

Chapter Title: Boethius

Book Title: Pagans and Philosophers

Book Subtitle: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz

Book Author(s): John Marenbon

Published by: Princeton University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1h4mhj6.8>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Princeton University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pagans and Philosophers*

JSTOR

Boethius

A striking contrast to Augustine's answer to the Problem of Paganism is provided by Boethius, an author nearly as widely read through the Long Middle Ages and whose *Consolation of Philosophy*—the work principally in question here—was translated into the gamut of medieval vernaculars, from Old High German to Hebrew.¹ But the *Consolation* does not *obviously* put forward an answer, or even state the Problem of Paganism, and on the reading followed by many specialists, Boethius was not concerned with it at all. To see why their judgement is wrong, the *Consolation* needs to be considered as a complex literary work that can be properly understood only when placed in its author's unusual cultural context.

BOETHIUS'S CONTEXT

Boethius was born in (probably) 476, a little more than a century after Augustine. In some ways, Augustine's classical world had by now disappeared. North Africa had been conquered by the Vandals. In Italy, where Boethius lived, the last Western Roman emperor had been deposed by the Goth Odoacer, who in turn was removed by Theoderic the Ostrogoth. Theoderic had in theory been sent by the Eastern emperor and governed under his aegis, but in practice he regarded himself as the ruler. The vestigial paganism, which had influenced Augustine's early life and with which he had later to contend, had disappeared. The senatorial aristocracy to which Boethius belonged was by now uniformly Christian, as were the people of Rome, and even Theoderic and his Gothic soldiers, although they followed the Arian heresy (Christ is subordinate to the Father, who alone is truly God). In other ways, however, Boethius was far closer to the classical Roman and Greek past than Augustine, a provincial parvenu, had ever been. Not only did Boethius grow up and live in Rome—still a capital culturally though not politically. He belonged to one of the

¹For the vernacular translations and influence of the *Consolation*, see Kaylor and Phillips 2012.

grandest Roman families and had been adopted into another of them: as such, he received an education in the Latin classics and—going beyond what was usual, even in his class—in not only Greek, but also Greek philosophy. His wealth and contacts meant that he had access to a range of Greek manuscripts so that, although almost certainly did not attend the Platonic school of Athens or Alexandria, he became familiar with much of their syllabus.²

It was in these Platonic schools that the few remaining philosophical adherents of ancient paganism were still to be found. The School of Athens survived until it was closed by Justinian in 529, shortly after Boethius's death; the School of Alexandria, which took a more accommodating line to Christianity, right up until the town fell to the Muslims in 641. The delicacy with which Boethius was able to negotiate the relations between his Christianity and the philosophical tradition he inherited depended on his remoteness from its contemporary pagan exponents. In the East, Christian philosophers preferred to follow a less ambiguous strategy. For instance, John Philoponus studied in Alexandria under Boethius's pagan contemporary, Ammonius. In his early works he based himself on his teacher, but much of his mature writing is a critique, on powerfully argued philosophical grounds, of aspects of Aristotelianism incompatible with Christianity. Or, to take an even more striking example, during Boethius's lifetime, a Christian author, perhaps a Syrian monk, deeply familiar with Proclus and the Platonic tradition, wrote a set of prayerful, mystical yet philosophically informed and suggestive texts. Their themes are explicitly Christian—the Trinity, the orders of angels, the ranks of the Church, and their language is rich in biblical echoes. But the hierarchical ordering of creation and the sophisticated negative theology they present are adapted from the pagan Neoplatonists, though with important changes. The author guaranteed his own anonymity and the fame of his writings by issuing them as the work of Dionysius, the Areopagite converted by St Paul (see above, pp. 19–20). By picking Dionysius, as opposed to any other early Christian, the writer was responding in a bold and direct way to the Problem of Paganism. Before he was converted by Paul, Dionysius had been a learned pagan; the late ancient writer, anachronistically, sees him as a Platonist of his own days. After his conversion, the writer indicates, Dionysius could keep most of the structure of his pagan philosophical universe, and express it in Christian terms. Platonism and Christianity can be syncretized, by accepting and baptizing pagan wisdom.³

²On the social and intellectual context of Boethius's life, see Moorhead 2009 and Chadwick 1981.

³Although the author does not conceptualize the question in terms of 'the Problem of Paganism', an approach to pseudo-Dionysius on these lines, and in greater depth, has been

Boethius's approach to the problem would be far less direct, and in part the result of the shape of his life. Most of it was spent, as was common for men of his class, in learned leisure. Boethius had a special interest in making Greek philosophical culture available to Latin speakers. He formulated an ambitious plan to translate into Latin, and provide with commentaries, all the works of Plato and Aristotle—though he never went beyond Aristotle's logic, for which he showed an especial fascination.⁴ At the same time, although not a priest, Boethius wrote on Christian subjects. These short treatises were gathered together as his five *opuscula sacra*. The first, on the Trinity, and the fifth, on the union between God and Man in Christ, share a common method. Very probably written to contribute to the doctrinal controversies of the time, the two treatises are striking because of the way they use Aristotelian physics, metaphysics and logic to probe theological problems. Boethius believes that he can show that two heretical formulations about the relationship between God and Man in Christ (he is two natures and two persons; he is one nature and one person) are incoherent in terms of natural philosophy. The true doctrine, that he is one person and two natures, divine and human, is argued to be cogent from a philosophical point of view, but requiring a step in argument beyond what would be acceptable except when talking about God. Similarly, Boethius shows how, up to a certain point, we can make logical sense of the idea that God is three and one, and he charts the point at which the philosophical analysis can no longer compass this mystery.⁵ The third treatise, explaining how all things are good simply in virtue of existing, anticipates the *Consolation* by being written so that it could equally well be from the pen of a pagan Platonist as from that of a Christian. By contrast, the fourth treatise is a simple account of orthodox Christian faith which concentrates on the narrative of sacred history. The unlikeness of this little work to anything else of Boethius's has led some to regard it as inauthentic, but most are now convinced by the case for its genuineness.⁶ Indeed, a fragment has been found, quite possibly part of an original preface to the fourth treatise removed by Boethius's earliest editors because they found it too daring. It can be interpreted as seeing faith as the highest of our cognitive faculties, which grasps the truth more purely than they do.⁷ This

developed in Stang 2012, who also gives full references to earlier discussions of these issues by Louth, Schäfer and others.

⁴On Boethius as a logician, see Ebbesen 1990, 2009; and Marenbon 2003, 17–42.

⁵For a more detailed exposition of this view, see Marenbon 2003, 70–87. The theological background to the *Opuscula* is explored in Chadwick 1981, 180–202, 211–22. There is a commentary (so far just to Treatises II, III and IV): Galonnier 2007.

⁶See Chadwick 1981; Galonnier 2007, 38–409.

⁷See Troncarelli 2000.

interpretation fits very well with the idea that philosophical reasoning can grasp divine things *up to a certain point*: it is there that faith must take over the task.

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

In 522, Boethius gave up his scholarly life in Rome to become the chief minister of Theoderic in his capital, Ravenna. Court intrigue, Boethius's high principles and, perhaps, his links with Greece and the Byzantine Emperor soon led to his downfall. He was imprisoned on charges which included treason and sentenced to death.⁸ It was during these final months or years that he wrote the most famous of his works, the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Unlike his previous works, written in elegant Latin but with little literary artifice, the *Consolation* is an elaborately contrived piece of writing as well a philosophical text.⁹ The setting is Boethius's own prisoner's cell. At the beginning of the text, as he laments his change of fortune in Ovidian verse, there appears to Boethius the prisoner a woman 'with burning eyes that saw more clearly than the run of humans', young and vigorous and yet so old that she seemed to belong to another era, sometimes of normal height, sometimes 'seeming to touch heaven with her head'. She is dressed in a seamless garment, which has been torn (I.1.5) by those trying to snatch away parts of it—a simile, it is explained, for the different schools which break up the unity of true philosophy. This figure shoos away the poetic muses who had been allowing him, the prisoner to wallow in his misery and, when he has recovered from his astonishment, the prisoner recognizes (I.3.2) 'Philosophy in whose house I had spent time since I was a young'. The work is a dialogue between Boethius the Prisoner and this figure of Philosophy, in which sections of argumentative prose are broken up by verse passages, reflecting on or developing the argument. Generically, it is therefore what is called a 'prosimetrum' or 'Menippean satire'. In ancient literature the genre of a piece sets up certain expectations about, not just the structure of a work, but its contents and aims, and so the fact that Boethius chose this form for the *Consolation* may be important in interpreting it.

The argument of the dialogue begins from the prisoner's own situation. Boethius represents himself as having forgotten the lessons of

⁸On Boethius's trial and condemnation, see Morton 1982 and Moorhead 1992, 219–26.

⁹There is extensive discussion of the work's genre and relation to Latin literary tradition in Relihan 2007 and Shanzer 2009b. Gruber 2006 gives a thorough commentary, directed especially to questions of literary background.

philosophy, dazed by his sudden fall from power and prosperity, and as believing from his own experience that God takes no care of humans, allowing the good to be oppressed while the wicked prosper. Philosophy disagrees. She begins by convincing the prisoner that the goods he has lost, such as riches and status, are not true goods. At this stage she allows that there are true goods which people can gain in their lives, such as sufficiency and respect, but the prisoner still has these.¹⁰ She goes on, however, to develop a monolithic conception of the good, which is identified with the Highest Good, which is God. She argues that only by seeking this good alone, and not by pursuing any other goods separately, can we achieve happiness. Taking up the prisoner's complaint that the wicked prosper, Philosophy claims, in terms borrowed from Plato's *Gorgias*, that, on the contrary, the wicked suffer because of their very wickedness, and the good are rewarded merely by being good. God is seen here and in other passages as purely a final cause, who does need to intervene in the running the universe: simply because he is the aim to which all things are directed, the universe orders itself justly. But she also proposes in other passages a different view, in which God is seen as an arranger as well as a final cause, distributing prosperity and adversity with the ultimate best interests of people in mind, whether in punishing the wicked, favouring the virtuous or testing and improving them through hardship. This theme is further developed by a discussion of chance and providence. Chance events, Philosophy explains, are those which occur when two chains of cause and effect coincide, but they, as all other events, are part of the overall pattern of cause and effect disposed by God. The human will, however, is still held to be free in its decisions and so morally accountable.¹¹ But the prisoner sees a different threat to this freedom. God knows all things, past, present and future. How is such knowledge of the future compatible with the claim that the future is open, since a human being can choose to will or not to will this or that act? The last, and by far the philosophically densest, part of the work ends with the Prisoner's elaboration of this problem, and Philosophy's intricate solution, which involves the special relationship between an eternal God's way of knowing and the flow of time.¹²

As in the case of the third theological treatise, there is nothing on the surface of the *Consolation* which points to a Christian author. The

¹⁰See Marenbon 2003, 105.

¹¹This summary of the (not entirely harmonious) arguments proposed in the *Consolation* is based on the much more detailed exposition in Marenbon 2003, 96–124.

¹²There have been many analyses of this section, philosophically the richest, of the *Consolation*: see Marenbon 2003, 125–45; Sharples 2009 (a very fine and balanced assessment of the interpretative debate); and Marenbon 2013b (corrects and amplifies my earlier discussion and gives a new reading of the argument).

prisoner converses with, and is convinced by, Philosophy—and not by a personification of Faith or Revelation. Philosophy works by means of rational argument from supposedly evident premises. Her arguments lead, indeed, to God, but it is a God which would not be obviously unacceptable to a pagan Platonist of Boethius's day. Yet there is certainly no trace of polytheism, and the metaphysical scheme lacks the multiple levels of emanation which Iamblichus and Proclus populated with the Graeco-Roman pantheon. Probed more deeply, this complete neutrality turns out to be qualified, though not seriously, on both sides. The language reveals Christian vocabulary and turns of phrase, as well as some biblical reminiscences. The most significant of them is (III.12.22) when Philosophy says, in the same words as the biblical Wisdom (viii, 1) that 'it is the highest good that rules all things strongly and disposes them sweetly'. Not only is the phrase a very direct echo of Scripture, but the prisoner replies by saying that he is delighted, not only by the conclusions Philosophy has reached but 'the very words' she has used.¹³ On the other side, there are perhaps some ideas put forward by Philosophy which would not be acceptable to Christians, at least in poem ('metrum') nine of book III, a solemn prayer to God, in which she summarizes the *Timaieus*. Medieval readers—as will become apparent—were certainly troubled by the references here to the World Soul and to the doctrine of reincarnation. But it is not clear whether Boethius himself would have regarded even this passage as unacceptable for Christians.¹⁴

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CONSOLATION

Why did Boethius choose to leave anything openly Christian out of this highly personal work, which he knew would be a final testament? Specialists on Boethius accept that they need to answer this question, but they usually do so in such a way as to suggest that the Problem of Paganism did not concern him. Most interpreters can be classed as Hellenizers, Christianizers or Syncretists.¹⁵

¹³The still very useful edition by Fortescue (Boethius 1925) contains (204–6) an index of biblical traces, reprinted in Bieler's *Corpus Christianorum* edition (CCSL 94) of the *Consolatio*; and a list partly based on it is given in Shanzer 2009a, 75–78, but none besides the reference to Wisdom viii, 1 is close. See De Vogel 1972, 12–17 for an assessment.

¹⁴The prisoner himself accepts the Platonic doctrine of recollection (III.12.1; V m.3, lines 22–31—this *metrum* is put into the prisoner's mouth) and, if he is considered to take it literally, he would also commit himself to reincarnation; yet such a view would not in his time have been obviously heterodox for Christians.

¹⁵This follows the division in Marenbon 2003, 156, but substitutes 'Syncretists' for 'Augustinists', since this wider category is able to include Shanzer and Troncarelli.

The Hellenizers regard the *Consolation* as a work of pagan, or at least non-Christian philosophy. They point to the fact that Boethius introduces Philosophy as the authoritative figure, sticks entirely to philosophical arguments and says nothing explicitly Christian; scriptural allusions and Christian language are seen as the unintended result of ingrained habit.¹⁶ Perhaps, faced by death, Boethius abandoned Christianity.¹⁷ Or perhaps, as some more recent scholars have argued, although Boethius was clearly a Christian, he was either only superficially one, or else he made an absolute separation between his writing as a philosopher and his Christian beliefs.¹⁸

The Christianizers argue, by contrast, that the *Consolation* was designed as a clearly Christian work. A simple version of this view lays emphasis on the Christian language and allusions, and on the ease with which Philosophy can be assimilated to the biblical figure of Wisdom.¹⁹ A more sophisticated version looks to the degree to which the younger Augustine, although a committed Christian writer, followed Platonic teaching. According to this view, Boethius would have found no tension, nor expected his readers to detect any, in the extent to which, though a Christian, he thinks and writes in the terms of Platonic philosophy.²⁰ This type of reading might therefore be described as Syncretist, though with a Christianizing bent. A purer Syncretist reading sees Boethius as deliberately trying to write a work based on the common ground between ‘the matter of philosophy and that of religion’.²¹

The Hellenizing view is somewhat implausible. The *Consolation* presents itself, by its setting and the fact that the only human character is Boethius himself, as a personal work, written by a man facing death. It is hard to see how he could simply put his Christianity to one side when writing in such a way, and even harder to admit that the Christianity of the writer of the *opuscula* was merely superficial. Moreover, Boethius’s

¹⁶The nineteenth-century hypothesis that the *opuscula sacra* were written by a different Boethius from the (supposedly pagan) author of the *Consolation* was disproved by a fragment from Cassiodorus (the *Anecdota Holderi*; published in Usener 1877); cf. Galonnier 1997, 40–58.

¹⁷Momigliano 1955, 213.

¹⁸See Courcelle 1967 for separation; Galonnier 2007—Boethius’s Christianity is a formality, and theology is seen by him as the servant of philosophy. Shanzer (2009b, 244) entertains the idea of ‘apostasy or failure of faith’ on Boethius’s part, but opts rather for syncretism (see below).

¹⁹Klingner 1966.

²⁰Chadwick 1981, 249.

²¹See Shanzer 2009b, 244–45; cf. 2009b, 73. Her view contrasts with Chadwick’s, since she believes that he is thinking ‘outside the Christian framework’. Troncarelli (2000) also thinks of Boethius as a syncretist, as did Fortescue (Boethius 1925, xlviii), who, however, like Chadwick, emphasizes his Christianity.

control of his language is exceptionally fine, and it is most unlikely that, if he wished to set Christianity aside, he would have let so much Christian and biblical language into his text. The prisoner's explicit acknowledgment and welcoming of the words Philosophy borrows from the biblical book of Wisdom is particularly hard to explain on this view.

There is a sense in which, by contrast, the Christianizing interpretation is indeed probably right. The earliest readers saw the *Consolation* in this way, and Boethius almost certainly would have expected most of them to do so. But the question remains whether Boethius wrote the *Consolation* in a way that would suggest to some readers—the more careful, most reflective and best educated ones—a more complex interpretation. The reasons why the question needs at least to be posed are that, on its own, the Christianizing view leaves unexplained why Boethius should have chosen to disguise the obvious Christian message he is supposedly putting by removing all explicit Christian references from the work; and, further, why he chose the particular, elaborate and unusual form for the work—a prosimetrum in which the Christian Boethius debates with a personification of ancient, pagan philosophy. The fact that the one explicit biblical quotation is from the book of Wisdom underlines this point. Wisdom, identified by this allusion with the Highest Good, is at once a biblical figure, from the Judaeo-Christian world, but of a sort which is accessible outside this tradition—and so to Philosophy.²²

These reservations about the Christianizing view seem to favour the Syncretizers. They are certainly correct that Boethius writes in a manner acceptable both to pagan Platonists and to Christians. But did he, by the form in which he wrote the *Consolation*, intend also to raise questions about how pagan philosophy and Christian belief are related?

One view, not yet considered, holds that Boethius raised these questions in such a way as to undermine the appearance of harmony in the work between philosophy and revealed religion: the *Consolation*, it holds, is a satirical work. To the alert reader, it carries a message which is the very opposite of what its title and plan suggest—much in the way that a satirical eulogy aims to lambast the pretended recipient of praise. The main advocate of this interpretation is Joel Relihan.²³ According to Relihan, Boethius's central point is that, although Philosophy promises consolation, she does not end by providing any. The work charts the failure of Philosophy to meet the prisoner's challenges and, through the Christian hints and allusions, suggests that his way to happiness is not

²²Shanzer presents the allusion in this way convincingly (2009a). So taken, it fits the dialogic interpretation advanced here as much as it does her own syncretistic one.

²³In Relihan 1993, the author advances his interpretation of the *Consolation* (187–94) in the context of a general study of Menippean satire; Relihan 2007 nuances and enriches the same general line of interpretation, with more close attention to Boethius's text.

to follow her but through humble prayer to God. Relihan uses two main types of evidence to support his view. First, there is the genre of the work. *Prosimetrum* or Menippean satire is, as he explains, associated with the ridiculing of pretention, especially pretention to wisdom. The form of the *Consolation*, therefore, alerts the reader to the possibility that Philosophy's claims to guide Boethius to his true home are not all she holds them up to be. This expectation, he argues, is fulfilled by various disappointments and absences in the text. Although described as a 'Consolation', there is no treatment of death or the soul. Philosophy tells the prisoner that he has forgotten who he really is and she will help him to remember; but she never gives an answer to the question. Philosophy promises to lead the prisoner to his homeland, but she does not, in the sense that there is 'no vision of heavenly harmonies . . . no apocalypse. . . .'²⁴ Boethius the prisoner learns the difficult lesson that, rather than look upwards, he must turn his gaze downwards, to the earth where he lives. There is no easy, philosophical route to a supernal realm, and the way to reach God is through humble prayer—and it is on this note that the work ends, with Philosophy urging Boethius to 'offer humble prayers to the heavens' (V.6.47).

Relihan has noticed some important features of the text and of Boethius's literary choices, but it is hard to accept this satirical reading, because it treats the argumentation, which makes up most of the *Consolation*, as mere padding, fruitless verbiage to show that Philosophy cannot reach her goals. Yet in general Philosophy is made to argue carefully and in many ways powerfully, even if she does not achieve overall coherence. If Boethius had merely been wishing to assert his faith, by showing the inadequacy of philosophizing, why would he have laboured so hard to philosophize? In especial, on Relihan's interpretation it is almost impossible to understand why Boethius chose to include the long and sophisticated argument about divine prescience and contingency at the end of the work. This piece of reasoning is the most impressive and original which Boethius ever devised. The author seems clearly to think that it has solved the problem under discussion and shown that God can foreknow contingent events and, given the premises and understanding of necessity and possibility accepted by both parties, the argument is remarkably successful. If it were the author's intention to show how Philosophy disappoints, why choose to add this section—which could easily have been omitted—in which she successfully reassures the prisoner about an important intellectual concern?

A more modest way to suggest that the *Consolation* demands a complex reading is to see it, not as a satire, but as a genuine dialogue. Like

²⁴Relihan 2007, 5.

Relihan's interpretation, this reading finds internal and formal cues which suggest that, for the alert reader, the *Consolation* does not unproblematically syncretize (in the manner of pseudo-Dionysius), but it leaves Boethius with his loyalties to both his religion and philosophy intact. Of course, no one denies that the *Consolation* is a dialogue. But, Relihan apart, interpreters tend to take Philosophy as speaking entirely in the author's voice, proposing correct and adequate answers to problems and objections placed in Boethius the prisoner's mouth. The dialogue is taken purely as a matter of presentation. Yet would not careful readers, at least, have been struck by the fact the *Consolation* is a work by a Christian author, who appears as the main character, and yet the authoritative figure who consoles him is not a Christian, but a pagan? Philosophy looks back in her comments to a tradition of ancient, pagan philosophy and its great exponents. Plato, Aristotle, Socrates and Seneca are her followers, but she mentions no Christians among them (except, of course, for the prisoner Boethius himself). Although, as is only to be expected in an author steeped in Christian as well as pagan literature, there is some Christian language throughout the text, the most Christian-sounding moments come in the prisoner's interventions.²⁵ Seeing the *Consolation* as a genuine dialogue means not losing sight of the fact that the authoritative figure is a pagan and the man she consoles a Christian, and that, for Christian readers, this juxtaposition must raise some questions.

Rather than, like Relihan, dismiss Philosophy's reasoning as unsuccessful, it may be better to conclude that it is well-managed and, so far as the individual strands of argument go, successful—but the author Boethius deliberately leaves his carefully contrived arguments in tension. Are there individual good things, such as friendship, which even a disastrous change of fortune such as Boethius's cannot destroy and have genuine value? Or is it the case, rather, as the monolithic conception of goodness put forward later implies, that nothing except the Highest Good, which is God, has any true value? Do the wicked punish themselves and the good gain their own reward simply through being virtuous, or does a provident God intervene to plan out humans' destinies according to his inscrutable wisdom and justice? Even the author Boethius's greatest philosophical achievement, Philosophy's highly wrought argument about divine prescience in book 5, although itself impressive, is juxtaposed with her inability to explain coherently how this liberty is compatible also with the fact that God does not just know our actions in advance but ordains them and all things.

²⁵Cf. Marenbon 2003, 157–58. De Vogel (1972, 4–6) discusses the strongly Christian language in which Boethius sets out in V.3 the consequences if humans are governed entirely by necessity.

Boethius, so the dialogic reading suggests, wants to suggest by such tensions and gaps that there is a level of knowledge to which Philosophy cannot rise. Despite her supernatural appearance when she enters, Philosophy is not a goddess, but has to work within the limited sphere of human reasoning.²⁶ She herself is well aware of these limitations. Talking about divine providence, she quotes (IV.6.53) Homer's line, 'But it is hard to explain all these things as if I were a God', and a few lines before she introduces (IV.6.38) a Greek quotation, perhaps from the Chaldean Oracles, by saying, 'For as someone even more excellent than I <says>'.²⁷ One of the developments in pagan Neoplatonism after Plotinus was an increasing lack of confidence in the powers of humans to reach the highest levels of understanding purely through their powers of reasoning. Boethius the author is doing no more, then, than attributing to the pagan philosophical tradition a diffidence about its own capabilities which its exponents themselves shared.

BOETHIUS AND THE PROBLEM OF PAGANISM

If Boethius intended his best readers to read the *Consolation* simply, either as a philosophical discussion separated from Christian belief, or as a Christian work using the language of philosophy, then the text does not address the Problem of Paganism. If it is designed as a syncretic work, compatible with Christianity but deliberately without any of its distinctive doctrines, then it side-steps or brackets the problem. If the work is read as a satire, then it does put forward a view about pagan knowledge and its limitations, but it is a very simple one. It suggests that there seems to be a Problem of Paganism, because of the claims to genuine knowledge made by pagan philosophy, but that in fact these claims are false.

Read as a genuine dialogue, however, the *Consolation* offers a distinct and far more interesting answer to the side of the Problem of Paganism concerned with pagan knowledge of God. It suggests that Philosophy can go a long way towards the truth, but there comes a point where it fails. It can devise excellent individual arguments, but cannot put them into a coherent whole, whilst in some areas, such as the compatibility between human freedom and divine preordination (as opposed to prescience), it fails almost entirely. Philosophy is not, however, depicted as being full of pride, based on an overestimation of its abilities. Boethius draws on the

²⁶I suggested (Marenbon 2003, 162) that the initial vision-like appearance of Philosophy may have been set up deliberately so that Philosophy herself can deflate it; Shanzer (2009b, 232) disagrees that there is any deflation, since an epiphany was the most obvious way to introduce a personification such as Philosophy.

²⁷Cf. Relihan 2007, 133.

trend in late ancient philosophy to limit the scope of discursive thought so as to make it clear that the philosophers themselves are aware of the limitations of their reasoning—a strikingly anti-Augustinian judgement. If this is the implied position in the *Consolation*, then Boethius is being very consistent with the stance he had already adopted in two of the theological treatises, where he took philosophical reasoning as far as he could, before indicating where reasoning about God has to diverge from thinking about his creation. In the *Consolation*, too, Boethius the prisoner, a Christian, follows Philosophy's path. So far as that path leads, it is the Christian's path too. It is only at the point, dimly indicated beyond the *Consolation*'s horizon, where human understanding fails that the two paths diverge, and only the Christian takes the right one.²⁸

²⁸In Marenbon 2004b, I discussed Boethius and the Problem of Paganism, but before I had fully formulated my general view of the nature of the problem (which I thought then arose only after Boethius's time).

