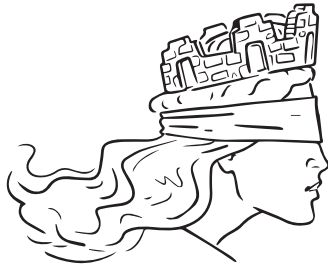


THE
CONSOLATION
OF
PHILOSOPHY



Translated by H.F. Stewart

*With an Introduction by
Austin Hoffman*

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INTRODUCTION

“Count your blessings.” “It could be worse.” “The wheel of fortune.” If you’ve ever heard these phrases, you can likely thank Boethius. A high-ranking Roman official and a Christian, Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while enduring a sudden prison sentence. The book is reminiscent of a Platonic dialogue as Boethius discusses fortune, happiness, goodness, and providence with Lady Philosophy, both a personification of wisdom and spokeswoman for the classical philosophical tradition. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a reminder to trust in the goodness of God during desperate circumstances. Although Boethius wrote many other works of theology and philosophy, *The Consolation* was his last work before his execution in A.D. 524, and it remains his most famous and quotable.

The World Around

During the time Boethius wrote *The Consolation*, the world rapidly transitioned from the Roman Empire to the Medieval era. After the reign of Caesar Augustus and his degenerate heirs, the Roman Empire faced internal collapse and external attacks. Later emperors unsuccessfully attempted various reforms to revive the dying empire. However, amid centuries of economic collapse, plague, and hardship, Germanic tribes began to invade Italy. Although the Germans sacked

Rome on several occasions, many historians date Rome's final fall at A.D. 476 when a Germanic ruler, Odoacer, deposed Roman emperor Romulus Augustus. The Germanic tribes, most notably the Ostrogoths, took control of Italy in the West while Roman custom survived in the East through the Byzantine empire.

Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* around A.D. 523 while awaiting trial for conspiracy against Theodoric. An Ostrogoth who had been imprisoned in the Byzantine empire, Theodoric received a Roman education and then served as commander for the eastern emperor Zeno. By Zeno's request, Theodoric invaded Italy and became the de facto ruler of Rome by A.D. 493 after removing the previous Germanic ruler, Odoacer. Although a tolerant ruler, capable general, and preserver of Roman tradition, Theodoric was also an Arian. Arianism was a heresy that claimed the Son was a created being, and it would become a large source of conflict between the East and West and may have contributed to Theodoric's persecution of Boethius and John I.

In the East, Justin I ruled the Byzantine empire and passed an anti-Arian edict in A.D. 523. Justin's nephew and heir, Justinian, married Theodora, a former prostitute and actress, in A.D. 525. Justinian is best known for his law code, *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which preserved Roman legal tradition for millennia after the empire's collapse. Because Greek was rarely spoken in the West, it is possible that Boethius received his education in the Byzantine Empire.

In the same year that Boethius was imprisoned, John I became pope of Rome in A.D. 523. On behalf of the Germanic king Theodoric, an Arian, he traveled to Constantinople attempting to soften the East's condemnation of Arianism. Upon John's return, Theodoric, much like with Boethius, accused him of conspiring with the Byzantines and arrested him; the pope would die in prison.

Around the time of Boethius's death in A.D. 524, Dionysius Exiguus created the *Anno Domini* calendar in order to more accurately determine the date of Easter—a major source of controversy for the

Ultimately, that friendship is only through Christ, by grace, through faith. If we read Boethius rightly, he will drive us back in faith to the God who knows all things.

~Austin Hoffman

21 Discussion Questions

Answers to these questions can be found at the back of the book.

1. Describe Lady Philosophy's appearance. What does this communicate about her nature? (Book I)
2. What prompts Boethius to write his book? (Book I)
3. According to Lady Philosophy, who has banished Boethius? (Book I)
4. How does Philosophy describe Fortune? (Book II)
5. Is fortune a biblical concept? (Book II)
6. Is failure a better teacher than success? (Book II)
7. What is the irony in pursuing isolated aspects of happiness like power, honor, riches, fame, or health? (Book III)
8. What is true happiness according to Philosophy? (Book III)
9. What does it mean that God is simple? (Book III)
10. Do moderns accept the maxim, "the perfect gives rise to the imperfect?" (Book III)
11. Does Scripture support the idea of divinization? (Book III)
12. What is power? (Book IV)
13. How does lenient sentencing potentially harm the criminal? (Book IV)



BOOK I

CONTAINING HIS COMPLAINT AND MISERIES

I.

I that with youthful heat did verses write,
Must now my woes in doleful tunes indite.
My work is framed by Muses torn and rude,
And my sad cheeks are with true tears bedewed:
For these alone no terror could affray
From being partners of my weary way.
The art that was my young life's joy and glory
Becomes my solace now I'm old and sorry;
Sorrow has filched my youth from me, the thief!
My days are numbered not by time but Grief.
Untimely hoary hairs cover my head,
And my loose skin quakes on my flesh half dead.
O happy death, that spares sweetest years,
And comes in sorrow often called with tears.
Alas, how deaf is he to wretch's cries;
And loath he is to close up weeping eyes;
While trustless chance me with vain favors crowned,
That saddest hour my life had almost drowned:

Now she hath clouded her deceitful face,
My spiteful days prolong their weary race.
My friends, why did you count me fortunate?
He that is fallen, ne'er stood in settled state.

While I ruminated these things with myself and determined to set forth my woeful complaint in writing, methought I saw a woman stand above my head, having a grave countenance, glistening clear eye, and of quicker sight than commonly Nature does afford; her color fresh and bespeaking unabated vigor, and yet discovering so many years, that she could not at all be thought to belong to our times; her stature uncertain and doubtful, for sometime she exceeded not the common height of men, and sometime she seemed to touch the heavens with her head, and if she lifted it up to the highest, she pierced the very heavens, so that she could not be seen by the beholders; her garments were made of most fine threads with cunning workmanship into an ever-during stuff, which (as I knew afterward by her own report) she had woven with her own hands. A certain duskishness caused by negligence and time had darkened their color, as it is wont to happen when pictures stand in a smoky room. In the lower part of them was placed the Greek letter π , and in the upper θ , and between the two letters, in the manner of stairs, there were certain degrees made, by which there was a passage from the lower to the higher letter: this her garment had been cut by the violence of some, who had taken away such pieces as they could get. In her right hand she had certain books, and in her left hand she held a scepter.

This woman, seeing the poetical Muses standing about my bed, and suggesting words to my tears, being moved for a little space, and inflamed with angry looks: "Who," says she, "has permitted these tragical harlots to have access to this sick man, which will not only not comfort his grief with wholesome remedies, but also nourish



BOOK II

I.

After this she remained silent for a while; and, having by that her modesty made me attentive, began in this wise: “If I be rightly informed of the causes and condition of your disease, you languish with the affection of your former fortune, and the change of that alone, as you imagine, has overthrown so much of your mind. I know the manifold illusions of that monster, exercising most alluring familiarity with them whom she means to deceive, to the end she may confound them with intolerable grief, by forsaking them upon the sudden, whose nature, customs, and desert, if you remember, you shall know that you neither did possess nor have lost anything of estimation in it; and, as I hope, I shall not need to labor much to bring these things to your remembrance, for you were wont, when she was present, and flattered you most, to assail her with manful words, and pursue her with sentences taken forth of our most hidden knowledge. But every sudden change of things happens not without a certain wavering and disquietness of mind. And this is the cause that you also for a while have lost your former tranquility and peace. But it is time for you to take and taste some gentle and pleasant thing which being received may prepare you for stronger potions. Wherefore let us use the sweetness of Rhetoric’s persuasions, which then only is

well employed when it forsakes not our ordinances; and with this, let Music, a little slave belonging to our house, chant sometime lighter and sometime sadder notes.

Wherefore, O man, what is it that has cast you into sorrow and grief? You have, methinks, seen something new and unwonted. If you think that fortune has altered her manner of proceeding toward you, you are in an error. This was always her fashion; this is her nature. She has kept that constancy in your affairs which is proper to her, in being mutable; such was her condition when she fawned upon you and allured you with enticements of feigned happiness. You have discovered the doubtful looks of this blind goddess. She, which conceals herself from others, is wholly known to you. If you like her, frame yourself to her conditions, and make no complaint. If you detest her treachery, despise and cast her off, with her pernicious flattery. For that which has caused you so much sorrow should have brought you to great tranquility. For she has forsaken you, of whom no man can be secure. Do you esteem that happiness precious which you are to lose? And is the present fortune dear unto you, of whose stay you are not sure, and whose departure will breed your grief? And if she can neither be kept at our will, and makes them miserable whom she at last leaves, what else is fickle fortune but a token of future calamity? For it is not sufficient to behold that which we have before our eyes; wisdom ponders the event of things, and this mutability on both sides makes the threats of fortune not to be feared, nor her flatterings to be desired. Finally, you must take in good part whatsoever happens unto you within the reach of fortune, when once you have submitted your neck to her yoke. And if to her whom, of your own accord, you have chosen for your mistress, you would prescribe a law how long she were to stay, and when to depart, should you not do her mighty wrong, and with your impatience make your estate more intolerable, which you can not better? If you set up your sails to the wind, you shall be carried not whither your will desires, but whither the gale drives. If you sow



BOOK III

I.

Though she had ended her verse, yet the sweetness of it made me remain astonished, attentive, and desirous to hear her longer. Wherefore, after a while, I said: “O most effectual refreshment of wearied minds, how have I been comforted with your weighty sentences and pleasing music! Insomuch that I begin to think myself not unable to encounter the assaults of Fortune. Wherefore, I am not now afraid, but rather earnestly desire to know those remedies, which before you told me were too sharp.” To which she answered: “I perceived as much as you say, when I saw you hearken to my speeches with so great silence and attention, and I expected this disposition of your mind, or rather more truly caused it myself. For the remedies which remain are of that sort that they are bitter to the taste, but being inwardly received wax sweet. And whereas you say that you are desirous to hear; how much would this desire increase if you knew whither we go about to bring you!”

“Whither?” said I. “To true felicity,” said she, “which your mind also dreams of, but your sight is so dimmed with fantasies that you can not behold it as it is.” Then I beseeched her to explicate without delay wherein true happiness consists. To which she answered: “I will willingly do so for your sake, but first I will endeavor to declare in

words and to give shape to that which is better known unto you, that, having thoroughly understood it, by reflecting of the contrary you may discover the type of perfect blessedness.

He that a fruitful field will sow,
 Doth first the ground from bushes free,
 All fern and briars likewise mow,
 That he his harvest great may see.
 Honey seems sweeter to our taste,
 If cloyed with noisome food it be.
 Stars clearer shine when Notus's blast
 Hath ceased the rainy storms to breed.
 When Lucifer hath night defaced,
 The day's bright horses then succeed.
 So you, whom seeming goods do feed,
 First shake off yokes which so you press
 That Truth may then your mind possess."

II.

Then, for a while looking steadfastly upon the ground, and, as it were, retiring herself to the most secret seat of her soul, she began in this manner: "All men's thoughts, which are turmoiled with manifold cares, take indeed divers courses, but yet endeavor to attain the same end of happiness, which is that good which, being once obtained, nothing can be further desired. Which is the chiefest of all goods, and contains in itself whatsoever is good, and if it wanted anything it could not be the chiefest, because there would something remain besides it which might be wished for. Wherefore, it is manifest that blessedness is an estate replenished with all that is good. This, as we said, all men endeavor to obtain by divers ways. For there is naturally ingrafted in men's minds an earnest desire of that which is truly good; but deceitful error withdraws it to that which falsely seems such. So that



BOOK V

I.

Having said thus, she began to turn her speech to treat and explicate certain other questions, when I interrupted her, saying: “Your exhortation is very good, and well-seeming your authority. But I find it true by experience, as you affirmed, that the question of Providence is entangled with many others. For I desire to know whether you think chance to be anything at all, and what it is.”

“I make haste,” said she, “to perform my promise, and to show you the way by which you may return to your country. But these other questions, though they be very profitable, yet they are somewhat from our purpose, and it is to be feared lest being wearied with digressions you be not able to finish your direct journey.”

“There is no fear of that,” said I, “for it will be a great ease to me to understand those things in which I take great delight, and withal, when your disputation is fenced in on every side with sure conviction, there can be no doubt made of anything you shall infer.”

“I will,” said she, “do as you would have me,” and withal began in this manner: “If any shall define chance to be an event produced by a confused motion, and without connection of causes, I affirm that there is no such thing, and that chance is only an empty voice that has beneath it no real signification. For what place can confusion have, since

God disposes all things in due order? For it is a true sentence that of nothing comes nothing, which none of the ancients denied, though they held not that principle of the efficient cause, but of the material subject, laying it down as in a manner the ground of all their reasonings concerning nature. But if anything proceeds from no causes, that will seem to have come from nothing, which if it cannot be, neither is it possible there should be any such chance as is defined a little before.”

“What then,” said I, “is there nothing that can rightly be called chance or fortune? Or is there something, though unknown to the common sort, to which these names agree?”

“My Aristotle,” said she, “in his *Books of Nature* declared this point briefly and very near the truth.”

“How?” said I.

“When,” said she, “anything is done for some certain cause, and some other thing happens for other reasons than that which was intended, this is called chance; as if one digging his ground with intention to till it, finds an hidden treasure. This is thought to have fallen thus out by fortune, but it is not of nothing, for it has peculiar causes whose unexpected and not foreseen concurrence seems to have brought forth a chance. For unless the husbandman had dug up his ground, and unless the other had hidden his money in that place, the treasure had not been found. These are therefore the causes of this fortunate accident, which proceeds from the meeting and concurrence of causes, and not from the intention of the doer. For neither he that hid the gold nor he that tilled his ground had any intention that the money should be found, but, as I said, it followed and concurred that this man should dig up in the place where the other hid. Wherefore, we may define chance thus: That it is an unexpected event of concurring causes in those things which are done to some end and purpose. Now the cause why causes so concur and meet so together, is that order proceeding with inevitable connection, which, descending from the fountain of Providence, disposes all things in their places and times.



ANSWERS TO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Describe Lady Philosophy's appearance. What does this communicate about her nature? (Book I)**

Lady Philosophy appears with varying heights, at times piercing the sky. Her eyes are keen beyond men's power. She made her garments from imperishable material, yet many men have stolen fragments of them, and she is covered with film from neglect. On the lowest hem is *Pi*, with steps ascending to *Theta*. In one hand she holds books, and in the other, a scepter. Her appearance reflects Boethius's perspective on wisdom. She is both low and accessible and yet beyond the reach of the mind. Various philosophical schools have small snatches of truth but fail to comprehend the whole. She can never fully disappear yet can be neglected. Her books and scepter call to mind Plato's philosopher-king. She represents both practical wisdom—what to do in a situation—and speculative wisdom—what is the nature of reality.

2. **What prompts Boethius to write his book? (Book I)**

When Boethius is suddenly imprisoned for protecting the senate, he complains that he is suffering unjustly, that the wicked are more powerful than the righteous, and that the world is only gov-

erned by random chance. While he still believes that God governs the world, Boethius does not remember how. Boethius does not fear death but grieves his loss of Fortune's gifts.

3. **According to Lady Philosophy, who has banished Boethius? (Book I)**

Lady Philosophy claims that Boethius has banished himself. He could never become an exile unless he wished to. The city Philosophy speaks of is the city of God. Anyone who dwells there may never be banished, yet someone can exile themselves by refusing to live there. Philosophy is more disheartened that she has been exiled from Boethius's mind than that he no longer possesses his library.

4. **How does Philosophy describe Fortune? (Book II)**

Fortune wears many disguises, acts friendly, and flatters, yet leaves without warning and overwhelms with pain. Her only constancy is her inconstancy. She is treacherous, traitorous, and terrifies with trickery. She cannot be trusted, retained, or mastered. She is like the wind which blows where it will. In medieval depictions, she is often veiled or blind and spinning her wheel.

5. **Is fortune a biblical concept? (Book II)**

While fortune as an impersonal force governing the world through random chance is unbiblical, the Bible does teach us to expect various seasons of good or bad "fortune" (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). Some may be blessed with earthly prosperity while others suffer sudden calamity, but God governs all things. This is the harder teaching administered by Philosophy. God is distributing both fortunes according to what will strengthen His children—this is how "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28). The challenge for believers is to rejoice in all circumstances despite the appearance of "bad fortune."