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**THE TRUE AND THE FALSE 'I' IN BOETHIUS' *DE
CONSOLATIONE***

1. Much has been said and written on the structure of Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae*¹. It has been described as a foremost example of antique philosophical consolatory literature and as a brilliant specimen of Menippean form although without its satirical spirit², yet over and above that, its content assumes a structure of its own, which finds itself inscribed in the more conventional framework of philosophical consolation. This inner structure is the structure of meditation, of a spiritual journey from appearances into the depths of the truth of human condition. Boethius the narrator declares that having engaged in sombre musings about his own woeful fate while being alone in prison³, he decided to write down his complaints, expecting thus to find some relief from his despair. Yet as he embarked on his project, it turned out that far beyond bringing him mere relief and consolation, the reflections he had undertaken proved in fact to be a passage from a false, unauthentic form of existence and from estranged consciousness, to the full, authentic form of being and to true consciousness. This sort of meditation, which brings about profound changes in the outlook and self consciousness of a self is well known in the tradition of ancient Platonism and Neoplatonism; it

¹ Cfr. G. O'DALY, *The Poetry of Boethius*, Duckworth, London 1991, pp. 28-29.

² Cfr. J.-M. CLAASSEN, *Displaced Persons. The Literature of Exile from Cicero to Boethius*, Duckworth, London 1999, p. 244.

³ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* I, 1, H.F. STEWART (transl.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1968, pp. 130 – 131: «While I ruminated these things with myself, and determined to set forth my woful complaint in writing, methought I saw a woman stand above my head». On Boethius' imprisonment cfr. H. CHADWICK, *Boethius. The Consolation of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981, pp. 46-68.

inscribes itself in the tradition of spiritual exercises which were to prepare and effect conversion, the turning away from the non being of the phenomenal to the being of the spiritual world⁴. Owing to these spiritual exercises the Platonic self was able to begin a come back to its true homeland and to make itself like a god. Within Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition the unauthentic form of existence was usually described as sickness, lethargy, oblivion or forgetfulness of oneself, while the opposite condition, that of «health», was always closely associated with perfect self-knowledge and self-consciousness. This way of speaking suggests that the condition of «forgetfulness» and «unconsciousness» is merely a superficial, transitory predicament of the self, which, while veiling and dimming the self's authentic consciousness, does not annihilate it altogether.

The guide in this meditation is the Dame Philosophy, who chases the Muses of elegiac poetry away from Boethius' bedside, calling them 'whores of the scene'⁵. This action is necessary, if our meditation is to effect real progress, for any spiritual progress can be accomplished only on the condition that the self abandons all distractions and surrenders itself wholly to the guidance of that which is most perfect in man as well as in the universe: the Mind, which also forms the divine element of reality. The Muses, which embody the merely apparent, the illusory, must unconditionally be removed from the way. If our meditation is to take us back to our true selves, to the truth of our existences, we have to purify ourselves, to detach ourselves from mere external appearances, to master our emotions and imagination, for all this gets in the way of life of intellect. Thus the process of purification is the process of detaching oneself from the outside world of merely corporeal being and concentrating upon spiritual life of mind.

2. Now let us have a closer look at the unauthentic form of existence, which is but a kind of lethargy, forgetfulness, and from which one ought to liberate oneself. This form of being is characterised by a perverted

⁴ Cfr. D.J. O'MEARA, «La science métaphysique (ou théologie) de Proclus comme exercice spirituel», in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne*, A. Ph. SEGONDS, C. STEEL (eds.), Leuven University Press- Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2000, p. 290: «La conception néo-platonicienne de la métaphysique comme introspection conceptuelle anagogique aura des conséquences historiques qui restent encore à mesurer».

⁵ Boethius, *The Consolation* I, 1, pp. 132-133. Cfr. CLAASSEN, *Displaced Persons*, p. 171.

hierarchy of faculties: emotions and desires silence the voice of reason, lower powers of the soul subordinate the higher faculties instead of being subordinated by them⁶. Such condition is bad, for it means loss of control of oneself, and consequently, absence of *enkrateia* and enslavement: «But he whom hope or terror takes, /Being a slave, his shield forsakes,/ And leaves his place, and doth provide/ A chain wherewith his hands are tied»⁷. The elegiac poetry, in accordance with Plato's outlook, adds to the confusion by nourishing and sustaining the emotions which ought to be subdued⁸.

In this condition the mind becomes estranged from itself: it turns to the darkness of external appearances and loses its own light, thus immerses itself in the night where it cannot perform its own function⁹. In such predicament even a man of learning, like Boethius himself, imbued with Academic and Eleatic teachings, is completely unable to know his own place in the world. He erroneously believes, that even though the eternal law orders the universe as a whole, the course of human life is excluded from the divine ordinance; thus he utters the complaint: «O Thou that joinest with love/ All worldly things, look from Thy seat above/ On the earth's wretched state;/ We men, not the least work thou didst create,/ With fortune's blasts do shake»¹⁰. For the consequence of the mind having thus fallen in darkness is a loss of self knowledge: man no longer knows who he is, he lacks awareness of his own true nature¹¹. Such condition is that of complete barrenness and sterility; while the self remains in it, its mind's life can bring no possible spiritual fruits. Yet this condition is not hopeless, irreversible, for it is that of mere oblivion and estrangement, and not that of a complete loss of one's true self¹².

⁶ Boethius, *The Consolation* I, 1, pp. 132-133.

⁷ Op. cit. I, iv, pp. 142 – 143.

⁸ E. ASMIS, «Plato on Poetic Creativity», in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, by R. KRAUT (ed.), Cambridge 1992, p. 341 and f.

⁹ Boethius, *The Consolation* I, ii, pp. 134 – 135: «Alas, how thy dull mind is headlong cast/ In depths of woe, where, all her light once lost,/ She doth to walk in utter darkness haste (...)/ Now having lost the beauty of his mind/ Lies with his neck compassed in ponderous chains;/ His countenance with heavy weight declined,/ Him to behold the sullen earth constrains».

¹⁰ Op. cit. I, v, pp. 158-159.

¹¹ Op. cit. I, 6, pp. 166-167.

¹² Op. cit. I, 6, pp. 164-167: «But this is the condition and force of perturbations, that they may alter a man, but wholly destroy, and as it were root him out of himself, they cannot».

Active engagement in politics may be also a feature of an estrangement of the self, for politics and public affairs belong to the realm of the external world. The opposition of ‘authentic’ versus ‘unauthentic life’ coincides with the opposition of ‘internal’ versus ‘external’, and to participate in the life of the society means to engage in the ‘external’; man can only do that insofar as he is an incarnate mind, that is a corporeal being. Now Boethius declares that he himself pursued a career in politics out of obedience to the admonishment by Plato: «Thou (sc. Lady Philosophy) by the same philosopher (sc. Plato) didst admonish us that it is a sufficient cause for wise men to take upon themselves the government of the commonwealth, lest, if the rule of cities were left in the hands of lewd and wicked citizens, they should work the subversion and overthrow of the good»¹³. However, according to Neoplatonic ethics, the civic virtues form the basest degree of moral perfection, for they concern the part of the soul which governs the body, but which is not the true self¹⁴. Thus however noble were his intentions in engaging in politics, it was this participation in public affairs that was instrumental in bringing about his downfall. Boethius complains about Fortune’s instability, for she first heaped her favours, often so rashly mistaken for happiness itself, and then turned her back on him, yet he is wrong in doing so. The gifts of Fortune are her property and she is right in offering them to or taking them away from whoever she pleases. «I have offered thee – Fortune says – no violence. Riches, honours, and the rest of that sort belong to me. They acknowledge me for their mistress, and themselves for my servants, they come with me, and when I go away they likewise depart. I may boldly affirm, if those things which thou complainest to be taken from thee had been thine own, thou shouldst never have lost them»¹⁵.

Such external worldly goods as property, honours, fame and the like are by nature perishable and as such they cannot give happiness to man; that is why any attachment to them is tantamount to voluntary alienation or self estrangement¹⁶. Happiness is the highest good available to a creature endowed with reason and it is easy to see that all possible goods

¹³ Op. cit. I, 4, pp. 144-145.

¹⁴ Cf. J. DILLON, «An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage», in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, L.P. GERSON (ed.), Cambridge 1996, p. 324.

¹⁵ Boethius, *The Consolation* II, 2, pp. 178-181.

¹⁶ Op. cit. I, 5, pp. 158-159.

that can be taken away from man, that is all possible kinds of external, corporeal goods are quite incapable of bringing happiness to man. They must be lost sooner or later: even if they are spared by the fickleness of Fortune, all the same one must lose them at the moment of one's death¹⁷, and the simple reason for that is that they are not man's proper goods, they do not really belong to him: «Why embracest thou outward goods as if they were thine own? Fortune will never make those things thine which by the appointment of the Nature belong not to thee»¹⁸. They are not man's true goods, for man's nature is radically different. It is time now to ask what is that true identity of man, hidden below the appearances of the false «I», like?

3. The true worth and dignity of man lies in that element of human nature that the Creator of that nature made the most perfect and dominant, namely in the mind: «For this is the condition of man's nature, that then only it surpasseth other things when it knoweth itself, and it is worse than beasts when it is without that knowledge»¹⁹. It is the mind and its ability to know and to know itself that elevates man above other creatures and in comparison with it all the other features of man are of but little worth²⁰. The ability to know is not only the feature which sets man above other creatures, first of all it is the feature which makes man like God. Now if the effort to imitate God and become like him is in the centre of Neoplatonist ethics, it is only natural that the faculty of the soul which is the ground of this likeness should become the focus of particular theoretical attention²¹.

In the fifth book of his *De consolatione* Boethius describes the hierarchy of cognitive faculties in man from the lowest to the topmost: senses, imagination, reason and the intelligence. Each higher faculty includes and surpasses the lower ones, thus the intelligence is the most perfect cognitive power, which includes the perfections of all others. The intelligence knows everything «as it were looking downward, having conceived that form, discerneth of all things which are under it, but in that sort in which it apprehendeth that form which can be known by none of the other. For it know the the universality of reason, and the figure of

¹⁷ Op. cit. II, 4, pp. 194-195.

¹⁸ Op. cit. II, 5, pp. 198-199.

¹⁹ Op. cit. II, 5, pp. 202-203.

²⁰ Op. cit. II, 5, pp. 202-203.

²¹ Cfr. DILLON, *An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage*, p. 315, 320.

imagination, and the materiality of sense, neither using reason, nor imagination, nor senses, but as it were formally beholding all things with that one twinkling of the mind»²². This way of knowing is proper to God, it is the way the pure mind possesses the most perfect, necessary, indubitable knowledge. Man ought to try to attain to that level of pure, divine intelligence for this is the only way man can overcome the limitations and constraints of his condition as an incarnate spirit/mind. Only at the level of pure intelligence can man enjoy the knowledge which is characterised by certainty and infallibility and which presents things in the order in which they exist²³. At the point where intelligence knows things directly and indubitably, man's mode of being approaches the divine mode, man is capable of transcending time and attaining eternity which is no other than perfect, simultaneous and total possession of interminable life²⁴. Only at that stage man can reach the condition that can be described as happiness, «which is that good which, being once obtained, nothing can be further desired»²⁵. This is also condition of full, absolute freedom, self-possession, peace, which no conceivable cause, not even sufferings experienced in the past can disturb: «Canst thou ever imperiously impose anything upon a free mind? Canst thou remove a soul settled in firm reason from the quiet state which it possesseth?»²⁶. In such a state of mind, and only then, the stoical ideal of *apatheia* can materialise, for only in that state the mind is free from influences coming from the baser and viler parts of the soul²⁷.

And last but not least, the attainment of that purely intellectual way of knowing means for man an attainment of perfect self-knowledge; it is a return to man's true identity; the real nature of man is here at last regained and at the same time surpassed, for man, at that point, is elevated to

²² Boethius, *The Consolation* V, 4, pp. 388-389.

²³ Op. cit. V, 5, pp. 396-397: «If therefore, as we are endued with reason, we could likewise have the judgement proper to the divine mind, as we have judged that imagination and sense must yield to reason, so likewise we would think it most reasonable and just that human reason should submit herself to the divine mind».

²⁴ Op. cit. V, 6, pp. 400-401.

²⁵ Op. cit. III, 2, pp. 228-229.

²⁶ Op. cit. II, 6, pp. 206-209.

²⁷ Op. cit. II, 4, pp. 194-195: «But if we know many who have sought to reap the fruit of blessedness, not only by death, but also by affliction and torments, how can present happiness make men happy, the loss of which causeth not misery?».

participating in Divine nature: «For since that men are made blessed by the obtaining of blessedness, and blessedness is nothing else but divinity, it is manifest that men are made blessed by the obtaining of divinity (...) they who obtain divinity must needs in like manner become gods. Wherefore everyone that is blessed is a god, but by nature there is only one God: but there may be many by participation»²⁸. Now we must ask in precisely what manner man can come to share in the nature of the divinity; in other words: how is the passage from the unauthentic to the full and true existence accomplished?

4. Having found himself in prison as a result of false accusation, Boethius the narrator begins by complaining against his fate and looking to poetry for consolation. He falls prey to his turbulent passions and in despair he utters the bitter complaint: «the last burden of adversity is that when they which are in misery are accused of any crime, they are thought to deserve whatsoever they suffer»²⁹. The Dame Philosophy who makes appearance in his cell first diagnoses his condition. The figure of the Dame Philosophy has also given rise to many different interpretations. Without engaging in a detailed discussion let me here say simply that I take that stately personage for a personification of philosophical thinking. In the Neoplatonic tradition, notably in Plotinus himself, philosophical discourse was the surest means of return to the One, of regaining one's true self; so naturally the Dame Philosophy comes to fulfil the task of recalling Boethius from his spiritual exile and lead him back to himself from his estrangement³⁰. She appears clothed in a vest which has the letter 'pi' embroidered in the down corner, a symbol of *philosophia praktike*, and the letter «theta» at the upper edge, which stands for theoretical philosophy – *philosophia theoretike*; both letters being connected by a sort of stairway. This epitomises the way philosophical discourse normally proceeds; beginning from practical matters, that are close at hand and easily accessible, and leading up to contemplation of elevated theoretical truth³¹. This is also the order the Dame Philosophy follows in her therapy: first she

²⁸ Op. cit. III, 10, pp. 270-273.

²⁹ Op. cit. I, 4, pp. 154-155.

³⁰ Op. cit. I, 5, pp. 158-159.

³¹ Cfr. D. SHANZER, «The Death of Boethius and the *Consolation of Philosophy*», *Hermes* 112 (1984), p. 358.

restores to the patient an emotional and mental balance, for he is found to suffer from «sickness of perturbation»³² and self-forgetfulness³³. The operation of restoring emotional balance and self-possession is effected by persuasion whose purpose is to remove the false opinions which are responsible for Boethius' perturbations: «and it is manifest that the nature of minds is such that as often as they cast away true opinions they are possessed with false, out of which the darkness of perturbation arising doth make them that they cannot discern things aright»³⁴.

The false conviction at the root of Boethius' sickness is his belief that he has been dealt with unjustly; Philosophy then persuades him that this is entirely mistaken: in fact he mourns the loss of purely external goods which are by nature perishable and which lie in the power of Fortune; his mistake is serious one for a philosopher: he believed his happiness to be where it was not, he sought for the good where he should not have. Thus the Dame Philosophy accomplishes the first, «practical» stage of the therapy: it consists in purifying mind from the attachment to external goods, in a rejection of corporeal goods as heterogeneous to man's nature. The proper assessment of the true value of external, perishable things enables the self to recover calm and clear-sightedness, to subdue emotions and passions to reason, and thus to prepare for further stages of the therapy.

More than that, however is required in order to complete the recovery of the self's true identity; in fact, what is necessary here is no less than conversion. Conversion means not just rejection of illusion, discarding that which is foreign to human nature, it consists in a total reorientation of life, in discovering a completely new way of seeing reality. This can only be accomplished under the guidance of philosophical wisdom. In his *Commentary on Porphyry* Boethius explains that love of wisdom, which is none other than philosophy, is an illumination of mind by pure Wisdom, and he adds that the study of wisdom is the same as the study of God. The relevant section of his commentary clearly makes use of the concept of enlightenment, which however is understood in a rather unusual fashion: the proper function of the enlightenment is recalling the self to its own

³² Boethius, *The Consolation* I, 6, pp. 164-165.

³³ Op. cit. pp. 166-167.

³⁴ Op. cit. pp. 166-169.

interior and restoring the mind to its uncontaminated nature in its pristine purity³⁵. Owing to that illumination the human being enters the depths of its own spiritual nature (*in profundum*)³⁶ to discover there «ingrafted in men's mind an earnest desire of that which is truly good»³⁷.

Now the Dame Philosophy embarks on the task of arguing for the existence of the Supreme Good. If the Supreme Good exists, it must be the fountainhead of all the other goods, for all the other goods are imperfect, and the imperfect is a mere reduction of that which is perfect. «For it is already manifest that perfect things were before the imperfect. Wherefore, lest our reasoning should have no end, we must confess that the Sovereign God is most full of sovereign and perfect goodness»³⁸.

Thus the Supreme Good turns out to be identical with God himself, with God, who is the spring of all happiness and the striving to recover the self's full, unimpaired, authentic existence turns out to be the same as the quest for happiness, for a union with the Supreme Good, and for divinisation. The search for one's lost identity coincides with the search for God; in finding his true nature, paradoxically, man surpasses his humanity and discovers his affinity to God. *Homoiosis theō* is thus shown to be the supreme objective in the life of a sage. Yet this end man must consciously accept in making sustained and strenuous effort to close the gap between his present condition and the Supreme Good, the providential governance of the world, which consists in bringing all things to their natural ends, does not dispense man from the responsibility he has to assume for the final outcome of his life: «You skirmish fiercely with any fortune, lest either affliction oppress you or prosperity corrupt you. Stay yourselves strongly in the mean! For whatever cometh either short, or goeth beyond, may well contemn felicity, but will never obtain any reward of labour. For it is placed in your power to frame to yourselves what fortune you please»³⁹.

³⁵ Cfr. Boethius, In *Porphyrium dialogi* I, 11 a, PL 64 : «Est autem hic amor sapientiae intelligentis animi ab illa pura sapientia illuminatio, et quodammodo ad seipsum retractio atque advocatio, ut videatur studium aequae sapientiae, studium divinitatis et purae mentis illius amicitia. Haec igitur sapientia cuncto animarum generi meritum suae divinitatis imponit, et ad propriam naturae vim puritatemque reducit».

³⁶ Boethius, *The Consolation* II, 3, 184-185.

³⁷ Op. cit. III, 2, 228-229.

³⁸ Op. cit. III, 10, 268-269.

³⁹ Op. cit. IV, 7, 360-361.

It is possible, then, to achieve a full, authentic existence, in fact it is only such perfect existence that is the worthy goal of the wise man's efforts. And it is the task of the Dame Philosophy to appear in the prison cell of one's desolation and despair and to lift one to start a search after one's own true identity and true destiny.

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