The Consolation of Philosophy Study Guide

The Consolation of Philosophy by Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

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BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Boethius is despairing while he waits in prison for his execution. Philosophy, embodied in a beautiful woman, comes to show him that his sadness is misguided. In the course of a lengthy discussion, she proves to him that true happiness is found in contemplating God.

Boethius is, at first, reluctant to understand the points Philosophy is trying to make. His misery is quite real to him and has made him forget all that he once knew as a philosopher. Sensing his state of mind, Philosophy decides to proceed gradually. She begins by showing how foolish it is to stake one's happiness on Fortune. Fortune, as all should know, can be both both generous and merciless. One should never count anything as his own, but rather regard it as a temporary loan from Fortune which can be taken away at any time. Indeed, even if one never lost one's wealth, the wealth would still be worthless, for that is not what can make a person happy.

Most men believe that one of five things—or a combination of the five—is the formula for happiness: money, honor, power, fame, or pleasure. However, none of these goods can really make a person happy, and there is plenty of evidence simply in the fact that people who possess them are often miserable. However, since men are naturally directed to seek happiness, there must be something about each of those five objects that is legitimately good. She then reasons that the ultimate good must contain all of those goods, but not, so to speak, piecemeal; rather, the ultimate good must be unified. She reasons that the ultimate good must be nothing other than God, for he is—by definition—the most perfect being and the most perfect being must also be the best being. If he is the best being, then it is logically necessary that he is also the highest good, which, in turn, implies that he is also happiness.

Boethius accepts everything so far but cannot help feeling dissatisfied with his misfortune. If God is so good, he asks, why does he allow the just to suffer while the wicked so often prosper? Philosophy argues that, though it may seem that way, in fact the opposite is true: Everyone always receives exactly what they deserve. Since happiness is found by seeking the good, the virtuous are rewarded simply by living good lives. No worldly reward could rival the greatness of being close to God. In a similar fashion, the wicked are punished by virtue of their own actions. To live an evil life is the greatest misery; however, the wicked, she argues, are actually made happier when they are punished. Punishment will tend to curb their evil ways and, therefore, they might turn their lives around and start living virtuously. The worst thing that can happen to an evil man is to be allowed to continue working his evil deeds. The winds of fortune are not meaningless, even if they do sometimes seem to be unfair. God is always in control and he allows the innocent to suffer to test their virtue. By emerging triumphantly, they manifest their goodness—and God's goodness—to the entire universe. God's purposes are not always clear, but one might always have faith that he directs everything according to his perfect intelligence and perfect goodness.

With the substance of her argument proven, Boethius is still troubled by the question of free will. If God orders the entire world and everything happens for a reason, this would seem to imply that man does not act freely. If he did, he could potentially disrupt God's plan. Yet, if God knows what man will do before he acts, it would seem that he acts, not because he wants to, but because God has preordained it. Philosophy says that this seeming contradiction only arises because of man's limited intellect. Man is time-bound and cannot conceive of how the eternal God knows what will happen. He does not see things unravel moment to moment, but rather, each moment in the world's history is always present to him. While everything man does is in accordance with God's plan, it is also done in accordance with man's own rational nature and, therefore, is a free act.

Book I

Book I Summary

Boethius is sitting in his jail cell writing a poem bewailing his suffering. He is surrounded, literally, by the Muses who inspire him in his writing. He is interrupted by a beautiful woman, who seems tall enough that, if if she stood up straight, her head would penetrate into the heavens. For Boethius' sake—and, therefore, the philosopher in general—she bends low to the ground to make herself accessible. Her face is youthful, but her bearing shows how ancient she truly she is; it is obvious she is not a product of Boethius' time or, perhaps, any time. On her dress is stitched the Greek letter Pi and, slightly above it, the letter Theta. They stand for practice and theory, respectively, and there is a stitched staircase between them. She tells the Muses not to distract Boethius, for a mind like his—the mind of a philosopher—has higher aims than mere poetry. Seeing how distraught Boethius, the woman finally speaks and praises his former way of life. He once was a philosopher, who, through reason, penetrated into the essence of nature and saw the order of the world and how God's providence governed everything. She tells him, as if a doctor making a diagnosis, that though he has fallen from his once-glorious heights, there is no permanent loss.

Boethius finally recognizes her: She is Philosophy. He asks why she has come to his prison cell; was it to share in his misery? She tells him that she would never abandon one of her students, especially one—like he—who suffers because of his commitment to her. She points to the examples of Anaxagoras and Socrates as examples of men who had the consolation of philosophy while they endured persecution from simple-minded, worldly men. She says, paradoxically, that such enemies are really of no threat to a philosopher, for he is protected by the fortress of philosophy and can do real harm. For now, Boethius cannot understand this; his suffering seems quite real at the moment. She tells him, in verse, that only the wicked and foolish are seduced by the ups and downs of Fortune; the philosopher is unmoved by anything that comes his way, good or bad.

Boethius remains silent, clearly confused. She asks him to speak, pointing out that she cannot perform her role as physician of the soul if he does not reveal what, in particular, ails him. He says that it should be obvious what troubles him. He is trapped in his miserable cell, condemned to death. He recalls his comfortable, leisurely life as a free man, studying in his library for long hours contemplating the perfect forms of governments and the nature of the universe. His commitment to philosophy was so strong that he could not, in good conscience, restrain himself from always standing up for truth whenever it came into question. This caused him no little trouble in his life, as foolish men become vengeful when they are contradicted. Eventually, he was sentenced to death for defending the senate, the entirety of which was condemned by the Emperor Hadrian on trumped up charges of treason. He was once a wealthy man, but now all his property has been confiscated. He has also lost his good reputation, for

though he suffers unjustly, the mass of people are ever eager to heap censure upon a condemned man.

Contemplating his misfortune prompts him to sing. He praises God, the creator and ruler of the universe, who orders everything except for the affairs of men. Men were blessed with the gift of freedom, which, unfortunately, so many pervert by living lives of wickedness and villainy. When he is done, Philosophy tells him that though his external circumstances are indeed miserable, he is the one who is truly responsible for his suffering. One does not need books or libraries in order to be a philosopher, for philosophy is in the mind, which can never be taken away. She disagrees with him that the affairs of men are outside of the scope of Divine Providence. Indeed, though it may seem that the wicked prosper and the virtuous suffer, happiness is the reward of those who follow the dictates of nature, and misery is the punishment for disobedience. In order to begin his spiritual rejuvenation, she asks him a series of philosophical questions: about the nature of Divine providence, what man is, and so on. Boethius is only able to muster insufficient responses to the questions; his mind has become rusty.

Book I Analysis

The extent to which this story is autobiographical is the subject of significant discussion and debate. It is historically certain that Boethius' actual experience was very similar to the situation described in the book. He was indeed condemned to death by King Theodoric, but the nature of his sentence differs factually from what is presented in the book. He was, first of all, condemned on suspicion of conspiring with the hated Byzantines, not for defending the Senate. Further, in the story Boethius complains of not being given a trial, but did in fact receive one. This last discrepancy, however, may not be terribly significant. Boethius lived and wrote during the last, decadent years of the Roman Empire and the fact that he received a trial is no guarantee that he received a fair one. However, the fact that he changed his crime is significant. There is, perhaps, something more sympathetic about the crime he is supposed to have committed in the book. He is directly condemned for doing what is required by virtue—standing up for the innocent. There is nothing inherently virtuous, however, about conspiring with the Byzantine Empire. Even assuming he was innocent of those crimes, his suffering has more the character of victimization than martyrdom.

It is worth considering the presentation of Philosophy. In the ancient world and, indeed, throughout the Middle Ages, it was common to refer to philosophy as a woman and, so, in this depiction, Boethius is not being, or attempting to be, original. Nonetheless, he is transmitting certain cultural assumptions which are necessary to understand the work. One thought that might jump out at the reader is how strange it is for philosophy to be embodied by a woman when philosophy was, in the ancient world, an exclusively masculine field. Women were generally believed to be intellectually incapable of the kind of rigorous, theoretical thought necessary to study philosophy. However, this depiction is, in fact, completely fitting with the cultural attitudes of the ancient Western world. Philosophers frequently distinguished between the active and the passive, the agent and the patient. This distinction generally mapped onto gender roles. Men were

the actors while women were passive and inactive. A man was estimated according to what he did, while a woman was valued based on what she was—by being beautiful, elegant, charming, and so on. Returning to the case at hand, one can see that this distinction remains. The philosopher is active; he works rigorously to achieve and obtain a truth that is naturally foreign to him. Through hours of long and difficult study, he hopes to achieve some measure of wisdom. Lady Philosophy, on the other hand, is already perfect and complete. She does not need to study or reflect; in other words, she can, like a beautiful women, simply be, while the men act. While certainly unacceptable in many ways to modern standards, for it denigrates the intellectual capability of women, it should be noted that the ancients did not despise the women, even if they did undervalue them. As Boethius shows, both men and women can be excellent, but each in their own, separate ways.

Book II

Book II Summary

Philosophy diagnoses Boethius' spiritual troubles as a longing for his lost fortune. She points out that Fortune is a "monster" that seems to take pleasure in its own predictability and loves upsetting men just when they get comfortable with their possessions. She reminds Boethius that he, when he was still blessed with riches and comforts, made many similar arguments. However, it is understandable that such a sudden turn of events should upset him, but it is time for him to stop moping and think correctly about the situation. She guesses that he probably feels as if Fortune has changed its attitude towards him, but he is mistaken; Fortune treats all equally, because it is utterly indifferent and chaotic. Further, he should not really feel that he has lost anything, for he should know that he never really owned anything. All that he had was, so to speak, on loan from Fortune, subject to being revoked at any time. Instead of being depressed about his loss, he should be thankful that Fortune allowed him the opportunity to be wealthy for as long as he was. He was aware all along that Fortune both exalts and humbles, and, therefore, when he found himself blessed with money and honor, he should have always kept in mind how weak his hold was on the money and honor.

Boethius complains that the points she makes, while elegant and perhaps even logical, do nothing to soothe his pain because they are, ultimately, only words, while his pain is quite real and tangible. She tells him that she has not yet gotten to the substance of her treatment; her present remarks are merely a preparation for her main argument. However, she points out, he should not be as a destitute as he is, for Fortune has not taken away all his blessings. She reminds him of the many members of his family he cherishes, including his two sons who take after his high morals. One cannot expect to be perfectly happy in life; almost invariably, something is lacking. If a man has a good reputation, he may have an unhappy domestic life; if a man is blessed with riches, he might be despised by the masses. Boethius, then, should focus on those aspects of his life which are good and not so unfairly accuse Fortune of mistreating him.

Boethius is forced to agree with her, but says it is natural for someone to be miserable who has once experienced happiness and then had it taken away. She disagrees strongly with him. His misery is not caused by his external circumstances but by his false beliefs. Happiness, she says, is the highest possible good. Material goods, however, cannot be the highest possible good since they can be taken away; it would be better to have something not subject to loss. She reminds him that he once believed exactly what she is saying. He once argued that the soul of a man is immortal while the body is perishable and, therefore, relatively insignificant. If he would only recall this wisdom, he would realize that he has not really lost anything of value, for no amount of wealth can equal the possession of truth.

Philosophy then decides to take the argument to the next level. Supposing even that material goods could not be taken away, she argues that they are still inherently valueless. Money, for example, is not really valued in and of itself, but when it is spent, and no longer possessed. Moreover, acquiring money necessarily requires making someone else poorer, for there is a limited amount of it. It would seem unfitting for the greatest good to have such a dreadful consequence to it. In the same way, all the things that men normally value, in the final analysis, are insufficient: Beautiful land, fine clothes, a large house, and fame can never truly satisfy man. Even high office, perhaps what was once Boethius' greatest accomplishment, is really worthless. Boethius objects and says that he merely wanted a way to, so to speak, share his virtue with others. He wanted to hold power so he could use it to promote justice and cultivate virtue in his subjects. Philosophy rebukes him here and accuses him of really seeking fame and approval. She points out how worthless such an accomplishment is: The earth is so small in the scheme of the massive universe; why should someone glory in having achieved a very temporary fame in one very small fraction of it, like Rome?

Philosophy says that Fortune is not always malicious. It can indeed, at times, be quite benevolent, but, paradoxically, only when men think it to be harshest. Loss can cause a man to reflect on the transience of his material goods and look for a higher form of happiness which is impervious to the winds of chance.

Book II Analysis

Boethius' religious views have been the subject of much debate. It is known with certainty that he was at least once a Christian, for among his works are several works on explicitly Christian theology. Yet, many feel that the lack of any direct reference to the Church or Christ is proof of a religious conversion to Roman paganism. God is always referred to as a kind of a metaphysical, impersonal entity; Boethius does not treat him with the kind of personal familiarity that one might expect in a Christian writing. Further, while he quotes freely from Pagan sources such as Homer and Plato, he does not even so much as mention the Bible.

It is certainly true that Boethius is heavily influenced by Pagan philosophers. He has explicit admiration especially for the greatest Greek philosophers, like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Further, his philosophy is obviously influenced by the Stoics, even if he does seem to deride them at times. The notion that the happy man is immune to the caprice of fortune is the very essence of Stoic philosophy. Likewise, many non-philosophical beliefs expressed in the book show a clear debt to the Pagans. For example, on page 47, Lady Philosophy talks of a time before civilization where men had everything they wanted and did not need any work. While perhaps there is some superficial resemblance to Eden in this passage, such a belief in a "Golden age" was an almost universal belief in the ancient Pagan world. Likewise, ancient writers were fond of reflecting on the enormity of the universe and relative tininess of Earth as a way of showing the folly of human ambitions.

It would probably be wrong, however, to conclude from this that Boethius was himself a Pagan. He lived in Rome and it is only natural that he would inherit many of the ideas and beliefs of his own country. Being a Christian does not rob one of his cultural heritage. Further, one can find a clear Christian influence in the way in which Boethius' ideas do depart from the Pagan philosophers. Any reader of ancient philosopher will sense a certain kind of elitism in the philosophers. The superiority of the philosophers over the common man was not simply a consequence of a choice in profession. People like Plato literally believed that a person was either born with a philosophical ability or not and, as a matter of fact, the vast majority of men could never hope for the true happiness that was reserved for the philosopher. Boethius' view, on the other hand, is substantially more democratic, as it were. He speaks of the nobility of man as such; by virtue of possessing human nature, one has a certain nobility. Happiness and wisdom, then, are available to everyone, even if very few choose to pursue it. This philosophical innovation agrees nicely with the Christian belief that salvation (that is, happiness) was open to all humankind, one of the several revolutionary beliefs of that religion.

The only question that remains is why Boethius does not explicitly choose to include Christianity in the text. To answer this question, it may be enough to just look at the book's title: THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY. Philosophy is a discipline which relies solely upon the use of reason and, therefore, cannot utilize the revealed truths of any faith. This does not mean that a philosopher must reject faith, but simply that if one is making a philosophical argument, one must adhere to a philosophical method. Further, Boethius might have been writing for an audience broader than Christendom and therefore chose not to include references to his religion which might have alienated some readers.

Book III

Book III Summary

Boethius tells Philosophy that already he feels greatly consoled and is eager to continue their discussion. She tells him that the next subject is the centerpiece of the whole conversation: the essence of true happiness. True happiness is what all men naturally want, the highest good, the best possible thing. There are many different opinions about what this exactly is. Some men believe that it is to have everything they want and so spend their lives in pursuit of wealth. Others believe that it is to be honored among men and thus work all their lives for a good reputation. Some believe that power is the greatest good and therefore strive for high political office. Still others believe that to be famous is the greatest happiness. The majority of men, however, believe that true happiness is obtained when their bodily pleasures are all satisfied. Many people also combine these goals in various ways. Some seek to be wealthy in order to fulfill all of their bodily desires. Some seek to perfect their body and make it strong in order to be valiant and battle and thereby become famous.

These five goods are not to be altogether dismissed. It is, indeed, good, for example, to be self-sufficient and need nothing. In a similar fashion, there is something legitimate in all of the other goods. This is because nature has ordained everything to seek its own natural end or goal. The beasts in the field instinctively search for food and escape from predators because their sole goal in life is to survive and reproduce. Man's goal, however, is higher, for he seeks a true happiness. His happiness is greater but, unfortunately, more obscure, and therefore he cannot seek it as directly as the boar or eagle does.

Now, ultimately, the reason these five goods all ultimately disappoint their possessors is because they fail to deliver what is expected of them. Men desire wealth because they want to be free of worry and need, and yet, as Boethius himself can attest, no amount of wealth is sufficient to eliminate all worry from man's life. Indeed, wealth even creates new needs and worries. A poor man does not need to worry greatly about being robbed, for example, but a rich man might need to hire guards to protect himself and his property.

Honor, too, is no guarantee of happiness or virtue. Indeed, far from being conducive to making a man better, a high office will often only expose his sins and ruin his name among mankind. In fact, there have been so many examples of corrupt officials and politicians that people no longer pay any respect to their offices. Further, whatever apparent happiness such dignity can bestow would immediately betray its worthlessness when one leaves his own city; a barbarian would not care about a person's fancy title far from Rome.

One might say that, even if high offices are, ultimately, insufficient, perhaps the highest office, that of king, would prove to constitute ultimate happiness because kings are the

most powerful men in the world. Yet, such a claim is obviously false as soon as it is uttered because stories of miserable kings pervade history. One need look no further than Rome's own history for plenty of examples—Nero, for example, was notorious for his wicked lifestyle and miserable existence.

That fame constitutes the greatest happiness is perhaps the least convincing of the five claims. Fame comes from two sources, from popular acclaim or from a high birth. In the first case, fame is awarded really for no reason, because it is given by the unthinking, vulgar mob. From the moment it is given, it is subject to be taken away at any time, for men are fickle and change their minds quickly. If fame is a result of one's heritage, then there is no reason to glory in it, either, for then one is not famous for any good deed he did, but merely because of who his parents are, a fact over which he has no control.

Finally, there is the case of bodily pleasures. It is characteristic of bodily pleasures that they tend to balance themselves out later. If a man indulges his body at one moment, he will often suffer for it later. A man who eats too many sweets, for example, will enjoy them for the moment but will find himself with a stomach ache later on. Further, if bodily pleasure were really identical with happiness then it would follow that animals are happy, since they devote themselves entirely to caring for their bodies.

The five commonly sought after goods, then, turn out to be insufficient, but as has been mentioned, there is something at least apparently good that men seek in these things. The error men run into is to divide happiness. They correctly identify good in all these things, but they seek them individually. It is good to be self-sufficient and it is good to enjoy one's life, but if these things are sought individually, they can never be obtained. True happiness involves possessing the single, highest good which bestows all of them simultaneously. It is now time, Philosophy says, to investigate the nature of this highest good, but before doing so she prays to God that with the discussion they might reach the truth.

She begins the argument by proposing a metaphysical principle: The imperfect is always the product of the perfect. Since there are many examples of imperfection on Earth, it follows then that there is something perfect, namely, God, the cause of everything else. Now, to be perfect means to lack nothing, and it follows, therefore, that God is the highest good, for if there were anything higher than him, it would mean he is, relatively, imperfect. Since the highest good is happiness, as they concluded earlier, then God must be happiness. Now, since God, by his nature, is singular, man can never hope to aspire to actually be God, but his happiness, rather, consists in a certain participation in God's Divine happiness. Next, Philosophy argues that the highest good must be something single and unified, for when something loses its unity, it also loses it being. When a person's soul separates from his body, for example, the body dies. This demonstrates the folly of those who attempt to approach happiness through its individual aspects; if the highest good were composed of several parts—wealth, honor, fame, and so forth—then it would not be perfect, because any composition requires something to compose it, but whatever composed it would necessarily be greater than it. Therefore, it follows from all this that the highest happiness, God, is one, but bestows all the things that man naturally seeks.

Philosophy then returns to a point Boethius made earlier. She reminds him of how he said that the entire world is governed by God. Now, since God is both good and omnipotent, if he orders everything, it logically follows that everything is ordered for the good. Therefore, evil really is nothing because if it existed it would imply either evil or powerlessness in God, which is impossible. Boethius sees how all this follows, but cannot help feeling the argument is somehow wrong, for it certainly seems there is evil in the world.

Book III Analysis

In order to understand the argument Philosophy is making in this chapter, it is necessary to understand the philosophical assumptions that are involved in the arguments. Central to ancient metaphysics was the notion of teleology, the idea that everything has a purpose or end towards which it necessarily strives. It was commonly believed, for example, that a rock's natural end was to go towards the center of the earth, and therefore when it is lifted in the air, it falls downwards. In a similar fashion, man is believed to have an ultimate end, happiness. It is wrong to think of it as a choice to pursue happiness; the ancients would believe that such a statement amounts to nonsense. Rather, happiness is the motivation behind all choices; one chooses to do this or that because it appears to be good to him. This is why Philosophy does not, and indeed cannot, reject the five false goods completely. Boethius is philosophically committed to the idea that when men seek these things, they are seeking something that seems genuinely capable of making them happy. Thus, Philosophy identifies aspects of each of the goods which are legitimately good and then, finally, concludes that those good aspects are only truly found in God.

Another metaphysical principle supposed in this chapter is the notion that the perfect is the cause of the imperfect. What this principle means is something must first "possess" whatever it causes. Something can only be made hot by something that is already hot, like fire; a cold thing cannot make something else hot. Likewise, a teacher must first know his subject before he can teach it to a student. To return to Philosophy's argument, if there is something that is good, but not perfectly good, it follows logically that it was caused by something at least as good as it is. What causes it, in turn, if it is imperfect, must be caused by something else. This process can only terminate in something which is completely perfect, for what is completely perfect has no need of a cause, but exists necessarily. This supremely perfect being, of course, is God.

Book IV

Book IV Summary

Boethius thanks Philosophy for her arguments and says he is beginning to remember the wisdom he lost. However, he is still troubled by the question of how it is that God, who is all-powerful and supremely good, allows the good to suffer and the wicked to be rewarded. Philosophy admits that it is a difficult question but that, in reality, the good never suffer and the wicked are always punished. This claim, she says, follows from what has already been proven. To be powerful means that one can obtain what one wants. Now, it was already determined that all men want happiness and that happiness is participating in God's divinity through a good life. It follows, then, that the the wicked are truly powerless and the good are the most powerful, for only the good truly obtain what all men want. The evil, on the other hand, try to be happy, but choose the wrong means to do so. In some cases, perhaps, they even stop seeking happiness, and as a result they lose some of their being; to be human means to seek happiness, and, therefore, if one stops seeking happiness one becomes, in a certain sense, less human.

Another way of putting the same argument is that actions are their own rewards. When a good man does a virtuous act, there is no need for him to receive any kind of external compensation like wealth or honor, for he is sufficiently rewarded by having done a good deed. On the other hand, justice is served even when a wicked man gets away with committing a crime, because his evil soul makes him miserable. It makes him miserable by depriving him of his humanity. Philosophy argues that sinful men really do become bestial, insofar as their brutish actions resemble the actions of animals.

Boethius accepts everything so far but remarks that he still wishes that the evil would lose the ability to persecute the good. Philosophy, once again, corrects him. First of all, if an evil person has power, he is doubly cursed, for he has the ability to indulge his wicked desires in a way he could not if he were powerless. Further, any power an evil man has will eventually be taken away from, even if it is not until his death. This is a blessing, however, for it is truly miserable for an evil man to continue in his evil ways. It follows from this that when the wicked are punished, they actually are made better, because the punishments take away their ability to sin. The point can be proven with another argument. Everyone admits that the punishment of crime is just and, further, that whatever is just is good. Now, if a person is evil and has something good done to him, he is better for it. Therefore, if an evil person is punished for his crime, he is made happier thereby.

Boethius is still troubled, however, by the force of his original question: Why does God allow the good to suffer and the evil to prosper? Even if the good are duly rewarded by their good deeds and the evil are duly punished by their evil deeds, it would seem unfitting for their worldly fortunes to so often depart from what they deserve. It would seem that it is all simply a matter of chance and that there is no reason or order behind any of it. Philosophy remarks that something can seem random to a person who cannot

understand the order behind it, and such is the case here. To explain how everything really does go according to God's plan requires entering into rather lengthy discussions of such enormous topics as Providence, fate, and free will, and she asks Boethius' permission to proceed slowly and methodically.

She says that God is like a craftsman, who, before he starts his work, already has a perfect idea of what he is going to build. God is the same way; from all eternity, he has decided what the world will be and how history will unfold it, and through fate he allows his plan to be executed. Fate is the force which controls those things which are furthest from God, like the daily affairs of men, while God uses his providence to directly order those things close to him. However, no matter the distance, God is in complete control everywhere. Now, that said, when God created the universe, he ordered everything to seek the good, which is himself. His methods, however, sometimes defy human reason or understanding, for man's finite intellect cannot see the true, far-reaching consequences of an event. Thus, at times, God may give power to a good man so he can correct the wicked, but he may also give power to the wicked to persecute the good. This does not mean God has taken the side of the wicked, but rather, that he plans to use even the wicked deed to create some greater good. Suffering, for example, allows a person to be virtuous and faithful; it is an opportunity to overcome a test and manifest, to the entire universe, the extent of one's virtue. It follows from all of this, then, that Fortune is always a benevolent force, even if it sometimes seems severe and even malicious.

Book IV Analysis

This chapter deals primarily with what is commonly referred to as the Problem of Evil. The problem is formulated, generally, in the following terms: If there is evil in the world, it is a sign that God is not omnipotent, not good, or does not exist, for otherwise God would eradicate evil. In the "Consolation," the question is formulated in terms of justice. Boethius is not troubled by the fact that people suffer; he is troubled by the fact that the good suffer and, interestingly, that quite often evil people do not suffer. The way the question is framed highlights the way people in the ancient Western world thought; they were not concerned so much with mercy—a feeling much more prominent in modern thought—but justice.

One point regarding Philosophy's answer to Boethius might escape the reader. As the reader will recall, in Book I, Boethius recited a poem which mentioned that the affairs of men were outside of God's providence; he gave man free will and allowed him to do as he will. This kind of argument is one common answer to the problem of evil, namely, that evil is a result of man's freedom, with which God chooses not to interfere. To Philosophy, this is not a convincing solution, and she even hints at her disagreement when he first made this statement. Here, however, she makes no mistake about her view: Everything, even the choices of men, are completely subject to the will of God. This does not necessarily amount to a denial of free will and that puzzle will be discussed at length in Book V.

As the book progresses, it should become increasingly clear that Boethius is, in fact, a Christian. Even while the discussion of God remains relatively impersonal and no direct mention is made of Christ, his trust in Divine providence is something which is foreign—at least in the degree presented here—to Pagan philosophers. Indeed, one might see a brief flash of Christian doctrine on page 124 when Boethius asks Philosophy is she believes souls are punished after death. She responds: "Yes, there are, some of them extremely harsh, and some, I think, with a purifying mercy." This arguably corresponds rather well with the Catholic doctrines of Hell and Purgatory. Hell is a place of unending, miserable punishment and could correspond to the "extremely harsh" punishment. Purgatory is a place where a basically good soul is cleansed of the lingering effects of sin before it is admitted to Heaven. This could very well be what he means by "purifying mercy." However, this is not a decisive answer to the question, for Pagan philosophers held a wide variety of opinions on the nature of the afterlife, and some, like Plato, reached a conclusion similar to Philosophy's theory.

Book V

Book V Summary

Convinced of the bulk of Philosophy's arguments, Boethius now asks a few tangential questions. First, he says it seems to him that there is no room for chance in the system Philosophy describes. She responds by saying that it all depends exactly on how "chance" is defined. If chance is meant to be a kind of completely random and arbitrary force that comes into being from nothing then, indeed, she does reject it, for such a thing is metaphysical nonsense. However, there is another definition of chance, which she borrows from Aristotle, that states that an event is said to happen by chance when the result is besides the intention of the parties involved. For example, imagine if a man buried a chest of gold in a field and, years later, another man, while digging for potatoes, dug up the chest. This event would be said to happen by chance because neither the man who buried the chest nor the man who discovered intended what happened. However, seen from God's perspective, the event was preordained all along.

This invites another question from Boethius: If God foreknows everything that men do, does this not entail that they do not have free will? For one can only know what is certain, and if it is certain, say, that a man will sit on a chair, then he sits on the chair out of necessity. Therefore, he has no free will. He remarks that some try to get out of this argument by reversing the logic. The man does not sit in the chair because God knows he will; rather, God knows he will sit in the chair because he does. Such a response, however, is not sufficient, because it simply rearranges the word; the fundamental problem remains.

Philosophy agrees that the question of free will is a difficult one but that there is no necessary connection between believing that man has free will and that God has foreknowledge of all that happens. She says that the difficulty arises from man's limited intellect; if he could think like God does, it would be obvious that there is no contradiction. God, she explains, is not time-bound like men are; he does not pass from moment to moment. Rather, he is eternal, which does not merely mean that he exists at all time; rather, he is outside of time and it is as if all moments in time were the present for him. Thus, he can simply look at the world and see everything unfolded throughout all of history. This does not entail that the actions of any man are necessary, even though God knows what will happen. For an action to be free, it simply means that it originates from the actor's own powers.

Having thus concluded their discussion, she exhorts him to keep his spirits up and focus his mind always on God.

Book V Analysis

This final chapter deals with what is probably the second most well-known difficult for Christianity, after the problem of evil which was discussed in the previous chapter. If God knows the future, it would seem that man has no free will. Philosophy offers up a number of arguments to avoid this conclusion. First, she distinguishes between the way man knows and the way God knows. Man is a temporal being and lives and experiences each moment. God, on the other hand, is eternal and therefore each moment in time is the same as the other; there is no present, or, more precisely, every moment is simultaneously present to him. Therefore, it is not technically correct to say that God foreknows, because such implies that there is a future to God. Instead, God simply sees the whole of Creation, from its beginning to its end, simultaneously. The reader might justifiably feel like this argument does not really answer Boethius' question. Regardless of how God knows the universe, it would seem that there is still no room for freedom: what Mike is going to do tomorrow is just as certain.

The second argument she provides is probably more powerful, though she seems to spend less time on it. It is related to the definition of free will that she provides earlier in the chapter. According to that definition, to be free means to be able to do what one wants, namely, to be happy. Therefore, the good man is ultimately free while the evil man is a slave. This is basically the same as the definition of power provided in Book III. However, if freedom of will is understood in this way, the fact that an act is necessary should not prohibit from also being a free. Freedom, on this account, does not depend on indeterminacy, but rather on acting in accordance with virtue. It might seem strange that an apparent consequence of this argument is that evil men do not act freely, but such actually agrees with another proposition in a previous chapter, namely, that evil deeds make a person less human. Evil men, then, lose their freedom along with their humanity.

Characters

Boethius

Boethius is both the author of the story and the main character. The work is semi-autobiographical but the author changes some significant facts. Boethius was, in fact, imprisoned and eventually executed by King Theodoric for treason. However, the crime he is accused of is different in the story than what is known historically. Boethius claims to have been convicted of treason for standing up for the Senate, whom Theodoric also condemned to death on trumped up charges. In reality, Boethius was convicted of conspiring with the hated Byzantine Empire. It is fairly obvious why Boethius would be tempted to change this fact. The Boethius in the story is meant to be a man of virtue whose miseries have caused him to fall away from his happy life. While it is entirely possible that Boethius was a victim of Theodoric's unjust and arbitrary whims, being falsely accused of aiding the enemy does not make one into a martyr; standing up for the innocents, at the risk of one's life, does.

Boethius' religious beliefs are the subject of much controversy. It was traditionally believed that Boethius was a Christian until the time of his death. It is historically certain that Boethius was at least a Christian at some point in his life, for among his body of works are a few theological treatises. However, some have argued that when he wrote the CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY, he had converted to Paganism. In evidence of this view, they cite the fact that the work never makes any explicit reference to Christianity, even though it would at times seem quite relevant. He relies entirely on Pagan sources and even cites Pagan mythology. Those who argue that Boethius remained a Christian respond by saying that Boethius was merely being methodologically rigorous. The discipline of philosophy is strictly concerned with what can be known through reason; what is known through faith is strictly off limits. Therefore, in writing a philosophical text, it would be inappropriate for Boethius to include Christian sources to help prove his points.

Philosophy

While he sits in his jail cell, despairing, Boethius is visited by Philosophy, embodied by a beautiful woman. She is described as looking youthful, but Boethius can tell that she is ancient. She is wearing a dingy, almost ragged dress which was once quite beautiful. On the hem of the dress is the Greek letter Pi (for practice) and, slightly above it, the letter Theta (for theory). A ladder is stitched in between. The dress has obviously seen quite a bit of abuse. Her appearance is quite symbolic. The fact that she is simultaneously both young and old suggests that she is timeless and always the same. Her dress is beautiful, suggesting that philosophy is glorious, but the fact that she has let it get dingy and ragged implies that she has a healthy disinterest in such a trivial, worldly thing. The letters on her dress relate living a good life with being wise. This symbol is very telling about the ancient understanding of philosophy. In the modern

world, philosophy is a purely intellectual style, but for the ancients it was a lifestyle. If one did not live well, one could not aspire to truly be a philosopher.

Philosophy's purpose in coming to Boethius is to encourage him and make him realize that no matter how miserable his current circumstances might be, he should not let it make him unhappy. She mainly reminds him of beliefs he once held but forgot. She urges him to have faith in God and remember that true happiness can only be found in contemplation of the Divine.

God

God is the highest good and creator of the universe. He orders everything in accordance with his supreme goodness.

Theodoric

King Theodoric is the king of Rome who sentenced Boethius to death for defending the senate.

Nero

Nero was a Roman Emperor who lived around 30 A.D. (Boethius, for reference, is writing in about 525). He is an example of a powerful man who is, nonetheless, miserable.

Aristotle

Aristotle was a Greek philosophers whose writings are cherished by both Boethius and Lady Philosophy.

Plato

Plato was a Greek philosopher. Boethius mentions being persuaded of Plato's belief that philosophers ought to be kings.

Socrates

Socrates was a Greek philosopher who was executed for spreading his philosophical beliefs.

Anaxagoras

Anaxagoras was a Greek philosopher who was exiled from Athens.

Seneca

Seneca was a Roman philosopher and statesman who was eventually forced to commit suicide.

Objects/Places

Boethius' Cell

The entire story takes place in Boethius' prison cell. He is awaiting his execution on unjust charges of treason.

Philosophy

Philosophy is the love of wisdom.

Free Will

One of Boethius' main confusions is how men can have free will if God knows what everyone will do.

Providence

Providence describes God's direct action over what happens in the universe.

Fate

Fate is the inevitable course of events in history as they unfold according to God's plan. It is distinguished from Providence, seemingly, because it is concerned with things very remote from God.

Rome

Rome is the city and country in which Boethius lives.

Earth

Philosophy uses the image of the Earth's tininess in relation to the rest of the universe to emphasize how trivial human ambitions are.

Philosophy's Dress

Philosophy wears a dress which symbolizes her various attributes, like her timelessness and how she is so often persecuted by wicked men.

Fortune

Fortune is the force in the world which gives and takes worldly goods like fame and money. Philosophy eventually tries to prove that the winds of fortune are always in accordance with God's Providence.

Pleasure

Pleasure, Philosophy claims, is what most men incorrectly think is necessary for happiness.

Themes

True Happiness Cannot Be Taken Away

As the story opens, Boethius is depressed because he has lost everything: his freedom, his property, his good name, and, soon, his life. Philosophy comes to console him and remind him that the truly happy man cannot have his happiness taken away from him. She devises several arguments to prove her point. The first is also the most simple. If happiness is the highest good, she argues, then it is logically necessary that there can be nothing better than it. However, if happiness could be taken away, then it would not be the best possible thing; a happiness that could not be taken away would be better. One might think this argument is invalid because it equivocates on what it means for happiness to be the highest good. It is plausible to think that happiness is simply the greatest attainable good, but her argument assumes that it is the greatest possible good. In other words, one might imagine that happiness could be defective in some ways, but there are simply no better alternatives.

Her main argument for the invincibility of the happy man is stronger. She argues that happiness must be the greatest good, for people always seek the best thing. Now, the fact that there are imperfect things logically implies that there are more perfect things. This is based on a metaphysical doctrine that was common in ancient philosophy. It states that a cause must always be "greater" than its effect. In other words, this means that something cannot give something it does not have. Something can only be heated by something that is hot. A teacher can only teach a student what the teacher knows; therefore, the existence of imperfect things suggests that there is a perfect thing which caused them. The perfect thing must be the highest good, for if there were a higher good, it would not be perfect. This perfect being is God who, therefore, is the source of happiness. Now, men are united with God through living a life in accordance with virtue. This union is a spiritual one and, therefore, cannot be interrupted by men, who are able only to injure the body. Therefore, true happiness cannot be taken away.

The World is Fundamentally Just

The main problem of the story is what is called the problem of evil. It is a puzzle which states that if God is both supremely good and supremely powerful, there would not be evil in the world. Yet, it is obvious there is evil in the world. This is the very problem that Boethius struggles with, and it affects him directly: He is sitting in a prison cell awaiting his execution.

His belief in God is not shaken, nor is his belief that God has ordered the world, but he is confused why good men are allowed to suffer while evil men, quite frequently, prosper. Philosophy first of all points out that he is perceiving the world incorrectly. As a matter of fact, she argues, the evil are always punished and the good are always rewarded. This is because a good action is its own reward. Since happiness consists of

being good, there is no need for an external reward for acting well. In a similar fashion, since living an evil life makes one miserable, the wicked are justly punished for their sins.

There is still the question, however, of why Fortune seems to reward the wicked and punish the innocent. Even if the material goods Fortune bestows are, ultimately, valueless, it still seems wrong. Philosophy explains that, no matter how strange or upside-down the world may seem at times, one must always believe that God is in control, even in the affairs of man. He is not primarily concerned with making sure that people live comfortable, pleasant lives, but rather that they live good lives directed towards God. Accordingly, he uses fortune to further this goal. He may take away everything from a just man in order to test his virtue and give him an opportunity to show how committed he is to God. Likewise, he may punish the wicked in order to turn their lives around.

God's Providence is not Incompatible With Free Will

The last confusion that Philosophy clears up regards the question of free will. The previous chapters have attempted to establish that God is the ultimate good in the universe and that he is in charge of everything that happens. However, if this is so, it would seem that man has no free will. If God knows everything that happened—indeed, if everything happens according to his plan—it would seem what men do, they do necessarily. But if men act out of necessity, it is logically true that they do not act freely.

Philosophy does not deny that men have free will. Indeed, she says that freedom of will is necessary to be a rational being like man. However, she sticks by her arguments regarding God's providence. In order to dispel the apparent contradiction, she first defines what exactly it means to be free. Freedom she defines, quite reasonably, as the ability to do what one wants. However, she has shown in the previous chapters that all men want happiness; therefore, it follows that freedom means being happy. Therefore, the good are absolutely free while the evil have lost all of their freedom to sin. This goes a long way to answering Boethius' question because it makes free will no longer a matter of indeterminacy. Rather, freedom simply means acting in accordance with the good; such is possible even if God has predestined all of one's actions.

However, Philosophy is not content to leave the argument there. She wants to avoid the conclusion that one's actions are necessitated. She argues that the puzzle only arises because man is incapable of understanding the world like God does. Men are time-bound; they experience the world from moment to moment. God, on the other hand, is outside of time and therefore sees the entire world, from the beginning of history to the end, all at once. Now, how one describes a thing often depends upon one's perspective. From the point of view of humanity, one's actions are free because they do not happen until the person chooses to perform them. From God's perspective, however, they are necessary because they all occur in accordance with his Providence.

Style

Point of View

The book is narrated in the first person-perspective. The narrator is meant to be Boethius himself and the book is largely autobiographical. Like the character in the story, the real Boethius was waiting in jail for his execution at the hands of King Theodoric. However, the nature of his crime, historically, was not as it is described in the book. In reality, Boethius was sentenced to death for treason; he was alleged to have conspired with the Byzantine Empire, one of Rome's enemies. In the book, however, he claims to have been sentenced to death for standing up for the Roman senate, which Theodoric had also sentenced to death on trumped up charges of treason. Why Boethius would change this detail should be fairly obvious. While it is possible that he was falsely accused by Theodoric, the real facts make him out to be a victim, not a martyr standing up for the truth and justice.

It is not clear whether Boethius actually had a philosophical conversion like the character in the book does. It is obviously true that if he did, it was before the writing of the book, which was completed while he was still under house arrest. Therefore, he is perhaps anticipating the misery he expects to face while he is in prison.

Boethius' religious beliefs are the subject of some debate. While it is certain that he was a Catholic at some point his life—he wrote tracts of Christian theology—some suspect that he abandoned his faith before writing THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY. In support of this view, they point out that he never makes any explicit references to Christianity or Scripture. However, this does not necessarily prove anything about his religious beliefs, for he may simply have been trying to write a purely philosophical text in which it would be inappropriate to include theological sources.

Setting

The entirety of the story occurs in Boethius' jail cell. The setting represents all of Boethius' various sufferings. He has been accused of treason and, with no trial, sentenced to death. In addition to his loss of liberty, he also has lost all his property, his good name (for, he notes, people are only too ready to heap blame upon a man who has been convicted of a crime, even if it is an obvious sham), and soon he will lose his life. Boethius was once a dedicated philosopher; in fact, his dedication to philosophy is what led him to stand up for the accused senators—but his beliefs have been shaken by all the turmoil in which he has found himself. He can no longer content himself with sitting around and thinking about essences and souls. This lapse is the occasion for Philosophy's visit. She is unwilling to let a man like Boethius simply fall to the wayside and die unhappily.

The book is, presumably, set in the same time that Boethius wrote it, namely, 6th century Rome. It is important to understand that Rome had fallen far from its glorious past. In fact, Rome had already completely crumbled. The Byzantines and Goths were fighting for control of the Italian peninsula. Boethius happened to be living during a period when the Goths, led by Theodoric, were in control.

Language and Meaning

The text, of course, is a translation of Boethius' original Latin version. The translator has done a generally good job of making the text readable and accessible, but it has not been overly simplified. It still makes use of a fair amount of sophisticated words. It is occasionally distracting when the translator imports an anachronistic idiom, but they are rare.

The style of the book alternates between fairly technical philosophical discourse and poetry. The translator does an adequate job of making the philosophical parts of the text comprehensible to a reader without much background in philosophy, but to fully grasp the text it is still necessary to understand the philosophical background against which Boethius is writing. His main philosophical influences seem to be Plato and Aristotle, the two great philosophers of antiquity, but he also shows clear signs of Stoic influence, especially in his discussions about how happiness cannot be taken away.

The poetic sections usually summarize or exemplify the philosophical discourse of the chapter. They usually come after the discourse, but occasionally they come first. The inspirations for the poems vary. Many of them make reference to Greek mythology. None make direct reference to Christianity, but there are some which are remarkably similar thematically. Consider, for example, the poem on page 42 which talks of building a house on a sturdy foundation. While perhaps a common enough metaphor, it is hard to imagine Boethius did not have the Christian parable in mind when he wrote it.

Structure

The story is divided into five books and each book is divided into several chapters. Each chapter follows a similar format; there is always a continuation of the conversation and a poem, either before or after.

Book I is mainly introductory. It sets up Boethius' condition and introduces Lady Philosophy. It ends with her questioning Boethius on some rather basic philosophical questions and when she realizes he is unable to provide the kind of answers a man of his learning should, she realizes she must start with fundamentals. Book II discusses Fortune and the proper attitude one ought to have towards it. This subject is meant to ease Boethius into the discussion because he is still too depressed to be open to the substance of her argument. Once he is convinced that happiness cannot and should not depend upon Fortune, she moves on to discuss the various opinions people hold about happiness in Book III. They finally conclude that happiness is participating in God's divine nature. In Book IV, they address the central question of the conversation: Why

does God allow good men to suffer? Philosophy concludes that everything that happens is in accordance with God's goodness, even if the reasons seem mysterious at the time. Men must always remember that they have hardly a fraction of the knowledge God does. Boethius accepts all that Philosophy has said but still has some lingering doubts. In Book V, they discuss the most significant of these: free will. Boethius does not see how free will is compatible with God's providence. Philosophy shows that the actions of men are necessary from God's eternal perspective but free from man's temporal perspective.

Quotes

"Her dress was a miracle of fine cloth and meticulous workmanship, and, as I later learned, she had woven it herself. But it had darkened like a smoke-blackened family statue in the atrium as if through neglect and was dingy and worn. I could see worked into the bottom border the Greek letters Pi (for practice) and slightly higher Theta (for theory) with steps that were marked between them to form a ladder by which one might climb from the lower to the upper. Some ruffians had done violence to her elegant dress, and clearly bits of the fabric had been torn away." (3)

"Only man is endowed with freedom / that you [God] could constrain but have chosen not to, / and slippery Fortune players her random / games with us. The innocent suffer / penalties proper to malefactors / and wicked men sit up thrones." (19)

"'As soon as I saw you with your tear-stained face, I knew that you were suffering and I understood that you had been banished. Unless you had mentioned it, I would not have supposed how far you had been sent away; but this banishment if not merely geographical, is it? 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. . . .'" (20)

"'Or is it that last happiness that you [Boethius] mourn? Was that good fortune so dear to you, even though you should have understood that it couldn't be trusted and was, therefore, never really yours? It doesn't stay, it doesn't last, and when it leaves, you are bereft? You should have recognized that it was never in your control and that the visit of the unreliable goddess is a sure sign of misery to come. . . .'" (29)

"'No,' she said patiently. 'You are suffering because of your incorrect beliefs. . . .'" (37)

"'But what is it that you really want? You want to fortify yourself against need by storing up plenty, and yet what you do has exactly the opposite effect. You have precious furniture, but that requires guards. Those who have a lot need a lot. It's expensive to be rich! . . .'" (45)

"Whoever cultivates a virgin field / must first clear away the brush and weeds, and cut / with a sickle the ferns and brambles to enable / Ceres to come with her seeds of nourishing grain. / The taste in the mouth of honey is sweet by far / if it follows something bitter, and stars in the sky/ are all the brighter after the dark storm clouds / have been blown away by a steady wind from the south." (60)

"All mankind comes from the same stock: you are children / of one father who rules over you all and cares / for all his sons and daughters. He gave you the horned moon; / he populated the earth with men; and he filled the skies / with shining stars." (75)

"'Do you understand, then, in what hog-wallow wickedness finds itself, and with what brilliance goodness shines? We can declare confidently that good deeds never go unrewarded and that wicked deeds never go unpunished. . . .'" (116)

"'. . . Think of the way a craftsman imagines the form of the object he is about to make and then produces by many steps the thing he had planned in his mind and had thought of in an instant. In the same way, God's unchanging plan for what is to be done is providence, but it is by fate that he accomplishes these things in the course of time and step by step. . . .'" (132)

"'. . . All fortune that may seem adverse, if it does not test you, punishes.'" (144)

"'. . . God can see as present future events that happen as a result of free will. Thus, they are, from God's point of view, necessary, although in themselves they do not lose the freedom that is in their nature. All those things, then, that God knows will come be will, indeed, come to be, some of them proceeding from free will, so that when they come to be they will not have lost the freedom of their nature, according to which, until the time that they happened, they might not have happened. . . .'" (173)

Topics for Discussion

Explain the symbolism of Philosophy's appearance.

Why is Philosophy a woman?

Is Boethius a Christian or a Pagan?

How does Philosophy resolve the apparent contradiction between the supremacy of God's providence and free will? Is her argument sound?

Explain Philosophy's proof for God's existence in Book III. Is this argument valid? How is it different or similar to other arguments for God's existence?

What does Philosophy mean when she says that evil acts make a person lose their humanity?

Why does each chapter begin (or, occasionally, end) with a poem?