John Marenbon, ed.
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This volume, aside from being a welcome addition to the Cambridge Companions to Philosophy Series, is unique in at least one respect: unlike other volumes in the series to which it belongs, it draws on the expertise of scholars from several disciplines outside of professional philosophy. Thus we find contributions by classicists, historians, medievalists, and literary scholars in addition to historians of philosophy. This is entirely appropriate, for Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (*ca*. 480-*ca*. 525/6) was more—some might say less—than a philosopher. Rather, he was also, in a very important sense, a conduit between the ancient and medieval worlds, both as a commentator and translator of Aristotle's logical works and as a gifted literary stylist who, having been influenced by ancient forms of prose and poetry, would later be revered by such giants of the canon as Dante and Geoffrey Chaucer. Now it is true that the volume's editor, John Marenbon, personally resists the conduit interpretation on the basis that it unfairly diminishes Boethius' originality, an originality which lay, not so much in the content of Boethius' writings (which was, as even Marenbon admits, highly derivative) as in *what* Boethius chose to write about and by *whom* he chose to be influenced (2-3). Be this as it may, it is nonetheless undeniable that Boethius provided a great service to western philosophy and literature through his translations and commentaries.

The volume is organized around Boethius's magnum opus and best-known work, the *Consolation of Philosophy.* After an introduction by Marenbon the volume divides into two parts, 'Before the *Consolation*' (Part 1) and 'The *Consolation*' (Part 2). The former includes chapters that address Boethius's contribution to the development of logic (Christopher Martin and Margaret Cameron) and theology (David Bradshaw, Andrew Arlig, and Christophe Erismann). These chapters focus on Boethius's logical works and commentaries and on the four treatises that comprise the so-called *Opuscula sacra*. The remaining chapters of Part 1 treat of Bothius's life and philosophical context (John Moorhead) and Boethius as a commentator of Aristotle (Sten Ebbesen). Part 2, by contrast, includes such philosophical themes contained within the *Consolation* as morality and the good (John Magee), and the topics of fate, divine foreknowledge and human freedom (Robert Sharples). A chapter on the Latin commentary tradition of the *Consolation* by Lodi Nauta, which addresses the work's philosophical afterlife in the Middle Ages, concludes these studies of the *Consolation* as a work of philosophy. The remaining two chapters of Part 2, by contrast, address literary themes associated with the *Consolation*: one chapter evaluates the *Consolation* itself as a work of literature (Danuta Shanzer), the other addresses its influence on later medieval prose and poetry (Winthrop

Wetherbee). The volume concludes with a useful appendix on Boethius's works (Magee and Marenbon), and an extensive bibliography of relevant secondary literature.

From the perspective of the history of philosophy, Boethius is chiefly known for his discussion and subsequent transmission of two problems that originated in antiquity but that had, at least in the case of the second problem, particular relevance to thinkers working within a Christian context. The first is the problem of universals, and the second is that of future contingents.

It was virtually an axiom of ancient theories of epistemology that true knowledge of something involved coming to know its universal form, whether this existed in some metaphysical realm, as Plato thought, or as instantiated in individual substances, as Aristotle held. And although Plato and Aristotle differed somewhat on this vital point, they both agreed that the mere apprehension of individual substances provided not true knowledge per se (*epistēmē*), but mere opinion (*doxa*). On the Platonic and Aristotelian accounts, to really possess some item of knowledge involves more than simply an ability to recognize, say, a chair when one sees it. Rather, it is to possess abstract knowledge of the form or essence—its 'chairness', as it were—in which such an object participates or which it shares with all members of its class. Individual objects, then, are what we perceive with our senses, and universal essences are what we apprehend with our intellects.

But what exactly is a 'universal'? Is it a mere abstraction, a concept in the mind, or does it exist in reality? The second possibility seems a non-starter, for everything outside of the mind appears to be singular, whereas universals, by definition, are related to many. Universals, it would therefore seem, cannot correspond to anything outside of the mind. But if a universal is merely a concept that does not correspond to anything in the outside world, how then can it possibly be true? For is this not precisely the definition of a false concept: one that has no correspondence to anything in the outside world? This, then, is the problem of universals that Boethius addressed in his second commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*, or introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*. The solution he offers is the broadly Aristotelian one that had been defended by the Peripatetic commentator Alexander of Aphrodesias (*ca*. 200 AD). According to this account, universals have a twofold nature: as the forms or organizing principles of individual things, and as universal intelligibles once they have been abstracted by the intellect. Alexander's discussion of this topic was to have an considerable influence on later medieval thinkers such as Peter Abelard (1079-1142), John Duns Scotus (1265/66-1308) and William of Ockham (*ca.* 1287-*ca*. 1247); and Margaret Cameron's chapter does an admirable job of illuminating this difficult topic.

While the problem of universals had important philosophical implications, the problem of future contingents, by contrast, was particularly pressing for later Christian theologians. In the ancient world, the problem was whether future contingents—events

that happen by chance or by human free will—were possible in a world governed by fate. In a Christian context, it concerned whether human free choice could exist in a world created by a perfect, and therefore omniscient God, who knows all things, including the future decisions that all humans will make. Put otherwise, the problem is that, if God has foreknowledge of what I will do tomorrow, then in what meaningful sense can I be said to be free? And if I am not free, then how can I possibly be responsible for my actions? Boethius adopted the Platonic solution of arguing that if God created the world—along with time—then he must exist outside of time. And if he exists outside of time, then there is no 'past', 'present' or 'future' for God as there is for temporal creatures such as us. Rather, God might be said to exist in an 'eternal present'. Indeed, according to this solution, it would be more accurate to say that God simply knows or sees what we are doing, than to say that he foreknows our actions. He sees some things happening necessarily—such as the sun rising—and some things happening contingently, such as deliberate human actions. But in no way does his knowledge of these latter actions undermine their contingency, any more than my witnessing Socrates walking undermines the contingency of his action. Divine omniscience and human free will are therefore able to coexist, as Robert Sharples shows in his excellent chapter.

Although it has been necessary to focus on (some of) the strictly philosophical themes of this Cambridge Companion, this should in no way be taken as a reflection on the quality of the chapters dealing with Boethius as literary figure. Indeed, the quality of all of the chapters in this magnificent volume is very high, a fact that will hopefully encourage historians of philosophy to broaden their horizons, as it were, and to 'read Boethius whole' (2), as Marenbon puts it. For if there is one thing that Boethius teaches historians of philosophy—and Marenbon is surely right about this—it is that we should avoid excessive specialization lest we set the boundaries of our discipline in too fixed and ungenerous a way.

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