



Divine Providence and Chance **Boethius**

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

BOOK I

The Universe is Governed by God

Prose 6

“Do you think that the universe is guided only by random chance?” asked Philosophy. “Or do you believe it to be governed by some rational principle?”

“I could never believe that such regularity could be the result of random chance. I know that God the Creator guides over his own creation. There never will come a moment in my life when I will abandon the truth of this belief.”

“So it is,” she said, “and this is the crux of the complaint you made just a while ago when you lamented the fact that only mankind was outside of God’s care. You were convinced of the fact that all things were ruled by reason. So I am perplexed as to how you can be so sick when you are grounded in such a healthy belief. But let’s examine this more closely, because it seems as though something is missing from your perspective. Since you have no doubts that the universe is governed by God, can you tell me *how* it is governed?”

“I don’t follow your questions, so I hardly know how to answer them.”

“So I was right in thinking that something was missing from your perspective: like a breach in the wall of a fort, your mind has become assailed by the sickness of emotional distraction. Tell me, do you remember what the goal or end of all things is—that goal towards which all nature is directed?”

“I once knew it,” I replied, “but now grief has dulled my memory.”

“But don’t you know the source from which all things come?”

“Yes,” I said, “that source is God...”

Poem 6

When the heat of the sun burns hot in summer,
the fool who plants his seed in the hard ground
must feast on acorns in the fall,
because the earth refuses this seed.
Don’t try to find violets in flowering woods

when all around you is being blasted by winter winds.
And don't try to greedily prune your vine branches in the spring
if you want to enjoy grapes,
since Bacchus ripens his fruit in the fall.
For God has ordained that each season has its own tasks
and does not allow confusion to reign.
Every attempt to disrupt the order that He has established
will fail in the end.

BOOK V

Philosophy Discusses Chance

Prose 1

When Philosophy finished speaking and was about to turn to other subjects, I interrupted: "Your encouragement is completely fitting and worthy of your authority. But from my own experience I am learning that the question of [God's] Providence is connected with many other matters. I would like to know whether there is such a thing as chance, and what it is."

"...I'll do as you request," she said, and she continued as follows: "If chance is defined as the outcome of random motion without any sequence of causes, then there is no such thing as chance. Apart from its use in our present discussion, I consider it an empty word. For what can possibly happen at random if God's order controls all things....It's a true saying that nothing comes from nothing..."

"Then is there properly anything at all that can be called 'chance' or 'happening randomly,'" I asked....

"My philosopher, Aristotle, defined it quite succinctly and properly in his *Physics*."

"How?" I asked.

"Whenever something is done for one reason, but something else other than what was intended occurs, it is called 'chance.' For example, if someone digs up the ground in order to cultivate it and finds a heap of buried gold, this is believed to have happened by chance. But it doesn't come from nothing. It has its own causes, whose unforeseen and unexpected occurrence seemed to have produced an event by chance. For, if the cultivator of the field had not been digging in the ground and if the owner of the gold had not buried it, the gold would not have been found. These, therefore, are the causes of this fortuitous occurrence, which comes about from a coincidence of causes and not from the intention of the person performing the act. For neither the one who buried the gold nor the one who dug it up, intended it to be found. As I said, it was a coincidence that the one dug where the other had buried the gold.

"We may, therefore, define chance as an unexpected result brought about from a coincidence of certain causes, where there was another intention. This coincidence of causes occurs because of the order proceeding from the connection among all things. This order emanates from its source, which is Providence, and which disposes all things in their proper time and place."

BOOK III

Philosophy shows that God rules the universe for the highest good

Prose 12

...“If you look back at what we agreed upon earlier,” Philosophy said, “you’ll soon remember something else that just a little while ago you said that you didn’t know.”

“What is that?”

“The way that the universe is governed.”

“I do recall admitting my ignorance, but I now would like to hear your explanation, even though I have some idea of what you will say.”

“A little while ago,” she said, “you affirmed without any doubt that the universe must be governed by God.”

“I still believe this without any doubt at all,” I said. “And I’ll explain the reasons for this: The universe could never have been so perfectly put together from such different and contrary parts, unless there had been one who could bring together such diverse things. And once this unity had been achieved, the very diverse nature of these parts would have broken it apart...unless there had been one to hold together what he had created. And the stable order of nature could not continue on its path...unless there was one who could oversee these changes, while remaining unchanging himself. This cause by which things remain in existence and in motion, I call God, according to the name all people use.”

Then Philosophy said, “Since these are your convictions, I think that there will be little trouble involved in restoring your happiness and returning you safely to your true homeland. But now let us return to our task: Haven’t we shown that sufficiency is necessary for happiness and that God is absolute happiness?”

“That’s correct,” I replied.

“Therefore he needs no external assistance in governing the universe, since, if he needs anything, he wouldn’t have complete sufficiency.”

“That follows logically,” I said.

“Then he governs all things by himself?”

“That’s true.”

“And we have shown that God is the absolute good.”

“Yes, I remember,” I said.

“Then he who is good and governs all things by himself must govern all things by good. And so he is the tiller and the rudder by which the ship of the universe is kept stable and unimpaired.”

“I strongly agree with that,” I said....

“...Since we concur that God steers all things by the helm of goodness, and all things, as I have said, have an inclination towards the good, can there be any doubt that they willingly are guided...by the power of that helmsman?”

“That would seem to be the case,” I said, “for no governance could be called happy if it was imposed unwillingly rather than out of compliance for the sake of salvation.”

“Then there is nothing that could preserve its own nature while opposing God?”

“Nothing.”

“But if one did try to oppose him, would one have any success at all against what we have shown to be supremely powerful in matters of happiness?”

“One would have no chance at all,” I said.

“Then there is nothing that could have either the desire nor the power to stand against the highest good.”

“I think not.”

“It is the highest good which governs all things with gentle authority.”

Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans. Michael S. Russo.

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