

BOETHIUS: TREATISE ON THE HEBDOMADS*

How substances are good in that they are,
although they are not substantial goods.

1. Prologue

To John the Deacon:

You ask me to set out and to explain a bit more clearly the obscurity of the question from our hebdomads that involves the way in which substances, in that they are, are good, although they aren't substantial goods. You say that this ought to be done because the method used in writings of this sort isn't familiar to everyone. Well, I myself am your witness how vigorously you treated these matters before. But I think about the hebdomads for myself, and I keep these speculations in my memory rather than sharing them with any of those people whose impertinence and insolence permits nothing to be analyzed without joking and laughter. Accordingly, don't be opposed to obscurities stemming from brevity; since they are the faithful guardian of the secret they have this advantage: they speak only to those who are worthy. Therefore, as is the customary practice in mathematics and also in other disciplines, I have first put forward terms and rules, in accordance with which I shall work out all that follows.

2. Terms

A common conception of the mind is a statement that each person approves upon hearing it. There are two kinds of these. One kind is common in such a way that it belongs to all men—for example, if you were to propose:

If you take equals away from two equals, the remainders are equal nobody understanding it would deny it. The other kind belongs only to the learned even though it comes from such common conceptions of the mind, as for example:

Incorporeal objects are not in a place and the like, to which the learned give their approval but not the common multitude.

* Translated from the Latin text in the Loeb edition.

3. Rules

- [1] Being and that which is are different. Being itself not yet is, whereas what has taken on the form of being is and exists.
- [2] What is can participate in something, but being doesn't itself in any way participate in anything. For participation occurs when something already is; something is, however, because it has taken on being.
- [3] That which is can have something beyond the fact that it is, whereas being has nothing else mixed in with itself.
- [4] Merely being something and being something in what is are different: in the former case an accident is signified, in the latter a substance.
- [5] Every that which is participates in that which is being so that it is, but it participates in something else so that it is something. Accordingly, that which is participates in what is being so that it be, but it is so that it participate in anything whatsoever.
- [6] Everything simple has its being and that which is as one; in everything composite, being and it itself differ.
- [7] Every diversity is discord, whereas likeness is to be pursued. Whatever pursues something is shown to be itself by nature like the very object that it pursues.

The [rules] that we have given above, then, are sufficient; the careful interpreter of the reasoning will apply each one in its arguments.

4. The Problem

Now the problem is as follows.

The things that are, are good. For the common view of the learned maintains that everything that is tends to the good, and everything tends towards its like; hence things that tend to the good are themselves good.

But we should look into how they are good—is it by participation or by substance?

If by participation, they aren't themselves good *per se* in any way. For what is white by participation is not white *per se* in that it is, and the same in the case of other qualities. If they are good by participation, then, they aren't themselves good *per se* in any way. Hence they don't tend to the good. But it was granted that they do. Therefore, they aren't good by participation but rather by substance.

Yet for those things whose substance is good, that which they are, are good. That which they are, however, they have from that which is being. Hence

their being is good, and so the being of all things is good. But if being is good, those things that are, in that they are, are good—and being and being good are the same for them. Hence they are substantial goods, since they do not participate goodness. But if being itself in them is good, there is no doubt that since they are substantial goods they are like the first good. Consequently, they will be this good itself, for nothing is like it apart from it itself. It follows from this that all things that are, are God—which is abhorrent. Hence they are not substantial goods. Consequently, in them being is not good. Hence they are not good in that they are. But neither do they participate goodness, for then they would not tend to the good in any way.

Therefore, they are not good in any way.

5. Solution

For this problem a solution of the following kind can be used.

There are many things that, while they cannot be actually separated, are yet separated in the mind and in thought. For example, while no one actually separates a triangle (or other [geometrical figures]) from the underlying matter, still, removing it by the mind, we speculate upon the triangle itself and upon its distinctive feature apart from matter.

Therefore, let us put the presence of the first good out of our mind for a while. (It certainly exists: this can be known from the view of all the learned and the unlearned, and from the religions of the barbarian peoples!) Putting this aside for a while, then, let us postulate all things that are to be good, and let us consider how they could be good if they were not to derive from the first good. From this point of view I perceive it to be one thing that they are good, another that they are. For let us suppose one and the same good substance to be white, heavy, and round. Then the substance itself would be one thing, its roundness another, color another, goodness another. For if each of these were the same as the substance itself, heaviness would be the same as color [or] as the good, and the good as heaviness—which nature doesn't allow to happen. And so in their case, then, being is one thing, being something another. Then they would indeed be good, yet they wouldn't have being itself as good. Hence if they were to be in any way, they would not be goods from the good and they would not be the same as goods, but there would be one being for them and another being for goods. However, if they were nothing else at all except goods, and they were neither heavy nor colored nor extended in spatial dimension and no quality were in them but that they were only good, then they would not seem to be things

but the principle of things, and “they” would not seem so but instead “it” would seem so. For there is one thing alone like this that is only good and nothing else. And since they are not simple, they can’t be at all unless that which is good alone had willed them to be.

Consequently, since their being derives from the will of the good, they are said to be goods. For the first good, since it is, is good in that it is, whereas the secondary good, since it derives from that whose being itself is good, is also itself good. But the very being of all things derives from that which is the first good and which is good in such a way that it is correctly said to be good in that it is. Hence their being is itself good, for then it is in it.

Accordingly, the problem has been solved. For although they are good in that they are, they nevertheless are not like the first good. For it is not howsoever things are that their being is itself good. Instead, since the being of things cannot itself be unless it derives from the first being (*i. e.* the good), consequently the being is itself good and is not like that from which it is. For the latter, howsoever it is, is good in that it is, for it is nothing else than good. Yet the former, unless it were from the latter, could perhaps be good—but it could not be good in that it is. In that case it would perhaps participate in the good, but they could not have being itself (which they would not have from the good) as good. Hence once the first good is taken away from them in the mind and in thought, although they would be goods, nevertheless they could not be goods in that they are. And since they weren’t able to exist actually had not that which is genuinely good produced them, consequently both their being is good and that which derives from the substantial good is not like it. And unless they were to derive from it, even though they would be goods they nevertheless could not be goods in that they are, since apart from the good and not from the good they would not be—because that first good itself is being itself and the good itself and being good itself.

6. Objections and Replies

First Objection

Yet won’t it also be necessary for those things that are white to be white in that they are white, since they derive from the will of God in order to be white?

Reply to the First Objection

Not in the least. For being is one thing and being white another. This holds because the one who produced them so that they be is indeed good, but not

white in the least. Hence it is in accord with the will of the good that they be good in that they are. But it is not in accord with the will of something non-white such as this that it is a property that it be white in that it is, for they did not derive from the will of the white. Therefore, since the one who willed those things to be white was not white, they are only white, but since the one who willed them to be good was good, they are good in that they are.

Second Objection

Thus according to this reasoning all things must be just, since the one who willed them to be is itself just?

Replies to the Second Objection

Not even this! For being good pertains to essence, whereas being just pertains to an act. Now in that case being is the same as acting, and so being good is the same as being just. But in our case being is not the same as acting, for we aren't simple. Hence in our case being good is not the same as being just. However, in our case, being is the same for all in that we are. Hence all things are good, but not also just.

Furthermore, 'good' is generic whereas 'just' is specific, and the species doesn't descend to all [instances of the genus]. Consequently, some are just and others something else; all are good.