

Boethius and the Consolation of the Quadrivium

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Boethius's *Consolation* has suffered under many criticisms. Misunderstandings about the nature of the work have either led to its neglect or helped to cultivate prejudices about its philosophical importance. The fact that the *Consolation* draws upon such a wealth of sources leads some to question the originality of the work, while the apparent opposition of the positions represented leads others to question its philosophical merits. My own view is that the *Consolation* uses its sources in an original way, and the diverse arguments and methods are unified in a Platonic ascent. Boethius presents a logical progression from lower forms of knowing and being to higher forms, in a way that is essential to the integration of the form and the content of the work.

Scholars such as Thomas Curley and Elaine Scarry have argued for the unity and coherence of the *Consolation* on the basis of the formula in book 5, that things are known according to the mode of the knower and not the object known.¹ The form of the *Consolation* reflects the various modes of knowing. Sensation, imagination, reason, and intellect not only constitute the content of the various books but also give each book its formal features. Book 1 adopts the idiom of sensation, book 2 imagination, books 3 and 4 reason, and book 5 intellect. The diverse modes are related in a hierarchical order, with the lower modes contained within the higher.

Yet I think that Curley and Scarry do not go far enough with this interpretation. Neither makes clear the logic of the relation between the faculties or the nature of the movement from one to the next. I argue that the relation between the modes of knowing must be understood in terms of the presentation of the mathematical sciences found in the *Consolation*. The logical relation of sensation, imagination, reason, and intellect is elaborated and clarified in the relation between astronomy, music, geometry, and arithmetic.

Medievalia et Humanistica, New Series, Number 34 (Paul Maurice Clogan, ed.), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008.

The unity of the modes of knowing and the mathematical sciences is illustrated by the various forms of the circle (*orbis*) in the *Consolation*.² Book 1 presents sensation with the astronomical circle of the stars, book 2 presents the musical circle of Fortune's wheel to the imagination, books 3 and 4 present the circle of geometry to reason, and book 5 considers the paradigm of these forms in the simplicity of unity itself, which is the principle of the circle. The movement from the lower forms of knowing to the higher depends upon the forms of the circle presented to the Prisoner. Each form resolves a problem that hinders the progress of consolation. At the same time, each leads to the recognition of a new problem that compels the Prisoner to ascend to a higher mode of knowing. It is in virtue of the continuity between the various forms of the circle across the mathematical sciences of the quadrivium that the Prisoner is able to perceive the logical continuity from one mode of knowing to the next. For Boethius, the quadrivium is the key to philosophical pedagogy.

Philosophy qualifies the principle that things are known according to the capacity of the knower with a statement that clarifies the relation between the various faculties. Without this clarification, the modes of knowing would be opposed in an irreconcilable way. Sense, imagination, reason, and intellect would contradict each other with no means of arbitrating between them. For this reason Philosophy adds that "the greatest consideration is to be given to this: for the higher power of comprehension embraces the lower, while the lower in no way rises to the higher" (*Consolation* 5,4,31–34).³ On the basis of this clarification the differences between the modes can be reconciled by recognizing the priority of the higher modes over the lower. Sense might contradict imagination, but imagination, as a higher and more comprehensive mode, must be regarded as revealing a greater truth concerning the same object.⁴

The question arises, however, how it is that the higher mode comprehends the lower. What does it mean to say that intelligence "knows the reason's universal, and the imagination's shape, and what is materially sensible, but without using reason, imagination or the senses, but by one stroke of the mind, Formally, so to speak, looking forth on all these things together" (*Consolation* 5,4,33)? How are the objects of the diverse modes not simply other?

A model for the relation between the faculties is found in the quadrivium. In fact, the quadrivium presents both sides, as the objects of the four mathematical sciences are for Boethius also related in virtue of be-

ing diverse forms of the same elements. Each science and its proper object is logically related to the others.

In the *Institutio arithmetica* Boethius states that arithmetic “holds the principal place and position of mother to the rest” (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,1,8).⁵ It is an exemplar of God’s thought, and “whatever things are prior in nature, it is to these underlying elements that the posterior elements can be referred” (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,1,8). Boethius argues that arithmetic is prior to geometry because without number there is no triangle, quadrangle, and so on. Remove the triangle and the quadrangle, still “3” and “4” remain. Similarly, arithmetic is prior to music because it is concerned with numbers in themselves, while music is concerned with the relations between numbers, the interval, and the harmonics, and so forth. Boethius goes on for the priority of arithmetic over astronomy, and the final logical order of the four sciences:

Arithmetic also precedes spherical and astronomical science insofar as these two remaining studies follow the third [geometry] naturally. In astronomy, “circles,” “a sphere,” “a center,” “concentric circles,” “the median,” and “the axis” exist, all of which are the concern of the discipline of geometry. For this reason, I want to demonstrate the anterior logical force of geometry. This is the case because in all things, movement naturally comes after rest; the static comes first. Thus, geometry understands the doctrine of immoveable things while astronomy comprehends the science of mobile things. In astronomy, the very movement of the stars is celebrated in harmonic intervals. From this it follows that the power of music logically precedes the course of the stars; and there is no doubt that arithmetic precedes astronomy since it is prior to music, which comes before astronomy. (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,1,11)

Understood according to an analogy with the quadrivium, the faculties of sense, imagination, reason, and intellect are understood as related in virtue of being diverse modes of common elements. There is, however, more than an analogy. The *Consolation*, in order to console, must move from the lower mode of sense to the higher mode of reason. This movement is characteristic of the progression of the quadrivium. As Boethius asserts in an argument for the place of the quadrivium at the very foundation of philosophical education, it is “the *quadrivium* by which we bring a superior mind from the knowledge offered by the senses to the more certain things of the intellect” (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,1,7). The quadrivium provides steps (*gradus*) by which the mind is progressively illuminated and can raise itself from its immediate sensible circumstances to the certainty of intelligible truth. This movement is essential to the *Consolation*. Not only do the books of the *Consolation* correspond to the modes of sense, imagination, reason, and intellect,

but there is also an important correspondence between the five books and the sciences of the quadrivium. The modes of knowing correspond to the objects of the mathematical sciences. In book 5 Boethius describes the objects of each faculty:

For sense examines the shape set in the underlying matter, imagination the shape alone without matter; while reason surpasses this too, and examines with a universal consideration the specific form itself, which is present in single individuals. But the eye of intelligence is set higher still; for passing beyond the process of going round the one whole, it looks with the pure sight of the mind at the simple Form itself. (*Consolation* 5,4,28–31).

The figure in matter examined by sense is akin to the definition of astronomy as the science of mobile things—that is, matter in motion. The figure without matter examined by imagination is akin to the science of music, whose harmonic intervals are immaterial figures. The specific form examined by reason is akin to the objects of geometry, and the form itself examined by intellect corresponds to the number, which is the principal exemplar in the mind of the creator.

The relation between the modes of knowing and the mathematical sciences is first suggested by the fact that Philosophy's primary example of how the modes know the same object in diverse ways uses a sphere (*orbi*), known by sight and touch (*Consolation* 5,4,26). Each book, I argue, presents the mode of knowing with an object of the mathematical sciences. Book 1 relies on sensation's grasp of the astronomical, book 2 relies on imagination's grasp of the musical, books 3 and 4 rely on reason's grasp of the geometrical (the reason why geometry is given two books is explained below), and book 5 relies on intellect's grasp of the arithmetical. In this way, the Prisoner is led from his immersion in the sensible to his *patria* in the intelligible. The perspective gained from contemplating the highest things and perceiving the nature of the Good's rule depends upon the movement from sensation and imagination to reason and intellect.

Book 1: The Circle of the Stars

Book 1 is the mode of sensation on the cognitive hierarchy. The Prisoner's senses are dulled and deficient, and as a result he is unable to see beyond the immediacy of sensation and the circumstances of his grief. Philosophy addresses sensation, the specific object of which is figure in matter, by adopting the practices of the science of astronomy. Astronomy, Boethius says in his work on music, is the science of "moveable

magnitude”⁶ and in the *Institutio arithmetica* he says that its object is the “movement of the stars themselves” (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,1,11). Thus while astronomy deals with the same elements as geometry (the circle, sphere, center, concentric circles), whose own elements derive from arithmetic, astronomy is distinguished in virtue of its relation to the material form of these elements. The circle of the stars is the first form of the *orbis* Lady Philosophy presents to the Prisoner. It is used to restore his senses, which leads to the recognition that there is a cause of his grief that cannot be understood from within sensation alone. The limit of sensation points beyond itself to the higher and more comprehensive mode of imagination. The movement between the modes is possible because of the continuity in the objects. Imagination too will be presented with an appropriate form of the *orbis*.

When Philosophy appears, the Prisoner is silent. She banishes the Muses, sits down on the bed next to him, and wipes away his tears, restoring his vision. This is the first step in the long process of consoling him. But how are we to understand the metaphorical restoration of his truer vision?

The answer is found in Philosophy’s first words to the Prisoner. While she banishes the Muses in the first prose section, her first words to the Prisoner are in meter at 1m2. Her song is a response to the Prisoner’s opening elegy, in which he recalls, “Verses [he] once made glowing with content” (*Consolation* 1m1,1). He believes that the Muses were the glory of his youth, that they comfort him still, and that they will never abandon him. To this false notion Philosophy opposes a true account of the Prisoner’s youth. She recalls: “This man / Used once to wander free under open skies / the paths of the heavens” (*Consolation* 1m2,6–7). The Prisoner’s youth was spent studying nature’s secret causes (*Consolation* 1m2,22–23), in particular the science of astronomy.

When Philosophy appears, the Prisoner’s gaze is downcast. When she approaches his bed she sees his face “cast down with sorrow” (*Consolation* 1,1,14), “his eyes cast down beneath the weight of care / seeing nothing / But the dull, solid earth” (*Consolation* 1m2, 26–27). The appearance of Philosophy makes him begin to turn his vision from the earth to the heavens. This is presented figuratively in the description of Philosophy. Philosophy has come from the pole (*cardine*) of the heavens to the Prisoner (*Consolation* 1,3,3). The image of the *cardo* in relation to the *orbis* of the heavens underscores the sensible aspect of book 1. The *cardo* is a pole—that is to say, it is a kind of center, but one that belongs to a complex figure, not a simple plane figure.⁷ She is standing above his head (*Consolation* 1,1,1); the Prisoner must look up from the song he is

recording, and he turns his gaze from the earth up to the sky. This change in orientation is required for the restoration of his sight. He is blinded by tears and cannot recognize Philosophy until she wipes them away with her dress. The recovery presented in these images represents what is accomplished philosophically by the presentation of the object of astronomy to his senses. The effect on the Prisoner's mind is equivalent to the figurative clearing away of fog that obscures vision. Philosophy's first song puts before the Prisoner the circle of the stars. The recollection of the study of the fixed and wandering stars (*stabilem orbem* and *varios orbis*) restores the Prisoner's vision by replacing an opaque and inscrutable object (the dull solid earth) with an object that is appropriate, one that can be "mastered and bounded by number and law" (*Consolation* 1m2,12).⁸

In the meter written with the help of the Muses, the Prisoner complains that his grief is due to a change in fortune. The first poem the Prisoner addresses to himself. The narrator describes the circumstances of the first poem saying, "While I was thinking these thoughts to myself in silence" (*Consolation* 1,1,1). The Prisoner's next meter is addressed to the "maker of the circle [*orbis*] of the stars" (*Consolation* 1m5,1). The Prisoner laments in verse that he is not simply afflicted by the feeling of loss. There is something that troubles him more deeply. He perceives that there is an incongruity between the order of the world and the disorder of human affairs. The maker of the circle of the stars has "a sure purpose ruling and guiding all" (*Consolation* 1m5,25), yet man's acts alone he will not constrain, though he rightly could. This opposition between the order of the heavens and the natural world on the one hand and the disorder and injustice of human life on the other leads the Prisoner to entreat the maker to "Look on this wretched earth, / Whoever you are who bind the world with law!" and "make the earth / Steady with that stability of law / By which you rule the vastness of the heavens" (*Consolation* 1m5,42–48).

When the Prisoner recovers the sight of the order in the heavens, he is forced to contrast this observed order with the chaos of his life. The articulation of his complaint about human affairs in 1m5 is possible only after he has looked upon the order of the heavens in virtue of the science of astronomy and seen the lack of this order in his own experience. It is also only after the Prisoner has articulated what he takes to be the cause of his grief that Philosophy can begin to properly diagnose him.

When he directs his sight toward the heavens, the Prisoner is able to perceive and articulate a deeper cause of his grief than the pain of losing fortune's gifts. The Prisoner feels the sting of the incongruity be-

tween the stars' order and the disorder of human life, and this is a necessary first step on the way to consolation. This step, however, is not sufficient to cure his ills. When Philosophy asks whether he thinks the world is governed by chance or reason, the Prisoner emphatically asserts that God indeed governs the world, and that he will never be moved from this opinion (*Consolation* 1,6,3–4). This opinion appears sound to Philosophy, despite the Prisoner's sickness. When, however, the Prisoner is asked if he knows how God governs the world (*Consolation* 1,6,7), what the end of all things is (*Consolation* 1,6,10), and who he is (*Consolation* 1,6,14), he cannot answer. These questions reveal the limits of the understanding he has from within his newfound perspective.

While he has gained an insight into the cause of his grief, he cannot find a solution for it. The Prisoner recognizes that there exists an order, but he cannot grasp the cause. The reason is that the science of astronomy considers matter in motion, and thus corresponds to the observations of the senses, whose object is "figure in matter" (*Consolation* 5,4,28). While the Prisoner can observe the order of the stars, he cannot give an account of the cause from the perspective of the senses. He has the true opinion that God rationally directs the world, but nothing more than opinion is possible from the observations of the senses that are involved in astronomy. This limitation is what compels the Prisoner to leave behind sensation and turn to what is above it. In book 2 the higher perspective of imagination will be considered.

Book 2: The Wheel of Fortune

Book 2 is the mode of imagination. The Prisoner's imagination is deficient, and the result is that he has a false image of Fortune. His mistaken image of Fortune leads him to believe that it is the loss of her gifts that grieves him, and he would be happy again if her gifts were restored. Philosophy addresses his imagination, the specific object of which is figure without matter, by adopting the practices of music. Music here, broadly conceived, includes not only the mathematical ideas of harmony and ratio, but the art of the Muses in general. For Boethius, music is logically prior to astronomy (and therefore a step higher on the ascent) because "the very music of the stars is celebrated in harmonic intervals" (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,1,11). For this reason, poetry, which is part of music, is prior to astronomy.

Philosophy employs the poetic device of *prosopopeia*, a form of personification, to show the Prisoner a true image of Fortune. *Prosopopeia* allows

Philosophy to present the figures, without matter, of Fortune and her wheel. The imagination can grasp the *orbis* of Fortune's wheel in the understanding of her nature and the nature of her handmaids. The idea of the wheel grasped by the imagination allows the Prisoner to see that Fortune is not the real cause of his grief. Purged of a false relation to Fortune, whose gifts are external and contain no inherent good, he turns to the only stable center of happiness, the self. From the perspective of the imagination, only the goods of the soul are real. The Prisoner, however, is unable to perceive how these goods are related to the "love which moves the heavens" (*Consolation* 2m8,30).

Lady Philosophy must treat the Prisoner's imagination in book 2. Imagination can grasp something of the cause that eludes sensation. First, however, the imagination must be restored. Like his senses in book 1, the Prisoner's imagination is deficient because it is turned toward an unsuitable object. The Prisoner has set a false image of Fortune before himself, and this has led him to err concerning the cause of his grief. He imagines that Fortune has changed her attitude toward him (*Consolation* 2,1,9). For this reason he believes that if her gifts were restored, his former happiness would return. Philosophy recalls Fortune's real nature by presenting the Prisoner with a true image to replace this mistaken one. The image restores his imagination and allows him to glimpse the reason behind the chaos of human affairs. He can once again see the nature of Fortune's rule. He can recognize how she employs her handmaidens to raise men up, only to cast them low when she takes them away. The restored understanding of Fortune allows the Prisoner to discover the one thing that Fortune cannot change and the stable source of happiness: himself.

In book 1 the Prisoner imagined that Fortune was deceitful (*Consolation* 1m1,17) and that she ought to be ashamed of her actions (*Consolation* 1,4,19). In book 2 Philosophy corrects this idea of Fortune as random and unpredictable by showing the Prisoner an image of her true nature. Fortune is not at all random, but as regular and constant as a turning wheel (*Consolation* 2,1,19). As in book 1, when Philosophy turned the Prisoner's senses toward the heavens, here she directs his imagination to an image of Fortune by putting on Fortune's face and arguing in her words. In the *prosopopeia* of book 2, Fortune pleads her case, saying, "This is my nature, this is my continual game: turning my wheel [*orbe*] swiftly I delight to bring low what is on high, to raise high what is down" (*Consolation* 2,2,9). The order of the circle of the heavens, which seemed to be absent from human affairs governed by Fortune, is now seen in her wheel. The *orbis* of Fortune is as regular as the *orbis* of the

stars. What is more, while the order of the heavens could only be observed, the reason for the motion caused by Fortune is presented in Fortune's own words. It is her nature. Her activity is what delights her.

Philosophy treats the Prisoner with music. The Muses banished in book 1 were replaced by Philosophy's own Muses ("my Muses," she calls them at 1,1,11), and in book 2 she employs music and rhetoric as the first, milder remedies appropriate to his condition.

There are three kinds of music according to Boethius: cosmic (*mundana*), human (*humana*) and that which rests in various instruments (*quae in quibusdam constituta est instrumentis*), including the human voice (*Institutio musica* 1,2). Human music "unites the incorporeal nature of reason with the body [by a] certain harmony and, as it were, a careful tuning of low and high pitches as though producing one consonance" (*Institutio musica* 1,2). It is human music that is employed in book 2. The cosmic music of the heavens "does not penetrate our ears" (*Institutio musica* 1,2). Human music does penetrate our ears, and "indeed no path to the mind is as open for instruction as the sense of hearing. Thus, when rhythms and modes reach an intellect through the ears, they doubtless affect and reshape the mind according to their particular character" (*Institutio musica* 1,1). The superficial character of music in book 2 has to do not with any imprecision in the mathematical science of music, but with our perception of a certain form. Philosophy does not present the Prisoner with a disquisition on the diatesseron, diapente and diapasos (i.e., the way in which music is related to arithmetic in the *Institutio arithmetica*). She sings to him once his senses have been restored. She sings in order that the harmonies of her song might begin to unite the diverse elements of soul and body. Music, like the imagination, is intermediate between the two; thus it is music that treats the imagination.

This orientation to external, false goods is overcome by looking at the supposed goods and recognizing the contradictions they contain (*Consolation* 2,5 to 2,7). It is demonstrated that happiness cannot consist (*constare*) of these things, and the contradictions repel the mind and effect the turn to the self as the center (*cardo*) around which happiness turns. There is also a tension that emerges and propels the argument beyond these first attempts at a cure. The poem at the end of book 2 that ends "*amor quo caelum*" (*Consolation* 2m8,29–30) articulates this newfound isolation. The self-imposed exile of 1,5 has been replaced by an even deeper kind of exile, one in which the self seems to fall outside of the divine rule.

The *cardo* of the heavens in book 1, with its relation to the physical extension of the world, is superseded in book 2 by a new center, the self.

Philosophy reveals to the Prisoner “on what [his] greatest happiness really turns”—literally, the center of his greatest happiness, *summae cardinem felicitas* (*Consolation* 2,4,23). This *cardo* is contrasted with the *punctus* of the sensible cosmos, which is ultimately nothing. According to Ptolemy, in relation to the whole of the cosmos, even Rome is an insignificant point. The nullity of the worldly *punctus* is contrasted with the riches of the self as *cardo* (*Consolation* 2,7,3). Of this insignificant point that is the world, only a quarter is habitable, according to Ptolemy. Thus, Philosophy compounds the force of the demonstration when she asks,

Now is it in this tightly-enclosed and tiny point, itself but a part of a point, that you think of spreading your reputation, of glorifying your name? What grandeur or magnificence can glory have, contracted within such small and narrow limits? (*Consolation* 2,7,6)

In book 1 the diminished capacity of the senses was enough to prevent the Prisoner from perceiving the truth of his immediate circumstances. The problem in book 2 is that a similar failure of imagination keeps him from seeing the true nature of Fortune. Once the Prisoner perceives Fortune’s impotence with respect to the stable center of his happiness—himself—he is freed from her influence. He is, however, now aware that the love that rules the heavens does not rule his heart, and the solution to this problem of governance cannot be found within imagination. The Prisoner must turn to what is above imagination, reason, to resolve this difficulty.

Book 3: Creation as a Circle

Book 3 is the mode of reason. The Prisoner’s reason is deficient, and the result is that he has mistaken the form of false happiness for the form of true happiness. Philosophy addresses his reason, which is the universal consideration of the specific form, by adopting the practices of geometry. Geometry speculates about fixed magnitudes (*Institutio musica* 2,3). Geometry is also the intermediate science. It spans the divide between the sensible and the intelligible. Geometry has a twofold orientation. The principles of geometry can be used as axioms in the investigation of the sensible world, and the sensible is known insofar as it is an image of the mathematical. Geometrical forms can also be investigated insofar as they are themselves images of higher intelligible realities. Book 3 deals with the first orientation, book 4 with the second. In book 3, the created world is understood as an image of the mathematical realities in the

mind of the creator (3m9), and the created world is presented as reverting upon the creator, the good, who is the center around which all things turn. While the sensible is known qua image of the intelligible, the opposition between the motion of created natures and the unmoved creator is not reconciled in book 3 from this perspective.

Music and rhetoric, which were the milder remedies applied in book 2, are replaced in book 3 by rational arguments. Music and rhetoric were superficial preparations for the stronger remedies of reason, which are received internally (*Consolation* 3,1,3). Philosophy will show him what true happiness is, but for the moment his mind is too occupied by images (*Consolation* 3,1,5). Thus, she explains to the Prisoner: "I shall try to describe in words and delineate a subject better known to you, so that, when you have seen that clearly, you may, since you will then have turned your eyes on its opposite, recognize the appearance of true blessedness" (*Consolation* 3,1,7).

In addition to the use of deductive arguments, Philosophy employs the geometer's technique of drawing corollaries (*porismata*) from proven theorems. We know that Boethius wrote on geometry, specifically, a translation of Euclid's *Elements*.⁹ We also know that he was deeply influenced by Neoplatonic notions about geometry.¹⁰

Book 3 corresponds to the first orientation of mathematical understanding, which takes mathematical principles as the axioms by which the sensible world is measured and stabilized. The central meter of the *Consolation*, 3m9 (which cannot of course be exhausted by any single interpretation), can be seen in one way as an understanding of the created world as an image of mathematical realities in the mind of the Creator. The material world is a moving image of a circular pattern of emanation and reversion. "Soul thus divided has its motion gathered / Into two circles, moves to return into itself, and the Mind deep within / Encircles, and makes the heaven turn, in likeness to itself" (*Consolation* 3m9, 15-17). Goodness is the center (*cardo*) (*Consolation* 3,10,38) and the created universe is a moving circle (*orbem mobilem*), which moves around this unmoved (*immobilem*) center (*Consolation* 3,12,37). Book 4 moves from contemplating the mathematical paradigms of the created world to a consideration of the nature of Fate and Providence, which are imaged in the relation of a circle to the center (*Consolation* 4,6,15).

By the end of book 3 all three questions involved in the diagnosis of book 1 have been answered. The Prisoner has remembered who he is (*Consolation* 2,4,22-26), what the end of all things is (*Consolation* 3,11,41), and how God governs the world (*Consolation* 3,12,22). There is nevertheless something inadequate about the conclusion of book 3,

which compels the Prisoner to continue. His consolation is not yet complete, and the reason for this can be understood by looking at the argument of book 3 as it is presented in the final meter. Orpheus is permitted to descend into Hades to bring back his beloved Eurydice. The ruler of the shades permits Orpheus to lead Eurydice up from Hades, but puts a condition on this gift: Orpheus may not look back upon her until they are once again outside Tartarus. Orpheus cannot resist and loses Eurydice again. Philosophy concludes the meter with a caution. "To you this tale refers, / Who seek to lead your mind / Into the upper day; / For he who overcome should turn back his gaze / Towards the Tartarean cave, / Whatever excellence he takes with him / He loses when he looks on those below" (*Consolation* 3m12,52–58). The Orpheus poem stands between book 3 and book 4 and demarcates the border between the sensible world considered in books 1–3 and the intelligible which is treated in books 4 and 5. Although book 3 contains the theological hymn of 3m9, it is cast in terms drawn from the sensible world. Although book 4 considers human actions, the ideas of virtue and vice are considered according to their forms or as ideas. Thus, the Prisoner completes the ascent that Orpheus failed to complete. The Prisoner leaves the cave at the end of book 3 and, in a way, does not look back.

The final meter of book 3 depicts the separation between the multiple, divided, and imperfect created things and their single, unified, perfect creator. The myth of Orpheus is transposed and coordinated with the image of the Platonic cave.¹¹ The tale of Orpheus, who lost Eurydice by looking back down toward the cave and not upward to the light of day, is commended to all who are trying to raise their minds to the light of the Good. In a simple sense, Orpheus, in this Platonic presentation, is trying to have in the sensible what belongs only to the intelligible. The two worlds are separate, and Orpheus loses what belongs to the intelligible by trying to contain it in the sensible.

While the rational character of book 3 stands in clear contrast to the attempts at musical and rhetorical persuasion in book 2, it is not so clear how book 3 differs from book 4. In book 4, Philosophy also employs a rational, logical method. The argument about the power of virtue and the weakness of vice depends upon the logical contrariety of the two: "For since good and evil are contraries, if it is established that good is powerful, the weakness of evil is clear; and if the frailty of evil is evident, the strength of good is known" (*Consolation* 4,2,3). Book 4 also employs the geometrical image of the concentric moving circles of fate and the still center of Providence (*Consolation* 4,6,15).

The difference between the approach to reason in books 3 and 4 can be understood by referring to the intermediate place of reason on the Platonic line (*Republic* 510b–c). Reasoning, in particular reasoning about mathematical, has a twofold orientation. Mathematical realities can be understood as those things of which things in the sensible world are images. In this way they are employed as principles in the investigation of the sensible world, and axioms whose truth is not investigated. The mathematical realities are in turn images of higher realities. By investigating mathematical, the mind may ascend to a knowledge of the things of which mathematical are only images. As Socrates notes, when the mind is turned toward the sensible, mathematical are principles and the things of which sensible realities are images. Turned toward the intelligible, they are themselves images of higher ideas (*Republic* 510a–511b).

As O'Meara suggests, geometry is more important for philosophers because, while it has a presence in images and the sensible, "geometry reaches . . . up to true and divine being."¹² Thus, while geometry is not the first of the mathematical sciences, it is in a sense more accessible from the lower realm and it appears in a more immediate way to the human mind.¹³

It is fitting that the allegory of the cave should be taken as an image to describe the movement of book 3. The allegory uses an image drawn from the sensible world to describe the relation between the sensible and the intelligible and the way in which the ascent is possible. The sensible is an image of the intelligible, and this allows the mind to move to the intelligible from within the sensible.

Book 4: The Geometry of Fate

Book 4 continues with the mode of reason, but moves to a consideration of geometrical realities not as they are reflected in the sensible, but as they are reflections of higher intelligible forms. The relation between the circle and the center is developed in an analogy that reveals the relation between Fate and Providence. The way that the moving sphere (*orbis*) or circle (*circulus*) is related to the still center (*cardo*) is an image of the relation of the motion of Fate to the immutability of Providence. The opposition at the end of book 3, which presents the imperfect and divided created world as simply other than the perfection and unity of God, is resolved in book 4. With this opposition

overcome, however, it is no longer possible to see how there is anything other than the good of Providence.

The Prisoner interrupts Philosophy to praise her arguments to this point. There is, however, work to be done. In fact, the greatest cause of his grief remains: that “although there does exist a good ruler of the universe, evil can exist at all and even pass unpunished” (*Consolation* 4,1,3–4). The Prisoner cannot reconcile the arguments that show that the Good is the end and ruler of all things with his experience, which seems to teach that virtue goes unrewarded and vice seems to prosper with impunity. Philosophy promises the Prisoner, “By the help of the same God of whose kingdom we are now speaking you will learn that the good are always powerful, while the bad are always abject and weak, nor are vices without punishment, nor virtues without reward” (*Consolation* 4,1,7). This argument returns to the world of human affairs, which was in a way left behind in the ascent to the highest good and unity itself in book 3. The appearance that the Good is simply other than the divided and created natures whose end it is must be overcome.

While it might appear that book 4 is a descent from the heights reached in book 3, it is in fact a continuation of the ascent. The glimpse of the “creator of heaven and earth” (*Consolation* 3m9,2) allows the Prisoner to delve into the inner logic of virtue and vice, and grasp their effect upon human nature. Book 4 considers the effects of virtue and vice on the soul, and shows how they can transform the human into a god or a beast. The logical method of book 3, by which the understanding of the false form of happiness leads to the recognition of the true form, is continued in book 4. Philosophy explains to the Prisoner that “since good and evil are contraries, if it is established that good is powerful, the weakness of evil is clear; and if the frailty of evil is evident, the strength of good is known” (*Consolation* 4,2,3). Not only does Philosophy establish the impotence of vice, she argues that “those who leave aside the common end of all things that are, at the same time also leave off being” (*Consolation* 4,2,32). The contrariety of virtue and vice is akin to the opposition of being and non-being.

Philosophy argues that good men can never be without their rewards and adds the remarkable notion that the vicious man is happier if he does not escape punishment (*Consolation* 4,4,36). These notions emanate from the very *ideas* of virtue and vice. When the Prisoner is reluctant to concede these conclusions, Philosophy reminds him that premises granted, he must accept the conclusions (*Consolation* 4,4,11). The Prisoner consents to the truth of the arguments about virtue and vice,

but sets them against the popular idea of fortune, “for none of those who are wise would prefer to be an exile, poor and disgraced, rather than to flourish staying in his own city, powerful because of his riches, respected for his honours, and strong in his power” (*Consolation* 4,5,2).

From this perspective virtue does go unrewarded and vice unpunished. For this reason, the nature of God’s governance is still unclear to the Prisoner, who laments once again, “Since he frequently grants delights to the good and unpleasant things to the wicked, and on the other hand frequently metes out harshness to the good and grants their desires to the wicked, unless the cause is discovered, why should his governance seem to be any different from the randomness of chance?” (*Consolation* 4,5,6). With the forms of virtue and vice having been established, it is now necessary to reconcile the appearances to these forms. Philosophy attempts to pass over the arguments necessary to explain why the clarity observed in the logical relation of the forms of virtue in vice is obscured and almost inscrutable in the world. The Prisoner is not satisfied with her assurances, and insists on knowing the causes of hidden things (*Consolation* 4,6,1). Philosophy acquiesces to the Prisoner’s vigorous and forceful demand.

Philosophy explains that the reason for her reticence is the Hydra-headed character of the problem (*Consolation* 4,6,2–3). She then sets out the arguments about Fate and Providence as if she were beginning “from a new starting point” (*Consolation* 4,6,7). The central image that captures the arguments is that of the nested spheres. The way that the mutability of Fate is related to immutable Providence is to be understood in terms of a geometrical image.

For just as, of a number of spheres (*orbium*) turning about the same centre (*cardinem*), the innermost one approaches the simplicity of middleness and is a sort of pivot (*cardo*) for the rest, which are placed outside it, about which they turn; but the outermost one, turning with a greater circumference, the further it is separated from the indivisibility of the central point, the wider spaces it spreads over; and if anything is joined or associated with that centre, it is gathered into its simplicity and ceases to spread and diffuse itself: in a similar manner, that which is furthest separated from the principal mind is entangled in the tighter meshes of fate, and a thing is the more free from fate the more closely it moves towards that centre of things (*Consolation* 4,6,15).

The opposition between the form of virtue, considered in itself, and its appearances in the world lead the Prisoner to question the nature of God’s governance. The cause of this apparent opposition, as well as a number of others, is explained using the image of the sphere as an image of higher realities opaque to human understanding. The relation of

Fate and Providence has parallels in a series of oppositions that cannot be reconciled by reference to an image drawn from the sensible such as the Platonic cave. Philosophy explains that “as reasoning is to understanding, as that which becomes is to that which is, as time is to eternity, as the circle is to its centre, so is the moving course of fate to the unmoving simplicity of providence” (*Consolation* 4,6,17). The geometrical image works in virtue of the place of geometrical realities between the sensible and the intelligible. They are easily grasped by the mind through images, but it is not the image but the idea of the sphere, contemplated by reason free from images, that allows the mind to glimpse the relation of the multiple spheres turning around a single center. With all of the oppositions set up by the image of the cave in book 3 (perfect/imperfect, being/becoming, divided/unified, time/eternity, etc.) having been reconciled, it appears at the end of book 4 that the greatest cause of the Prisoner’s grief has been addressed. The conclusion is that God “removes all evil from within the bounds of his commonwealth by the course of the necessity of fate” (*Consolation* 4,6,55). This consolation, however, is not complete. In book 5 it appears that with evil, Philosophy has also banished contingency and freedom by making Providence absolute. This appearance is overcome by the proper understanding of knowledge and the relation of the various faculties.

Book 5: The Unity of Center and Circumference

In book 5 Philosophy turns to intellect to solve the problem of the relation of free will and Providence, which vexes reason. As Philosophy notes, “reason belongs only to humankind, as intelligence only to the divine” (*Consolation* 5,5,4). For this reason, intellect can only be sketched according to reason’s ability to comprehend it. In order to present the divine mode of knowing to reason, Philosophy adopts the methods of the science of arithmetic. Arithmetic is to the other mathematical sciences as intellect is to the other modes of knowing. Arithmetic is logically prior and contains the elements of all the other sciences in a more perfect and complete way. As Boethius writes in the *Institutio arithmetica*, “from the beginning, all things whatever which have been created may be seen by the nature of things to be formed by the reason of numbers” (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,2,1). The principle of number itself is unity, for “it constitutes the primary unit of all numbers which are in the natural order and is rightly recognized as the generator of the total extended plu-

rality of numbers” (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,7,5–6). Thus, number is the principal archetype of creation, and unity is the archetype of number.

In book 5 Philosophy adopts the language of arithmetic to present the final form of the *orbis*. In book 1 the *orbis* of the heavens, the object of astronomy, was adopted to conform to sensation’s grasp of figure in matter. In book 2, the *orbis* of Fortune, drawn from the art of the Muses, was appropriate to the imagination’s grasp of figure without matter. The ever-moving wheel of Fortune was shown to turn around an unmoving center (*cardo*), the self. In books 3 and 4, the two orientations of the geometrical *orbis*, as the paradigm of the sensible (3m9) and the image of higher intelligible realities (*Consolation* 4,6,15), were adopted for their conformity to reason. The *orbis* in book 5 is that which belongs to arithmetic. The sensible, imaginative, and rational forms are superseded in book 5 by the paradigm of the *orbis*: unity itself. As Boethius explains,

Unity in both power and force is a circle and a sphere. As often as you multiply a point by itself, it always ends in itself from which it began. If you multiply one by one, one remains; and if you multiply it again and again, it is still the same. If there is one multiplication of a number, it gives a plane figure, which is a circle; if you multiply it a second time, then a sphere is created. (*Institutio arithmetica* 2,30,4–5)

Philosophy describes the highest intelligence as a point (*cacumen*) and describes the highest knowledge as simplicity (*simplicitas*) (*Consolation* 5,5,12). The simplicity of the divine mind is identified with unity (*Consolation* 4,6,10), and the discussion of the nature of the divine intelligence is therefore likened to the paradigmatic relation of the center to the circle. The arithmetical unity in geometry is the center of the circle, and contains within itself in an unextended way all that belongs to the circle. What is present in the circle as extended and complex (circumference, radii, center, etc.) is present in the point or unity in an unextended and simple way. This relation is described by Proclus and can be usefully set forward here to illuminate the power inherent in the unity described by Boethius.

Proclus, in his commentary on Euclid’s geometry, describes not only the elements of the circle, but from these elements moves to a consideration of the causes of the circle. After considering the various sensible, imaginative, and rational forms of the circle, he writes, “Now that it has been made precise what is meant by a circle (*kuklos*), its center (*kentron*), the circumference of the circle (*periphēreia*), and the figure (*skēma*) as a whole, let us move once more and ascend from these details to the

contemplation of their paradigms” (*In primum Euclidis*, 153). The paradigm of the circle is the unified possession of all the elements at once. Proclus explains: “As in the circle the center, the distances, and the outer circumference all exist at the same time, so also in the paradigm there are no parts that are earlier in time and others that come to be later, but all are together at once—rest, procession, and reversion” (*In primum Euclidis*, 153). The various extended and complex forms of the circle originate in the simplicity of the paradigm.

But the figures differ from the paradigms in that the latter are without parts or spatial intervals, whereas the figures are divided, the center being in one place, the lines from the center in another, and the circumference that bounds the circle still another. But up there they are all in one. If you take what corresponds to the center, you will find everything in it; if you take the procession coming out of the center, you will find that this also contains everything; and likewise if you take the reversion. (*In primum Euclidis*, 153–154)

Everything is found in the simplicity of the center.¹⁴ As the numbers 3 and 4 are the conditions of the triangle and the square (*Institutio arithmetica* 1,1,9), so unity is the condition of the circle and the sphere. Philosophy has moved from the geometrical image of the nested spheres in book 4 to the simple paradigm of this image found in arithmetic. The arithmetical unity that is the principle of geometry is adduced to expound an analogy of the divine intellect’s relation to contingent actions, for “God possesses this present instant of comprehension and sight of all things not from the issuing of future events but from his own simplicity” (*Consolation* 5,6,41).

Philosophy presents the Prisoner with this image of the simplicity of the divine intellect. The Prisoner cannot ascend to share in this perspective. Instead, it can be glimpsed from within human reason. This glimpse is achieved when the geometric image of the nested, concentric circles of book 4 is considered, as far as possible, according to the principles of the circle. The glimpse of unity considered in book 5 is achieved by collapsing the extended idea of the circle into its center. The procedure of simplification is analogous to that followed in the movement from book 1 to book 2, book 2 to 3, and 3 to 4.

In book 1, the circle of the stars is composed of the figure of the circle and matter. This complex is simplified in book 2, which leaves aside the matter for the figure alone. This figure is merely an image in book 2, the image of Fortune’s wheel. While the sensible matter is left behind by the imagination, there is still composition in the figure in the imagination. The mind imagines a particular circle, a wheel, and whatever attends the particularity of this image. The wheel is not a circle—rather, it

is circular. In book 3 the particularity is stripped away, and the idea of the circle itself is seen under the aspect of its role as a paradigm of the created world. This paradigm, which is grasped through its images in the created world, is purged of those images and contemplated according to its own nature as an image of the highest intelligible.

By following the progressive logic of increasingly simplified forms of the circle, Philosophy can point the Prisoner's mind to the idea of God's grasp of Providence, which contains human freedom. The circle can be simplified by reducing it to its center, which contains in an almost ineffable way the fullness and plurality of the geometric shape. The fecundity of unity is akin to the fecundity of the circle's center, which contains in the extensionless point at its center the infinite number of radii and the endless line (without a determinate beginning or end) of the circumference.

Conclusion

The books of the *Consolation* form a step-by-step ascent from the lower part of the soul to the higher. For Boethius, the ascent passes from sense (book 1) and imagination (book 2) to reason (books 3–4), but it ends with a glimpse of what is beyond reason (book 5). Intellect and not reason characterizes the divine life and is its mode of knowing all the lower modes in a simple way. Boethius moves the reader from the lower modes of knowing to the higher by showing the limits of each mode. At the end of each book there is an opposition or a contradiction that cannot be resolved by the mode and points to the need to adopt a higher mode of knowing.

The *Consolation* not only advances from lower modes of knowing to higher, but also presents an ascent through the levels of being. When Philosophy appears to the Prisoner her height is ambiguous (*Consolation* 1,1,1), and she appears at one moment to “confine herself to the ordinary measure of man” (*Consolation* 1,1,2), while at another moment it appears that “the crown of her head touched the heavens” (*Consolation* 1,1,2) and at yet another she appears to have “penetrated the heavens themselves” (*Consolation* 1,1,2) and passed beyond the reach of human vision. The three heights of Lady Philosophy represent the terrestrial world of process, the spheres of the heavens that circumscribe the natural world, and the transcendent divinity. For Boethius, consolation requires an ascent from the lower, human perspective to the highest, divine perspective, even if this divine perspective is only intimated or adumbrated.

Notes

1. Thomas F. Curley, "How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*," *Interpretation* 14 (1986); Elaine Scarry, "The External Referent: Cosmic Order; The Well-Rounded Sphere: Cognition and Metaphysical Structure in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Resisting Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). My own view is that Curley and Scarry do not adequately recognize the nature of the distinction between book 3 and book 4. The two books do, as Curley argues, operate at the level of reason. There is, however, a significant difference between the modes of each. It is not, as Scarry argues, that book 3 does not fall into the linear progression of the ascent. I argue that it is because book 3 demarcates the division between the sensible and the intelligible, and the reason that bridges this divide necessarily shares in the features of both. This is the nature of geometry.
2. On the many circles found in the *Consolation*, see Jean-Luc Solère, "Bien, cercles et hebdomades: formes et raisonnement chez Boèce et Proclus," in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs* (Louvain: Peeters, 2003): 55–129; John Magee, "The Boethian Wheel of Fortune and Fate," *Mediaeval Studies* 49 (1987): 524–533; H. R. Patch, "Fate in Boethius and the Neoplatonists," *Speculum* 4 (1929): 62–72.
3. English translations of the *Consolation* are from the Loeb Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by S. J. Tester (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). Book, section, and line references are to the Latin text of *De consolacione philosophiae*, edited by Claudio Moreschini (Leipzig: Teubner, 2000).
4. On the importance of this relation between the faculties, see Stephen Blackwood, "Philosophia's Dress: Prayer in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*," *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 146.
5. All references to the text of the *Institutio arithmetica* are from *L'institution arithmétique*, edited with a translation by Jean-Yves Guillaumin (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995). English translations from Michael Masi, *Boethian Number Theory: A Translation of the De Institutione Arithmetica* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1983).
6. *De institutione musica* 2,3. All references to the Latin text are from Boethius, *De institutione musica*, edited by G. Friedlein (Leipzig: Teubner, 1867). English translations from Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, translated with introduction and notes by Calvin Bower (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).
7. Proclus describes the pole and the center in this way: "Of necessity, therefore, [Euclid] adds at the end that this point which lies within the circle and from which all the lines drawn to the circumference are equal is the center of the circle. For there are only two such points, the pole and the center, but one is outside the plane, the other within it. If you imagine, for example, a gnomon standing at the center of the circle, then its extreme point is the upper pole, and all the lines drawn from it to the circumference of the circle are demonstrably equal to one another. Likewise in a cone the apex of the whole figure is the pole of the circle at its base." Proclus, *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, translated by Glenn R. Morrow (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 121. For the Greek text see Proclus, *In primum Euclidis elementorum comentarii*, edited by G. Friedlein (Leipzig: Teubner, 1873).
8. In addition to the explicit reference to astronomy and natural philosophy, Im2 contains a striking resonance with Ovid's account of Pythagoras in *Meta-*

morphoses XV, 60–75. There Pythagoras is described as living in exile because of a tyrant, yet continuing to approach the gods with his thoughts. This connection to Ovid's Pythagoras is to be contrasted with the striking allusions to the *Tristia* that mark the Prisoner's opening elegy. On the relation of 1m1 to 1m2, see Thomas Curley, "The *Consolation of Philosophy* as a Work of Literature," *American Journal of Philology* 108 (1987): 343–367.

9. See David Pingree, "Boethius' Geometry and Astronomy" in *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, edited by Margaret Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 55–161; Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 102; and Max Lejbowicz, "Cassiodorii Euclides: Eléments de bibliographie Boécienne," in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs* (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2003), 301–339.
10. Henry Chadwick notes that "Proclus uses the word *porisma*, exactly as in Boethius, to mean an 'incidental gain arising out of the demonstration of the main proposition' (*In Eucl. Elem.* I, 212, 16; 301, 22 Friedlein)," *Boethius*, 106–107. For the more general influence of Proclus on Boethius, see Wayne J. Hankey, "Ad intellectum ratiocinatio: Three Procline logics, *The Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena's *Periphyseon* and Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae*," in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 29, edited by Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 249.
11. On the Orpheus poem and its central importance for the *Consolation*, see Eileen Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille: Words in the Absence of Things* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 48–49; Gerard O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius* (London: Duckworth, 1991), 188–207; Seth Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue: Literary Method in the Consolation of Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 154–165; Anne Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 53–60.
12. Dominic J. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 173.
13. Chadwick notes that for the Neoplatonists, "Mathematics in general and geometry in particular therefore occupy a half-way house between the material world and the purely abstract world of concepts" (*Boethius*, 106). On the intermediate position of geometry, see also Annick Charles, "Sur le caractère intermédiaire des mathématiques dans la pensée de Proclus," *Les études philosophiques* 22 (1967): 69–80; Ian Mueller, "Iamblichus and Proclus' Euclid Commentary," *Hermes* 115 (1987): 334–348; Ian Stewart, "Mathematics as Philosophy: Proclus and Barrow," *Dionysius* 18 (2000): 151–181; Jean Trouillard, "La puissance secrète du nombre selon Proclus," *Revue de philosophie ancienne* 2 (1983): 227–241; and Stanislas Breton, *Philosophie et mathématique chez Proclus* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969).
14. Cf. Plotinus's *Enneads*, where the geometry of the circle is employed to illuminate the nature and character of One, *Nous*, and Soul: 5,1,11; 6,5,5; 6,8,18; 6,9,8.