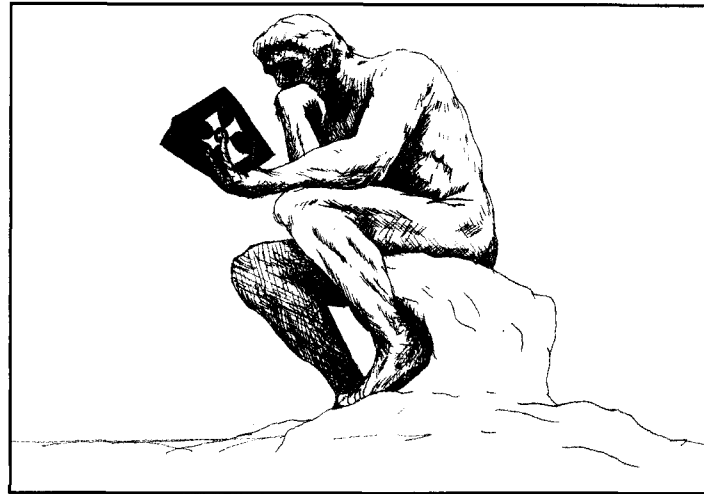


Boethius and Lady Philosophy

First Things First

by James Patrick



As founder of the intellectual tradition of the West, Saint Augustine has one peer: Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, a Roman of noble antecedents who spent his life in the service first of literature, then of the Gothic kingdom of Theodoric, and always, throughout a life that compassed literary success, high office, and political disgrace, of the Catholic faith and the Lady Philosophy, his figure for the philosophic wisdom of the West.

The political story that shaped Boethius' life began in 324, when Constantine's plan to move the capital of the empire from Rome to the city of Byzantium, on the eastern shore of the Sea of Marmora, matured. By moving the capitol, Constantine unintentionally left the West defenseless at the moment when barbarian pressure and influence became irresistible. In 476, the emperor Romulus Augustulus was deposed by the soldier Odovacar, who governed until 486, when he was defeated by Theodoric, an able Arian Ostrogoth educated in Constantinople. Theodoric's capital, Ravenna, became the first city of Italy.

For the senatorial class into which Boethius was born in 480, the move from Rome to Ravenna brought little change. Theodoric, like Odovacar before him, was an insistent tax collector, but he left in place the senatorial class, with its customary access to office and honors. Though an Arian, Theodoric tolerated Catholic families, and they, in turn, continued to dominate Italy, repaying Theodoric by calling him *Rex Theodoricus Pius Princeps Invictus Semper*.

Ostrogoth dominance segregated Italian society; the Roman class of "those who mattered most" staffed local administration, while the Goths controlled the army. No Roman was allowed to enter the army; no Goth was allowed to enter a Roman school. The most troublesome division, however, was not be-

tween Roman and Ostrogoth but between Catholic and Arian. The Arians tolerated Catholics but never trusted them. They admired the senators and used them, but Catholics were only rarely and reluctantly admitted into their families.

Constrained by Ostrogoth power, Byzantine neglect, and Arian heresy, Boethius' world was anxious but usually not unsafe. In an insecure time, when *romanitas* was threatened but not yet defeated, it was the custom of the class that possessed memory to write down the things remembered. Around 430, Vincent of Lerins had written his *Commonitorium*, typifying the tradition that would make copying the practical sign of the monastic life, and, three centuries later, the Venerable Bede, in his *History of the English Church and People*, noted that he had depended upon "countless faithful witnesses who either know or remember." Memory was the bridge between the dying empire of Augustus and the revival of learning in the ninth century.

Boethius' father died when Boethius was a boy, so he was reared in the household of the powerful senator Symmachus. Boethius fell to the literary life naturally; the time was ripe. The philosophy of Aristotle in its relation to Plato and to neoplatonism was a dominant theme at Athens, Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople. Boethius' surviving works must be seen against a background of a lively philosophic tradition represented by Porphyry, Iamblichus of Calcis, and Plutarch of Athens and his pupils Hierocles and Proclus the Lycian. Boethius himself translated Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, *Categories*, and *Topics* and commented on Marius Victorinus' translation of Porphyry's *Introduction to the Categories*. Philosophy, reason's perennial engagement with truth, was derivative but not sterile. By 507, Boethius (not yet 30) had written extensively on Aristotle and the liberal arts. Later, he would write short theological treatises and, at life's end, the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

When Boethius wrote the *Consolation*, he was in prison, with the near certainty of death always before him. Thus, many have

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wondered why he did not locate his expectations in the company of the saints and martyrs, choosing, instead, to see his plight as another example of the persecution of true philosophy, analogous to “the flight of Anaxagoras, the poison of Socrates,” and “the torments of Zeno.” Another great-souled prisoner, held captive a thousand years later by another king of great power and doubtful orthodoxy, wrote the *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, an appeal to the passion of Christ. That Boethius’ choice suggests he was not a Christian is an argument now abandoned, as is the complementary contention that the author of the *Consolation* could not have been the author of the theological treatises *On the Trinity*, *On the Catholic Faith*, and *Against Eutyches*. But this hardly answers the question.

Boethius turned instinctively not to the flower of the Catholic life that he had defended, nor to Christian doctrine, which he considered indisputable, but to the root of that life and that faith—reason. Reason was Boethius’ first defense; his enemies’ unreasonableness, the sign of their sure defeat. The first book of the *Consolation* traverses the precincts of Stoicism and Platonism, always abjuring the answers that the Catholic faith might give in favor of the answers of Lady Philosophy. Boethius’ practice perpetuated the great tradition begun by St. Justin Martyr, who, having become a Christian about 150, set down the proposition, “Whatever is true belongs to us Christians.” The divine *Logos*, Justin argued, was so dispersed throughout Creation that the Greek philosophers might properly claim some share in the truth. From the beginning, Socrates, who believed intermittently in the immortality of the soul and in something like eternal life, was irresistible to Christians, who saw him as a martyr for the truth.

The insistence that a life pleasing to God might begin in reason made Christianity an indomitable world religion to which nothing human would ever be a stranger. The educated world was left with the problem of stating precisely the relation between nature and supernature, reason and faith, philosophy and theology. Christian teachers might have attempted to spiritualize philosophy by confusing the Holy Spirit and the world-soul, creating something that, viewed in one way, was a vast rationalism and, viewed in another, seemed to make the world a theodicy and mankind divine. Or they might have construed a separation between natural wisdom and sacred doctrine and created a kind of double-truth scheme in which things true in philosophy and nature might have no relevance at all to sacred doctrine and the supernatural life. Instead, they chose the pattern later summarized by Saint Thomas: Grace does not destroy but perfects nature, with nature understood to have its own created goodness and to be responsive to the insights of reason.

Boethius’ works became a treasure house for the Middle Ages, and four of the questions considered in the *Consolation* illustrate the continuity and creativity of thought that the dying age of imperial Rome bequeathed as an intellectual patrimony to the unseen future of Saint Thomas, Dante, and Chartres.

First, and most significantly, Boethius revisited the fundamental question, advising John the Deacon “if possible to join faith and reason” and implying that it is possible to do so without destroying philosophy or destroying faith. Boethius would, at one time, write (as in the *Consolation*) as though divine wisdom did not exist and, at another (in the theological treatises) as though philosophy had been given to mankind to subserve and clarify the teachings of the Church.

One of the greatest characteristics of Christianity is its rea-

sonableness. Faith is rooted in a preparatory reason that sacred doctrine, in turn, perfects. Moreover, even Christian revelation is never unreasonable. Miracles, which represent the perfecting of Creation toward the eschatological order in which Christ is King, absolutely transcend human reason and powers, but these actions are nevertheless reasonable in a divine realm that exceeds our reason’s grasp.

Today, the world is full of anti-Boethian religions of unreason. There is the unreason of the cults: “The leader is always right.” More dangerous is the unreason of Islam. We find suicide bombing deeply unreasonable, but a community of 1.2 billion Muslims includes no insignificant number of teachers who find this superbly logical. The reason, of course, is that Allah is preeminently a will to which the wise submit. While Christians talk about God Himself being the *Logos*, the rationale of everything that exists, that is absent from Islam. Following Boethius, the West came to understand that philosophy could not simply be subsumed into God’s Will.

Second, the problem of universals, an eternal fascination of the human intellect, found its place in Boethius’ philosophy. Nine beings sit on the U.S. Supreme Court, and each of them is called “human”; yet no two of them are identical. Should we be called “human” because certain characteristics can be observed as belonging to each of us—two arms, two eyes, one head, speech? Or is there a metaphysical reality, indicated by these similarities, that underlies the differences?

This question is significant, for if the reality of my humanity is exhausted in the possession of certain empirical characteristics, I may cease to be human when those characteristics are absent. I may lose the power of speech, at which point my life could be proclaimed less than human and taken from me. Or, had I been conceived 60 years later, perhaps I might have been declared not to be human until I left my mother’s womb. The question of the existence of universals or forms is more than abstract.

Plato first identified the problem in moving beyond the philosophy of the physicists, who sought in some material element the commonality of beings—fire, water, atoms, number—to the conviction that the real unity of similar beings lay in their ideas or in some universal predication. For Plato, the reality of the forms was to be found in some ultimate ground of reality located in a purely intellectual realm. Aristotle always said that he only differed from Plato over his own conviction that the forms existed in things themselves. The question remained: How are we to speak of these universals or forms or ideas that are known only in individuals yet bind all of reality?

Although he added significant qualifications, Etienne Gilson was right when he wrote that, by asserting that “They, universals, subsist in connection with sensible things, but we know them separate from bodies,” Boethius did more than posit the problem; he solved it. The problems the philosophy poses can always be visited again, but whenever that problem of universals is considered, we end up back at Boethius, who gave the Middle Ages the foundation on which Saint Thomas developed the most explicatory epistemology ever proposed.

Third, Boethius dealt with the question of perfection. Discovering that which is better or best is part of being human. Philosophy moves out of a set of principles that mark the division between fruitful reflection and nonsense. One such principle is that of sufficient reason. The first sentence of Aristotle’s *Ethics* is a kind of transformation of this principle: Aristotle writes that every art and every inquiry aims at some good; action is not purposeless, nor is nature. We presuppose purposes or

reasons and, with them, reasonableness. If, at the end of the day, your Mercedes has been turned into a tiny pumpkin-like coach drawn by white mice, you will at least ask where the wizard is hiding and why he perpetrated this wicked deed. We cannot think apart from the principle of sufficient reason. Nor can we think apart from the principle of noncontradiction. We cannot inhabit a world in which beings can be themselves and some other thing simultaneously and in the same way. Nor can we think apart from something that might be called the “principle of perfection,” which, in its basic form, is simply the assertion that something is better than something else.

If you repair to your doctor to be told that you have a rare and fatal condition that he proposes to use as the basis of a scholarly paper but does not presume to treat, you will change physicians, because we know that being is better than not being and that a physician who considers both health and disease interesting conditions between which he cannot judge is no doctor at all. This principle of perfection is assumed by Anselm in his famous argument that God is He than Whom no greater can be thought to exist and by Saint Thomas in his argument that belief in God is reasonable because, if something is better than something else, there must be some Being Who is best.

It was Boethius who, among few others, transmitted to the Latin Middle Ages the observation that, “if in any kind we find something imperfect, there must needs be something perfect also of the same kind. For if we take away perfection we cannot so much as devise how there shall be any imperfection.” The longing in the human heart for Eden is not an illusion. We could not know the world as fallen or ourselves as broken unless Eden and the saints exist. If my use of the word *better* has meaning, it has meaning because there is, in fact, a best. Of course, our culture claims that all distinctions construe insufferable inequalities, but Boethius, speaking to the dying world of Gothic Italy, gave us a better principle.

Finally, the definition for which Boethius is most famous should not be forgotten. Attempting to write accurately and convincingly about Christ in *Against Eutyches*, Boethius found it necessary to say what a person really is. Many descriptions of what it is to be human—descriptions of faculties and characteristics—had already been written, but Boethius’ contribution is a deceptively simple definition that became a commonplace of Western thought: A person is an individual substance of rational nature. In other words, a person is not merely an example or an abstraction. Individuals are not self-subsistent—only God is—but they are *themselves* and not some other thing. In that sense, there are no individuals in much of oriental thought. For Boethius, however, “only the single persons of Cicero or Plato or other single individuals are termed persons.” And persons have a nature, a specific difference that gives form, and, for man, that form is rationality.

These four ideas, none radically original but all certainly more well known in the West because of their reiteration by Boethius, had before them a great future. Boethius knew that, if the battle were lost on the grounds laid out by Lady Philosophy, any victories won on the higher ground of revealed truth would be insecure. In a barbarian age, Boethius’ works were a bulwark erected against such a consequence. Ours is another barbarian age in which the attack on reason has been pursued relentlessly, most successfully in the universities, which were intended as reason’s castle. But again we find, beginning with Pope Leo XIII’s great encyclical *Aeterni Patris* and bol-

stered by the letter of John Paul II entitled *Fides et Ratio*, an insistence that right philosophy is the foundation, albeit not the perfection, of every human good and, preeminently, of the Faith.

Viewed from Boethius’ prison cell, the future of Roman civilization could hardly have looked bleaker than the future of our postmodern world, viewed from the prison of our poisonous subjectivity and relentless relativism. While there is no final victory in time, the future we call the “Middle Ages” belonged to Boethius. Tolkien, in one of his letters, addresses our inability to see what is really happening around us: “The future is impenetrable, especially to the wise; for what is really important is always hid from contemporaries, and the seeds of what is to be are quietly germinating in some dark corner.”

The battle must not be forfeited, even in what seems to be a difficult hour. If reason’s battle for the intellect is lost, the struggle for the souls of men and their civilization cannot be won, and, in the last seven centuries, the philosophical battle has been in the enemies’ hands. Revelation was only defeated by a kind of reason that was, in itself, unreasonable. All the great contemporary moral battles are ones in which the contenders are not faith and unfaith but reason and unreason. The frantic efforts of the antilife apologists are mistakes in the realm of reason. The claim that a being begins as something not human is the denial that anything at all really exists, yet this is the argument of those who claim that a child only becomes human at birth. The claim that it is permissible to take the life of an unborn child for selfish purposes is both unreasonable and an injustice before it is a sin. The culturally besetting curse of homosexuality outrages reason and nature before it violates charity and purity, causing social destruction before it courts damnation. Even the much-despised teaching ensconced in *Humanae Vitae* was proposed to men of good will everywhere and without any reference to revealed truth, for the fact that it is unlawful for the highest purpose of an act conjoined in nature to some secondary good to be subordinated to that secondary good is true on its face. A man does not really need a theologian or a priest to tell him that using elephants for door stops and Mexican blue butterflies to make stew, though certainly possible and perhaps in some way pleasurable or efficient, are actions that mistake the justice, and hence the reasonableness, of the case.

If Lady Philosophy cannot touch the intellect, Christ can only with difficulty touch the heart. If it were true that Boethius wrote about philosophy because faith had deserted him, his works, especially the *Consolation*, would forfeit something of their relevance. But Boethius’ local canonization in Pavia after his execution was not the foible of an uninstructed era. When Boethius knew that he, like his beloved Roman civilization and the little kingdom of Theodoric, had run out of earthly hope, he concluded his *On the Catholic Faith* with these words:

All therefore that the faithful now expect is that the end of the world will come, that all corruptible things shall pass away, that men shall rise for future judgment, that each shall receive reward according to his deserts and abide in the lot assigned to him forever and ever; and the sole reward of bliss will be the contemplation of the Almighty. So far, that is, as the creature may look upon the Creator, to the end that the number of angels may be made up from these and the heavenly city filled where the Virgin’s son is King, and where will be everlasting joy, delight, food, labor, and unending praise of the Creator.

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My Hometown

Augustine's *City of God*

by Aaron D. Wolf



Saint Augustine did not originally desire to be a pastor. When, in 387, he finally surrendered to the Holy Ghost in the garden of his “philosophers’ estate” in the countryside outside Milan, he intended to follow the example of Saint Anthony and live a life of quiet solitude, separated from the temptations and trials of the world. In his *Confessions*, he recalls, “You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer desired a wife or placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith . . .”

In converting to Christianity and agreeing to be baptized, Augustine was prepared to battle his flesh for the rest of his life, particularly against the concupiscence at work in him, as well as

a certain vain and curious longing, cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning, not of having pleasure in the flesh, but of making experiments through the flesh. This longing, since it originates in an appetite for knowledge, and the sight being the chief amongst the senses in the acquisition of knowledge, is called in divine language, “the lust of the eyes.”

This battle with the flesh and the eyes was, he believed, best undertaken in retirement, and Augustine returned to Africa in 388 to live as one of the “servants of God,” a group of laymen devoted to studying the Scriptures and mortifying their flesh.

Three years later, when a middle-aged Augustine left his hometown of Thagaste for nearby Hippo Regius to seek support for his little religious household on his family estate, he was afraid of the very thing that ultimately happened to him. Hearing Bishop Valerius’ sermon on the need for more priests in Hippo, Augustine found himself pressed by the mob of parish-

ioners to the bishop’s elevated throne, whereupon he submitted himself for ordination, weeping, believing that he was being judged by God for looking down upon clergymen as a philosopher. By 395, he would be consecrated as successor to Valerius, though, as he would later say, “I did not think myself the equal of those who ruled over congregations.”

Such was the inner life of he who would be made a saint and doctor of the Church—perhaps the most significant mind to influence the Middle Ages. His life’s work was conducted in the face of a dying age that spawned, among other things, the Donatist controversy, the Pelagian heresy, and a rebirth of paganism. Augustine responded to each of these crises as a pastor, and, in so doing, blessed the Church with wisdom and direction that speaks even to our own dying age. But he was able to do so because his work as a pastor was a reflection of his inner life—of his struggle against the “sin which so easily besets.”

One aspect our dying age shares with Augustine’s is the elevation of rhetoric (however debased) over the other liberal arts. His was a litigious age, when style was more important than substance. Even farmers could make use of rhetorical skills, for it was only a matter of time before you might be hauled before a judge (or a bishop) over a property dispute. Thus Augustine, the son of an upper-class Roman, was sent to the academy to learn the indispensable art of rhetoric. “It was my ambition,” he admits, “to be a good speaker, for the unhallowed and inane purpose of gratifying human vanity.”

Though Augustine developed a fascination for the theater at a young age, and could make others weep at his recitation of poetry, his heart was captured by higher things when he read Cicero’s *Hortensius*, an exhortation to philosophy. Later, when Augustine described his conversion to Christianity, he lamented that “many years of my life had passed—twelve, unless I am wrong—since I had read Cicero’s *Hortensius* at the age of nineteen and it had inspired me to study philosophy.” Clearly, Au-

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