

# Boethius on the Problem of Desert\*

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Boethius opens his *Consolation of Philosophy* with a problem of sorts: the Prisoner<sup>1</sup> has been arrested and sentenced *in absentia* to death. Yet while this is a pressing problem for the Prisoner, it is not, or not obviously, a *philosophical* problem. Death might be problematic for any number of non-philosophical reasons.<sup>2</sup> For instance, death might prevent someone from doing something he wants to do, or it might be painful and unpleasant, or the circumstances in which it occurs might be degrading or ludicrous. The Prisoner does object to his imminent death on all these counts, but there need be nothing philosophical at stake in his objections—closure, avoiding pain, and dignity are perfectly good reasons for each of these counts, comprehensible to anyone; they do not of themselves force any philosophical questions on us. Even if we take these objectionable features to be moral evils, as the Prisoner does, there is still no reason to think that their moral evil is thereby problematic. The victim of an injustice has been wronged, but the mere existence of an injustice does not *eo ipso* pose a philosophical problem, be it about the nature of justice, the possibility

\* All translations mine. The Latin text is supplied when it is not readily available. References to the *Consolation of Philosophy* are to its prose sections. An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the 2009 Pepys Lecture at UCLA.

<sup>1</sup> The Prisoner is the dramatic character (*a.k.a.* “Boethius”) who narrates and appears in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, as distinct from Boethius, the historical person who lived and died in the late Roman Empire and wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy*—a distinction worth keeping in mind.

<sup>2</sup> Death need not be problematic. It could be a blessed relief from pain and suffering, or the honorable response to the circumstances, or justified in a good cause, or a morally irrelevant side-effect of doing the right thing. And if death is not a problem, it is *a fortiori* not a philosophical problem. (Put aside the quibble that death is some sort of event or process or transition rather than a “problem” strictly speaking; we often call a situation, such as widespread poverty, a moral problem, and the same sense of “problem” is at issue here.)

of evil, or anything else. To suffer an injustice may be a tragedy but it need not be philosophy. Plato, in contrast to Boethius, made a similar situation into an explicit occasion for philosophy in his *Crito* when Socrates, tried and sentenced to death by his fellow Athenians, was given an opportunity to escape. As soon as Crito made his offer, Socrates declared that they “must therefore examine whether we should act this way or not” (46B23), touching off a discussion of fundamental moral principles and their application to his case. But there is no such offer or circumstance at the outset of the *Consolation of Philosophy* to spell out what the philosophical question at stake might be. Nor does the Prisoner seem to think that death poses a philosophical problem in general, part of the human condition, the way Sartre held that we are brought face-to-face with the absurd in an existential encounter with death wherein questions about the meaning of life and the ground of moral value are inescapable. Instead, the Prisoner dwells on his own particular death, objecting to its particular features in a long litany of complaints. What the Prisoner seeks for these complaints, as the title of the work makes clear, is consolation. Yet this fact is as unhelpful as it is indisputable. There is no initial reason to think that the Prisoner will find consolation through addressing a philosophical problem or set of problems. Quite the contrary; consolation comes in many non-cognitive forms. We might be consoled by the mere presence of a friend, for example, or by a gift as a “consolation prize”. And even if consolation may be a by-product of understanding (though it need not be), the problems for which one receives consolation might not be philosophical problems; after losing my job I might be consoled by the recognition that many people have lost their jobs recently, which is an economic rather than a philosophical problem. If we throw up our hands and insist that there must be a philosophical problem lurking in the area because the title of the work is “the consolation of *philosophy*” (assuming that it was meant to have a title and that it has the title it was meant to have), we may be correct but we are still not a single step closer to identifying the philosophical problem or set of problems at issue.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> There was an established genre of consolation-literature in antiquity, much (though not all) of it written by philosophers. Yet even this historical fact is not conclusive. Philosophy in antiquity addressed many topics we no longer think of as part of philosophy—biology, chemistry, economics, and other disciplines are obvious examples. Consolation likewise might once have been taken as part of the philosophical enterprise but which we now think is addressed to non-philosophical issues, dealt with today in a variety of non-philosophical venues: self-help books, grief counseling, therapy, pastoral advice, and so on. Indeed, the idea that *philosophy* could console someone on Death Row might seem improbable. Joel Relihan, *The Prisoner’s Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius’s “Consolation”* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 48–9,

There is a common alternative view, one which philosophers seem to have adopted recently. The *Consolation of Philosophy* has been recognized as a classic of world literature ever since it was written, and its literary aspirations are as undeniable as its literary virtues. It is no accident that the work opens with the Prisoner trying to find consolation in artistic pursuits. The *mise-en-scène* in which Lady Philosophy confronts the Prisoner after chasing away the Muses—“those painted-up whores” (1.1.8: *has scenicas metriculas*)—might serve merely to set the stage for their joint investigation of several loosely interrelated philosophical issues: the unity of virtue, the nature of the good, the existence and providence of God, the relation of free will and foreknowledge. The discussions of these problems are sufficient to cure the Prisoner of his mental torpor (1.2.5: *lethargum patitur*); his recognition of God’s governance and goodness is consolation enough. The Prisoner’s impending death, on this reading, has a literary rather than a philosophical point, providing a handy introduction to Boethius’s philosophical travelogue, which moves “from Stoic moralism to Platonic transcendence” as one scholar says.<sup>4</sup> There is no philosophical problem which the *Consolation of Philosophy* addresses, according to this view, only a series of philosophical topics, the discussion of each occasioned by the dramatic (literary) setting.

I think this alternative view, common as it is, is mistaken. Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* is indeed a literary masterpiece, but it is also a philosophical masterpiece, dominated by a philosophical problem that gives it structure and unity.<sup>5</sup> The problem is posed not by the mere fact of death, nor by the precise circumstances or manner of the Prisoner’s

for instance, tells us that “the reader” expects a consolation to include “assertions of the immortality of the soul, descriptions of the rewards of the blessed, and visions of eternity”; there being none of these or any mention of “a beatific vision” in the text, Relihan concludes that we are meant to regard the *Consolation of Philosophy* “as not-a-consolation; in short, as a parody” (!).

<sup>4</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 5.2.

<sup>5</sup> Well, perhaps two philosophical problems. I follow the mediæval Latin commentary tradition in taking the discussion of free will and divine foreknowledge in Book 5 to address a problem in philosophical theology, while the remainder of the work is a treatise on ethics (with a bit of metaphysics as its underpinnings)—and I follow the same tradition in taking Book 5 to have a problematic status, a view also defended by Hermann Tränkle, “Ist die *Philosophie Consolatio* des Boethius zum vorgesehnen Abschluss gelangt?” in *Vigiliae christianae* 31 (1977), 148–56. The recent *Cambridge Companion to Boethius* (ed. John Marenbon, Cambridge University Press, 2009) implicitly endorses the distinction by including precisely two articles on the philosophical content of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, one on Books 2–4 (John Magee) and the other on Book 5 (Robert Sharples). I also hold that the literary merits of the *Consolation of Philosophy* are, at least for the most part, secondary to Boethius’s philosophical agenda.

impending death, but rather by the turn of events that led to the Prisoner's unfortunate current condition. Boethius is, I think, quite clear on this score. But modern readers have a hard time recognizing the philosophical problem he is addressing for two reasons. First, the problem itself is not commonly discussed in its own right, traveling under its own name, so to speak, the way more familiar philosophical problems often do: the problem of universals, Newcomb's Problem, the Problem of Evil. Second, not all of the background assumptions entering into the problem are accepted widely nowadays. Yet for all that there is, I maintain, a clear philosophical problem at the heart of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, one that Boethius lays out with clarity and precision. Once we identify the problem we can then consider how Boethius solves it and whether his solution provides the Prisoner with the consolation he seeks—questions which have unexpected answers.

Boethius opens by rejecting the common alternative view. As noted, the *Consolation of Philosophy* begins with the Prisoner seeking solace in literature, composing a poem about his unhappy plight, when Lady Philosophy appears and chases away the Muses (1.1). Shorn of its artistic trappings, Boethius's point is that literary art is not the proper response to philosophical problems, and furthermore that the ensuing work is primarily philosophical rather than literary (which means that its literary qualities in the end subserve its philosophical agenda). After some minor stage-setting, Lady Philosophy asks the Prisoner directly in 1.4.1 why he is weeping and wailing. Again, if we "un-translate" her query from its literary and dramatic context, the question raised here is the very one with which we began: what philosophical problem is posed by the Prisoner's situation? Put another way, what philosophical problem is at stake in the Prisoner's admittedly unhappy circumstances? Boethius recognizes that the problem is not evident and that it needs to be properly introduced. Lady Philosophy's query prompts the Prisoner's long litany of complaints. Modern readers lose track of Boethius's philosophical point in the welter of details in this litany. They do not recognize that the Prisoner adheres strictly to the rules of classical rhetoric, following a pattern which would have been familiar to Boethius's audience.<sup>6</sup> In particular, classical readers of Boethius

For discussion of these matters see Peter King, "Boethius: The First of the Scholastics," *Carmina philosophiae* 16 (2007), 23–50.

<sup>6</sup> The Prisoner's lament follows Quintillian's fivefold structure for effective oratory: (a) the *exordium* or *prooemium*, an introduction designed to make the audience well-disposed to the case, 1.4.2–9; (b) the *narratio*, the recounting of the facts, 1.4.10–15; (c) the *probatio*, describing the false accusations, 1.4.16–21; (d) the *refutatio*, rebutting the accusations, 1.4.22–4; (e) the *peroratio*, 1.4.25–46.

would have known that the Prisoner's case is encapsulated in the closing remarks of his peroration (1.4.46):

I seem to see criminals in their hideaways wallowing in joy and pleasure, the most abandoned of them scheming to renew false accusations, whilst good people are prostrate with terror at the sight of my plight; evildoers, one and all roused by their impunity to venture on wicked deeds, and to see them through for their rewards, whereas innocent people are not only deprived of their safety but even of their defenses.

In short, the wicked prosper and the good suffer. The Prisoner's death is a case of something bad happening to someone good (1.4.34):

Instead of being rewarded for my genuine virtue, I am punished for a counterfeit crime.

It is not merely that the Prisoner is facing death, or even that he has been sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit; it is that his actions merit reward rather than punishment, which is precisely what has gone awry when the good suffer and the wicked prosper—the generalized version of the Prisoner's case. Boethius confirms that this is indeed the philosophical problem at stake at the next point in the dialogue where the issue could sensibly be raised, the beginning of Book 4. Lady Philosophy has devoted Books 2–3 to “curing” the Prisoner of his delusions and “reminding” him of the Supreme Good (God). The Prisoner acknowledges the truth and value of what Lady Philosophy has told him, and then states explicitly that the central cause of his unhappiness (4.1.3: *maxima nostri causa maeroris*) is as follows (4.1.4):

While wickedness reigns and prospers, virtue not only goes unrewarded but is enslaved and trodden down by criminals, made to pay the penalties in place of the wrongdoers.

Neither virtue nor vice receives its due. Lady Philosophy recognizes the problem—that is, Boethius declares that it is indeed a legitimate philosophical problem—and, as Lady Philosophy begins to sketch her solution, she calls the results established in Books 2–3 “preliminaries” (4.1.8: *decursis omnibus quae praemittere necessarium puto . . .*). The circle is then closed: the problem raised in 1.4 can finally be addressed in 4.1, all the necessary preliminaries to its solution having been dealt with. The philosophical material in Books 2–3, then, is merely subordinate to the central philosophical problem addressed in the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Call it the *Problem of Desert*: Why do people not get what they deserve?

The Problem of Desert is the appropriately generalized form of the problem Boethius takes to be raised by his own downfall from Master of Offices

to convicted conspirator, Boethius regarding himself as a clear example of a morally virtuous person and thus someone who did not deserve his fate. (Much of the Prisoner's Lament in 1.4 is devoted to examples of his moral goodness.) The Problem of Desert is logically posed by any instance of an undeserved fortune: someone virtuous not being rewarded, someone vicious doing well. The Prisoner often speaks of "the good" suffering and "the wicked" prospering, but this is no more than rhetorical shorthand; Boethius knows perfectly well that good people are sometimes rewarded for their virtues and that wicked people are sometimes punished for their vices. Indeed, the Problem of Desert is posed by even a single instance of an undeserved fortune. Yet Boethius is not interested in this minimal logical possibility. Instead, he is interested in what he takes to be the actual case, the real world, in which people's fortunes are strictly independent of their deserts and are distributed more or less randomly across people and their lives, a view he sums up vividly in his image of the Wheel of Fortune (described at length in Book 2). If worldly success and failure are indeed governed by "the blind goddess Fortune," so that chance is the only factor, then everyone's fortune is strongly independent of what they (morally) deserve—and the Problem of Desert has been sharpened to a razor's edge.

Once sharpened, the Problem of Desert naturally gives rise to a related but distinct philosophical problem. Why be moral? If worldly fortune is strongly independent of morality, as the Wheel of Fortune would have it, or even if common wisdom is right that nice guys finish last (and the wicked thus prosper in virtue of their wickedness), why would—indeed, why *should*—anyone toe the moral line? Lurking behind the Problem of Desert is the specter of the moral defector. Failure to give a satisfactory answer to the Problem of Desert makes non-moral behavior that much the more appealing, and seriously impairs the prospects for a convincing explanation of why we ought to be moral. Conversely, a compelling solution to the Problem of Desert might provide everything needed to motivate moral behavior; although it is not the same problem its solution may be transferable.

It might be objected that the Problem of Desert is no more than a specific form of questions about justice and injustice, fairness and unfairness. Yet this is not quite right, strictly speaking. It may well be unfair or unjust for someone not to get what she deserves, but such considerations of justice and fairness are logically posterior to the issue of who deserves what (and why), which is the heart of the Problem of Desert. Claims about desert are usually taken to justify further claims of justice and injustice, not to be such claims themselves. For example, one might think that an injustice has to be the result, direct or indirect, of moral agency; a virtuous person who dies young in an earthquake does not get what she deserves but is not, or

not obviously, the victim of injustice, since the earthquake was not the product of moral agency.

The Problem of Desert is often confused with the traditional Problem of Evil.<sup>7</sup> They are not the same. The Problem of Evil questions how the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent God could be compatible with the existence of evil, whereas the Problem of Desert questions (roughly) the distribution of evil in the world; clearly explaining how it is possible for some phenomenon to exist is logically prior to explaining how and why it is distributed in some way. (It is one thing to explain the existence of social wealth and another to explain its distribution.) The Problem of Desert, of course, is logically dependent on a solution to the Problem of Evil, since evil must exist in order for there to be some (perhaps morally objectionable) distribution of it. Again, a solution to the traditional Problem of Evil might well leave the Problem of Desert unresolved, since we might have reasons to accept the existence of evils and nevertheless ask why they fall upon the good rather than the wicked. Most importantly, Boethius himself explicitly says that the two problems are distinct. The Prisoner summarizes the traditional Problem of Evil in 4.1.3: “Despite the existence of a good Ruler of the world evils can exist and go unpunished,” a fact “that surely merits great astonishment.”<sup>8</sup> He immediately goes on to say that there is *another* problem which logically depends on the Problem of Evil (*huic aliud maius adiungitur*), a problem even greater than the Problem of Evil, the Problem of Desert (4.1.4):

But the [Problem of Evil] leads on to an even greater problem, [namely the Problem of Desert]: While wickedness reigns and prospers, virtue not only goes unrewarded but is enslaved and trodden down by criminals, made to pay the penalties in place of the wrongdoers.

Since there is an analytical distinction between the Problem of Evil and the Problem of Desert, and since Boethius is careful to distinguish them and give greater importance (or at least have the Prisoner give greater importance) to the Problem of Desert, we are entitled to conclude that the

<sup>7</sup> This confusion has led commentators to identify the philosophical problem addressed in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, at least in part, as the Problem of Evil; so John Magee in “The Good and Morality: *Consolatio* 2–4,” in J. Marenbon (ed.), *Companion*: “The second [task], which is made to appear as a kind of afterthought and fits within the confines of Book 4, is . . . to explain how evil can exist in a world that is universally governed by the Good” (184). Joachim Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius: De consolatione philosophiae* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006 [second edition]), introduces Book 4 by speaking vaguely of “der Frage nach der Theodizee” (315/316) as the question at issue, not recognizing the clear statement of the Problem of Desert in 4.1.4—seeing fit to comment on that passage only that the notion of “reward” is discussed in 4.3.1–8.

<sup>8</sup> There is a brief allusion to the Problem of Evil in 1.4.30 as well.

Problem of Desert is the central philosophical problem of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, not the Problem of Evil.

The modern response to the Problem of Desert is to reject it on the grounds that it poses an unanswerable question. There is no reason to hold that there is or should be a general answer why a variety of people meet with the variety of fortunes they do. Perhaps there is no reason to discover even in individual cases: someone just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, that's all. It might be true that Mary did not deserve to be run over by a drunk driver, but there need not be any reason why she was undeservedly run over—only reasons why she was run over, which is not at all the same thing, and even in combination with reasons why she did not deserve it do not amount to an explanation of why she was undeservedly run over. To be sure, there are cases in which someone clearly deserves or does not deserve what happens: the hard worker whose perseverance pays off in the end, the criminal who profits through his crime. Particular cases may have particular explanations. But blind chance may still be the best “answer” for most cases of fortune.

Whatever the merits of this modern response to the Problem of Desert, Boethius tries to forestall it. He devotes Books 2–3 to establishing the nature of goodness, the existence of a Supreme Good, and, finally, the governance of the world by the Supreme Good. The Problem of Desert, like the Problem of Evil, gets its bite from the background assumption that a benevolent deity providentially rules the world,<sup>9</sup> and Boethius is well aware of the need for this assumption. After the Prisoner presents the Problem of Desert in 4.1.4, describing how people seem not to get what they deserve, he immediately continues (4.1.5):

No one could possibly be amazed and upset enough that these things should happen under the rulership of a God Who is omniscient, omnipotent, and wills only good things!

“These things” are the wicked prospering while the good suffer. If we do not accept the background theistic assumption, we have no reason to think that the Problem of Desert poses a general problem. Much that happens just happens. But if God is in His Heaven and all is right with the world, then there must be a reason why Mary was undeservedly run over by a drunk driver, a reason why the Prisoner undeservedly faces a grisly

<sup>9</sup> A Principle of Sufficient Reason might guarantee that there is a reason why the distribution of goods and evils is the way it is, but the further assumption of a benevolent deity is required to motivate the only solution acceptable to Boethius, namely that people get what they deserve. (A malevolent deity might arrange things so that people get only what they do not deserve.) The usual philosophical theism will do the trick for Boethius.



execution. Boethius, of course, not only accepts the theistic assumption, he has spent the greater part of Book 3 trying to establish it as a conclusion, to make it more than a mere assumption.

Take stock. The Problem of Desert is the central philosophical problem addressed in the *Consolation of Philosophy*. The Prisoner addresses the problem directly to Lady Philosophy, taking care to distinguish it from the Problem of Evil and to lay out its theistic background. Lady Philosophy declares that the philosophical results attained in Books 2–3 are all the preliminaries required (4.1.8), and that they can now proceed to resolve the problem, sketching how she will do so (4.1.6–9), thereby giving the Prisoner “wings” with which he can “soar aloft” and “return to his native land.” Removed from its dramatic context and put as starkly as possible, the Problem of Desert asks why people do not get what they deserve, a problem made acute by the seemingly random distribution of fortune in a theistic universe. So stated, there seems to be a straightforward and well-known answer to it. The fact that Boethius does *not* give the straightforward answer, and indeed barely gives it a passing mention, is one of the most surprising things about the *Consolation of Philosophy*. (As we shall see it is also a point on which some later thinkers found Boethius wanting.) The oddity of his omission will be apparent.

Call the straightforward answer the *Afterlife Solution*. It is founded on the following two claims:<sup>10</sup>

[A1] Everyone deserves to suffer in this life, as a consequence of Original Sin.

[A2] In the Afterlife, rewards and punishments are distributed in accordance with desert.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Augustine, *City of God* 19.4, which says that Christian faith “holds that eternal life is the highest good and eternal death the worst evil, and that we should live rightly in order to obtain the former and avoid the latter”—a passage typical of many. Similar remarks can be found in Athenagoras, Tertullian, and others among the early Church Fathers, though none are as strident as Augustine, who devotes Book 21 of his *City of God* to the eternal damnation and suffering of sinners in Hell, and Book 22 to the eternal happiness of the blessed in Heaven, as their just deserts. (But see the next note.) In addition to these theologians, the Bible itself offers a wealth of direct support for the Afterlife Solution. With regard to [A1], Ps 51:5, for example, says that we all come into the world as sinners: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” With regard to [A2], Jesus says in Mk 9:43–49, for instance, that sinners are cast into the unquenchable hellfire directly as a consequence of their sins, whereas in Lk 16:32 he says that Lazarus was carried by angels as one of the righteous to the bosom of Abraham; Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:10 that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

Now [A1] is compatible with people getting undeserved rewards, for it holds only that any rewards they are given are *ipso facto* undeserved, not that people (who do not deserve them) cannot be given them. More to the point, [A1] tries to sidestep the Problem of Desert by claiming that we all deserve to suffer; that being so, no sufferer has a legitimate complaint about her suffering (since it is deserved), even if another person, who also deserves to suffer, does not suffer. The Wheel of Fortune can therefore have full sway over this life. The Afterlife is another matter, for [A2] is central to Christianity itself: Heaven and its joys for the devout, Hell and its torments for the sinner. The import of the Afterlife Solution is clear. People do not always get what they deserve in this life, but in the long run—taking the Afterlife into account—people *do* in fact get what they deserve. Eventually, moral conduct has its due reward and immoral conduct its due punishment, thereby vindicating the justness of God's rule. To this basic framework can epicycles be added: our time in this life is a test, some evils are unforgivable and some can be expunged—but the Afterlife Solution encapsulated in [A1]–[A2] includes all that is necessary for an answer to the Problem of Desert, at least in outline.<sup>11</sup> Its application to the Problem of Desert is straightforward, even if the doctrine of Original Sin underlying [A1] is not. What is more, the Afterlife Solution offers a clear and compelling answer to the Problem of Desert. We only need to take the long view and trust in Divine Justice, and everything will be as it ought to be.

Boethius rejects the Afterlife Solution. It is mentioned once by the Prisoner and brusquely dismissed by Lady Philosophy in the sole direct mention of the Afterlife in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, in the following exchange (4.4.22–3):

“Well, I ask you: Do you not reserve any punishments for souls after the death of the body?”

<sup>11</sup> There are complications and subtleties. Augustine seems to deny [A2], since he takes the doctrine of God's grace to entail that rewards and punishments are *not* distributed in ways proportionate to desert, except in the broad sense that all humans deserve the torments of Hell as a consequence of Original Sin, as [A1] maintains; to think that reward and punishment are parceled out according to desert is to subscribe to the Pelagian heresy. This blocks a solution to the Problem of Desert, since God's distribution of postmortem fortunes is (literally) gratuitous—which replicates in the Afterlife the very problem the Afterlife Solution was introduced to resolve. Yet as mentioned in the preceding note, Augustine wholeheartedly endorses the Afterlife Solution. Whether the two are logically consistent is an open question, but there is no question that Augustine thought they were, and no indication that Boethius was aware of the philosophical difficulties for the Problem of Desert lurking inside the Augustine's doctrine of grace.

“Indeed, considerable punishments: some I think will be imposed with penal harshness, and others with merciful cleansing. But it is not part of the plan to examine these matters now.”

As with punishments, so with rewards, though here the interlocutors speak only of punishment. But the remarkable feature of this exchange is Lady Philosophy’s claim that the Afterlife is not up for discussion in the context of answering the Problem of Desert: *nunc de his disserere consilium non est*. Literally, such issues are *irrelevant* at the present time, or, to remove the point from its dramatic context, Boethius is declaring that the Afterlife is irrelevant to a solution of the Problem of Desert. And indeed, Lady Philosophy immediately returns to address the Problem of Desert in 4.4.24, having dismissed the Afterlife Solution. But a mere dismissal, no matter how brusque, seems hardly enough, especially given that the Afterlife Solution is common enough to occur to anyone.

Boethius has, I think, two reasons to set the Afterlife Solution aside. The first is suggested by the dramatic action of Lady Philosophy’s dismissal, namely that matters pertaining to the Afterlife are not relevant to *philosophy*. For Boethius did know about and accept the Afterlife, complete with its rewards and punishments, as his brief summary of Christian dogma, *The Catholic Faith*, makes clear.<sup>12</sup> He may have thought of the Afterlife as an article of faith, not accessible to philosophy. Some confirmation that this may have been his view is provided by the literary context in which Lady Philosophy offers her brusque dismissal. For the passage in which it occurs is otherwise heavily indebted to Plato’s *Gorgias* 523A–527A. If we look back at Boethius’s source, what follows upon Socrates’s exchange with Callicles is an eschatological myth, and the rejection of the Afterlife by Lady Philosophy might be meant to indicate that philosophy has no proper traffic with such myths, being one and all not arrived at through reason.<sup>13</sup> Hence while there is no direct evidence that this was Boethius’s view, he may provide a clue through his literary model, which he would expect his readers to catch. Yet even if this is Boethius’s view, it cannot be the whole story. If it were, Lady Philosophy should tell the Prisoner either to become a student of theology, or that philosophy has failed him and he should have faith. She does neither of these things, continuing instead to address

<sup>12</sup> See *De fide catholica* 204.234–243, where Boethius calls the doctrine of the Afterlife the “foundation of our religion.” The evidence of the *Anecdoton Holderii* disproves the old nineteenth-century hypothesis that Boethius was not a Christian (in part due to his non-acceptance of the Afterlife Solution): see Alain Galonnier, *Boèce: Opuscula sacra I, Capita dogmatica (Traité II, III, IV)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 380–409.

<sup>13</sup> This line of reasoning is given by Magee, “The Good and Morality,” 194–5.

the Problem of Desert, precisely as though the Afterlife Solution had been refuted, not merely dismissed or set aside.

Boethius has another reason for not accepting the Afterlife Solution. His second reason is philosophical in nature, but takes some careful reading of his text. When Lady Philosophy states part of her preferred solution to the Problem of Desert early on, sketching her strategy for answering it, she alludes to the Afterlife Solution as follows (4.4.14):<sup>14</sup>

Nor am I now, [in answering the Problem of Desert], working away at a point that might occur to just anyone, namely that decadent behavior is corrected by retribution and led back to the right way by fear of punishment, being also an example to the rest to avoid what is blameworthy. Instead, I think that there is a *different* way in which the wicked are unhappy when they are not punished, yet no regard at all is given to any form of correction or to setting an example.

Lady Philosophy is clear here that she is not laboring (*molior*) the Afterlife Solution, with its covert appeal to self-interest. It is true that people are motivated by fear of punishment, but that point, which “might occur to just anyone” (note the trace of contempt), is no part of a philosophically adequate solution. There is instead a different way (*alio quodam modo*) to address the Problem of Desert—a philosophical approach that allows us to explain the genuine, if not apparent, unhappiness of the wicked, without any appeal to punishment or its deterrent effects, or analogously reward and its motivational effects. That is to say, Boethius is at pains to set the Afterlife Solution aside in favor of a different strategy, one that resolves the Problem of Desert despite the fact (*tametsi*) that it pays “no regard at all” to the elements of the Afterlife Solution. The point at issue here is subtle. The philosophical *problem* with the Afterlife Solution lies precisely in its appeal to reward and punishment, as well as in its further appeal to their exemplary and deterrent effects. Boethius’s objection is not that the Afterlife Solution makes false claims about the Afterlife. It does not. As noted at the start of the preceding paragraph, Boethius (though perhaps not Lady Philosophy) recognizes the existence of the traditional Afterlife with its delights for the good and griefs for the wicked. Nor is Boethius’s objection that the motivational and deterrent effects that these goods and griefs have are psychological rather than philosophical grounds. Undoubtedly they are psychological, but motives for behavior can be reasons as well as causes, and there is no sign that Boethius thinks that people are not motivated by

<sup>14</sup> Neque id nunc molior quod cuius ueniat in mentem, corrigi ultione prauos mores et ad rectum supplicii terrore deduci, caeteris quoque exemplum esse culpanda fugiendi; sed alio quodam modo infeliciores esse improbos arbitror impunitos, tametsi nulla ratio correctionis, nullus respectus habeatur exempli.

reward and punishment. Rather, Boethius objects to any philosophical appeal to the goods and evils of the Afterlife,<sup>15</sup> such as is made in the Afterlife Solution, as morally irrelevant to our present status, and *ipso facto* rejects the Afterlife Solution—indeed, it is no ‘solution’ at all in Boethius’s eyes, for, as he tells us, the view that goods in the Afterlife somehow cancel or mitigate suffering in this life is mistaken. More precisely, Boethius objects to the notion that there is a moral calculus, some possible ‘payment’ for undeserved agonies that makes them morally acceptable. The key idea behind the Afterlife Solution is that future deserved goods and evils can somehow morally balance present undeserved evils and goods, that is, that these (present and future) goods and evils are commensurable. Boethius rejects that claim. But since their presentness or futurity makes no difference to their status as goods or evils,<sup>16</sup> as neither does their deservedness or undeservedness, Boethius is in fact rejecting the claim that goods and evils are commensurable *tout court*. Boethius is an ‘anti-commensurabilist.’

Unfortunately, Boethius gives no further reasons in the *Consolation of Philosophy* in support of his anti-commensurabilism. Since the balancing of goods and evils underlies not only the Afterlife Solution but also modern consequentialist moral theories, it is especially frustrating that he says no more. We can, however, suggest two lines of argument about why the Afterlife Solution, though mistaken, seems initially appealing. Each supports a version of anti-commensurabilism and could have been what Boethius had in mind. It should be borne in mind, however, that while these two lines of argument are not historically anachronistic, they are speculative.

First, there is a distinction that needs to be drawn between two situations that might otherwise be confused.<sup>17</sup> It ought not to be that you suffer some evil. *A fortiori*, it ought not to be that you suffer some evil and then receive some good. But given that you suffer some evil, it is better that you then receive some good rather than not. The fact that the state of affairs in which you receive some later good is better than the state of affairs in which you

<sup>15</sup> I take the unrestricted claim “any philosophical appeal” from the way in which Boethius phrases his rejection: no regard at all (*nulla ratio* and *nullus respectus*) is given to the constituents of the Afterlife Solution.

<sup>16</sup> Boethius’s position therefore does not turn in any interesting way on there being an Afterlife; he simply rejects the idea that some goods or evils can counterbalance other goods or evils, whether this life is taken together with the Afterlife or taken instead on its own. Deserved goods in the Afterlife do not counterbalance undeserved evils in this life, and likewise later deserved goods in my life do not counterbalance earlier undeserved evils in my life. Boethius’s position is thus of wider philosophical interest than the context in which it was developed might suggest.

<sup>17</sup> See David Lewis, “Semantic Analyses for Dyadic Deontic Logic,” in S. Stenlund (ed.), *Logical Theory and Semantic Analysis* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1974), 1–15.

do not might lead you to think that a sufficient good could make that state of affairs as good as, if not better than, the state of affairs in which you do not suffer the evil in the first place. However, the two cases are logically different. The latter only has the value that it has conditionally, namely given that you suffer some harm, whereas in the former you do not suffer harm at all. The evil-plus-sufficient-good state of affairs can only be compared to the absolute case if the good is enough (whatever that may mean) to “cancel” the evil—that is, if we assume that the goods and evils are somehow commensurable. Such an assumption is not forced on us by logic; we are not inconsistent if we hold the three claims enunciated at the beginning. They do not provide grounds for accepting commensurability. We can maintain that one ought not to suffer an evil, and admit that given that one suffers evil it is better to then receive good rather than not, without accepting the commensurability of the goods and evils involved, or thinking that the latter situation might somehow be the same as the initial situation. The reason for rejecting commensurability here is the same as that suggested in Boethius’s anti-commensurabilism. If someone suffers an undeserved evil (say), and suffering an undeserved evil is morally objectionable, then any morally objectionable features there are to suffering undeserved evil, whatever they may be, are not changed by receiving goods, even deserved goods.

Second, the persistent attraction of the Afterlife Solution may come from confusing it with the situation in which someone contracts to suffer some otherwise undeserved evil for a later good. Here the consent involved in the contractual agreement does cancel the undeservedness of the evil suffered. (We do not consent to the travails of this life for the sake of rewards in the Afterlife, but put that aside.) It might be thought that consent must therefore track the commensurability of the goods and evils involved. Hence the goods and evils must be commensurable in themselves. But this is not so. It is one thing for me to break your leg and then pay your medical bills with something extra for your inconvenience; it is quite another thing for us to agree beforehand that if I pay your medical bills with something extra for your inconvenience I am permitted to break your leg. In the latter case there is no wrongdoing, and hence you suffer no evil (certainly no undeserved evil); your consent gives me permission to break your leg, as indeed it would even if you offered me nothing in return for doing so. But the former case is quite different. It is wrong for me to break your leg, and *a fortiori* wrong for me to break your leg and then pay your medical bills with something extra for your inconvenience; paying your medical bills and a little extra does not make it any less wrong for me to break your leg in the first place, which is an undeserved evil you suffer. This is true even if you would have agreed to the bargain had it been offered

to you in advance. The fact that you would have agreed to have your leg broken had you been given the offer (no matter what the offer might have involved) does not cancel the wrongdoing in my breaking your leg without first obtaining your consent. Thus consent does not track commensurability but instead bestows permission, making what is otherwise morally unacceptable acceptable.

The fundamental point in both lines of argument is that suffering undeserved evil cannot be made right through some form of compensation. The later bestowal of goods does not take away the fact that suffering an undeserved evil is wrong; equally, the later bestowal of evils does not take away the fact that enjoying undeserved goods is wrong. It may be a better state of affairs all around when those who suffer undeserved evils receive goods and those who enjoy undeserved goods suffer evils, but this does not affect the moral wrongness of suffering undeserved evils or enjoying undeserved goods. This is why Boethius rejects the Afterlife solution. Lady Philosophy wants a solution in which “no thought is given” to future goods or evils because they are simply irrelevant to the moral wrongness that makes the Problem of Desert a pressing philosophical problem in the first place.<sup>18</sup> Boethius sets himself the much harder task of solving the Problem of Desert while foregoing any appeal to pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die.

Instead of the Afterlife Solution, Boethius adopts what we can call the *Socratic Solution* to the Problem of Desert, so-called because he derives it from the positions taken by Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*.<sup>19</sup> In a nutshell, the Socratic Solution defends the following thesis:

[S] Each person gets exactly what he or she deserves.

<sup>18</sup> At least one of Boethius’s scholastic commentators seems to have gotten his point exactly. Around 1380, Pierre d’Ailly raises a doubt in Q. 1 art. 6: “Supposing that there were no postmortem happiness or reward, should human happiness then be placed in goods that are subject to fortune or in virtuous actions?” (Chappuis 162\*). He argues that while it “seems to many” that without reward or punishment in the Afterlife human happiness would consist in sensuous pleasures, virtue, as the proper exercise of human capacities, would still constitute human happiness (163\*). The Afterlife is irrelevant.

<sup>19</sup> Boethius likely knew the *Gorgias* directly, but he also knew the tradition of Neoplatonic commentary on the *Gorgias*, which undoubtedly influenced his reading. The positions he discusses are likely Socratic and not Platonic in origin, though all attributions to Socrates are tenuous; we can at least say that the positions taken by Socrates in the *Gorgias* resemble those found in the Speech of the Laws in the *Crito*. His views doubtless are indebted to Stoic ethics (and its understanding of Socrates) as well, both in its own right and as absorbed by the Neoplatonic tradition. Gruber, *Kommentar*, is the starting-point for scholarly study of these philosophical influences on the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Since no one meets with an undeserved fortune, there is no problem with the distribution of desert; everyone gets what he or she deserves, contrary to appearances, and hence no Problem of Desert to solve—the rug has been pulled out from beneath it. Now the Socratic Solution might seem to be no more than a philosophical sleight-of-hand, a cheap trick to make the problems we have been concerned with vanish. It is not. A solution to the Problem of Desert will show us either why people do not get what they deserve, or why they do. Given Boethius's acceptance of Divine Providence, he needs to explain how it is people do all get what they deserve. Both the Afterlife Solution and the Socratic Solution deny that there is any traction to the Problem of Desert, in exactly the same manner. The Afterlife Solution proposes that each person gets what he or she deserves, though only in the long run. The Socratic Solution proposes that each person gets what he or she deserves, though appearances are deceptive. In each case we deny any mismatch between people's deserts and their fortunes. Part of the immediate appeal of the Afterlife Solution is that it gives full recognition to undeserved fortune in this life, which it buys at the price of trading away present fortune for future just deserts. As we have seen, Boethius rejects any such trade-off as a philosophical confusion. The price of the Socratic Solution, of course, is that there seem to be genuine instances in this life of undeserved fortune, which Boethius must now show are one and all merely apparent.

The bulk of Book 4 of the *Consolation of Philosophy* is devoted to arguing for the Socratic Solution in a variety of ways. Boethius takes [S] to follow from four subordinate theses:

[S1] The good are powerful (and hence able to attain their ends), whereas the wicked are powerless (and hence unable to attain their ends).

Lady Philosophy offers four arguments for [S1] in 4.2.

[S2] Virtue is its own reward, and vice is its own punishment.

As an anti-commensurabilist, Boethius rejects the trade-off among goods and evils characteristic of consequentialist moral theories. By contrast, he emphasizes the intrinsic value of goodness. The virtuous have genuine happiness through their possession of the Supreme Good, and the vicious fail to get what they want and are beset by debilities, not strictly in control of themselves. These are constitutive features of virtue and vice, which are therefore not merely instrumental to these results but analytically tied to them. Now since the good deserve to be happy and the wicked deserve to be unhappy, we are close to being able to derive [S]. Boethius does so by endorsing two further 'Socratic' theses (which are especially clear in 4.4):



[S3] The only benefit or harm that matters is moral improvement or worsening.

[S4] Only you can morally improve or worsen yourself.

In combination with [S2], these two theses allow us to conclude that each person gets what he or she deserves (4.3). The good get genuine happiness, and their condition cannot be worsened by the wicked; the wicked fail to get what they really want, and are ‘punished’ by worldly success—which allows them to persist in their genuine unhappiness, victims of their own ignorance, self-delusions, and desires. All that matters is one’s moral condition, after all, and on the moral scales—not the scale of worldly success—the virtuous win and the wicked lose. Hence each person gets exactly what he or she deserves, as the Socratic Solution maintains, and the Problem of Desert has been resolved.

Rather than follow Boethius through the twists and turns of his arguments for [S1]–[S4], we can take a shortcut to understand why he opts for the Socratic Solution, based on the considerations discussed in fleshing out his rejection of the Afterlife Solution. If there is no commensurability among goods and evils, then no amount of goods or evils can affect the wrongful moral status of suffering an undeserved evil or enjoying an undeserved good. But if nothing can affect their moral status, their wrongfulness cannot be ameliorated. Yet even a single instance of undeserved fortune is enough to pose the Problem of Desert. Hence there cannot be even a single instance of such wrongfulness. But since people clearly have the fortunes they have, their fortunes must in every case be deserved rather than undeserved—which is what the Socratic Solution maintains.

To understand why Boethius opts for the Socratic Solution is not to make it plausible, to be sure, and much of what Boethius says in Book 4 tries to put the best face on it. His personal situation gives him credibility; to maintain that imprisonment and imminent execution is exactly what he deserves—here the character and the author merge—earns the *Consolation of Philosophy* a hearing it would not otherwise merit. Yet philosophers and theologians have not generally followed Boethius in adopting the Socratic Solution. This is not because they misunderstood him. Quite the contrary; the Latin commentary tradition on the *Consolation of Philosophy* in the Middle Ages seems to have understood Boethius very well, better than the modern tradition. Witness one of the most popular mediæval commentators, the Dominican friar Nicholas Trevet (1265–1334), who gives a concise and lucid summary of the whole work in his Preface (8–9):<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Tractat enim in opere isto de consolatione miseri qui propter amissionem temporalium deicitur in merorem putando per hoc quod non equa meritis præmia reddantur.

In this work, Boethius deals with the consolation of someone miserable who, depressed over the loss of temporal goods, is thrown into grief, thinking on this account that he was not given proper reward for his deserts. Boethius shows that the contrary view holds, proving that in accordance with infallible divine judgment genuine rewards are given to the good and penalties due to the wicked, which anyone who is suffering persecution can be consoled by when he calls up its memory.

Boethius's subject, Trevet correctly declares, is the Problem of Desert: the Prisoner is miserable because he believes that he does not deserve his fortune; Boethius proves that the contrary view is correct, namely that people do get exactly what they deserve—the Socratic Solution—and remembering that people get exactly what they deserve provides consolation to those suffering adverse fortune. Nicholas does not seem upset by Boethius's rejection of the Afterlife Solution; if anything, he gives the impression that Boethius quite rightly rejects it. This impression is borne out even when we descend to details, though of course there are many differences among the commentators. William of Conches (1080–ca.1150), for instance, does not blink at Lady Philosophy's brusque dismissal of the Afterlife Solution at 4.4.22; the only remark he offers is minimal (240.48–51): "Since Lady Philosophy had said that the penalty for evils is ended with death, so that someone with a depraved mind not think that there will be no punishments after death, Boethius asks Lady Philosophy whether that is the case." Nicholas Trevet repeats William's comment in his discussion of 4.4.22, and cleverly proposes that Lady Philosophy is worried about a potential difficulty (576): since it has been argued that the wicked are happier if punished than not, would not punishment in the Afterlife make sinners happier than they are in this life, contrary to intent? Trevet's answer, that the sinners in Hell are worse off because they recognize their errors but are unable to redeem themselves, is ingenious if not textual. Likewise, where William offers no comment at all on the suggestion in 4.4.14 that the Afterlife is irrelevant to the Problem of Desert, Trevet, in contrast, declares that Lady Philosophy meant that there is *another*, not a "different," way in which people get what they deserve: in addition to whatever rewards and punishments the Afterlife may hold, people also get what they deserve in this life.<sup>21</sup> Despite individual

Contrarium cuius manifestat Boethius ostendo secundum iudicium diuinum infallibile uera praemia bonis malisque poenas debitas reseruari, quod quicumque persecutionem patiens cum ad memoriam reducerit consolari poterit.

<sup>21</sup> Trevet on 4.4.14 (573): Sed praeter istas [causas] est tertia de qua subdit SED ALIO QUODAM MODO, scilicet a praedictis ARBITROR INFELICIORES ESSE IMPROBOS IMPUNITOS TAMETSI, id est quamuis, NULLA RATIO CORRECTIONIS NULLUS RESPECTUS EXEMPLI

differences, the commentators find Boethius's Socratic Solution to be acceptable and to provide the consolation sought by the Prisoner in his distress. In some respects, this should not be a surprise. The mediæval commentator took his job to be explaining the text, not differing with it. Even someone such as Pierre d'Ailly, whose *quaestiones* are far removed from low-level glossing or *explication du texte*, is clearly in sympathy with Boethius. If we went no further than the commentary tradition, we might think that mediæval readers, unlike modern ones, found Boethius's solution to the Problem of Desert unproblematic, and indeed took consolation in it.

Not all readers of Boethius wrote commentaries, though. Freed from the conventions that held the commentator to explain his text systematically, other mediæval authors could voice their disagreement with Boethius and the Socratic Solution. Consider the case of Jean Gerson (1363–1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris and an influential clergyman. At one point, after the Council of Constance, he was exiled from France by the Duke of Burgundy; in his humiliation he wrote his own *Consolation of Theology*, a prosimetric work in four books for which he was given the honorific title of *Doctor consolatorius*. His work is a dialogue between Volucer and Monicus, and right at the beginning Gerson invokes Boethius and spells out his dissatisfaction with him (1.2 188):

MONICUS: You have rightly praised theology, Volucer, but in getting consolation against the vicissitudes of chance, against the vanity of worldly happiness, why is the dialogue of Boethius and Lady Philosophy not enough? It is elegantly written, lucid, and distinguished, maintaining the most profound and true views.

VOLUCER: Do not be surprised, Monicus, if theology is put before philosophy. For as grace is more excellent than nature, as the mistress to her handmaid, as the teacher to the student, as eternity to time, as understanding to mere calculation, as things which are not seen to things which are seen, so too theology is more excellent than philosophy... Let us commence with theology beginning with the Word from the Supreme Being, with which Lady Philosophy ended her consolation in Boethius.

The next-to-last sentence in the *Consolation of Philosophy* is an exhortation (5.6.47): "Pour out your humble prayers to Heaven!" Philosophy, it appears, can only offer cold comfort; theology is needed to provide the ultimate solace from the ultimate source, God Himself—a loving and caring God, not "the God of the philosophers." As Volucer goes on to

HABEATUR. Deinde cum dicit et quis, inquam, prosequitur Philosophia istum modum tertium alium a praedictis. Et primo quaerit Boethius quis sit iste modus...

say, “theology begins its consolation with a journey from the point at which philosophy gives out” (1.2 188). Nor can philosophy reach all the way to God’s judgments (190). In the end, Volucer offers his own prayer, meant to parallel the closing exhortation of Lady Philosophy (4.5 244):

We raise our eyes to Heaven and declare: God is the Father of mercies and of all consolation, in Whose mercy we must hope, conforming ourselves to His will, from Whom comes the virtue of patience and in Whom is serenity of conscience.

Consolation is a divine gift; philosophy cannot provide it, because God’s loving mercies are beyond the province of mere reason.

Gerson’s view that consolation is properly a matter of religious belief rather than reasoned argumentation seems to have won out by the end of the Middle Ages. Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), like Boethius, was a devout Catholic who was imprisoned under sentence of death by a ruler who was also a Christian but of a different persuasion. At the beginning of his 1534 work *Dialogue of Comfort Agaynst Trybulacion* 1.1, written in direct emulation of Boethius during his imprisonment while awaiting his eventual execution, More writes (10.15–24):

Howbeit in very dede, for any thyng that euer I red in [the old morall philosophers], I neuer could yet fynd, that euer these naturall resons, were able to give sufficient comfort of them selfe for they neuer stretch so ferre, but that they leve vntouchid for lak of necessarye knolege, that speciall poynt, which is not onely the chief comfort of all but without which also, all other comfortes are nothyng: that is to wit the referring the fynall end of their comfort unto God, & to repute & take for the speciall cause of comfort, that by the pacient suffraunce of their tribulacion, they shall attayne His favour & for their payne receve reward at His hand in Heven.

According to More, consolation comes from God alone, since by suffering patiently people hope to receive rewards after death. As with Gerson, philosophy does not stretch so far as to provide consolation, since philosophers *qua* philosophers do not have access to this all-important truth. Thus we return to the Afterlife Solution to the Problem of Desert.

But should we? I’d like to close with a plea for Boethius’s Socratic Solution, on the basis of some modern considerations. What matters, more than anything else, is what matters morally. Hence the only sense of harm that (morally) matters is ‘moral harm,’ that is, morally worsening or bettering someone. Mere physical pain, imprisonment, and the like do not matter, because they do not matter morally—they are outside one’s control, and being a victim of circumstance is no moral failing. That, I take it, is the point of the Socratic Solution. Put this way, I find it very plausible. Of course I would rather not be imprisoned, tortured, executed; but those

things are not up to me, and therefore are not moral matters, which means they do not really matter at all. We get what we morally deserve, because what we morally deserve is entirely up to us. Perhaps this is cold comfort, not the “consolation” Boethius hoped to provide. His brand of cognitive therapy seems no match for the hot emotions one feels in being victimized, even while recognizing, intellectually, that it does not matter, since it does not matter morally. Yet this is odd. Were not people just as prone to anger, to resentment, to feelings of revenge in Antiquity and the Middle Ages? Perhaps, in the end, it is a modern failing—not a mediæval one.

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