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Boethius' Metaphysics of Being and Goodness

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Introduction: An overview of the work of Boethius

"By writing the *Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius provided all educated people of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance with one of their principal classics, a work of both intellectual profundity and literary delight to be read not only in Latin by clerks in their study but also by laymen at leisure, and therefore often in the vernacular.

(...)

"His world is the old world of antiquity with an intellectual framework dominated by Ptolemaic ideas about the world, by Aristotle's doctrines of substance and accidents, by a Platonic metaphysic setting asunder mind and matter, by Pythagorean ideas of mathematics and of musical proportion as the key to the structure of the cosmos."

(...)

"Boethius was by temperament a man who liked to strike out on his own. In all the fields that he touched he had some Latin predecessors. Apuleius anticipated him in writing a short guide to Aristotle's difficult treatise on *Interpretation*. It is likely that Boethius knew Apuleius' work, but he never mentions it by name. Apuleius also anticipated him in making an adaptation of the *Arithmetic* of Nicomachus of Gerasa, but Boethius sets about his own version of Nicomachus as if he had no predecessor. Marius Victorinus, the African rhetor of the mid-fourth century whose conversion to Christianity astonished high Roman society about 355, directly covered some of the ground that Boethius was to claim as his own. He made a translation of Porphyry's *Isagoge* or introduction (Porphyry did not explain what he was introducing, but in the sixth century it was assumed to be an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*; a version, with eight books of commentary, of Aristotle's *Categories*; a version of Aristotle on *Interpretation*; a tract on the hypothetical syllogism; and a commentary on Cicero's *Topics*. Boethius acknowledges that Victorinus was the most eminent orator of his time, but loses no opportunity of drawing attention to Victorinus' blunders either in logic or in translation from the Greek. Nevertheless, it can hardly be accidental that the portion of Boethius' dialectical work which became most widely known covers much the same area as that laid down as the standard curriculum by Victorinus in the fourth century. Although Boethius succeeded in making careful translations, which were then given a further meticulous revision, of both *Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophistic Refutations*, the transmission of these last treatises is a thin line. Until the twelfth century they were little known or not at all. Neither in his dialectical studies nor in his works on mathematics did Boethius claim to be original. For arithmetic he closely follows his Greek model in the Pythagorean Nicomachus of Gerasa. This study is intended as a preparation for the introduction to music, a much longer work dependent on Nicomachus and on Ptolemy. The *Institutio Musica* is transmitted incomplete in the manuscript tradition, which breaks off in the middle of a sentence half way through the fifth book. Originally the work must have run to six or seven books.

(...)

"In his logical treatises there stands one monograph which had special interest for him, namely, that on the hypothetical syllogism of the conditional form: 'if A, then B; but A, therefore B', or 'if A, then B ; but not B, therefore not A.' The school of Aristotle had begun the investigation of the logic of conditional statements of this kind. The Stoics had taken the matter considerably further, treating the variables AB as symbols not (as in Aristotle) for terms but for entire propositions. Cicero took some notice of this Stoic logic, so that it was not bringing out matter of which the Latin world knew nothing. But Boethius' monograph is the most careful and detailed study in logic to come from his pen, and without it our knowledge of ancient propositional logic would be thin. To medieval logicians this treatise was not perhaps of the greatest interest. John of Salisbury regarded it without enthusiasm, but conceded that it was at least clearer than anything that Aristotle would have written on the subject, had he done so. In recent times modern logicians have shown a more benevolent interest in Boethius' work in this complex field. John of Salisbury felt that some of Boethius' logical studies were too abstract to be of any use. There is no doubt that his expositions of Aristotle are academic and detached, but written with the conviction that they train the mind to detect fallacies. In his second commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge* he utters the warning: 'Those who reject logic are bound to make mistakes. Unless reason shows the right path, the incorrupt truth of reality cannot be found'. In the commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* he writes in pain of the threat to the survival of culture in his own time, and speaks of the imminent collapse of liberal studies unless drastic action is taken to preserve the values of the classical past. Knowledge is not only gained in the process of historical change; it is even more easily lost. Human culture can suffer impoverishment more readily than it can achieve enrichment. Hence Boethius' sweat and toil in his study to make available to the Latin world those works which the best philosophers of his age regarded as the proper ladder of true education. They were Neoplatonists and set action far below contemplation. Their educational ideal was relatively little concerned with politics or economics or even ethics (though Boethius' contemporary Simplicius wrote a commentary on the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus which must be reckoned a treatise on the moral life), but was directed towards what they called 'theoria', rendered

by Boethius 'speculatio'. Under the heading of speculative philosophy they wrote of physics, i.e. the scientific study of the natural order; or of mathematics; or of metaphysics and 'theology'."

From: Henry Chadwick, *Introduction* to Margaret Gibson (ed.), *Boethius. His Life, Thought and Influence*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1981, pp. 1-5.