

Boethius, logic, and time: The story thus far

The 5th century philosopher and theologian, Boethius, has attracted much study over the last fifty years. I will examine some studies on Boethius's logic, with a focus on his work on reconciling divine foreknowledge and human free will.

Early Christian philosophy faced a number of problems in popularising itself in the face of academic disdain. As the historian of early medieval logic, John Marenbon, remarks, this led to the 'fusion of ... logic and theology. The tools of logic were summoned to clarify and order Christian dogma; and ... concepts and arguments logical in origin were charged with theological meaning.'¹ In case of Boethius himself, this led to a synthesis of 'Greek Neoplatonism, Latin philosophical writing, Greek Christian literature, and the Latin church fathers'². It would seem that the synthesis he attributes in his earlier books to the 8th century monk, Alcuin of York³, he later attributes to Boethius⁴.

The Problem Defined

One of the major questions of Boethius' day was God's foreknowledge and how that allows free will. Aristotle considers this in *De Interpretatione*, as the sea-battle question: A sea-battle necessarily either will or will not take place tomorrow, though it is not necessary either that it must or that it must not take place. How can we logically reconcile these two facts?⁵

This problem was given an edge by the need of Christianity, to establish itself and to defeat heresies. An illustration of this can be seen in Augustine of Hippo. Having argued against the Manichees that free will was part of the answer to the problem of evil⁶, he found himself being quoted to deny the all-encompassing providence of God by the Pelagians⁷.

Some Attempted Answers

As Owen Chadwick points out, the stoics responded by abandoning free will, and retaining the necessity of every event⁸. St. Augustine's solution, according to William Rowe, was accept the necessity of all events while denying that this excludes free will⁹. Boethius rejected both solutions,

1 **John Marenbon**, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, Pg. 4

2 **Marenbon**, *Boethius*, Oxford University Press, 2003, Pg. 11

3 **Marenbon**, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, Pg. 4

4 One explanation might be that between Boethius and Alcuin, there was very little if any development in logic. What little there was occurred in Isidore of Seville, and Cassiodorus. See **Stephen Gersh** *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition*, vol. II, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, 785-786. This analysis might be flawed. However, exploring the flaws in the general picture between Boethius and Alcuin is beyond the scope of this particular essay. Marenbon, however, notes (*From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre*, p. 3-4) that Bede the Venerable of Jarrow, when he came to adapting the patristic exegetical work, removes all scientific and metaphysical digressions.

5 **Aristotle**, *On Interpretation, IX*, (tr) **E.M. Edghill** <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/interpretation.1.1.html>

6 **Augustine of Hippo**, *The Problem of Free Will* (tr) **Dom Mark Pontifex**, New York, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1955, 5-9

7 *Ibid*, 9ff.

8 **Owen Chadwick**, *The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 158

9 **William L Rowe**, *Augustine on Foreknowledge and Free will* **Review of Metaphysics**, December 1964, 18:356-363. See particularly 356-7.

as Chadwick¹⁰, and Rowe himself, argue¹¹, though Boethius was influenced by Augustine in his general outlook, as Stephen Gersh tells us¹². Paul LaChance contends that stoic elements are present in Boethius's thought, and that he does not defend free will solely in terms of freedom of choice¹³. However, as Owen Chadwick counters, Boethius shows some reserve towards the stoics¹⁴. He saw Plato and Aristotle as authorities, following Porphyry¹⁵. Further, Boethius's logic¹⁶, and his approach to logic as a means of purifying argument¹⁷, is mostly Peripatetic. The stoics could not counterbalance the Neoplatonic and Peripatetic schools which formed his tradition¹⁸. Boethius's veneration of Augustine is also an explanation of some similarities..

Boethius's Approach to the Problem

Boethius considers in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the issue of whether all things are indeed in the control of a God who foresees and orders things, and also whether this God can be blamed for the evil that happens in the world. On Marenbon's reading, the consideration is directly related to the position of Boethius in finding himself in prison despite being a just man¹⁹. However, as we have seen above, Boethius was attempting to solve a problem which he inherited, however relevant the problem was to his own situation. Also, as argued by Kretzmann and Stump²⁰, Boethius' concern with the problem predates the Consolation, going back to his Theological Tractate on The Trinity, and his commentaries on the De Interpretatione²¹, though Marenbon alleges that in the *De Interpretatione* commentaries, Boethius solves no problems²². It is also worthy of consideration that, according to Marenbon himself, the fourth of the theological tractates *On the Catholic Faith* represents an attempt at stating the beliefs of Catholics with a view to proposing to himself their eventual philosophical justification²³, and the reconciliation of freedom of choice and the divine foreknowledge is a problem that stands out as an incomplete task.

Boethius begins by considering the division of these two problems proposed by some – that God's foreknowledge is not causing it, thus depriving man of free will²⁴. However, since he is concerned with justifying both providence and foreknowledge, this does not satisfy him, and he points out that even on their own grounds, the solution is spoilt by the fact that independent of divine causation, the fact that something is known as true means that it is necessarily true²⁵. Marenbon suggests that Boethius's solution to the problem is what he calls 'The Modes of Cognition Principle' stated as:

'Everything that is known is grasped not according to its own power, but rather according to the

10 Chadwick, 130f.

11 Rowe, art. cit., 361

12 Gersh op. cit., 652-653

13 Paul J LaChance, *Boethius on Human Freedom*, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 309 -327. See especially 326.

14 Chadwick, 130.

15 *Ibid*, 133

16 *Ibid*

17 *Ibid*, 108

18 Helen Kirkby *The Scholar and his Public* in Margaret Gibson (ed) *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, Basil Blackwell, 1981, 55-57

19 Marenbon, *Boethius*, pp. 126-7 and *passim*.

20 Elenore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, *Eternity*, *Journal of Philosophy*, 78(8) August 81. 431

21 Simo Knuutilla, *The Medieval Background of Modern Modal Conceptions*, *Theoria* 2000: 66(2): 185-204, *passim*.

22 Marenbon, *Early Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction*, London ; Boston : Routledge & K. Paul, 1983, 34-35 It must be noted that Marenbon's *Boethius* is a much later work than either of Marenbon's other cited works.

23 Marenbon, *Boethius*, 67-68. For a presentation of the dogmas of free will and foreknowledge, see **Boethius** *On the Catholic Faith*, p. 59 in <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/boethius/tracts.iv.iv.html>

24 Marenbon, *Boethius*, 128

25 *Ibid*

capacity of those who know it.¹²⁶

This would mean that God's knowledge is related to God's mode of knowledge, which can be separated from the mode of knowledge of man. Left as it is, this might sound as a barely concealed resort to a two-source view of truth alleged against Boethius by such writers as Owen Chadwick²⁷ i.e. that certain conclusions can be maintained theologically, however philosophically untenable. Boethius avoids this by suggesting a tenable mode of knowledge for God differing from, though analogical to, human modes of knowledge²⁸. This view, set out in different forms by Stump and Kretzmann²⁹, Brian Leftow³⁰, and Paul Fitzgerald³¹. Essentially, this view suggests that God exists in an eternity, which consists in a 'complete possession, all at once, of illimitable life'³². Thus, God is omniscient, but he does not have foreknowledge³³. In other words, God sees all time in the same manner that human beings see the present³⁴. Boethius uses the image of a circle to make this clearer. In the words of Owen Chadwick, 'Boethius suggests ... that as time is to eternity, so the circle is to its centre, and so is the moving inter-connection of events in fate in relation to the unmoving simplicity of providence.'³⁵ Finally Boethius introduces a *distinctio* between what is conditionally necessary (for example 'a sea battle is occurring now', when it is occurring) and what is simply necessary (for example, the Principle of Non-Contradiction)³⁶. The necessity that something is true when it is true, he argues is not considered to make it any less free³⁷. In the same way, God sees the future as necessary because he lives in eternity, but contingently necessary³⁸.

The Tenability of Boethius' solution

There has been much argument on the tenability of Boethius's solution. Marenbon himself argues that the neatness of the above solution is destroyed by his Proclus inspired view that God knows all things including the motions of the human mind precisely because he causes them, rather than being caused by them³⁹. With Siobhan Nash-Marshall, we may respond that God as creator, must be simple⁴⁰. Divine Simplicity cannot be abandoned without giving rise to even more problems. Therefore, it cannot be argued that God's knowledge is caused externally. Thus, the only tenable solution must be that God's causation is of a different mode⁴¹. While it is true that Boethius does not anticipate this solution, this does not affect his discussion of free will and foreknowledge.

This view was also challenged by Anthony Kenny, who argued that 'no coherent account seems possible of [God's] infallible knowledge of future free actions'⁴². A similar view is taken specifically

26 *Ibid*, 131-132

27 Chadwick, 220.

28 Marenbon, *Boethius*, 137

29 Stump and Kretzmann, op. cit.

30 Brian Leftow, *Boethius on Eternity*, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 7(2): 123-142, April 1990.

31 Paul Fitzgerald *Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity* *Journal of Philosophy*, 82: 260-269., 1995

32 Stump and Kretzmann, 431. The differences between the three presentations are minor and refer to the details of how eternity relates to duration and time.

33 *Ibid*, 442 n. 19.

34 Marenbon, *Boethius*, 137

35 Chadwick, 242.

36 Marenbon, *Boethius*, 141-143. The examples are my own.

37 *Ibid*, 142-143

38 *Ibid*, 143

39 *Ibid*, 144-145

40 Siobhan Nash-Marshall, *God, Simplicity and the Consolatio Philosophiae*, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (2) 225-246. See esp. 246.

41 Which is the solution of Thomas Aquinas. See Herbert McCabe, *Freedom in God Matters*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987, 10-24.

42 Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, 87.

relating to Boethius (who is only mentioned in passing by Kenny), by Martin Davies⁴³ However, John N Martin, having formalized Boethius's logic, proves that the conclusions of Boethius are indeed tenable, given that all truths known by God can be expressed as eternal truths, i.e. truths whose truth status does not change with time⁴⁴.

The Vexed Question of Ancestry

Much dispute has arisen over whether or not Boethius can claim to be original. James Shiel in a famous article⁴⁵ challenged the exaggerated claims of earlier scholars such as Courcelle⁴⁶ regarding Boethius's originality. Boethius scholars of the latter school saw him as a reviver of Greek Culture in the latin west, working with very little between himself and Aristotle and Plato⁴⁷. Over-correcting for this, Shiel suggests (though he argues that this should not detract from our view of Boethius) that, particularly in his commentaries, Boethius was merely the translator of the annotations of previous scholars⁴⁸.

On the other hand, Marenbon⁴⁹ and Sten Ebbestein⁵⁰ both point out that there is very little evidence for the claim that Boethius was nothing more than a translator of scholia. Others, such as Richard McKeon, point out that he imposed on the material he gathered an order which was not there to begin with, putting together “an Academic Aristotle, who taught the west to discuss invention and discovery, a Neoplatonic Aristotele who provided philosophical hierarchies for theology, and a sophistic Aristotle who related philosophy to action and to literature”⁵¹ and giving them a context which “made them the source of ongoing inquiry, acceptance, and rejection”. Similarly, Stephen Gersh makes note of how Boethius used and transformed neoplatonic source material, but points out that many of his positions are radically different from those of Porphyry and Plotinus, for example⁵². Marenbon points out the originality of Boethius's solution of the Foreknowledge problem⁵³. Brian Leftow argues that Boethius's presentation of eternity as atemporal duration cannot be traced back to Plotinus and Plato, or at least that such a tracing is arguable⁵⁴.

It is noted too, that Boethius himself claims originality and there is no good reason to doubt him⁵⁵.

Many emphasize too the influence of Boethius in making logic an inseparable part of theology⁵⁶. Ebbestein also notes that Boethius performed the medieval world a great service in resisting the temptation to Pythagorize in the manner of philosophers such as Iamblichus, keeping logic sane⁵⁷. Marenbon also emphasizes how Boethius differs from the earlier philosopher-theologians such as

43 **Martin Davies** *Boethius and others on Divine Foreknowledge* **Pacific Philosophical Quarterly** 1983: 64: 327

44 **John N Martin** *A tense logic for Boethius in Themes in Neoplatonic and Aristotelian logic : order, negotiation, and abstraction* Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT : Ashgate, c2004, 53-64.

45 **James Shiel** *Boethius's Commentaries on Aristotle* in **Richard Sorabji (ed)** *Aristotle Transformed*, London: Duckworth, 1990.

46 **Helen Kirkby** in **Margaret Gibson (ed)**, 55-57.

47 *Ibid.*

48 **James Shiel**, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

49 **Marenbon**, *Boethius*, 20

50 **Sten Ebbestein**, *Boethius as an Aristotelian Commentator* in **Richard Sorabji (ed)** *op. cit.* (376)

51 **Richard McKeon** *The Hellenistic and Roman Foundations of the Tradition of Aristotle in the West* **Review of Metaphysics** 32: 677-715, 1979

52 **Gersh**, *op. cit.*, 694-699.

53 **Marenbon**, *Boethius*, 134.

54 **Leftow**, 123

55 **Boethius**, *In Interpretatione: second commentary*, ed **C. Meiser**, Leipzig, 1877, Teubner, 121, as quoted in **Jonathan Barnes** *Boethius and the Study of Logic* in **Margaret Gibson**, *op. cit.*, 80

56 **Chadwick**, 173

57 **Ebbestein**, 390-391

Victorinus and Augustine in that it is the logical not the metaphysical side of neoplatonism that predominates in his consideration of theological problems⁵⁸.

Conclusion

Thus, Boethius, through his consideration of the relation of God to time, transformed logic in the medieval latin west.

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