Claudio Moreschini

A Christian in Toga

Boethius: Interpreter of Antiquity and Christian Theologian



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Contents

Foreword 7

1. Boethius' great cultural project 9
   1.1 Mathematics 12
      1.1.1 Arithmetic 13
      1.1.2 Music 18
   1.2 Translations of Greek works on logic 20
   1.3 The theological treatises 25
   1.4. Boethius' legacy: Cassiodorus 28

2. Philosophy and Theology in Boethius' *Opuscula Theologica* 35
   2.1 The *De fide catholica* 35
      2.1.1 Authenticity 35
      2.1.2 The doctrines 39
      2.1.3 The purpose 40
   2.2 The *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium* 42
      2.2.1 The theological problem 42
      2.2.2 Boethius' solution 44
      2.2.3 God and matter 45
      2.2.4 God and action 47
      2.2.5 God and being 48
      2.2.6 The refutation of Nestorius and of Eutyches 50
      2.2.7 *Natura* and *persona* 54
      2.2.8 The human person 54
      2.2.9 After Boethius: *persona* according to Deacon Rusticus . 60
      2.2.10 *Persona* in the Trinity 62
   2.3 The opuscula on the Trinity 63
      2.3.1 *Utrum Pater* 64
      2.3.2 *De sancta Trinitate* 66
   2.4 *De hebdomadibus* 71
      2.4.1 *Forma essendi* 74
      2.4.2 Participation in God 76
      2.4.3 Participation in God according to Boethius 78
      2.4.4 Participation and God's *simplicitas* 80
      2.4.5 The problems of participation 82
      2.4.6 Boethius and Augustine 86
      2.4.7 Conclusions 88
      2.4.8 Some observations on the terms of 'being' 88

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ISBN Print: 9783525540275 — ISBN E-Book: 9783647540276

3. The *Consolatio Philosophiae* 92
3.1 Was the *Consolatio* completed? 92
3.2 The literary genre 94
3.3 The *prosimetron:* poetry in the *Consolatio* 94
3.4 The prosimetron: the *Consolatio* as a *satira* 97
3.5 A satire as a consolation 100
3.6 Who is Philosophy? 101
3.7 The structure of the *Consolatio* 102
3.8 *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (Petrarch) 103
3.9 Philosophy and Religion in the *Consolatio* 108
3.9.1 The Neo-Platonism of the *Consolatio* 108
3.9.2 The *Consolatio* and the tradition of Latin Neo-Platonism 117
3.9.3 The doctrine of the *summum bonum* 118
3.9.4 God is a monad 124
3.9.5 The cosmic soul 125
3.9.6 The simplicity of God 125
3.9.7 On 'becoming God' 126
3.9.8 God, the supreme intellect 127
3.9.9 Providence and Fate 128
3.9.10 The astral body 130

4. Boethius' Christianity 132
4.1 Bovo of Corvey 133
4.2 The *Anonymus Einsiedlensis* 135
4.3 Adalboldus of Utrecht 137
4.4 Christian faith and philosophy 138

Bibliography 145
Selected Sources 145
Works Cited 146

Index nominum 153

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Foreword

The core of this book has its origin in the lectures I delivered at the University of Bremen in October 2011 during the annual graduate seminar "Christentum als antike Religion" organized by Christoph Auffarth, Marvin Doebler, and Ilinca Tanaseanu-Doebler. To them, and in particular to Professor Auffarth, for the warm and generous hospitality he extended to my wife and me, I wish to express my fondest gratitude. The original text has obviously been modified and enlarged (also thanks to the constructive observations by Marvin and Ilinca), even though I decided to keep the title of the lectures, "A Christian in Toga".

As it may be inferred from it, this book is neither an introduction, nor a general study on Boethius, but is meant to investigate the question of Boethius' Christianity, secular and at the same time theologically profound. Secular, because Boethius was a layman, who did not belong to the Church, and because he used almost exclusively the heritage of Greek (and partly Latin) Neo-Platonism together with those rational tools typical of a philosophical system. On the other hand, he was thoroughly interested in the issues of contemporary Christianity, starting from Augustine, whose legacy is perceivable even when not overtly mentioned. "The last of the Romans" (as Martin Grabman called Boethius, a designation that has generally become accepted) was therefore able to produce a synthesis, the validity of which was acknowledged throughout the Middle Ages until the rediscovery of Aristotle.

For his integration of philosophy and the kerygmatic tradition towards a theo-logy (a 'speaking of God not by faith but by reason')[1] Boethius paved the way with the works he dedicated to the *quadrivium*, and with an ambitious cultural project, which we hint at in the first chapter. Boethius did not abandon this idea (which we illustrate in the second chapter), even at the end of his life, when he composed the *Consolatio Philosophiae*. Notwithstanding the title, which emphasizes the importance of philosophy rather than that of religion (a fact that has often aroused wonderment and led to some new, though unconvincing, explanations), Boethius' last work, as we try to demonstrate in the third chapter, remained faithful to the main tenets of his philosophy, and explained the central questions of human life and of the universe by means of Neo-Platonism – a Christian Neo-Platonism.

Finally, I wish to thank my friend John Magee, of the University of Toronto, for having kindly translated into English the difficult passage of Boethius at p. 25, n. 52, and Dr. Cornelia Oefelein, who was extraordinarily attentive and

1 This is the key-word proposed by Tisserand (2008) 9 and passim.

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careful in correcting the English text, and showed great competence in arranging the final format for publication.

Pisa, September 2013 Claudio Moreschini

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1. Boethius' great cultural project

When examining Boethius' personality, our attention is usually drawn (when not studying his works on logic) to that composition which, since the Middle Ages, has been considered his most important one, the *Consolatio philosophiae*. The author's dramatic end and the nobility of the legacy of his message just before death have appeared so 'moving' that it is safe to say that Boethius is known especially for his final work.[1]

However, I would like to propose a different evaluation.

The *Consolatio* was written just shortly before the author's death, perhaps only months, or even weeks. In any case, this characteristic of having been written at the end of Boethius' life has influenced the opinion of critics regarding its author. It is quite logical to presume that when he embarked on his philosophical activity, Boethius could never have imagined the dramatic

1 The political, social, and economical condition of Italy during the reign of the Ostrogoths is still the object of thorough ongoing research and studies. Courcelle (1948) spoke of a cultural 'renaissance' under the rule of Theoderic. He insisted on this interpretation, which certainly had the merit of breaking down traditional stereotypes with which the presence of the Barbarians in the western part of the Empire was evaluated. But he did not investigate in depth – as this was not a problem within his scope – the historical and social aspect of that period, for which the most recent scholarship uses the term 'Roman-Barbaric kingdoms,' not simply 'Barbaric,' in order to underline the persistence of Roman tradition even in the years following the great invasions and the demise of the Western Empire. It is well known that Courcelle's views on the barbarian kingdoms (expressed in Courcelle (1964)) have been questioned by recent research. From the increasing amount of secondary literature on the subject see at least Goffart (1980), Thompson (2002), Cameron/Ward-Perkins/Whitby (eds.) (2000), Liebeschuetz (2006); Heather (2009) and (2010).
During the reign of Theoderic, Italy seems to have overcome its internal and external crisis, and to have entered upon a period, albeit short, of a new economical and cultural flowering in which, besides Boethius, other important men of letters, such as Cassiodorus, Arator, and Ennodius, were active. As is well known, the relative tranquility and stability that the king was able to establish in the first years of his reign had positive effects both on the political life and economy of Italy. One feature of this social and cultural situation was also the flourishing of schools, in which the members of aristocratic families were formed. The school, which continued to be organized in the traditional way, educated and prepared students for public office: it privileged the teaching of grammar, rhetoric, and law. Grammar was considered the foundation of eloquence, and continued to be studied with great interest. Generally speaking, this culture favored grandiloquent rhetoric and frequent displays of erudition, and in an excessive complication of form it became 'manner.' In spite of its brief vitality, ultimately it could not compensate for the growing lack of knowledge of the Greek language. As a consequence, contact with the very culture that had always nourished the Latin one, that is, philosophical and scientific culture, ceased. It is Boethius who opposed this process – and was the last to do so. Boethius, in fact, is the most significant contributor to this cultural renaissance. This is the context for his great plan to restore and preserve Greek philosophical and scientific culture, and to incorporate it into that of the Romans.

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end of his life. So how did he conceive of his project at the beginning of his philosophical activity? What was his aim? This is what our following observations on a 'Christian in toga' propose to expound.

One of the first endeavors of his youth (ca. 505 AD), was to deepen the study of the sciences of the quadrivium, interpreting them in a manner corresponding to Roman tradition. Soon after (ca. 510 AD), he began to critically reconsider Platonic – Aristotelian philosophy, translating and commenting Aristotle as his most compelling task. In his harmonization of both Plato and Aristotle, he may be considered a Neo-Platonic commentator, doing the very same work in Rome as Proclus in Athens or Ammonius in Alexandria. Boethius was without any doubt a follower of Proclus and Ammonius, whose doctrines (although not Christian) are essential to his philosophy.[2] During the years he composed the logical works he had occasion to discuss some questions regarding the Christian faith. He presented his interpretations in the *Opuscula theologica*, which he wrote in various moments and on different occasions, and which were compiled into one corpus during the Carolingian age. There he proposed a solution to controversies in Christology dividing Rome and Constantinople (ca. 510 AD), and Trinitarian theology, taking his stance when the question arose after the arrival of the so-called 'Scythian monks' in Rome (ca. 520 AD). The *Consolatio*, whose composition Boethius could logically not have foreseen, came last. It summarizes, of course, the previous studies, but Boethius himself could not consider it a work, which finally characterized his philosophical activity: he had always regarded himself a Neo-Platonist and a Christian.

Considered in its entirety, Boethius' opus adheres to the principle: "*Fidem, si poteris, rationemque coniunge.*" Its importance, asserted by Boethius himself at the end of one of his theological *Opuscula* (*Utrum Pater et Filius*, 185,67),[3] has been acknowledged in view of an evaluation of his theology, but not in its overall significance. Up to this period, in fact, Christians had been exhorted and admonished to separate faith from reason, not to connect one with the other. It is well known that events never occured according to the principles repeatedly asserted by Christian writers, namely that purity of faith should be preserved as it had been before, especially in Western Christianity. In Boethius' passage, *ratio* signifies philosophy, and rarely up to that time, especially in the Latin West, the method of joining reason with faith.[4] Pierre

2 The dependence of Boethius on Porphyry, on the one side, and on Proclus and Ammonius, on the other side, has been demonstrated by Courcelle (1948 and elsewhere), expanded by Obertello (1974, 476 – 544), and is now generally accepted, although it is not likely that Boethius traveled to Alexandria or to Athens to study Platonism. However, this possibility is not excluded by Chadwick (1981, 20).

3 We quote Boethius' *Consolatio* according to our own edition (^{2}2005).

4 See Tertullian's famous prescription (cf. *Praescr.* 7), which goes back to the passage in Col 2:8, exhorting Christians not to follow 'philosophy' and not to abandon themselves to curiosity. Tertullian's (or Paul's) prescription was constantly repeated by Christian writers in the West,

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Hadot denies such a definition (in our opinion too radically). He suggests with regard to an important section of the *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium* (c. 2 – 3), in which the problems of the person and the substance are discussed from a purely philosophical outlook, that, in general, Victorinus' and Boethius' endeavour to approach theological problems by means of a philosophical method failed, since their discussion is confined to a philosophical analysis.[5]

In addition, Boethius was a layman. Up until his time theology in the West had been the exclusive prerogative of the Church: in this respect, an antecedent may be found in Marius Victorinus. We will see, in fact, that Victorinus, theologian and philosopher, is significantly present in the works of Boethius. However, for Boethius, too, any theological study must develop from the fundamental principles of the Catholic Church, thus making it necessary to ascertain whether the results are consistent with it. The ultimate *auctoritas* on faith and philosophy was Augustine, whose renown had become fully acknowledged, despite the polemics directed against him during the fifth century AD (due mostly to his doctrine of free will). In the *De sancta Trinitate* (prol. 30 – 2) Boethius frankly asserts: "*Vobis tamen etiam illud inspiciendum est, an ex beati Augustini scriptis semina rationum aliquos in nos venientia fructus extulerint.*"[6] In Augustine Boethius encountered the same intermingling of (Neo-)Platonism and Christian faith, which he attempted to apply to his own studies. Lastly, such a divergence between *fides* and philosophy cannot be upheld for Boethius' works: as R. Crouse observed, "according to his classification of sciences, both the *Tractates* and the *Consolation* must belong to *theologia*, and seek to penetrate divine mysteries *intellectualiter.*"[7] Claudio Micaelli has provided an important discussion of this problem.[8] This intermingling will be examined briefly in the following pages, which are dedicated to the works on the quadrivium and on logic. For full discussions of these topics, the reader is requested to consult the definitive studies by Obertello, Chadwick, Marenbon, and Gruber.[9]

although actual practice did not necessarily conform to it. Augustine himself, who was a Neoplatonic philosopher and wrote philosophical dialogues before his conversion, allegedly abandoned philosophy after his baptism, and even more emphatically after his return to Africa. The final point of Augustine's change in opinion regarding philosophy and rationality is reached in the *Retractationes.*

5 P. Hadot (1968), 66 – 67.

6 "You must however examine whether the seeds of argument sown in my mind by St. Augustine's writings have borne fruit." We quote here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, the translations of the *Consolatio* and the *Opuscula Theologica* by Tester (1978).

7 Crouse (1982), 417 – 21.

8 In the first chapter of his book (1995).

9 Cf. Obertello (1974), 172 – 96 and 451 – 75, Chadwick (1981), 71 – 107, Marenbon (2003b), 14 – 16, Gruber (2011), 14 – 25.

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1.1 Mathematics

Boethius provides a definition of mathematics in one of his opuscula theologica, the De sancta Trinitate (2,73 – 6), one of his latest works. Mathematics is a science situated between physics and theology. Physics, mathematics, and theology are *speculativae partes*, i. e. 'parts of the speculative science', of the θεωρητική (i. e. of contemplative philosophy), according to the division of sciences we find in the contemporary Neoplatonist Ammonius Hermeiou, whose lectures Boethius had presumably attended in Alexandria.[10] Mathematics is

sine motu inabstracta (*haec enim formas corporum speculatur sine materia ac per hoc sine motu: quae formae cum in materia sint, ab iis separari non possunt*).[11]

In the *Institutio arithmetica* Boethius repeatedly calls mathematics *mathesis* (*prooem.* 4; II 4,1 and 31,1). This meaning of *mathesis* is new, because at that time *mathesis* usually designated astrology.[12]

Being part of philosophy, and concerning themselves with the incorporeal forms, mathematical sciences have quite a close relationship with the Platonic tradition: the fourth book of the *Republic* expounds their theoretical function. Thanks to their power to develop the faculty of abstraction, mathematical sciences purify and awaken the soul's eye, currently obfuscated and distracted, but the only one able to perceive the truth, and lead it from sensual reality to the intelligible one, that is the object of philosophy.[13] Yet mathematics is not philosophy, as the Pythagoreans asserted. According to Plato (*resp.* 509e ff.), mathematical objects certainly are νοητά, but they are known by the διάνοια, not by the νοῦς. Therefore Boethius, in the passage of the *De sancta Trinitate*, assigned mathematics to philosophy, but did not identify them; he distinguished between mathematics and theology, which studies the objects *sine motu abstracta*, i. e. the νοητά, as Plato asserted of philosophy.[14]

Mathematics is divided into the sciences of the *quadrivium*. Boethius' treatises on them,[15] originally intending to produce a well-ordered corpus,[16]

10 Cf. Amm. Herm., *in Porphyr. Isag.* 13,10 – 15 Busse.

11 "Mathematics does not deal with motion and is not abstract, for it investigates forms of bodies apart from matter, and therefore apart from motion, which forms, however, being connected with matter, cannot be really separated from bodies." On this passage see also Heilmann (2007) 23 – 28.

12 To explain this modification of the meaning of *mathesis* Hadot pertinently quotes a passage of Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* I 9,6), where Gellius asserts that the Pythagoreans and the ancient Greeks called μαθήματα geometry, gnomonic, music and the noblest sciences, while in his time μαθήματα currently meant astrology and the astrologers were called μαθηματικοί. Cf. I. Hadot (^{2}2005), 170 n. 56.

13 On this topic see Heilmann (2007) 68 – 88 and 104 – 12.

14 For this distinction between mathematics and theology, we follow Guillaumin (1990) 122 – 25.

15 Certainly we cannot give an exhaustive bibliography on the problem of the quadrivium and its

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are most likely his very first works. Only those on arithmetic and music are extant; those on astronomy and geometry (mentioned by Cassiodorus)[17] are lost. Although arithmetic and music do not constitute a real propaedeutic to Platonism (they are, however, propaedeutic to philosophy[18]), Platonism appears to be an essential component of them:

Le *quadrivium* médiéval, le cycle des quatre arts mathématiques, a été conçu dans le contexte de la doctrine platonicienne. Aucune autre philosophie, et encore moins une réflexion purement pédagogique et didactique n'aurait pu imaginer que l'étude de ces quatre sciences pût être l'instrument nécessaire pour la connaissance des êtres. Cette vue des choses n'à été possible que sur un arrière-plan philosophique précis et à l'aide d'une doctrine qui attribuait à certains nombres des fonctions ontologiques."[19]

This statement appears to fit Boethius' philosophy perfectly, and his re-interpretation of Christian doctrine on the basis of Platonic tenets.

1.1.1 Arithmetic

The presence of Platonism already characterizes what is likely Boethius' first work, the *Institutio arithmetica*, whose contents depend heavily on the *Introductio arithmetica* (Ἀριθμητικὴ Εἰσαγωγή) by the Neopythagorean Nicomachus of Gerasa (first half of the second century AD).[20] The mingling

origin: for an idea of different opinions, we quote only Pizzani (1981) and I. Hadot (^{2}2005); for Augustine see also Shanzer (2005), against Hadot and in support of the hypothesis of a Varronian origin of the four disciplines.

16 According to Pizzani, it seems difficult to consider the works on arithmetic and on music as corresponding to an actual project. We do not have, he observes, any proof that Boethius intended to use them towards creating a kind of introduction to philosophy. Although he adopted the scheme of the mathematic disciplines proposed in the prooemium of the *Institutio arithmetica* from Nicomachus' introduction, yet he did not follow it when composing his own scientific treatises. The *De institutione musica* is not limited by a mathematic interpretation, and chronology does not provide any proof that Boethius composed the four treatises on the quadrivium in succession (on arithmetic, on music, on geometry and on astronomy). The *De institutione musica* could have been written long after the *De institutione arithmetica* and indubitably was conceived by Boethius as an autonomous work. Cf. Pizzani (1981), 211 – 26. I am not entirely convinced of Pizzani's argument. There are no difficulties in supposing that Boethius could have executed his project later, after having written on arithmetic and music, and not composing his works in immediate succession. The project was such that it could have required many years for its execution.

17 Cf. Cassiodorus, *Variae* I 45.

18 Cf. Bernard (1997) 67 – 69.

19 I. Hadot (^{2}2005) 99.

20 The *communis opinio* is that Boethius *translated* Nicomachus, but this must be corrected by a careful examination of many passages in both Nicomachus and Boethius. Boethius, as he himself asserts (*inst. arithm.*, *praef.* 3), modifies Nicomachus' work from the very introduction. Cf. Guillaumin (1989) 869: "paraphrase éclairée." On the importance of Nicomachus for the formation of the quadrivium cf. I. Hadot (^{2}2005), 63 – 69; for the Pythagorean and Platonic

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of Platonic doctrines in the so-called Neopythagorean works is evident at least since the beginning of the Imperial era.[21]

The *Institutio arithmetica* still displays a rather simple and traditional Platonism.[22] In the prologue, which he dedicated to his father-in-law, Symmachus, Boethius emphasizes the important function of science. Arithmetic is the first discipline of the quadrivium (praef. 4). Then Boethius asserts that, according to Pythagoras, it is not possible to reach the perfection of philosophical speculation without deepening the study of the sciences of the quadrivium, which constitute the necessary pathway for ascending from sensual realities to intellectual truths (I 1,5). Only these sciences, in fact, are able to enlighten our mind's eyes, which are now obfuscated by and submerged in corporeal senses, and direct them toward higher truths.

According to the well-known interpretation of the word, Pythagoras stated that philosophy is aspiration to wisdom (*Instit. Arithm.* I 1,1), a definition repeated by Boethius in the contemporary works, such as the *Institutio musica* (II 2) and the first commentary on the *Isagoge* by Porphyry (I 3, p. 7,12 – 23, Brandt); this definition is certainly traditional, and is found as well in Boethius' sources, Ammonius (p. 9,7 ss.) and Nicomachus (p. 1,5 – 2,5).[23] Philosophy as knowledge of the real and immutable being returns – expressed almost in the very same words – in a passage of *Instit. Mus.* II 2: Pythagoras considered philosophy as the science

eius rei […] *quae proprie vereque esse diceretur. Esse autem illa putabat, quae nec intentione crescerent nec deminutione decrescerent nec ullis accidentibus mutarentur. Haec autem esse formas magnitudines qualitates habitudines ceteraque quae per se speculata immutabilia sunt, iuncta vero corporibus permutantur et multimodis variationibus mutabilis rei cognatione vertuntur* (p. 227,21 – 228,2 Friedlein).[24]

origin of the four sciences of the quadrivium, not only the most exhaustive I. Hadot, but also Guillaumin (1990), 139 – 140 (Archytas: VS I, pp. 330 – 1; Plat., *resp.* 522c and 530d).

21 Pizzani (1981), 225 – 26.

22 An examination of the first chapter of the *Institutio arithmetica* is provided also by Heilmann (2007) 88 – 103.

23 Other *loci similes* in Boethius' and Ammonius' commentaries on the *Isagoge* are the division of philosophy into theoretical and practical philosophy and the variety of their species (Boethius p. 8,1 – 8; Ammonius, p. 11,6 – 21), as well as the threefold division of theoretical philosophy (Boethius p. 8,8 – 9,12; Ammonius, p. 11,21 – 12,6).

24 "[the science] of those things […] which properly and really exist. Those things, he asserted, neither increase by an enlargement nor diminish by a contraction nor change due to any accidents. They are the forms, the greatness, the qualities, the characters and all the peculiarities which, when considered per se, are unchangeable, but do change when they are united to matter and are subjected to multiple alteration caused by their union with a changeable thing."
This text (if it is sound) is not clear, because the true being is first presented in the singular (eius rei quae etc.), then in the plural (illa, quae nec crescerent etc.). We translated ad sensum, as Heilmann (2007, 117) did (without noting the difficulty).

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