



Human Suffering and the Nature of Fortune Boethius

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

BOOK I

Boethius Complains About His Unfortunate Circumstances

Poem 1

Once I wrote songs with a joyful heart,
but now I write mournful tunes.
The Muses that guide my words are maimed
and my cheeks are wet with tears.
But no fear could dissuade [my muses]
from accompanying me along my way.
They were the pride of my youth—one filled with joy and glory.
And now, in my later gloomy days, they are a comfort to me.
For sorrow has come upon me in old age without warning
and my days are numbered by grief.
White hairs now cover my head
and my skin hangs loosely from my worn-out limbs.
Death would be a blessing if it spared men in their sweet years,
but came to them in times of woe.
But now death is oblivious to the cries of the wretched,
And will not close eyes that are filled with tears.
While fickle Fortune once smiled upon me with her vain favors,
I've all but drowned in this saddest hour of my life.
Now [Fortune] has transformed her deceitful face,
dragging out the misery of life with wearing delays.
My friends, why did you so often call me blessed,
when one who has fallen has never really stood on stable ground.

Philosophy Approaches Boethius in His Time of Grief

Prose 1

While I was reflecting in this way to myself, expressing my grief in writing, I suddenly became

aware of a woman standing over me. She had an appearance full of majesty and her eyes shone with a fire that far surpassed the usual power of men.... Her clothing was made of the finest materials by subtle workmanship....On the bottom of her hem was embroidered the Greek letter Π (*Pi*), on her top hem was the Greek letter Θ (*Theta*). And between the two there was a ladder of ascent that rose from the lower letter to the higher....She held books in her right hand and in her left she held a scepter....

My eyes were so filled with tears that I could not make out who this woman of such commanding power was. All I could do was to turn my eyes to the ground and wait in silence to see what she would do next. Then she came near me and sat down on the edge of my bed. Looking at my sad face lined with grief, she began to speak these words about the troubled state of my mind:

Poem 2

“Alas, how dull the mind grows when sunken
into the depths of despair. Her bright light lost,
she is forced to walk in complete darkness,
when distress, fanned by earthly winds, grows too great to bear.
This man was free to run through open heavens,
to watch the luminescent splendor of the sun,
to inquire into the brightness of the chilly moon;
like a conqueror, he observed the spheres and the wandering course of stars....
Now having lost the beauty of his mind,
he lies with neck bent low by heavy chains,
and the dust of earth is all he has left to contemplate.”

Prose 2

“But now,” she said, “is the time for healing rather than for complaining.” Then fixing her eyes intensely upon me, she said, “Aren’t you the man who was brought up with the milk of my learning and nourished with the food I gave you until you reached maturity? I provided you with the weapons you needed to keep safe, but you threw them away. Don’t you know me? Why don’t you speak? Do you remain silent from shame or bewilderment? I would prefer that it was from shame, but I see that this is not the case.”

When she realized that it was not that I wouldn’t speak, but that I was completely tongue-tied, she laid her hand gently upon me and said, “There is no danger here: he is suffering from lethargy, a disease that afflicts so many deluded minds. He has forgotten who he is for now, but he will remember as soon as he recognizes me. To help him, let me wipe away the dark clouds of worldly concerns from his eyes.”

Saying this, she gathered a small piece of her garment and dried my tearful eyes.

Poem 3

Then night was dispelled and the darkness fled away,
and my eyes returned to their former power....

Philosophy Addresses Boethius

Prose 3

In this way, the clouds of my grief were scattered and I took in the daylight. Recovering my senses, I turned to examine the face of my physician. Directing my eyes towards her and my gaze upon her, I recognized the nurse who had cared for me since my youth—Philosophy. And I asked her, “Why have you, mistress of all virtues, come down from heaven to visit me in my lonely place of banishment? Are you, like me, the victim of false charges?”

“Do you think that I would ever desert you, my child?” she replied. “Shouldn’t I share and bare some part of the burden that has been laid upon you because of animosity for my name? Never would I allow the innocent to be abandoned in times of trouble. Do you think that I fear being accused, as if this was any new situation? Did you think that this was the first time that Wisdom has been threatened by the power of evil forces?...”

“You should not be surprised if we are driven by storm winds, when it has been our guiding principle to displease wicked men. Even though their numbers are great, they are to be scorned, because they have no leader and are carried away by ignorance, without any order at all.... Safe on our high citadel, we can laugh at their furious attacks, secure in our knowledge that our defenses are strong against such folly....”

Boethius Complains to Philosophy of His Unjust Sufferings

Prose 4

...“Tell me why you are weeping,” she asked....“If you want the doctor’s help, you must show your wound.”

So, rallying my spirit to its former strength, I replied, “Does the savage fury of Fortune’s attack upon me need to be explained? Doesn’t it speak for itself? Look at the very appearance of this place. Is this the library of my house that you chose as your resting place—where you had so often discussed matters human and divine with me? Are these the clothes I wore or is this the same expression on my face as when I used to probe the secrets of nature with you?...”

“Are these the rewards you give to your obedient servants? Wasn’t it you, who through the mouth of Plato, argued that states would be best off if they were either ruled by philosophers or if those who ruled them had studied philosophy? And didn’t you also say that the reason why philosophers should rule was so that the helm of government should not be left in the hands of wicked and unscrupulous individuals who might bring corruption and ruin upon good citizens? And was it not in following this advice that I resolved to practice in public life what I had learned from you in our private conversation? You and God himself, who planted you in the minds of the wise, are my witnesses that the only consideration I had in holding public office was the promotion of the common good of all people. It was for this reason that that I entered into conflict with the wicked, and why, for the sake of preserving justice, I have been indifferent to the hatred that this provoked in powerful men....

“[These men made] charges against me and their charges were accepted. What was the reason for this? Did my actions deserve this?...Fortune should have been ashamed, if not at the sight of an innocent man accused, at least at the depravity of my accusers....

“In all this, grief has not so dulled my sensibilities that I should complain about wicked men making attacks upon virtue. But what really gets me is that they have accomplished exactly what

they set out to do!...The idea that vicious individuals should prevail over the innocent while God watches over us—this seems too monstrous to be true. It's not without some justification, therefore, that one of your own followers asked, 'If God exists, what is the source of evil? And, if God doesn't exist, what is the source of good?'...

"I won't even get into all the rumors and various opinions about me that are circulating among people. Let's just say that the final burden laid upon us by cruel Fortune is that, when some accusation is made against a poor man, they are believed to deserve all that they suffer. And so here I am—stripped of my possessions, driven from office, my reputation stained, persecuted because I have tried to do good. And I can see wicked men filled with happiness and joy and every degenerate individual devising new false accusations. I can see good men lying paralyzed with helplessness after seeing my predicament, and vile men pursuing every opportunity for committing crime without fear of punishment and even in the hopes of gaining rewards. The innocent I see robbed not only of their peace and safety, but even of the chance to defend themselves...."

Philosophy Tries to Reassure Boethius

Prose 5

While I shared this long and sad tale, Philosophy looked on at me with a calm expression, completely undismayed by my complaints. Then she said, "As soon as I saw you downcast and tearful, I knew that you were in misery and exile, but I didn't know how far you had been banished until I heard you just now. But it's not just that you have been driven from home: you have driven yourself. Or, if you would rather believe yourself to have been driven, you have been driven by yourself rather than any other, since no one else could have done this to you...."

"And so I am not so much disturbed by the site of this place than by your own attitude. It's not the walls of your library, decorated with ivory and glass, that I need, but rather a place to dwell in your own mind. For it is there that I've stored not books, but that which gives them value—the wisdom that they contain..."

"You have protested against Fortune with anger and complain that rewards are not measured out according to merit. In your final embittered rant, you prayed that the same peace that rules the heavens should also rule the earth. But your mind is so filled by a torrent of emotions and you are so buffeted about by anger and sorrow that you are not able to handle strong medicine. Instead, I will use gentler remedies...."

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.

Philosophy Attempts to Put Boethius' Misfortunes into Perspective

Prose 6

“First then,” Philosophy continued, “will you let me test your mental state by asking a few questions, so that I can decide on a proper course of treatment?”

“Ask whatever you want,” I said, “and I’ll try to answer you.”

“Do you think that the universe is guided only by random chance? 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.”

“So how is it possible that you can know the source of all things and still not know their goal?...Answer this now: do you remember that you are a man?”

“How could I forget that?” I answered.

“Call you tell me what a man is?”

“Are you inquiring as to whether I know that a man is an animal that is rational and mortal? I know that and recognize that I am that.”

“Do you know nothing else about what you are?” asked Philosophy.

“No, nothing,” I said.

“I know the cause—or rather the chief cause—of your sickness. You have forgotten what you are. And so now I have found out the reason for your sickness and the means of restoring your health. You are confused because you have forgotten what you are and, therefore, are upset that you are in exile and robbed of all your possessions. Because you don’t know the purpose and end of all things, you believe worthless and evil men to be powerful and happy. You have forgotten how the universe is governed, and so you think that the changes of fortune that you have experienced occur without purpose. These sorts of ideas lead not only to sickness, but to death....”

BOOK II

Philosophy Instructs Boethius about the Nature of Fortune

Prose 1

After this, Philosophy remained silent for a while, and her stillness made me focus my attention on her. She then began to speak again.

“If I have properly diagnosed the causes and nature of your sickness, it seems to me that you are suffering because of the absence of your former good fortune. It is the loss of this, as you image it, that seems to have disrupted the state of your mind. I know the various disguises of that monster, Fortune, and how she pretends to have friendly feelings towards those whom she is about to cheat, overwhelming those whom she has deserted with grief. If you can keep in mind her nature...and habits, you’ll see that you never had anything of value when she was with you, and lost nothing of value when she left you....

“What is it, then, O mortal man, that has caused you to experience such grief and sorrow? Did you experience something strange and unexpected? But you are wrong if you think that Fortune has changed towards you. This is her nature—the way she always behaves. She is changeable and so in changing she has shown her true character to you....If you approve of her ways, then accept her and make no complaints. But if you are disgusted by her treachery, then reject her and the games that she plays....”

True Happiness is Found Within, Not in the Fickle Gifts of Fortune

Prose 4

“Everything you say is true....” I replied to Philosophy. “I can’t deny that I achieved prosperity very quickly. But it’s the very memory of this that causes me the most agony. For of all the sufferings of fortune, the worst misfortune of all is to have once been happy....”

“At least we’ve made some progress,” she answered, “if you can find something not to complain about. But I find your moaning difficult to bear, when you complain about the loss of some of your happiness. Who do you think is so completely happy that he doesn’t have some issues with his situation in life? It is part of the human condition to be filled with anxiety, since happiness is imperfect and inconstant. One person may be very rich, but may be ashamed by his social status; another has a high social status, but is so crippled by poverty that he would rather remain unknown; another may be blessed with wealth and social status, but is unhappy because he has no wife; another may be happily married, but lacks children to inherit his fortune; another is blessed with children, but is miserable because they are so vicious. So no one is completely satisfied with the lot Fortune has sent him.

“...Consider that it is often the most blessed individuals who are the most sensitive to their situation in life. Since they are unused to adversity, unless everything works out perfectly for them, they are disturbed by every little concern and devastated by every small trouble.

“Think about how many men would be overjoyed even to have the smallest part of your remaining good fortune. This very place, which you call your place of exile, is home to those who live here. Nothing is miserable unless you think it so, and similarly nothing is blessed unless you are content with it. Who is there that wouldn’t want to change his conditions in

life if he views them with impatience. The sweetness of life is always mingled with bitterness. Even those who enjoy its pleasantness cannot prevent such happiness from departing when it chooses to.

“It’s plain then how paltry worldly happiness is when it can abandon those who are content with their situation in life and cannot satisfy those who are discontent. Why, then, do men seek happiness outside themselves when it is to be found within them?...

“If I ask you whether there is anything that you value more than your own self, you will agree that there is nothing. If, then, you are the master of yourself, you are in possession of something that you would never wish to lose and which fortune could never take away from you. Consider further that happiness cannot be dependent upon matters of chance. If happiness is the highest good of rational creatures, and if nothing capable of being lost can be the highest good (since that which is best cannot be lost), then it’s clear that Fortune by its very fickleness cannot bring happiness....”

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

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