

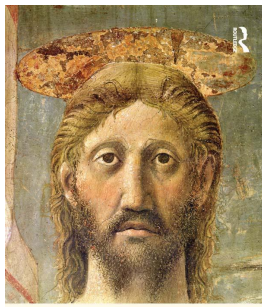
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BOETHIUS

John Marenbon

Boethius made two important contributions to the philosophy of religion. In his *Opuscula sacra* (Short theological treatises) (hereafter *OS*; 1983, 2000), he used a method of logically analysing Christian doctrine that would deeply affect the medieval tradition of theology. In his final work, *De consolatione philosophiae* (Consolation of philosophy; hereafter *Consolation*; Boethius 1983, 2000) he devotes most of the last book to discussing the problem of prescience: the question of whether God's foreknowledge of events prevents their being contingent. The solution he proposed was taken up by Aquinas, and this line of argument, as interpreted by contemporary philosophers, is considered to be one of the main ways of tackling the problem. But before these themes can be discussed, they need to be placed into the broader context of Boethius' times, life and works.

BOETHIUS' LIFE AND WORKS

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius' life was shaped by the accident of his birth (c.476) into a noble Roman family, and his adoption into an even nobler one. His privileged background meant that he acquired fluent Greek and had access to Greek culture and manuscripts. He was able to spend most of his life in learned leisure, devoted to arithmetic, music and, above all, logic. Italy was ruled by the Ostrogoths, and Boethius' social and intellectual eminence led the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, to choose him as his chief minister. But suspicions among the Goths about his loyalty and rivalries at court led to his fall from favour, imprisonment and (c.525) execution on trumped-up charges of treason.

Boethius had taken advantage of his unusually good education to embark on an ambitious scheme of making Greek culture available to Latin speakers. After writing textbooks on arithmetic and music, closely based on Greek models, he turned to logic. Although he proposed to translate all the works he could find of Aristotle and Plato, in fact he confined himself to logic, but not to mere translation

of the Aristotelian texts. He composed logical commentaries and textbooks, which would transmit to the Latin thinkers of the Middle Ages many aspects of the logical thinking of late antiquity. Although he was far from being a creative logician, Boethius was not a simple translating machine, putting Greek ideas into Latin words. He had his own distinctive preferences, which led to logic in his presentation having a more genuinely Aristotelian character than many of his contemporaries would have given it.

Although Boethius' culture was formed largely in the pagan Greek Neoplatonic tradition (which also included the study of Aristotle), he and all his Roman contemporaries were Christians – Catholic Christians – as opposed to the Goths, who were Arians. The Greeks were also Catholics, but the 'Acacian schism', a difference over Christology, separated them from the Romans. Boethius, not a priest, but a committed Christian, wanted to use his logical skills to help reunite the Eastern and Western Churches. To this end, he wrote (c.513) a short theological work that proposed a Christological formula that he hoped would be acceptable to both sides: *Against Eutyches and Nestorius* (OS V). He then (c.519) wrote two treatises on the Trinity, also designed to heal schism (OS I and II, which is just a partial sketch for I). When the *Opuscula sacra* were collected together, two other works were added: a confession of faith (OS IV) and a purely philosophical discussion arguing that the goodness that things have in virtue of existing is different from God's goodness (OS III).

It was when he was in prison, waiting to be executed, that Boethius wrote his most famous work, the *Consolation*. The *Consolation* was studied throughout the Middle Ages and up to the eighteenth century, and it was the only ancient philosophical work to be translated into a whole variety of medieval vernaculars. The *Consolation* is based boldly on Boethius' own personal situation at the time he was writing it, and it consists of a dialogue between Boethius himself and Philosophy, personified as a woman. Suddenly stripped of his possessions, power and liberty because of a false charge against him, and facing death, Boethius, as portrayed in the dialogue, can no longer believe that human affairs are ordered justly by God: the wicked prosper and the good are oppressed. Philosophy's task is to show Boethius why, despite appearances, the world is ordered by God with complete justice. First, after she has given him the chance to tell the story of his downfall, she shows him that he has lost nothing of value in his change of circumstances. She then introduces the more extreme argument that people go astray by seeking intermediary goods rather than grasping the highest good, which is God himself. She is now in a position to answer Boethius' initial complaint more directly, explaining how the wicked, because they lack a knowledge of the true good, are not really happy but only succeed in punishing themselves. Rather inconsistently, perhaps, she complements this account of the highest good as a final cause with a view of it as efficient cause, a divine providence in which everything, in ways sometimes inscrutable, is planned for the best. But does not the all-encompassing character of God's place, executed on earth by fate, mean that human beings do

not act freely? Philosophy argues that the motions of the human mind, at least, are free, but then she is faced by an objection from Boethius. If God foreknows all things, is not even this freedom removed? Philosophy ends the work answering this problem, and her response will be examined in detail below.

Interpretation of the *Consolation* is difficult. Boethius is a Christian, and yet at the end of his life he writes a *Consolation of 'Philosophy'*, in which he carefully excludes any explicit reference to Christianity, and where the authoritative personification clearly belongs to the world of pagan Neoplatonism, although pagan Neoplatonism purged of the elements that clashed openly with Christian doctrine. There is room to ask whether, while showing the respect for pagan philosophy that had shaped his intellectual life, Boethius does not give some hints that Philosophy is not absolutely an authoritative figure, and that the consolation she can offer is limited (see Marenbon [2005: 146–63] for an ill-considered discussion that does, however, set out the issues; and Relihan [2006] for an extreme but interesting view).

THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF *OPUSCULA SACRA I* AND *V*

Boethius was certainly not the first Christian writer to use philosophical and logical tools. In the Latin tradition, Marius Victorinus and Augustine had set an example, and a sophisticated use of logic was a hallmark of much Greek doctrinal writing in his time (Daley 1984). No one, though, at least in the Latin tradition, had developed this use of logical analysis in theology in the two main ways followed by Boethius.

One of Boethius' methods was to try to show that, if scrutinized carefully, and in the light of certain philosophical premises that he considered reasonable to hold, heretical positions were revealed to be incoherent. In *OS V* he is aiming to confute two antithetical heterodox positions: that of Nestorius – that in Christ there was a divine nature and divine person, and a human nature and human person; and that of Eutyches – that in Christ there was just one nature and one person. To Nestorius (*OS V,4*) he objects that the closest relation that the divine-nature–divine-person combination can have with the human-nature–human-person is one of mere juxtaposition: his view leaves the Son of God and Jesus Christ as two separate things and so, instead of explaining the Incarnation, in effect it denies it. Although Eutyches insisted that Christ had one nature, he admitted that it derived from (*ex*) a divine and human nature. It is this admission that allows Boethius to object to him. Boethius argues (*OS V,6*) that none of the ways in which a divine and human nature could, in principle, be combined is possible: the divine nature, which is immutable, could not become human and so mutable; nor could human nature become divine, or divine nature and human nature be combined into a divine-and-human nature, because both sorts of transformation would require (according to the laws of Aristotelian physics) a common matter between divine

nature and human nature, and there is none. It remains, then, to conclude that there are two distinct natures in Christ, divine and human, but, as the argument against Nestorius shows, one person: and that, of course, is the orthodox position Boethius set out to vindicate.

Boethius' other method also fits Christian doctrine closely to philosophical argument, but here the aim is to show how far a mystery of the faith can be explained in terms of ordinary logic and to chart the exact point at which such an explanation fails. This is the method he uses in discussing the Trinity (OS I). How can the Father, Son and Holy Spirit be the same thing and yet three? They are the same, Boethius argues, because there is no intrinsic predication – a predication that bears on the nature of the thing itself – that can be made about one and not about the others. (Boethius also explains, in Augustinian style, how such predications must be understood differently in the case of God than for created things, because no property outside himself can be attributed to God: to say that God is wise is to say that God is wisdom itself.) They differ (OS I,6) just according to the extrinsic predications of paternity, filiation and spiration that can be made about the individual persons. In principle, a thing can be related to itself by a predication of relation: everything, for example, is similar to itself. In the created world, the relations of paternity, filiation and spiration can only hold between things that are also different from each other in other ways besides their differing in these relations. A father cannot differ from his son only in that paternity can be predicated of him and filiation of his son. But in the case of God – and it is here that ordinary logic breaks down – we have to try to imagine that there can be a difference solely in terms of being Father, Son or Spirit in something that is intrinsically one and the same.

The method of the *Opuscula sacra* was imitated and developed by twelfth-century theologians at the beginning of the elaboration of scholastic theology. In particular, in his *Theologia 'summi boni'* of 1120, Peter Abelard (1987b) tried to devise his own extended logic of similarity and difference to explain divine trinity. In his commentary on Boethius' *Opuscula sacra* (c.1145), Gilbert of Poitiers set out a whole system of distinguishing ways of speaking about the natural world from what would be appropriate for God, but also of transferring them 'proportionately' so as to provide some way of discussing the divine.

THE PROBLEM OF PRESCIENCE: BOETHIUS' REAL SOLUTION AND THE 'BOETHIAN' SOLUTION

In contemporary philosophy of religion, there is an extensive literature on the 'Boethian' solution to the problem of prescience. But the line of argument attributed to Boethius is not at all what emerges from a careful reading of the *Consolation*. For this reason, Boethius' own arguments (ignoring the dialogue form: the views expressed, usually by Philosophy, that seem to have been endorsed by Boethius the author will be presented simply as his) will be set out in this section; the next

section will comment on them and briefly consider their influence; and then, in the final section, the ‘Boethian’ solution, as it appears in contemporary discussions, will be examined and compared with Boethius’ solution.

The problem of prescience: Boethius’ real solution

Intuitively, the problem of prescience seems easy to grasp. If God foreknows everything, then it seems that the future must be fixed, since nothing can happen otherwise than as God already knows it is going to happen. I believe that I have the choice whether, this afternoon, I spend my time finishing this chapter, which is already overdue, or cycling in the countryside, but as soon as I reflect that God knows now which choice I am going to make, I see that this belief is false, at least if having a choice implies that there is a possibility of doing otherwise than one does. Suppose God knows that I shall go cycling: I could decide to stay in and work only by making God’s knowledge into a false belief, which is impossible.

Putting this intuitive grasp of the problem into a definite form is more difficult, and to a considerable extent the nature of a solution depends on the formal terms in which the problem is set out. In the *Consolation*, the problem is given these two formulations:

- (1) “If God sees all things and can in no way be mistaken, then there necessarily happens what he by providence will have foreseen will be” (*Consolation* V.3.4,¹ in Boethius 2000)

and

- (2) “If things are capable of turning out differently from how they have been foreseen, then there will no longer be firm foreknowledge of the future, but rather uncertain opinion” (V.3.6).

It may well be that these formulations rest on a logical fallacy, but Boethius seems not to notice this, certainly not when he first puts them into the mouth of ‘Boethius’ in the dialogue, and arguably not at any time (see below).

Boethius appears to believe that (1) can be answered fairly easily, whereas (2) demands a complex solution, which will also provide a more satisfactory answer to (1). The solution to (1), it seems, lies in the fact that it does not assert that God’s foreknowledge *causes* future events (ultimately, Boethius does think that God’s knowledge is causative, and this stance presents great problems for interpreting the *Consolation* as a whole (Marenbon 2003: 143–5); but this idea is ruled out of his

1. *Consolation* is cited by book, prose and sections numbers (i.e. V.3.4 refers to book 5, prose 3, section 4) and translations throughout are my own.

main discussion of divine prescience). It follows, Boethius argues (V.4.7–13), that, if future events are all necessary, they must be necessary for some reason other than God's foreknowledge. But, if this or other considerations make (1) seem unproblematic, there remains, Boethius acknowledges, the difficulty proposed by (2). For future events to be contingent rather than determined, it must be uncertain now how they will turn out, and this uncertainty prevents them from being objects of *knowledge*. If God foreknows them, then he will be regarding as certain what are not in fact certain: he will be judging something as being other than it is, and that, so it is usually thought, is "foreign to the integrity of knowledge" (V.4.21–3).

At the centre of the long and complex solution to (2) that Boethius now develops is, however, a rejection of precisely this generally accepted and seemingly obvious point: that everything is known as it is. People believe, says Boethius (V.4.24–5), that "everything that is known is known just according to the power and nature of the things that are known". But "the truth is the very contrary. For everything that is known is grasped not according to its own power, but rather according to the capacity of those who know it". What does this assertion – the 'modes of cognition principle' – mean? Since it is supposed to explain how it can count as knowledge to hold that an event that is in itself uncertain (because future and contingent) is certain, it seems to be challenging what is normally held to follow from the definition of knowledge: that

(3) If someone (*A*) knows something (*x*), then *x* is in fact as *A* knows it to be.

The modes of cognition principle is not, however, arguing for the simple negation of (3), but rather that (3) is an inadequate presentation of what is involved in knowledge. All knowledge must be relativized to the knower, and so, rather than (3), it is more accurate to say

(4) If *A* knows *x*, then *x* is as *A* knows it to be relative to *A*'s mode of cognition;

and the consequent in (4) is compatible with

(5) *x* in itself is not as *A* knows it to be.

In V.4, Boethius sets out a complicated scheme of cognition relativized to knowers, in which each of levels of cognizing – sensing, imagining (common to both humans and non-human animals), reasoning (peculiar to human beings), intellecting (peculiar to God) – grasps the same knowledge through its own special object of cognition in its own special manner.

For the continuation of his argument, however, Boethius relies on a simpler way of applying the modes of cognition principle, which is now stated in a slightly different form: "everything which is known is cognized not from its own nature but from that of those which grasp it" (V.6.1). The suggestion is that, if we want

to understand how God has knowledge of future events that are uncertain, we should consider God's nature. And his nature – or the aspect of it relevant to this discussion – is that he is eternal. Being eternal is not, Boethius adds, a matter of existing for an infinite length of time, but rather, he explains (in a definition that became classic) divine eternity is “the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of unbounded life” (V.6.4). (Many interpreters see this definition as a way of saying that God is atemporal, but it is highly debatable whether this is what Boethius meant; see below). Although this way of eternally living is difficult for human beings to understand, Boethius stresses throughout the discussion in V.6 that it has one important parallel with human experience that helps us grasp it. God lives in an eternal present, which is like our fleeting present, except that our present passes immediately whereas God's remains for ever. For God, all events, past, present and future, are known in this eternal present. If we wish to understand God's knowledge of all things, we should therefore consider our knowledge of the present.

Next, Boethius introduces a distinction that shows how the similarity between our knowledge of what is happening at present and God's knowledge of all things in his eternal present provides the key to solving the problem of prescience. He distinguishes between simple and conditional necessity (V.6.27). Simple necessity is found in natural necessities: it is simply necessary, for instance, that all human beings are mortal and that the sun rises. Conditional necessity is when, for instance, “if you know someone is walking, it is necessary that he is walking”. Boethius continues:

For what each person knows cannot be known and yet otherwise <than it is known to be>, but this condition by no means brings with it that simple necessity. For it is not a thing's own nature which makes this necessity, but the adding of the condition: for no necessity compels a person who voluntarily is walking to be walking, but when he is walking, it is necessary that he is walking. (V.6.28–9)

Boethius, then, is arguing that an ordinary contingent event, such as my walking across the room, is *necessary* when it is relativized to the knowledge of someone who knows it is happening as it is happening in the present, but that this necessity is not like that of a simply necessary event. In the last sentence of the passage quoted, Boethius gives a clue to understanding what is involved in this conditional necessity: it is exactly like the necessity of the present; indeed, the suggestion seems to be that the necessity of the present is a species of it. The necessity of the present is a feature of Aristotle's understanding of modality, which was followed by Boethius, as his commentary on *On Interpretation* shows clearly (cf. Knuutila 1993: 51–5). Neither Aristotle nor Boethius had a conception of synchronic alternative possibilities. ‘I am sitting and it is possible that I am standing’ means, for them, that it is possible that at the next instant I

stand up. If, at the present moment, I am sitting, then it is necessary that I am sitting at this moment. But this necessity, Aristotle believes, in no sense impinges on freedom.

All Boethius has to do now is to refer back to the parallel between human present knowledge and divine knowledge. When we see something happening, and know it is happening, the event is necessary, but only relative to us and in a way that is entirely unconstraining. “In the same way, therefore”, he says, “if providence sees something present, it is necessary that it is, although of its nature it has no necessity” (V.6.30). God does indeed see all things, past, present and future, in his eternal present; relative to him, they have the necessity of the present, but that does not make them simply necessary: things that happen as a result of free will are, in their own nature, free, but in relation to God’s vision of them they are necessary “by the condition of God’s knowledge” (V.6.32).

To summarize, although some future events – those dependent on free will – are uncertain in themselves, they are certain in relation to God’s cognition of them, and so in grasping them as certain, God has knowledge of them. In order to be grasped with certainty, these events must be necessary, but they are conditionally, not simply necessary. Every event is conditionally necessary when it is happening, or when it is known to be happening in the present by human beings, or known to be happening by God (at whatever time relative to us it happens, past, present or future) in his eternal present, but this conditional necessity in no way prevents the events from being the result of free will.

Difficulties with Boethius’ solution

It may have struck attentive readers that the way in which Boethius formulates the problem of prescience (in (1) and (2)) seems to be based on a logical fallacy: one concerning logical scope. Boethius seems to be saying (to consider (1); the same point *mutatis mutandis* applies to (2)) that, because God has knowledge of all future events, and because knowledge cannot be erroneous, all future events are necessary. This looks like the following deduction:

- (6) God knows all future events.
- (7) Necessarily, if someone knows something, it was/is/will be the case.
- (8) All future events will happen necessarily (not contingently).

But (8) does not follow from (6) and (7). All that (7) establishes is the necessity of the *connection* between someone knowing something, and that thing being the case (not that thing being necessary). It is true that, necessarily, if God knows that event *x* will happen, it will happen, and it is true that, for every future event, God knows it will happen; but that does not in the least show that any of these events will happen necessarily. What would be needed along with (6) to entail (8) would be the premise

(9) If someone knows something, it was/is/will necessarily be the case.

But there is no reason at all to grant (9).

It seems, therefore, that Boethius' statement of the difficulty confuses wide-scope necessity (Necessarily, if p then q), as found in (7), and narrow-scope necessity (If p , then necessarily q), as found in (9). (Later medieval logicians would describe this as the distinction between necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the consequent.)

For some modern interpreters (e.g. Sharples [1991] in his generally excellent commentary), when Boethius distinguishes between simple and conditional necessity, he is taking account of precisely this confusion: simple necessity is narrow-scope necessity, conditional necessity wide-scope necessity. But there are three strong reasons not to follow this reading. First, if Boethius finally notices that his initial posing of the problem is based on a fallacious inference, why does he not say so and either declare the problem solved or explain how it can be restated in a way that does not commit the fallacy? So far from such a reaction, he gives no hint that the distinction between simple necessity and conditional necessity reflects back on how he originally stated his views. Rather, his argument proceeds as set out above. Secondly, when necessity is wide-scope and so applies to the whole of an 'if ... then ...' proposition, not to the antecedent or the consequent, it does not make either the antecedent or the consequent themselves necessary. But in Boethius' account of conditional necessity, he takes it that this necessity *does* make the consequent necessary, but in a special, 'conditional' way.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there is good reason to believe that Boethius could not even have understood the distinction between narrow-scope necessity and wide-scope necessity. In order to notice a scope distinction of this sort, a logician needs to be thinking in terms of propositions and the operations that can be conducted on them individually (negation) or to link them together (conjunction, disjunction, entailment). Following the work of Christopher Martin (1991), it is clear that Boethius had no conception of such propositional operations. He did not even think of conditionals as connecting together propositions, but instead thought of them as proposing a special sort of link between some of their terms.

Still, although Boethius should not be credited with uncovering the scope fallacy, it is an oversimplification to say that he falls into it. He certainly lacked the tools to formulate the problem in such a way as to show that he was aware of and avoiding it, but he did not, as a reading of the opening of his argument in isolation might suggest, think that the problem of prescience consists of inferring (8) from (6) and (7). He recognized, without stating it formally, that time has a central part in the problem: we are not concerned with what God knows about what is happening (for us) now, but with his knowledge of the future. Lying beneath the surface of the apparently invalid inference that he uses to set up the problem is a genuine problem that cannot be resolved by logical disambiguation.

The character of Boethius' position is put into focus by the story of its influence in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (see Marenbon 2005: chs 3–5). In his *Dialectica* (c.1105–15), using the discussion in the *Consolation* as a starting-point, Peter Abelard quickly identified the scope fallacy that a propositional formulation of Boethius' posing of the problem would commit. But Abelard believed that, by unmasking this fallacy, he had solved the problem of prescience, and most of his contemporaries followed him in this belief. It was only gradually, in the course of the thirteenth century, that the temporal dimension of the problem, intuitively grasped by Boethius but ignored by Abelard, was rediscovered. Aquinas, benefiting from the understanding of propositionality that had become common from Abelard's time, was able to formulate this aspect of the problem with a formal precision that entirely eluded Boethius; but his solution proceeds along uncannily Boethian lines.

The 'Boethian' solution

Readers of current literature on the problem of prescience are very likely to be told of the 'Boethian' solution to the problem (sometimes attributed to Aquinas, or to Aquinas and Boethius together) (see e.g. Leftow 1991: 160; Zagzebski 1991: 37–9). It is only loosely related to the line of argument actually proposed by Boethius (and hardly more closely to that advanced by Aquinas). In order to understand this 'Boethian' solution, it is first necessary to see how the problem can be formulated, using the apparatus of propositional logic, in a way that incorporates the temporal element and avoids committing the scope fallacy. If God foreknows all future events, then it is not merely true that now, at time t_2 that he knows what will happen at some future time, t_3 , but also that at some time in the past, t_1 , he knew what would happen at t_3 . We recognize that past events are unchangeable and so in some sense necessary (philosophers speak of their 'accidental necessity'). We can, therefore, say that

- (10) It is now, at t_2 , (accidentally) necessary that God knew that x will happen at t_3 .

It is a principle accepted in the system of modal logic (the transfer of necessity principle) that supposedly best models our common-sense modal intuitions that, if a consequent follows necessarily from an antecedent, and if the antecedent is itself necessary, then the consequent too is necessary. That is to say:

- (11) (Necessarily (if p then q), and necessarily- p) implies necessarily- q .

From the disambiguated version of Boethius' posing of the problem of prescience, we can take the (in itself innocuous) statement that:

- (12) Necessarily (if God knows p , then p).

But in (10) it has been established that (accidentally) necessarily God knows p (that x will happen at t_3), and so, by (11), it follows that

(13) Necessarily x will happen at t_3 .

This formulation of the problem of prescience is called the ‘accidental necessity argument’ and it formalizes the intuitions about time and knowledge that make the problem intuitively worrying.

The ‘Boethian’ solution rebuts this argument by rejecting (10) because, according to this solution, God is atemporally eternal. If God is atemporal, then no temporal proposition directly about him is true. It is false, for example, to say that ‘God is wise now’, or that ‘God is good in 2007’, or that ‘God is good at t_n ’, where for t_n can be substituted any moment or period of time. (The qualification ‘directly’ is included because the truth of, for instance, ‘In 2007 God is believed to be good by most US citizens’ is not challenged by this position.) If, then, God is atemporally eternal, it is not true that he knew at t_1 what would happen at t_3 . Rather, it is true that he atemporally knows what will happen at t_3 , and this will not provide the premise necessary for the accidental necessary argument to go through. Since the accidental necessity argument depends on the necessity of the past, and none of God’s knowledge is past, none of it is accidentally necessary.

Neat though this solution may be, it faces two large problems. First, it can be argued that, if God is atemporally eternal, then the distinction between past, present and future breaks down, not just for God, but for all things. If God is atemporal, then, it is usually considered, his act of knowing in one glance what happens at t_1 and at t_2 and at t_3 must be simultaneous with t_1 and t_2 and t_3 . But since simultaneity is a transitive relation, t_1 and t_2 and t_3 will therefore be simultaneous with one another, and time will collapse into a single instant. The counter-argument, that the relation of simultaneity between an event in time and a timelessly eternal knower has a special character, and is intransitive (Stump & Kretzmann 1981), just reveals in its apparently *ad hoc* nature the looseness of our grasp on what it might be to be timelessly eternal. Secondly, just as it can be argued that past events are accidentally necessary because unchangeable, so it might be argued that accidental necessity attaches to whatever happens in God’s timeless eternity, since it too cannot be changed (Zagzebski 1991: 60–61). In short, even if the ‘Boethian’ solution does not generate unacceptable consequences – which is doubtful – the problem can easily be reformulated in a way that it cannot solve.

But these criticisms should not be addressed to Boethius, who was not responsible for what is called the ‘Boethian’ solution. The ‘Boethian’ solution is directed against a formulation of the problem in terms that he, given his lack of a grasp of propositionality, could not have even understood. And its central principle, that God is atemporally eternal, is arguably not a feature of Boethius’s genuine argument at all.

As was made clear in expounding Boethius' argument, he does not think that God's eternity consists in his lacking a beginning and an end to his existence, but rather in having a life that is lived wholly and perfectly at once. There is a distinguished scholarly tradition of interpreting this comment (and a parallel one found in OSI,4) to mean that God is timeless, and there do seem to be some earlier ancient authors who had a definite conception of an atemporal type of eternity (Sorabji 1983: 119–20). But there is nothing in Boethius' text to suggest that he considered any temporal proposition about God (such as 'God is good today') to be false. When he talks about divine eternity, Boethius is describing how God lives his life: unchangingly, all at once, so that his knowledge is always the same; his whole life, as he says, is like one of the fleeting instances of our life made permanent and stable (*Consolation* V.6.13). As explained, Boethius builds his solution from this idea, claiming that, since God is eternal in this way, God's knowledge of all things is like our knowledge of what is happening at the present instant. There is no reason, then, to think that Boethius would have wished to reject common-sense claims such as 'God is good today', although he would want to underline that such a statement lacks the usual conversational implicature that he might not be good tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

Boethius' theological methods and his way of tackling the problem of prescience are both examples of a subtlety of mind that shows how mistaken were those scholars in the past who treated Boethius as hardly more than a translator: an intermediary for Greek ideas to pass to a Latin-speaking world. Moreover, his influence on the Middle Ages in both these areas was so profound that no one eager to understand Abelard, Aquinas or even Ockham can afford to neglect him. But Boethius did not speak the language of contemporary philosophy, and he formulated the problem of prescience in a way that obscures what we consider to be its logical substance. The fathering on to Boethius of a solution to the problem, which he neither gave nor even would have understood, is a touching example of the need contemporary philosophers appear to have, at least in philosophy of religion, to wrap themselves in the authority of past thinkers. Since, however, the 'Boethian' solution is all too easily dismissed, it would in all ways be fairer to assess Boethius for what he actually proposed, and not for what it is believed that he should have done.

FURTHER READING

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On ETERNITY see also Ch. 5. On FOREKNOWLEDGE see also Ch. 6; Vol. 3, Ch. 13. On FREE WILL see also Chs 7, 9, 19; Vol. 1, Ch. 18; Vol. 3, Chs 9, 15; Vol. 5, Ch. 22. On LOGIC see also Chs 4, 17; Vol. 3, Ch. 3; Vol. 4, Ch. 19. On THE TRINITY see also Chs 2, 8, 15; Vol. 1, Chs 14, 17, 20; Vol. 3, Chs 3, 9, 17; Vol. 4, Ch. 4; Vol. 5, Chs 12, 23.

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