NOTES ON BOETHIUS

I. Boethius

A. Life

1. Dates: 480-524

2. Executed for treason -- charges obscure

3. Coincidence? Athenian schools of philosophy closed by Byzantine Emperor Justin in around 527


   a. [Arianism was the view (one of the most important "heresies") that the Logos, the Son of God, was not co-eternal with the Father but was instead the first of creatures.]

5. Served as consul (Roman institutions still in place)

B. Thought

1. Seemingly a Catholic, but puzzlingly there are no specifically Christian themes in Consolation of Philosophy and he found his consolation in philosophy, not in Christ.

2. Goal: translating the complements of both Plato and Aristotle into Latin [for Aristotle accomplished by William of Moerbecke in 13th century; for Plato by Marsilio Ficino in 15th century]

3. Actually translated the logical works of Aristotle

4. One of a number of ancient minor philosophers who tried to harmonize the works of Plato and Aristotle -- one method was to assign Aristotle the sphere of physics and Plato the sphere of theology.

C. Works

1. Translations

   a. Porphyry's Isagoge ("Introduction") an introduction
to Aristotle's Categories

b. Aristotle's logical works

2. Original works

a. Theological Tractates

(1) "The Trinity is One God Not Three Gods"

(2) "Whether Father, Son and Holy Spirit May Be Substantially Predicated of the Divinity"

(3) "How substances Can Be Good in Virtue of their Existence without Being Absolute Goods"

(4) "On the Catholic Faith"

(5) "A Treatise against Eutyches and the Nestorians"

b. Consolation of Philosophy

D. Consolation of Philosophy

BOOK I

I POEM: Lament

PROSE: The appearance of Lady Philosophy—allusion to Republic VI—philosophy as a woman reviled, neglected, and pursued by unworthy suitors. LP chases the muses away for tempting B to indulge his grief.

II POEM: He who once contemplated the secrets of the heavens now looks only at the dust.

PROSE: LP: you have forgotten your defenses against sorrow. But I shall heal you. You have merely a touch of amnesia, and you have forgotten who you are.

III POEM: The night was put to flight as when the North wind blows away clouds.

PROSE: B: Why have you come? To suffer false accusation along with me? LP: Why should I not help you? you are not the first to suffer burdens because of the hatred of my name.
IV POEM: Detaching oneself from fear and desire makes one invulnerable to the storms of life.

PROSE: B: Fortune has brought me down. I did my duty as a philosopher and as a reward have been allowed to be falsely imprisoned by wicked men.

V POEM: Creator, you rule the heavens, but not, it appears, the earth.

PROSE: LP: You have wandered far from home, which is ruled by a king who does not banish his subjects. I will now use gentle remedies.

VI POEM: Nothing is allowed to disturb the divine order


VII POEM: Banish joy, fear, hope and grief

BOOK II

I PROSE: Your misery is due to the loss of good fortune. But the very inconstancy of Fortune is her constancy. If you play her game you must be content with the bad as well as the good-- if you can't do that you must reject her entirely.

POEM: Fortune raises up the weak and casts down the strong only to show her power--she is indifferent to the sorrow of those she has cast down.

II PROSE: LP: What Fortune would reply to your accusations: you have no claim against me because the things I have taken away never belonged to you in the first place-- wealth, honors, etc., are my servants. Am I to be denied my rights? Just as the seasons change, etc., I turn my wheel, raising people up and casting them down.

POEM: No matter how much Plenty gives to humans, appetite can never be satisfied, and no one can be rich who always wants more.

III PROSE: LP: With all the good fortune you have enjoyed, even with your present misfortune it is difficult to argue that you
nave not been fortunate overall. Besides, even if you think you have, your misery also will pass. When someone dies, does he desert Fortune or does she desert him?

POEM: Whatever comes to be passes away.

IV PROSE: If you are still moved by the empty name of Fortune, you still enjoy great happiness--for example the love and virtue of your family--but you cannot be cured unless you reject Fortune completely. Good fortune is never perfect--it either lacks some key element or vanishes quickly. Furthermore, Fortune cannot bring happiness because (1) whatever can be taken away is not the highest good, (2) he who does not know Fortune's unreliability is too ignorant to be called happy, and he who does cannot escape anxiety, and (3) you accept the soul's immortality and the possibility of happiness after death--but if the removal of good fortune (at death) does not make one miserable, then how can the possession of good fortune make one happy?

POEM: Build the house of your happiness on a firm foundation.

V. PROSE: Stronger medicine: the gifts of Fortune (1) can never really be yours and (2) are vile and contemptible--wealth can only be a good by being expended and must either bring hate by being hoarded or poverty by being distributed--jewels are nothing compared to living things--the beauty of nature can never belong to you except as it satisfies the modest needs of the body--The beauty of clothing belongs to the tailor, not to you--servants are either dishonest and a curse or honest and their own good, not yours. Riches can never ward off poverty--they just create more need. Men seek to raise themselves by possessing things far inferior to themselves. Men tower over the rest of creation when they remember their own nature, but when they forget it they sink lower than the beasts. A person with empty pockets whistles past the highwayman.

POEM: O for the days when man led a simple life without luxuries! (an allusion to Plato's Republic)

VI PROSE: High office is unworthy of the dignity of man--in the unvirtuous it produces catastrophe, while it adds nothing to the virtuous. Furthermore, power is only over people's bodies and possessions, never over their souls. Furthermore, whatever one can do to another, he can also suffer at the hands of another. Furthermore, if these dignities were intrinsically good, they could not belong to the wicked. Furthermore, all these gifts of Fortune
are misnamed because so-called wealth cannot satisfy greed, power cannot give true mastery (which is of self), and high office cannot confer true dignity.

POEM: All Nero's power could not restrain his madness.

VII PROSE: Even fame for virtue, which you sought, is nothing when compared even to the extent of time and space, much less when compared to eternity.

POEM: Ditto

VIII PROSE: Good fortune deceives, but bad fortune enlightens.

POEM: O man, if only Love who rules the sky could rule your hearts as well!

BOOK III I PROSE: LP: I am leading you to true happiness--first cause, then pattern

POEM: You have been prepared for the vision of true good by examining spurious good.

II PROSE: Happiness when obtained leaves nothing to be desired--contains all good--desire for true good planted by nature in all men--error leads them to confer an attribute with the thing itself

POEM: All things seek their proper good.

III PROSE: Wealth lacks sufficiency, power. Nature is satisfied with little, whereas nothing satisfies greed.

POEM: The rich man is burdened with care.

IV PROSE: Office doesn't confer true dignity--it heaps disgrace on evil--it doesn't bring real fame

POEM: High office for Nero brought universal contempt and contempt for dignities he bestowed

V PROSE: Kingly power difficult to keep, is only over a small region. Friends of kings are sometimes betrayed.

POEM: A king who is a slave to care is no true king.
VI PROSE: Fame is not widespread. If undeserved it is shameful. If deserved, it is superfluous.

POEM: Pleasure brings misery to its devotees.

VII PROSE: Neither bodily pleasures nor the pleasures of family can bring happiness.

POEM: Pleasures invariably bring pain.

VIII PROSE: These things neither produce the good things promised nor come to perfection by the combination of goods.

POEM: People seek happiness on earth when it is to be found in heaven.

IX PROSE: Sufficiency must be one and undivided, not divided like things we have been examining—completely self-sufficient being, worthy of veneration, famous, happy

POEM: Outline of Plato's Timaeus

X PROSE: The perfect causes the imperfect. Supreme God=perfect good=happiness. Origin of all is supreme goodness itself. By possessing divinity we become happy.

POEM: Come to the bright light which rules the stars.

XI PROSE: Power, etc., are kinds of goodness. When power, etc, differ, they aren't good, but when they are the same thing they are good. All things desire being (=unity). So unity=goodness.

POEM: The seed of truth lies hidden deep within.

XII PROSE: God rules the world by being the good which all things seek. Evil is nothing, since God can't do it (a paradox)

POEM: Orpheus and Euridice as a metaphor for dwelling on earthly things.

CONSOLATION, BOOK IV

I PROSE: B: Why does evil exist and go unpunished? Why is good trodden underfoot and punished in the place of evil? Especially when God is omniscient and omnipotent? LP: This is not so. Good is
always strong, evil weak. Sin never goes unpunished or virtue unrewarded. The good are happy, the evil are unfortunate.

POEM: I (philosophy) will bring you back to your source and ending.

II PROSE: Weakness of evil = strength of good. Arguments that the good are powerful, the evil weak: (1) Action requires will and power. To not obtain what one seeks is weakness. All seek goodness, but the good obtain it whereas the evil do not. (2) To obtain something fully and naturally shows more power than to obtain it partially and unnaturally. The wicked obtain goodness imperfectly and through desire rather than through virtue. Implications: (1) whatever leads to evil-- ignorance, intemperance-- is a form of weakness. (2) [Since something is good to the extent that it is], evil is a form of non-being. More arguments: (1) Evil is non-being, and therefore, the ability to do it is not a power. (2) God, who is omnipotent, cannot do evil. (3) A power is a good, whereas the ability to do evil is not.

POEM: The wicked king appears to rule, but really is ruled.

III PROSE: Goodness is its own reward. Good = happiness = divinity. Wickedness must also be its own reward. As goodness raises a person above the human, evil thrusts him below.

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POEM: Circe's potions could change the body, but not the soul.

IV PROSE: B: but the wicked can still bring destruction on good. LP: If this were removed they would not reap their punishment. Achieving wicked desire is even worse than having it. Their misery is ended by the mercy of death. The wicked are happier if punished than if they go unrestrained. In receiving a punishment the wicked receive a good, which makes them happier than otherwise. (I shall omit a discussion of punishment after death.) B: Most people would despise your opinion. LP: What you "look towards" determines whether you are among the stars or in the mud. Those who commit injustice are more unhappy than those who suffer it. There is no room for hatred. The wicked, whose minds are sick, deserve sympathy.

POEM: Do not fight evil, but pity it.

V PROSE: B: But besides the kinds of happiness and misery that are
related to men's acts, isn't there another kind that derives from fortune? A wise king would bring this form of misery on the evil rather than on the good. What's the difference between the actions of God and those of chance? LP: Ignorance of God’s plan makes it seem like chaos. But you still can know there is a plan.

POEM: Hidden cause confounds the heart.


Generation and motion of all things subject to change receive causes, order, and form from the unchanging mind of God. The divine plan when considered in relation to God is providence; when considered in relation to its effects is fate. Providence is folded in God's mind, while fate is unfolded in time. Providence is the cause of fate. this is true no matter what the manner of fate's operation may be: World-soul. Obedience of all nature. Motions of stars. Powers of angels or other spirits. Whatever is ruled by fate is ruled by providence, but not vice-versa. Some things rise above fate because of their stability (proximity to God). Things are free of fate to the extent that they are close to the immobile center of all things.

fate : providence = reasoning : understanding = becoming : being = time : eternity = circle : its center.

Fate governs all change with an immutable order that copies the immutability of God.

Evil by itself causes nothing.

Divine order never prevents attaining the divine.

We cannot always clearly discern good and evil, because we cannot see into people's souls.

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God apportions rewards and punishments according to the best health of everyone.

God brings good out of evil.

POEM: God rules all things.
VII PROSE: All fortune is good. All fortune is directed by God toward our attainment of good. But why do we call some fortune bad?


2 and 3 are clearly profitable. 1 is good. What about 4?

Everyone says 4 is bad. But if this is true, then the virtuous are happy and the wicked suffer. Fortune does not counter-balance, but confirms the happiness of the good and the misery of the bad.

POEM: Be heroic in virtue.

CONSOLATION, BOOK VI

I PROSE: Is there such a thing as chance? No, if chance is an event without a cause. To happen for no cause is to arise from nothing, which is impossible. Real meaning of "chance": whenever something is done for some purpose and something else results. The unexpected event is due to a conjunction of causes with action for some purpose. This conjunction arises ultimately from providence.

POEM: Just as when the Tigris and Euphrates, which ultimately flow from the same source, flow back together it produces confusion for the pilot of a boat on either, so a conjunction of causes produces confusion from the point of view of either.

II PROSE: Is there freedom of will? Yes. whatever can govern actions by a judgement of the best is free. Celestial and divine beings have clear judgement, uncorrupted will and power. Humans have these to the extent that they focus on the divine mind. If they have given themselves up to wickedness, they lose reason and freedom.

POEM: The creator sees all.

III PROSE: God's forerknowledge seems opposed to freedom of will. All things must happen as foreknown by God. Therefore, everything happens of necessity. Therefore, there is no freedom of will. Even if the event causes the knowledge, it makes no difference (and is also absurd). "Man sits iff it is true that man sits." If it is possible for something to happen other than as it does, then it is possible for God's opinion to be mistaken. Therefore, if he were
certain, he would be mistaken, while if he were in doubt he would not know. Thus it is vain to punish or reward men. Also pointless to hope or pray.

POEM: How can truth be against truth? We must recall what we once knew.

IV PROSE: The actions of the charioteer must happen as I see them, yet my seeing them does not impose necessity on them. What is known is known according to the ability of the knower.

Intelligence (nous) Reason Imagination Sense
Superior includes inferior.

POEM: The mind is an active power, but needs to be activated by the passive senses.

V PROSE: Intelligence belongs only to divinity. The highest kind of knowledge is that which also knows objects of other kinds. If sensation argues that the universal is nothing, credence must instead be given to reason. Thus human reason argues that non-necessitating foreknowledge is impossible, but we must instead give credence to God.

POEM: Here also raise your soul to heaven.

VI PROSE: Eternity: the complete, simultaneous, and perfect possession of unending life.

So unending existence does not equal eternity because it does not possess its whole life simultaneously.

The present in time imitates the all-embracing present of eternity.

God views all things as together and simultaneous. His "foreknowledge" is really knowledge of what is to him present. So just as men's vision of the present doesn't necessitate it, neither does God's.

Simple vs. conditional necessity: "Necessarily p": Simple. For example, if p = "All men are mortal". "Necessarily, if p then q": Conditional. For example, p = you know x is walking; q = x is walking.
Conditional necessity does not imply simple necessity.

If God sees that something will happen, it must happen, even though it has no necessity of its own nature; just as sensation is universal re reason but individual in its own nature.

God's knowledge cannot be made wrong because God has no future.