


## BOETHIUS: FIRST OF THE SCHOLASTICS\*

 OETHIUS was the first of the scholastics in much more than a chronological sense. His Latin translations of Aristotle gave the mediæval world something to think about and, through his paraphrases and his word-for-word commentaries, Boethius also provided the mediæval world with an object lesson in how to think about it. His theological treatises set the style for later scholastic investigations of dogma: concise, tightly-reasoned chains of argument applied to matters of faith, rich enough to be commented on in their own right. His intellectual influence was so pervasive in the Middle Ages that we might be tempted to paraphrase Whitehead's famous dictum<sup>1</sup> and declare mediæval philosophy to consist in a series of glosses on Boethius.

One work, however, has been left out of this accounting. While the influence and impact in the Middle Ages of Boethius's translations, paraphrases, commentaries, and theological treatises has long been studied and is well known, the same cannot be said for his masterpiece, the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Yet it too received its 'series of glosses' in the Middle Ages. In what follows I propose to look into this neglected history, focusing primarily on the reception of the *Consolation* as a philosophical text by later mediæval thinkers. Putting aside its literary qualities, then, we can ask: What did later scholastics make of the *Consolation* as a philosophical treatise? What philosophical problem did they take it to address, and how did they take it to solve that problem?

I'll proceed as follows. In §1, I'll describe the tradition of philosophical commentary on the *Consolation*, as far as it can be made out at present. In §2, I'll discuss the interpretation of the logical structure of the *Consolation* in the commentary tradition. In §3, we'll look at the particular question of how the issues and arguments given in Book 5 are related to the rest of the work, a question that has consequences for the unity of the *Consolation* as a whole. In §4, the medicinal metaphors Boethius uses to present the 'therapeutic' arguments will be looked at in detail as an example of how the commentary tradition can illuminate the logical structure of the text.

\* All translations mine.

<sup>1</sup> Whitehead [1929] 63: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato."

## 1. THE COMMENTARY TRADITION

Manuscripts of the *Consolation* can be traced from the sixth century onwards; the watershed seems to have been the Carolingian revival of learning in the ninth century, after which copies of the *Consolation* can be found throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup> Often the text of the *Consolation* was found along with a commentary; there are even manuscripts where the text appears between two different commentaries. The ninth century also saw the first renderings of the *Consolation* into the vernacular with the Anglo-Saxon version of Alfred the Great and the bilingual Old High German edition of Notker of St. Gall. The work was translated sporadically over the next several centuries – there are versions in Catalán and Languedoc, for instance – until the series of translations into Old French, beginning around 1100; thereafter it appears regularly in most European vernaculars.<sup>3</sup> Latin and vernacular traditions drew from each other: Jean de Meun translates the Latin prologue to William of Aragon’s commentary to put at the beginning of his own French translation, *Li Livres de confort*, and regularly makes use of the Latin commentary of William of Conches;<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Trevet makes use of Alfred the Great’s Anglo-Saxon verse rendering of Boethius’s poems in his Latin commentary. There are also commentaries written entirely in the vernacular, such as the middle Dutch commentary known as the ‘Ghent Boethius’<sup>5</sup> or the anonymous mediæval French translation and commentary *Del confortement de Philosophie*.<sup>6</sup> Hence the text of the *Consolation* was readily available in a variety of forms from early on in the Middle Ages.

The *Consolation* did not simply sit on library shelves, however. There is evidence that it was used to teach proper Latinity to students in their early training, a role it played in different places and at different times.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the *Consolation* seems to have figured in university education. In the first half of the thirteenth century, it is listed in the *Guide de l’étudiant* and similar

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the classic studies of Patch [1935] and Courcelle [1967], see Beaumont [1981], Palmer [1981], Troncarelli [1981], the several studies in Hoenen & Nauta [1997], and most recently Troncarelli [2005]. Many individual studies are listed in Kaylor [1992].

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the references in the preceding note, see also Alexander & Gibson [1976], Minnis [1981], Atkinson & Babbi [2000].

<sup>4</sup> See Crespo [1973].

<sup>5</sup> See Hoenen [1997]. This was perhaps the lengthiest commentary on the *Consolation* in any language.

<sup>6</sup> See Bolton-Hall [1997].

<sup>7</sup> See Black & Pomaro [2000] and Black [2002] for the use of the *Consolation* as a teaching text in mediæval Italy, for instance.

manuals from the University of Paris, and perhaps was recommended to students as early as 1215;<sup>8</sup> it was not removed from the list of books bachelors at Paris were expected to have read until sometime around the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere it remained on the list of required books into the first decades of the sixteenth century, particularly in central Europe. Yet the *Consolation* does not seem to have been a text on which bachelors in the Arts Faculty were required to lecture, the way the texts of Aristotle were; it may well be that it was a work everyone was expected to know, but not to teach or cover in detail at university. The commentaries we have do not seem to have been written for use in the classroom, even when they were written in an academic setting, as for example the commentary of Nicholas Trevet. The precise position of the *Consolation* in the curriculum remains obscure.

There seem to have been three separate phases of commenting on the *Consolation*.<sup>10</sup> The first phase begins in the middle of the ninth century, with contributions from figures such as Alcuin of York and John Scottus Eriugena, who seem to have sparked or renewed interest in the *Consolation*. Lupus of Ferrières (d. 862) wrote a short work on the meters of Boethius's poems that was used throughout the Middle Ages. The high-water mark of this first phase seems to have been the commentary of Remi d'Auxerre, composed between 902 and 908. It was widely used and widely imitated, so that there are many 'remigian' glosses in manuscript; even those who disagreed with Remi, such as Bovo of Corvey, were indebted to his commentary.

The second phase begins at the end of the eleventh century. Like the revival of philosophy generally at this time, it shows a more technical understanding of Plato and Aristotle (the *Timaeus* and the works of the *logica uetus* respectively). The peak of this phase is the commentary of William of Conches (1080–ca. 1150). There are many 'conchian' glosses from this time. William's commentary circulates, and remains influential, for the rest of the Middle Ages.

The third phase begins in a flurry of activity at the start of the fourteenth

<sup>8</sup> See Lafleur [1992], Lafleur [1997], and Jauneau [1997]. Lewry [1983] identifies the *Consolation* as one of the "philosophical books" mentioned by Robert de Courçon in his letter to the University of Paris in 1215; see Kneepkens [2003] 715.

<sup>9</sup> Denifle & Chatelain [1891] 678–679: *Item quae audiuitis Boethium de Consolatione: Dispensatur.*

<sup>10</sup> Some of the unclarity here stems from the earlier unclarity about the position of the *Consolation* in mediæval education. We need to clarify the latter to understand the circumstances in which someone would compose a commentary on the *Consolation*. Details about editions of commentaries used here are given in the Bibliography.

century, with Nicholas Trevet (1265–1334), William of Aragon, and William Wheatley (or Whetely) writing their commentaries within a few years of each other. Trevet’s commentary, which makes heavy use of William of Conches, became the most popular and widely circulated of all mediæval commentaries, surviving in over a hundred manuscripts.<sup>11</sup> From this point onwards the *Consolation* is the object of attention in a variety of formats: vernacular translations; literal glosses and commentaries, in the vernacular as well as in Latin; and in a new genre, namely scholastic *quaestiones*. The latter were treatises consisting in a series of questions that were raised or inspired by a given text. In the second half of the fourteenth century we find several such treatises, including one by Pierre d’Ailly (1350–1420/1) from around 1380.<sup>12</sup> The heightened attention given to the *Consolation* in this third phase seems to have lasted for the rest of the Middle Ages. The fifteenth century, for example, saw the commentary of Denys the Carthusian (1402–1471), of mixed literary genre: sections of literal commentary were interspersed with *quaestiones* and ‘spiritual’ interpretation. Such widespread activity was in part responsible for the humanist interest in Boethius at the beginning of the Renaissance.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars and historians of philosophy first proposed to align these several phases doctrinally. In particular, the second phase was said to be ‘platonist’ and the third ‘aristotelian’.<sup>14</sup> But that simple interpretive scheme is inadequate. The patterns of borrowing from earlier commentaries are much more complicated than this scheme would allow: Bovo of Corvey in the ninth century is unsympathetic to the ‘platonist’ elements in the *Consolation*, the ‘aristotelian’ Nicholas Trevet in the fourteenth relies extensively on the twelfth-century ‘platonist’ William of Conches. Better to junk this scheme altogether and look at the commentaries afresh.

When we do, a fact immediately strikes us. The commentaries on the *Consolation* are not isolated from one another, but form a continuous *tradition*. Later commentators read, and frequently made use of, earlier commentators. Some ‘remigian’ elements from the ninth century show up in Denys’s fifteenth-century commentary. Naturally, each commentator had his own agenda; Trevet, for instance, seems concerned to defend positions associated

<sup>11</sup> See Dean [1976].

<sup>12</sup> Kneepkens [2003] describes some anonymous *quaestiones*. For d’Ailly see Chapuis [1993] and [1997].

<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo Valla particularly objects to Boethius’s Latinity in his *Elegantiae linguae latinae* (*Opera* 215–216). But there were positive evaluations of Boethius in the Renaissance as well: see Grafton [1981] and Nauta [2003].

<sup>14</sup> See Patch [1935] and Courcelle [1967].

with Aquinas (*e.g.* the unicity of substantial form) in his commentary.<sup>15</sup> And of course later commentators did not read all of the earlier commentators. But it is clear that the commentaries on the *Consolation* comprise an independent tradition, and that since its inception mediæval philosophers came to Boethius's text with an awareness of what their predecessors had made of it.

There is a particular advantage in recognizing that mediæval commentaries on the *Consolation* form a tradition. It is this. Rather than limiting ourselves to what any single commentator has to say, we can interrogate the tradition as a whole<sup>16</sup> to see what collective wisdom, or at least consensus, there may be with respect to a given question, problem, passage, or the like. Hence we may legitimately ask: What did the commentary tradition make of the *Consolation* as a philosophical treatise? That is, what philosophical problem did they take it to try to solve?

## 2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARGUMENT

The literary structure of the *Consolation* makes it hard to see what the correct philosophical reading of the text could be.<sup>17</sup> Boethius opens the work *in medias res*. Its dramatic *mise-en-scène* is the Prisoner's lament over his fallen state, which is a problem for the Prisoner, indeed, but not obviously a philosophical problem. The point is worth a moment's reflection. As the *Consolation* opens, there is no initial statement of a philosophical problem to be solved, theses to be defended, a position to be held against all challengers. Indeed, the *Consolation* offers few clues along these lines. Its separate books and chapters have no informative titles or headings, and do not seem to divide the text in a way that articulates its logical structure. The *dramatis personae*, namely the Prisoner and Lady Philosophy, are both clearly on the same side, so to speak; we do not anticipate the eventual refutation of one or the other. The *Consolation* is a text whose philosophical meaning has to be teased out.

The commentary tradition agrees, unanimously and unhelpfully, that the aim of the *Consolation* is, well, consolation. In the first phase, commentators generally follow Boethius in saying little or nothing more; they also tend to concentrate on biographical material in their introductions. This practice

<sup>15</sup> See Nauta [1997].

<sup>16</sup> More exactly, we can interrogate the parts of the tradition (readily) available to us. I have listed in the Bibliography the seven works that are the basis of the study here. Until more commentaries have been edited and studied, all results are only provisional. Since the commentaries are not always easy to get hold of, I have provided the Latin texts cited *in extenso*.

<sup>17</sup> Much as in the case of another philosophical work that is also a literary masterpiece, namely Augustine's *Confessiones*.

changes in the second phase. William of Conches writes a general prologue to his commentary in which he gives a succinct account of the aim of the *Consolation* by outlining the structure of Boethius's arguments (4.39–52):<sup>18</sup>

Thus Boethius deals with his subject-matter as follows: [1] he shows that temporal things are transitory and that the complete good is not among them, and so we should not be gladdened by their presence nor saddened by their absence; [2] he shows what the highest good is, and where it is situated, and how it is reached; [3] he shows that good people are always powerful and wicked people powerless, and that rewards always come to good people and punishments to evil people; [4] why some good people fare well in this life and others poorly, and likewise why some wicked people fare well and others poorly; [5] what divine providence is, as well as fate, chance, and free choice; [6] he puts forward arguments that seem to show that free choice is not compatible with divine providence, and disproves the false resolution<sup>19</sup> some people offer; [7] he establishes his own resolution with arguments.

William is interested in the dialectical stages of the *Consolation*, not in its literary or expository form; his sevenfold division of its logical structure gives equal weight to unequal portions of the text. William's [1] covers all of Books 1–2 and the first half of Book 3; [2] covers the second half of Book 3; [3] and [4] are dealt with in Book 4; [5]–[7] are the subject of Book 5. A more inclusive amalgamation, suggested by William's division, is tempting: [1]–[4] deal with ethics, broadly speaking, including the bit of metaphysics needed to underpin the ethics, whereas [5]–[7] deal with a specific issue in philosophical theology.

The later commentary tradition seems content to follow William's analysis of the structure of the *Consolation*. For example, Pseudo-Aquinas, writing his commentary some three to four centuries after William, not only adopts William's analysis but plagiarizes William's presentation wholesale in his preface – a good example of the kind of indebtedness found in the commentary tradition (122 col. 3 adding the numbers from William's presentation):<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Agit ergo de tali materia tali modo: ostendendo temporalia esse transitoria nec in eis esse perfectum bonum, et ita non esse laetandum de praesentia eorum nec dolendum de eorum absentia; deinde ostendendo quid sit summum bonum et in quo situm et qualiter ad ipsum perueniatur. Postea ostendit bonos esse semper potentes, malos impotentes; bonis numquam deesse praemia nec malis supplicia. Deinde cur boni quidam in hac uita floreat, quidam deprimantur; similiter cur quidam mali floreat, quidam deprimantur. Deinde quid sit diuina prouidentia, quid fatum, quid casus, quid liberum arbitrium. Deinde ponendo argumenta quibus uidetur liberum arbitrium cum diuina prouidentia esse non posse, et falsam solutionem quorundam improbando, deinde suam solutionem rationibus approbando.*

<sup>19</sup> The 'false resolution' is no doubt the one Boethius sketches in 5.3.7–8.

<sup>20</sup> *Quinto uidendum est de generali summa huius totius libri. Ubi sciendum quod Boethius in hoc libro ostendit bona temporalia esse transitoria, et non consistere totaliter in eis totalem*

Fifth, we should generally summarize the whole book: [1] Boethius shows that temporal goods are transitory and that the whole of genuine happiness does not consist in them, and, consequently, that we should not be saddened by their absence nor pleased by their presence; furthermore, [4] that no one should exult in faring well nor be depressed in adversity. [2] He also shows in this book what the highest good is, where it is situated, and how to reach it. [3] It is also shown that good people are always powerful and wicked people powerless, and that good people always have their rewards and wicked people their punishments. After this, [5] he shows what divine providence is, as well as chance, fate, and free choice. [6] Boethius puts forward arguments by which he proves that free choice is not compatible with divine providence. He lays out a false resolution offered by some people and disproves it; thereafter [7] he establishes the genuine resolution which he confirms with arguments.

Pseudo-Aquinas's placement of [4] abstracts a step further than William from the literary details of the *Consolation*, since it groups the arguments of Book 4 logically with the arguments about transitory goods rather than following Boethius's order of presentation.<sup>21</sup> Apart from minor variations of this sort, the later commentary tradition generally adopts William's analysis.<sup>22</sup>

Now William's analysis commanded widespread acceptance in the later commentary tradition because it is generally well-grounded in Boethius's text itself. Throughout the *Consolation*, Boethius offers occasional signposts that show the direction of the argument. The first long stretch of argument is signalled by the use of medicinal metaphors introduced after Lady Philosophy's diagnosis that the Prisoner is suffering from an illness (1.2.8). It is a peculiarly philosophical illness, namely that the Prisoner has "forgotten himself" (1.3.5: *Sui paulisper oblitus est*); several stages of therapy are called for, each needing

*ueram felicitatem: et per consequens non est dolendum de eorum absentia, nec gaudendum de eorum praesentia: et neminem debere extolli in prosperis, nec deprimi in aduersis. Ostenditur etiam in praesenti libro quid sit summum bonum, ubi sit situm, et quomodo ad ipsum perueniatur. Etiam ostenditur quod boni semper sunt potentes et mali semper sunt impotentes, et quod bonis numquam desunt sua praemia, malis nunquam sua supplicia. Post haec ostenditur quid sit diuina prouidentia, quid casus, quid fatum, quid liberum arbitrium. Et ponit Boethius rationes quibus probat liberum arbitrium non posse stare cum prouidentia diuina. Et ponit quorundam falsam solutionem et eam improbat; postea ostendit ueram solutionem quam rationibus confirmat.*

<sup>21</sup> Still, Pseudo-Aquinas may have done violence to Boethius's arguments, since the claims about desert defended in Book 4 (and in [4]) seem to depend on establishing [2], and perhaps [3] as well.

<sup>22</sup> Denys the Carthusian is closer to modern practice in offering an overview of the *Consolation* that summarizes it book-by-book, even at the cost of doing some violence to the logical structure of Boethius's arguments. He offers a succinct statement of his interpretation in his comments on the beginning of *cons.* 4.1 (436A).

different medicines. Exactly how this literary metaphor plays out in philosophical terms will be discussed in §4 below. Whatever the details, the end of this stretch of the argument, corresponding to William's [1], is brought to an end when Lady Philosophy declares that she will say no more about false happiness, moving on to the task of indicating what true happiness is (3.9.1: *ordo est deinceps quae sit uera [felicitas] monstrare*).

In line with [2], Lady Philosophy then explicitly states that she will show the Prisoner what the highest good is (3.9.1 and 3.9.32), where it is situated (3.10.1: *quonam haec felicitas perfectio constituta sit*), and how it is attained (3.10.22–25). The individual arguments under each heading are also clearly articulated, as are the several arguments that close Book 3 having to do with the unity of the supreme good and God's divine governance of the world. The latter are not obviously included in William's division.

The next major signpost in Boethius's text occurs at the start of Book 4. The Prisoner interrupts Lady Philosophy, and – finally! – states the fundamental problem of the *Consolation*: not the problem of evil (4.1.3), but the problem of desert (4.1.4–5):<sup>23</sup>

A further and greater problem looms: while wickedness rules and fares well, virtue not only goes unrewarded but is enslaved and trodden down by criminals, made to pay the penalties in place of the wrongdoers; that this happens under the reign of an omniscient and omnipotent God Who wills only good things must be the cause of astonishment and complaint from all.

Why doesn't each person get what he or she deserves? But each does, Lady Philosophy replies, and, given the preceding results (*si ea quae paulo ante conclusa sunt inconuulsa seruantur*), she declares in 4.1.7 that she will prove that good people are always powerful and wicked people weak, and that rewards always come to good people and punishments to evil people, as William describes in [3]; furthermore, that good people achieve success and wicked people suffer misfortunes, as William describes in [4]. These proofs occupy the bulk of Book 4.

Boethius marks the next and final major structural division of the *Consolation* at the beginning of Book 5, which William subdivides into his [5]–[7]. Lady Philosophy, about to speak of other matters (*ad alia quaedam*), is interrupted by the Prisoner, who asks about chance and Providence (5.1.3). Lady

<sup>23</sup> *At huic aliud maius adiungitur: nam imperante florenteque nequitia uirtus non solum praemiis caret, uerum etiam sceleratorum pedibus subiecta calcatur et in locum facinorum supplicia luit. Quae fieri in regno scientis omnia, potentis omnia, sed bona tantummodo uolentis dei, nemo satis potest nec admirari nec conqueri.* This is the general form of a complaint voiced by the Prisoner in 1.4.34 (alluding to 1.4.29).



Philosophy replies (5.1.4–5):<sup>24</sup>

She said: I am in a hurry to keep my promise<sup>25</sup> and to reveal to you the way by which you are to be brought back to your homeland. Although these matters you raise are quite useful to know about, they do divert us a bit from the path we have set ourselves, and I am afraid that you will be tired out by these digressions and not have enough strength to follow the proper track.

The Prisoner assures Lady Philosophy that she need not be worried on his behalf, and so they turn to chance, fate, divine providence, and free choice. But note that Lady Philosophy explicitly calls their investigations “digressions” (*deuiis*), diverting them from “the proper track” (*rectum iter*); she also describes what has yet to be done, namely show the Prisoner how he is to be brought back to his homeland, which seems not to happen anywhere in Book 5. The material in Book 5, then, seems to be only tangentially connected to the rest of the *Consolation*, which itself seems not to have completed the goals it sets itself.

William’s analysis, in its separating the ‘ethical’ theses [1]–[4] from the ‘theological’ theses [5]–[7], is in line with the ambiguous status of Book 5 as seen in its introductory passages. William makes the join visible. But that, of course, is to raise questions about the unity of the *Consolation* as a whole – questions that modern commentators generally ignore, preferring to take the *Consolation* as a complete and unified work as it stands.<sup>26</sup> But what did the commentary tradition make of these passages, and in general the dialectical relation between the ethical aims of Books 1–4 and the technical issues in philosophical theology of Book 5?

### 3. THE STATUS OF BOOK 5

Around 1480 Pierre d’Ailly summarized the whole of the *Consolation* in

<sup>24</sup> *Tum illa: Festino, inquit, debitum promissionis absolere uiamque tibi qua patriam reuēharis aperire. Haec autem etsi perutilia cognitu tamen a propositi nostri tramite paulisper auersa sunt, uerendumque est ne deuiis fatigatus ad emetiendum rectum iter sufficere non possis.*

<sup>25</sup> See 4.1.8–9 for Lady Philosophy’s stated intent to show the Prisoner the way home and provide him with wings, which the Prisoner explicitly calls a ‘promise’ in 4.2.1 – a reference noted by Trevet *ad loc.* (668–669).

<sup>26</sup> An argument currently popular in support of the unity of the *Consolation* is its supposed ‘concentric ring’ structure: for each given metre Boethius uses there are generally two poems written in that metre, poems that are related thematically, occurring in sections of the *Consolation* centred around the only poem in a unique metre, the magnificent 3m9 *O qui perpetua...* as the heart of the work. However, this argument – unknown in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – does not address the ambiguities noted in 5.1.4, and so I shall not consider it here.

two questions, one ethical and one theological, which he put as follows:<sup>27</sup>

- Can a philosopher arrive at a genuine understanding of human happiness, pursuing his philosophical investigation with only the natural light of reason?
- Is it compatible with God's eternal and unchangeable foreknowledge of everything future that some purely contingent event come to pass?

D'Ailly takes these two questions to be logically independent. In literary terms, we could represent this as the hypothesis that Books 1–4 form a unity, to which Book 5 is, essentially, an Appendix. William of Conches in the twelfth century seems inclined to the same view in his commentary on 5.1.1 (288.8–15):<sup>28</sup>

But since treating these matters seems far removed from consolation, which is the goal of this work, [Boethius] first puts a short transition in which he shows how he comes to treat them. . .

The transition William refers to is the Prisoner's interruption of Lady Philosophy, which provides a dramatic, not a logical, link between the earlier books and Book 5.<sup>29</sup> The ensuing discussion is indeed "far removed from consolation." Remi d'Auxerre, near the beginning of the commentary tradition, seems likewise to regard Book 5 as an Appendix in his paraphrase of Lady Philosophy's words in 5.1.5 (341–342):<sup>30</sup>

I have therefore proposed that you should be brought back to your former state of contemplation, which surely is close at hand. But the matters you are asking about get in your way, since while you delay me over them you cannot go to the places I have told you about.

<sup>27</sup> See Chappuis [1993] and [1997] respectively: *Utrum aliquis philosophus per inquisitionem philosophicam in naturali lumini ad ueram humanae beatitudinis notitiam ualeat peruenire* (14\*), and *Utrum cum aeterna et immutabili Dei praesentia omnium futurorum stet aliquid simpliciter contingenter euenire* (71). Chappuis [1997] 21 suggests that d'Ailly was led to this division of the text by Pseudo-Aquinas. Perhaps, but there is support in the commentary tradition, as the above sections have demonstrated.

<sup>28</sup> *Sed quia de istis tractare uidetur remotum a consolatione de qua intendit in hoc opere, praemittit quemdam breuem transitum quo ostendit unde tractat. . .* William seems of two minds about the status of Book 5. When Lady Philosophy claims that answering the Prisoner's questions would divert them "a bit" (*paulisper*) from reaching their goal, William explains this as a hint that answering the question isn't completely irrelevant or independent (289.29–31): *Sed ne aliquis putaret quod omnino esset aduersa et ita esset superfluum de istis in hoc loco tractare, ait: PAULISPER id est aliquantulum sed non omnino.*

<sup>29</sup> Hence the translation of 'unde' as 'how he comes' in the preceding passage.

<sup>30</sup> *Ergo, inquit, proposui te in pristinum contemplationis statum reducendum quod utique iam prope est sed ea quae tu interrogas impediunt te, quoniam dum in his me remoraris non potes adire ea quibus a me informandus es.*

Remi underlines the irrelevance of the discussion in Book 5 for the goal of consolation, that is, for returning the Prisoner to proper contemplation of God.<sup>31</sup> From all phases of the commentary tradition, then, there is support for reading Book 5 as a logically independent treatise appended to Books 1–4.

Yet there is another hypothesis available. For Book 5 might count as a digression but not as an appendix if it were embedded in a larger framework, one that made good on the repeated intention of Lady Philosophy to show the Prisoner the way back to his homeland. On this hypothesis, the *Consolation* as we have it is missing Book 6.<sup>32</sup>

This seems to be the view that Silk's Anonymous ninth-century commentator has in mind when he turns to explain Lady Philosophy's reluctance in 5.1.4 (271.15–272.3):<sup>33</sup>

She said: I AM IN A HURRY to fulfill the promise I made to you. She said this because she wanted to put an end to the work. . . Lady Philosophy also said: Although these matters are useful to know, they are still remote from OUR PLAN, *i. e.* from our aim. Her plan was described in 4.m7.32, GO NOW YOU INTREPID ONES: with these words she exhorted him to return to his heavenly homeland.

Arguing through the questions which she dismissed here got in the way of this. . . To “put an end to the work” Lady Philosophy needs to carry out the rest of her plan, namely, to show the Prisoner how “to return to his heavenly homeland.” The commentator explains how Lady Philosophy would accomplish this when he describes what she was up to at the time of the Prisoner's interruption in 5.1.1 (271.1–7):<sup>34</sup>

She was ready to extend her argument further, so that mortal men would strive to attain immortality through the heights of virtue; and she WAS TURNING her discourse TO THESE OTHER MATTERS, *i. e.* to exhort men to practise the good. . .

<sup>31</sup> Silk's Anonymous ninth-century commentator recognizes an ambiguity in Remi's formulation: *Et ostendit quod sit illud promissum, VIAM scilicet ei ostendere id est rationem QUA reuertatur ad PATRIAM propriam, id est ad pristinum intelligentiae suae statum, uel ad paradisum.* The Prisoner is either rendered capable of contemplating God in this life, or is taken to Heaven to look upon God in the Beatific Vision.

<sup>32</sup> Or Book 6 and Book 7, and so on: the point is that there is additional material to the *Consolation*. For the sake of simplicity, I'll speak as though there were only a single book to be added.

<sup>33</sup> *Et illa: FESTINO tibi perficere quod promisi. Hoc ideo dixit quia finem libri uoluerat facere. . . Dixit quoque Philosophia: Quamuis haec sint utilia cognitione, tamen remota sunt a PROPOSITO NOSTRO, id est ab intentione. Propositum quippe eius fuit in his quae dixit ITE NUNC FORTES; quibus uerbis hortata fuerat eum reuerti ad caelestem patriam. Ad hoc contrarium erat disputare de his questionibus quae iam amiserat. . .*

<sup>34</sup> *Superiorem enim rationem adhuc prolongare parabat, scilicet ut mortales homines per uirtutum culmina immortalitatem consequi studerent; seriem disputationis suae VERTEBAT, ut AD ALIA QUAEDAM, id est ad bonum exercitium homines inuitarent. . .*

There seems to have been consensus in the commentary tradition that the Prisoner would be shown how to return to his homeland by practising virtue. Pseudo-Aquinas, for instance, puts it this way: “Lady Philosophy’s exhortation is correct, since philosophy encourages the virtues and contempt for the goods of fortune.”<sup>35</sup> Presumably this would have been the content of Book 6.

Nicholas Trevet has an unusual twist on this second hypothesis. He too holds that the argument of the *Consolation* as we have it is incomplete, but that Boethius meant to resolve it in another work, as he tells us in his commentary on 5.1.4 (669):<sup>36</sup>

The WAY through which man can arrive in reality at what he should attain are the virtues of the mind. Boethius meant to deal with them – not in this work, but at the end of his *De musica*, dealing with ‘human music’; this is clear from what he says at the start of *mus. 4.2*. But he never carried out his plan, since he was prevented by the death inflicted by King Theodoric.

Since the last part of the *De musica* is lost, if it ever existed, Trevet’s solution cleverly combines two problems, namely the missing endings of each work. Of course, Trevet’s suggestion is superfluous. If he assumes that we don’t have the end of the *De musica* because of Boethius’s execution, why not leave the *De musica* out of account and simply assume that we don’t have the end of the *Consolation* because of Boethius’s execution? Yet whatever we may think of Trevet’s solution,<sup>37</sup> it clearly shows that he adopted the second hypothesis and saw the *Consolation* as incomplete.

The mediæval commentary tradition, then, differs from modern interpretation in recognizing a problem with the status of Book 5, although there does not seem to be consensus on whether the first hypothesis (Books 1–4 are a unity and Book 5 and appendix) or the second hypothesis (Books 1–5 need an additional Book 6) is the better. I should note, however, that in the late fifteenth century Denys the Carthusian tries to give a unified account of the *Consolation*, breaking with the tradition in a number of respects. Closer to modern practice, Denys offers an analysis that summarizes the *Consolation* book-by-book, rejecting William’s analysis. He gives a succinct statement of

<sup>35</sup> Pseudo-Aquinas (165 col 3): *Notandum, quod dicit exhortationem philosophiae fuisse rectam, quia philosophia hortatur ad uirtutes et ad contemptum fortuitorum.*

<sup>36</sup> *Via autem, per quam homo peruenit ad ipsam in re consequendam, sunt uirtutes animi, de quibus intendebat Boethius agere, non quidem in hoc libro sed in ultimis libris musicae, agendo de musica humana, ut patet ex hiis quae dicit in principio eiusdem libri musicae captulo secundo; sed non compleuit intentionem, scilicet a rege Theodorico morte praeuentus.*

<sup>37</sup> Pseudo-Aquinas adopts Trevet’s solution while correcting his grammar (165 col 3): *Illa autem per quae homo peruenit ad ipsam, sunt uirtutes, de quibus Boethius intendebat agere non in hoc libro, sed in ultimis libris musicae suae, agendo de musica humana: intentionem autem suam non compleuit, quia a rege Theodorico morte praeuentus fuit.*

his interpretation in his comments on the beginning of 4.1 (436A):<sup>38</sup>

In Book 1, Lady Philosophy carefully examines the causes of Boethius's sorrow. In Book 2, she administers the milder remedies to him as her patient. In Book 3, she administers the more effective and more sublime remedies, setting forth and arguing about in what several things happiness seems to consist (although it does not really), and again in what happiness truly is – or rather, what it is and how it may be attained. At this point, in Book 4, Lady Philosophy removes from Boethius's mind anything still remaining from his former indisposition, uneasiness, doubt, and confusion, showing that the whole of the universe, and in particular the human race, is well-governed in proper order by its creator: God the omnipotent, just, holy, and more than the wisest. Everything is ordered to its appropriate end, yet the providence of God does not confer necessity on human acts. This is the subject of Book 4 and of the following Book 5, wherein Boethius, in the role of someone not yet sufficiently illuminated, puts forward his doubts, wonderings, and confusions; Lady Philosophy answers them all wisely, or rather Boethius himself does in his role as a wise and virtuous man.

There are many differences between William and Denys: the former puts under a single logical heading what the latter sums up in each of the first three books, for instance.<sup>39</sup> The important move Denys makes is to understand the subject of Book 4 in such a way as to make it part of a continuous enterprise with Book 5, linking them through the mention of divine providence in 4.6.4. When he turns to the details of the text, though, Denys does not offer any explanation of the problems that led earlier commentators to find the status of Book 5 problematic; he is often content merely to repeat and paraphrase the text rather than engage the difficulties it poses.<sup>40</sup> It is true that divine

<sup>38</sup> *Denique in primo libro Philosophia causas doloris Boethii diligenter scrutata est; in secundo autem adhibuit ei ut aegro faciliora remedia; in tertio autem efficaciora et magis sublimia, disputando et declarando in quibus beatitudo uideatur multis consistere, cum ita non sit, et item in quo uere sit: immo et quid sit, ac qualiter pertingat ad ipsam. Nunc in hoc quarto libro remouet a mente Boethii quidquid in ea adhuc residet de sua pristina indispositione, inquietudine, dubietate et inuolutione, ostendendo totum uniuersum, praesertim genus humanum, a creatore suo Deo omnipotente, iusto, sancto ac supersapientissimo ordinate et optime gubernari, nec quidquam finaliter inordinatum relinqui, nec tamen a prouidentia Dei necessitatem actibus humanis inferri. Et haec est materia huius libri quarti, et etiam quinti sequentis: in quibus Boethius in persona hominis nondum satis illuminati, dubia sua, admirationes et inuolutiones proponit, ad quas Philosophia sapienter respondet, immo ipse Boethius in persona hominis sapientis ac uirtuosi.* Denys offers a similar account in commenting on 5.1, in his art. 1 (562A).

<sup>39</sup> There seems to be an echo of Denys's account of Books 1–3 in Pseudo-Aquinas's commentary on the beginning of 3.1 (143 col. 1): *Postquam Philosophia in primo libro scrutata est causas doloris Boethii, et in secundo libro adhibuit sibi remedia facilia, in praesenti libro et in sequentibus Philosophia adhibet Boethio remedia grauiora.*

<sup>40</sup> See for instance Denys on 5.1.4 art. 1 (563A–B): TAMEN A PROPOSITI NOSTRI

providence occurs in Book 4 and in Book 5, but that does not mean that the problems in which it plays a part are logically connected. Asserting that there is a connection does not make it so; Denys has to argue for the claim, which he does not do. For all that, Denys's extensive commentary shows that there were at least some readers who tried to take the *Consolation* as a unified whole.

Attempting to spell out the logical structure of the *Consolation* as a whole led us to question whether Book 5 was a proper ending, given the course of the argument. But in doing so we put off a question about whether the *Consolation* has a proper beginning, a question to which we must now return. In particular, we need to take a look at the philosophical cash-value in Boethius's use of literary artifice: the metaphor of sickness, health, and therapeutic treatment for the Prisoner, with which the philosophical project of the *Consolation* commences.

#### 4. THE MEDICINAL METAPHORS

Boethius deploys the metaphor of medicines that are weaker (more gentle) and stronger (more harsh) in describing the stages that Lady Philosophy uses to make the Prisoner 'healthy' again. The metaphor is introduced in 1.5.11–12, and repeated in 1.6.21 and 2.1.7. Thereafter the metaphor is exercised at intervals to signal the Prisoner's progress. The first application is at 2.1.8, where Philosophy's consolations are explicitly aligned with rhetoric (see also 2.3.2), and the second at 2.4, where Fortune's goods are said to be unsatisfying because ephemeral and transitory. A new stage of progress is marked at 2.5.1, where Philosophy offers the Prisoner stronger medicine; this seems to occupy the remainder of Book 2. The third stage is reached in 3.1.2, where the Prisoner demands stronger remedies, including those that seem bitter indeed (3.1.3): the explanation of the forms of false happiness, as Philosophy summarizes it in 3.9.1 – whereupon the medical metaphors are abandoned, and Boethius offers the second 'signpost' for interpreting the argument (namely "to indicate what true happiness is"), as described in §2 above.

The literary metaphor serves a dialectical purpose. Roughly speaking, the 'strength' of the medicines corresponds to the strength of the arguments

TRAMITE PAULISPER AVERSA SUNT, *id est aliena sunt a processu et uia nostri principalis intenti, quod fuit ea describere quae consolatoria sunt afflictis*; VERENDUMQUE EST, *id est formidandum*, NE DEVIIS FATIGATUS, *id est ne tu lassatus quaestionibus et responsionibus impertinentibus huic proposito et abducentibus a principali intento*, AD EMETIENDUM RECTUM ITER SUFFICERE NON POSSIS, *id est non ualeas satis fortis consistere ad pertranseundum RECTUM ITER, id est inuestigationem et apprehensionem perinentium ad principale propositum*.

offered by Lady Philosophy, with each successive stage dropping assumptions used in the arguments of the preceding stage. More to the point, the harsh remedies employ a different dialectical strategy, as Trevet notes in his comments on 2.1 (177–178):<sup>41</sup>

After Lady Philosophy investigated Boethius's condition and the cause of his affliction sufficiently in Book 1, here [in Book 2] she proceeds to the business of curing him. On this score she does two things: (a) she administers some gentle remedies to alleviate his pain and prepare for the stronger remedies to be taken; (b) she gives him the stronger remedies in 3.1.1. Boethius endorsed this way of proceeding in 1.5 and at the end of 1.6. He calls 'gentler remedies' the arguments derived from common use among people to remove pain; he calls 'stronger remedies' the arguments directed against people's common opinion, showing what the perfect good is and where it is situated and how to reach it.

The first several stages of therapeutic medicine have this much in common: they are all more or less commonly used to console people in their miseries, and do not address the root causes of their unhappiness. Trevet seems to be following William of Conches on this score, who, apropos of the Prisoner's diagnosis by Lady Philosophy in 1.6.21, remarks (95.30–96.37):<sup>42</sup>

Lady Philosophy shows how [the Prisoner] is consoled once the cause of his sorrow is known, namely by giving first weaker medicines and then stronger ones. The weaker medicines are the rhetorical arguments in common use to take away sorrow. The stronger medicines are arguments contrary to popular opinion for showing what the perfect good is, where it is situated, and how to reach it.

William's remarks about rhetoric here show that he has an eye to the first

<sup>41</sup> *Postquam Philosophia in primo libro sufficienter conditionem et causam morbi Boethii inquisiuit, hic ad curationem procedit. Et circa hoc duo fecit: primo enim adhibet quaedam remedia lenia quae dolorem mitigent et ad remedia ualidiora recipienda praeparent; secundo apponit ualidiora remedia libro tertio ibi IAM CANTUM. Istum enim modum procedendi commendauit libro primo prosa quinta et sexta in fine. Et uocat 'leniora remedia' rationes sumptas <iuxta> communem usum hominum ad remouendum dolorem; 'ualidiora remedia' uocat rationes contra communem opinionem hominum, ostendentes quid sit perfectum bonum et in quo situm et qualiter ad ipsum perueniendum.* Trevet offers similar remarks at the start of Book 3 (297–298), and Pseudo-Aquinas copies Trevet (143 col. 1): *Postquam Philosophia in primo libro scrutata est causas doloris Boethii, et in secundo libro adhibuit sibi remedia facilia, in praesenti libro et in sequentibus Philosophia adhibet Boethio remedia grauiora. Sunt autem remedia grauiora rationes contra communem opinionem hominum, probantes quod in bonis exterioribus non consistit uera felicitas ostendendo in quo sit felicitas uera, et quomodo ad ipsam perueniatur.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ostendit Philosophia qualiter consoletur Boethium cognita causa doloris illius, scilicet ponendo prius leuiora medicamina, deinde grauiora. Et sunt leuiora medicamina rhetoricae rationes iuxta usum hominum ad remouendum dolorem. Grauiora medicamina sunt rationes contra opinionem hominum ad ostendendum quid sit perfectum bonum et in quo situm et qualiter ad id perueniatur.*

application of mild medicine, namely the “sweet persuasiveness of rhetoric,” which has to be guided by philosophy to stay on the right road (2.1.8). This first stage of therapy offers no arguments, strictly speaking, but rather the popular view that Fortune always involves ups and downs: the Prisoner should count his blessings (2.4.5–9); he ought to recognize that good fortune only comes with the possibility of adverse fortune (2.4.4); good fortune may pass, but by the same token so does adverse fortune (2.4.11). Unfortunately, the Prisoner counts his misfortunes as well as his blessings, and is still unhappy over his current condition. Rightly so: these consolations all boil down to the thought that Fortune operates impersonally, and that ups and downs are inevitable. But surely that misses the point. Suffering is perhaps worse if personal (and the result of malevolence), but it isn’t easier to bear if it’s just the roll of the cosmic dice, as it were. Likewise, while it may be true that fortunes rise and fall, that doesn’t mean that there isn’t genuine suffering involved in their fall. The gambler is not consoled for his losses by the thought that sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. These popular consolations are patently inadequate for dealing with the Prisoner’s tragedy.

Lady Philosophy then offers three arguments to the effect that ephemeral goods cannot provide happiness (2.4.25–29), as her second application of therapy. She immediately moves on to ‘stronger medicines’ (2.5.1) wherein the ephemerality of the goods of Fortune is set aside, arguing that they aren’t worthwhile even apart from the fact that they can be lost, that is, arguing that the goods of Fortune are intrinsically worthless (2.5.2).<sup>43</sup>

Suppose that the gifts of Fortune were not ephemeral and transitory: what is there in them that can ever become yours, or, once examined and weighed, is not worthless?

The transition marked at 2.5.1–2 looks back to the preceding three arguments and forward to the point-by-point arguments against wealth (2.5), honours and power (2.6), and reputation (2.7).<sup>44</sup> It is at this point that the commentary tradition brings the literary metaphor into alignment with its dialectical meaning, that is, by identifying the precise assumptions that are made or dropped at each ‘application’ of medicinal reasoning. First the Anonymous

<sup>43</sup> *Age enim, si iam caduca et momentaria fortunae dona non essent, quid in eis est quod aut uestrum umquam fieri queat aut non perspectum consideratumque uilescat?*

<sup>44</sup> Boethius revises this list in Book 3 by distinguishing honours and power, and by adding (physical) pleasures, to get his final catalogue of five candidates for what makes life worth living. Here Boethius argues in each case that the supposed ‘good’ in question is not intrinsically worthwhile, apart from its ephemeral and transitory nature.



commentator of the ninth century (89.1–8):<sup>45</sup>

Lady Philosophy, seeing [the Prisoner] to be a little bit improved, says: Up until now I have used weaker medicines, but now I shall use stronger ones. Above [in 2.4.25–29] I proved that earthly goods should not be pursued, since they are transitory. I prove once again the same point: If they were not transitory, they ought not be pursued; then since they are transitory so much the less ought they be pursued; but, even if they were not transitory, they ought not be pursued.

The initial round of argumentation turns on the assumption that “earthly goods... are transitory”; the second round of stronger medicine drops this assumption, arguing that they are not worth pursuing in their own right. So Nicholas Trevet in the fourteenth century (236–237):<sup>46</sup>

After Lady Philosophy put forward [in 2.4.25–29] less forceful remedies to show that the goods of Fortune should be spurned and one should not be sorrowed at their loss, here she puts to the same end more forceful remedies, which are arguments derived from the circumstances of particular goods of Fortune.

The strength of the medicines matches the dialectical power of the arguments. When the Prisoner announces that he is ready for drastic remedies in 3.1.2–3, even circumstantial features of the goods of Fortune are put aside. Instead, Lady Philosophy adopts the second dialectical strategy mentioned above, namely “arguments contrary to popular opinion for showing what the perfect good is, where it is situated, and how to reach it.” The five traditional candidates for happiness, namely wealth, honours, power, reputation, and physical pleasure, cannot deliver on their promises, but do implicitly describe the Supreme Good: it is final, in that it puts an end to all desire; complete, in that there are no goods outside it; dominant, in that there is nothing better than it. This formal specification of the Supreme Good has to be filled out, of course, but even at this abstract level it’s enough to establish that none of the traditional candidates measure up. That brings us to the next structural division of the *Consolation*, at which point the medicinal metaphors are dropped.

The commentary tradition explicates Boethius’s literary metaphors by aligning them with strictly logical features of the arguments presented in the

<sup>45</sup> *Videns Philosophia Boethium aliquantulum esse promotum, inquit: Hactenus sum usa debilioribus medicaminibus, sed nunc utar ualidioribus. Probaui superius quod terrena non sunt appetenda, quia sunt caduca. Et adhuc idem probo: Si cum non essent caduca, non essent appetenda, tunc cum caduca sint multo minus sunt appetenda; sed, si etiam caduca non essent, non essent appetenda.*

<sup>46</sup> *Postquam Philosophia posuit superius remedia minus mouentia ad ostendendum quod bona Fortunae sunt contemnenda nec nimis de eorum amissione dolendum, hic ponit ad idem remedia magis mouentia, cuiusmodi sint rationes sumptae ex conditionibus particularium bonorum Fortunae.*

*Consolation*. Modern commentators do not do as much: Gruber [1978] gives the correct cross-references for these passages, but he does not cash them out in terms of their dialectical strength. Here mediæval commentators, with their eye to detail and to philosophical issues, seem to me to have it all over their modern counterparts. There is a curious ‘double vision’ effect in Books 2–3: the same issues are explored; the attractions of wealth, power, and so on take their drubbings in each book; the same sorts of considerations about happiness and the human good are mobilized. This will seem no more than pointless repetition on Boethius’s part unless we see that the several arguments are of logically different strengths, and are not meant to build on one another so much as to push the philosophical investigation to deeper and deeper levels. The commentary tradition makes this abundantly clear.

#### CONCLUSION

It should be clear that if mediæval philosophy is a series of glosses on Boethius, those on the *Consolation* deserve a place of signal honour, above all for their insight into the text as a work of philosophy, whatever its literary or other virtues might be. From the commentary tradition we can learn to treat it with the respect it deserves, whether it is a matter of questioning the role of Book 5 in the overall argument or how best to understand the initial literary introduction of the philosophical problems with which it deals. Closer attention to the commentary tradition would, I think, prove even more enlightening, questioning our contemporary assumptions and bringing us to a closer philosophical engagement with Boethius. And that, after all, is what we should be doing as philosophers and as historians of philosophy.

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- ANONYMOUS. From the ninth century, an anonymous commentary edited and published in Silk [1935]. Silk argued that the commentary was written by (or heavily indebted to) John Scottus Eriugena, but his case has not won general acceptance; ‘anonymous’ seems best. Silk also includes in an Appendix some extracts from the influential commentary of Remi d’Auxerre, dating from the beginning of the tenth century.
- WILLIAM OF CONCHES. From the twelfth century, the commentary by William of Conches (1080–ca. 1150), edited in Nauta [1999]. There are many ‘conchian’ glosses in manuscript; nobody yet has a view about their interrelations.
- TREVET. The Dominican friar Nicholas Trevet or Trivet (1265–1334) was educated at Oxford and Paris; he was a student of Thomas of York, and wrote his influential commentary around 1300. There is no critical edition, but Edmund Silk was working on an edition at the time of his death, and a typescript of his draft edition was deposited with his papers at Yale University. Trevet’s commentary was the most influential at the end of the Middle Ages, being used by Jean de Meun and by Chaucer, among others – Silk notes “some eighty or ninety manuscripts” in his preface; Dean [1976] lists over a hundred.
- WILLIAM OF ARAGON. William of Aragon was a doctor and a professor of medicine, writing at roughly the same time as Trevet. Portions of this work have been edited in Terbille [1972], working from the Erfurt manuscript only; there are now five known manuscripts of Aragon’s commentary: see Minnis [1981] 353n15, Atkinson & Babbi [2000] 183–184. Crespo [1973] has established that Jean de Meun translated William’s prologue to his commentary to preface his own French translation; Jean’s death in 1305 provides a *terminus ante quem* for William’s composition of his commentary.

- PIERRE D’AILLY. There is a late fourteenth-century pair of questions about the *Consolation* by the young Pierre d’Ailly (1350–1420/1). The first question has been edited in Chappuis [1993]; the second is described in Chappuis [1997], but has not yet been edited.
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