

## **Boethius: The Logical Works**

Translated main parts of Aristotle's works on Logic as well as Porphyry's Introduction to Aristotle's Categories.

A problem raised but not solved by Aristotle's works on Logic concerned the relation between the terms and concepts appropriate to categorical propositions and arguments and reality.

Are the categories divisions of language or divisions of reality? Do genera and species constitute another set of real beings besides the sensibly perceptible objects that they classify? How do words and statements represent things? Boethius discussion of these questions and the material on it that he transmitted to the middle ages was of very great importance to medieval philosophy.

In his Introduction, Porphyry raised but did not try to solve the following problems:

A universal, by definition, is what is common to all the members of a given class. Everything which is must be a single, individual thing, but a single thing cannot be common to many things. A universal cannot be shared out in pieces, to many things. It must be whole in each of the things. How can anything be both one and many in this way? This seems impossible if universals were substances in Aristotle's sense of the term. Are Universals mere thoughts? But thoughts either correctly represent reality or they don't. If there is nothing in reality corresponding to a thought, it is an empty thought. If a thought does correspond to something in reality then what is it? Universals would then correspond to real beings but this takes us back to the problem of how these real beings can both be one and many. Moreover, do universals exist only in material things or apart from material things? Are they perceivable by the senses, or only by the intellect?

Boethius offers a solution to these problems. He claimed his solution was consistent with Aristotle's philosophy. Every member of a species bears a likeness to other members of the same species. By setting aside the many dissimilarities that members of the same species bear to each other, the mind can perceive these likenesses. The likeness they have to each other constitutes the species. So, genera and species subsist in sensibly perceivable things and are sensibly perceptible but they are also thought as subsisting in themselves and as not having their being in other things.

This last point distinguishes an aristotelian view of universals from that of Plato, who claimed that genera and species are not only thought as subsisting in themselves but really do subsist in themselves.

Boethius' solution raises questions. Does he mean that genera and species are thought to subsist in themselves but really don't. Or does he mean that they are correctly thought to subsist in themselves? If the former, then thoughts about universals are empty. If the latter, then the one-many problem is raised all over again.

In his own commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, Boethius again touches on the problem of universals while discussing Aristotle's distinction between primary and secondary substances. In this work, he makes collections of like individuals universals rather than just their likenesses the basis of genera and species. This fits with Aristotle's classification of universals as secondary substances and individuals as primary substances. He justifies this move by calling attention to the linguistic nature of Aristotle's *Categories*. It is a book about names insofar as they signify something and what names primarily signify are individual substances.

In his commentary on Aristotle's book *On Interpretation*, Boethius develops still another view of the relation between language and reality. Words primarily signify thoughts rather than things. Such thoughts are not to be confused with mental images, because thoughts can be either true or false but images can't be either true or false.

However, thoughts cannot exist without images. The mind produces thoughts from images. Thoughts are the same for all peoples, unlike words and images, which differ from one national group to another. This goes for incorporeal things such as goodness, justice and God as well as for corporeal things. It is not always clear which thoughts are signified by certain words. The verb "to be", for example seems to signify both existence and participation. In the contexts where it signifies participation, e.g. "Fido is a dog" he treats participation as a relation of inherence between a universal quality and a particular individual. In this work he seems to treat universals as signifying thoughts which are thoughts of really subsisting things but he does not explain how such things can be universals, both one and common to many things.

In one way, Boethius is not entirely at fault for having produced a confused account of universals because all of the things he says about universals can be found in Aristotle's writings. In commenting on the various parts of Aristotle's writings, Boethius may have been setting the stage for a unified theory of universals but he never produced one. He was unable to follow through on many of his projects, possibly because of his untimely death at the hands of Theodoric's executioners. The problem was bequeathed to medieval philosophers. It became a theme that was discussed at great length in the middle ages and was regarded by many as of key importance in philosophy and theology.

### **On the Consolation of Philosophy**

Written by Boethius while in prison awaiting execution. His offense was that he tried to save another senator who was accused of carrying on a treasonable correspondence with the eastern emperor. Theodoric's reason for concern was that as long as the Eastern and Western parts of the empire were at odds, Rome was a safe and valuable ally for him.

So, he saw any hint of reconciliation as a threat to him since it might mean that relations between Romans and Goths would deteriorate even more than they had. He died sometime between 524 and 526.

In the Consolation, Boethius depicts himself as a character imprisoned under sentence of death, miserable with self-pity. In this state, he is visited by another character, a beautiful female spirit who is the personification of Philosophy. Why female? One should remember that the Greeks had already personified wisdom as the Goddess Athena. Philosophy listens to Boethius' complaints and consoles him.

The obvious point here is the idea which was generally assumed in the late Hellenistic period in the history of Philosophy, that the purpose of philosophy is practical. Its goal is the alleviation of suffering and to guide us in the improvement of our character and the attainment of peace and happiness.

Philosophy in Boethius' book attempts to do this for him.

She begins by pointing out to him that most of his present misery is due to problems that occurred out of sheer misfortune. One has no right to blame fortune for losing things acquired by fortune or getting into difficulties by misfortune.

Fortune is by nature changeable. None of the things one gains through good luck, wealth, fame, power, etc. are pure unmixed goods. It is unwise to place the highest value on such things. When people strive to attain these things, they are really aiming at something better, the highest good, but due to their ignorance, they do not realize this. The highest good is God. So far, this statement is not very different from what one finds in older traditions such as those of the stoics and, even in Aristotle's philosophy, we are told that the highest good is that happiness which consists in the contemplation of divine truths.

Philosophy goes on to explain, consistent with the Platonic tradition, that those who spend their lives in pursuit of power, pleasure and wealth are really powerless and wretched even when surrounded by gold and installed in high offices. What most people consider success is really failure. The pursuit of such things is evil since it results in such vices in the soul as greed, cruelty, cowardice and lust. Vices are a privation and a disorder of the natural being of the soul. So, in worshipping false goods, people only do harm to themselves, even destroy themselves by corrupting their souls.

Philosophy also reminds Boethius that all events are the results of chains of cause and effect. Then plan of these cause-effect chains may be called fate but it is a plan that is under the control of divine providence. Anyone who believes in God as Boethius says he does, must recognize that in God's plan for his creatures, all is for the best. True freedom does not consist in struggle against God's plan but in acceptance of it, submission to God's will.

Here, Boethius raised the problem of how God's foreknowledge of all future events can be consistent with human free will. Aristotle had raised the issue of how future-tense propositions can be definitely true or false if some future contingent events are up to human free choice. Aristotle solved the problem by declaring that future tense propositions are not true or false. Boethius rejects this solution on the grounds that God's foreknowledge must be certain. His solution is like that of Augustine and Proclus. Different types of beings know contingent events according to their specific capacities. Since God exists in eternity, outside the flow of time, he does not know events in the way that human beings know them. What appear to human beings as past present and future events, God knows all at once. His knowledge of an event that is, for us, in the future is more like our

knowledge of an event which is, for us, in the present. Such knowledge does not destroy the contingency of the event.

Unlike Augustine, he does not make specific references to Christian doctrines in this work. And, unlike Augustine, he does not give any sign of uneasiness over apparent conflicts between christian doctrines and many aspects of the neoplatonism he embraces.

Boethius had served as Master of Offices under Theodoric. He was succeeded in this position by Cassiodorus, a highly learned and capable man who was not in any way original in his own work. On his retirement from public life Cassiodorus went to live in a monastery he founded in the city of Vivarium. This monastery became a center of great importance in preserving classical texts, including, of course, the works of Boethius and those of the ancient authors that he had translated into Latin. In many ways, Boethius' death marks the end of the classical age and the transition to the medieval period in philosophy.