flow of time" (Boethius 2008, 168-169). Consequently, God's knowledge is not a grasping one in the course of time, but, unlike the human foreknowledge, it is timeless. For God there is no future, only eternal present; this means that future-related terms such as "knowledge in advance" and "anticipation" are not appropriate at all (cf. Boethius 2008, 168-180).

The Lady Philosophy draws the conclusion regarding the divine knowledge as follows: God's "knowledge surpasses time's movements and is made in the simplicity of a continual present, which embraces all the vistas of the future and the past, and he considers all this in the act of knowing as though all things were going on at once" (Boethius 2008, 170-171). Having this kind of absolute, timeless and whole knowledge of the creation, God is not someone who sees something before it happens, but in his eternity, in the eternal present, free from before and after. This knowledge of God is not just a passive knowing, but it constitutes itself as an active act of providence. It is not *praevidentia* (pre-vision), but *providentia* (providence) (cf. Boethius 2008, 171) as act of preserving all of creation to partake of life. That's why through the divine providence is maintained the freedom of man in its integrity (cf. Boethius 2008, 175).

The Lady Philosophy closes her work with Boethius by telling him that by virtue of man's free will, his acts and prayers will have meaning:

"Do not be deceived. It is required of you that you do good and that you remember that you live in the constant sight of a judge who sees all things." (Boethius 2008, 175)

Conclusions

This essay attempted to show how philosophy can bring consolation or happiness, using the example of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*. Boethius is not a philosopher who thinks independently of Christian theology. He combines elements of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy with Christian theology and creates a hybrid of common thinking which shows a clear interdependency of philosophy and theology in his time. He was not the only one. In search of truth and as a reaction to the Gnostic thinking of his time, Clemens of Alexandria (150-215 A.D.), for instance, ascribes a significant role to pagan philosophy in understanding divine truth and interpreting Holy Scripture (cf. von Ostheim 2008, 217).

Following the footsteps of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Plotinus, Augustin etc., Boethius creates a philosophical figure, the Lady Philosophy, who fulfills her purpose very well. The uniqueness of Boethius' work *Consolatio Philosophiae* consists in the fact that it seeks a philosophical consolation, which, however, is provided with Christian elements.

The banishment from himself is the diagnostic of the Lady Philosophy on Boethius, who does not know anymore who he is.

The Lady Philosophy shows Boethius that he is not in a geographical but in an internal exile. He needs infinite consolation, the consolation of happiness that lacks nothing. Boethius, unable to stray from Christian theology or classical philosophy, speaks of happiness as God himself, as the essence of God, the goal of human happiness. Participating in divinity by doing good practicing virtues leads to the nearness to the happiness itself, namely God. Thus, the first principle of the philosophical life is clear in Boethius' understanding: no happiness without the goodness that made it, God himself. This assertion brings with it certain counterarguments that we have presented. It is mainly the theodicy with its main argumentations, the existence of evil and the free will.

Boethius perceives philosophy as healing the soul. Philosophy is not only a way of speaking or arguing, but also a way of life. If we compare his philosophy with the Greek "*apatheia*" then it is an abandonment of the sinful self. It's not about giving up at all, it's about redeeming the selfish and sinful self. In the 7th century Maximus the Confessor spoke of dispassion, that is, liberation from bodily affects (*apatheia*), abstinence from all evil and participation in God (cf. Savvidis 1997, 122). If we remember those who, through their good deeds, become doers of good and participants in the goodness of God, then we do not get far from a special asceticism of philosophy in Boethius' thinking. All of Boethius's references that we have read regarding virtue and vice are nothing more than a tendency towards a process of the soul liberation of the human being from the affects, which does not stand against human nature and determination, but it brings fulfillment for becoming like God. It is not a Manichean view that the body is the dwelling place of evil, but a process of *apatheia* in late antiquity of the Western philosophy. Boethius never says the body is bad or source of sinful fall, but he talks about man as a whole.

Boethius' originality seems to lie in the topic of free will of man. One gets the impression that the essential goal that determines the whole discussion is the free will (cf. Bechtel 2006, 283). The whole logic of the *Consolatio* is based on the idea that God preserves man's free will. This means that man is not the result of a chaotic action, but he is sustained by divine providence, being in the same time product of his own will.

Boethius' answer to the question of whether a successful life in the spirit of philosophy is possible is yes. However, this life according to the principles of Lady Philosophy is doable solely in connection with a divine entity. Seeing beyond the ballast of the material ephemeral is Boethius' main thesis. Happiness is not what it seems to be.

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