



# ON SUFFERING: LESSONS FROM BOETHIUS

*Posted on July 1, 2017 by N. Dass*



Perhaps one of the more famous examples of "prison literature," [\*The Consolation of Philosophy\*](#), by Boethius, may also be read as a contemplation on the ideas of innocence and justice.

Both these terms have deep roots in the philosophical tradition, through which justice becomes an application of morality, which is [defined](#) as commutative, distributive, contributive, restorative, legal, and retributive. Justice, therefore, seeks to reestablish social harmony, disrupted by crime.

Within such legal parameters, Boethius seeks to answer a far more difficult question (and one most pertinent to him, in his little book) - where is justice when an innocent man is wrongly sentenced and then executed by the state?

Anicius Severinus Manlius [Boethius](#), one of the more [important thinkers](#) to emerge from the Early Middle Ages, was born into an illustrious Roman aristocratic family about the time that the last Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed in August of 476 AD. Boethius' exact year of birth is unknown.

*Just as all things work toward the good, so do all things work toward justice*

This was also the time when Rome, and the western Empire, came to be ruled by the Goths, under the kingship of the famous [Theoderic the Great](#) (454-526), whose round [mausoleum](#) can still be seen near Ravenna.

As a youth, Boethius received the best education of the day, which meant that he knew Greek, along with his native Latin. His highly influential theological and philosophical works came to [define](#) the medieval world, and helped give Latin its preeminence as the language of learning (a status it would retain well into the nineteenth-century).

Indeed, it is because of him that the works of Plato came to be rendered into Latin; and before his political downfall he was busy translating all the works of Aristotle. His eventual plan was to reconcile Plato to Aristotle (the dilemma of whether idealism or materialism is the best rational tool for understanding reality).

Because of his high birth, Boethius eventually came to serve Theoderic in the capacity of *magister officiorum*, or "Master of Offices," which meant that he was head of all the government and court services; a very powerful position.

*evil is the failure to attain the good*

However, given his concern with establishing the just state, based upon Plato's idea that rulers must

also be philosophers, he openly and vigorously condemned venality among courtly officials.

But he misjudged the influence of the men he criticized, and before long he was charged with conspiring with [Justin I](#), the Eastern Roman Emperor. Perhaps the justification of this accusation was Boethius's active engagement with Greek learning in the East (hence the charge of conspiring with Justin to overthrow the empire in the West). Though he appealed to be heard by Theoderic, the senate condemned him to exile and death.

He was executed likely in 525. Theoderic did not long survive him, dying in 526, and Justin died in 527.

While in prison, awaiting execution, Boethius wrote his most famous treatise, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (circa 524), which is composed in the [prosimetrum](#) form (partially prose and partially verse).

*justice becomes an application of morality*

The work itself may best be described as a dialogue between the condemned prisoner Boethius and a beautiful woman, whom he names "Lady Philosophy."

In the work, Boethius presents himself as depressed and perplexed: how can a man, who truly is innocent and virtuous, face imminent execution?

He explicitly asks: "If there is a God, why is there evil? And if there is no God, how can there be good?" (Book I, Prose, 4).

In other words, how can he believe in the idea of innocence when he will be executed for something that he has not done?

He writes the *Consolation* first as a protest and second only as an attempt to come to terms with his own imminent death. In the process, of course, he writes one of the most poignant examples of "prison literature."

Boethius, indeed, is searching for meaning in the face of utter meaninglessness. He knows he will be put to death soon. Thus, he needs to know why he must die.

Lady Philosophy certainly has her work cut out for her - not only must she console an innocent man who will be executed (there will be no last minute repeal, no rescue scene), but she must also convince him that all things, even those that are seemingly wrong and unfair, work towards ultimate good.

*If innocence is to be truly triumphant...it must comprehend its own purpose*

To do the job, the only tool Lady Philosophy possesses is reason. But how can the death of the

innocent be reasoned? Lady Philosophy tells the prisoner Boethius: "I shall quickly wipe the dark clouds of mortal things from your eyes" (Book I, Prose 2).

Her best method is to shift Boethius's mind away from the particular (his own sad predicament) and into the world of ideas, where his fate will fulfill a greater purpose - for she will lead him to meaning.

If innocence is to be truly triumphant, despite defeat and utter annihilation, it must comprehend its own purpose - each individual life is to be seen within the context of eternity.

The execution of Boethius will not be the victory of injustice, or the triumph of evil; rather, it will be the eventual working out of the good.

Lady Philosophy tells him:

*Nature leads you toward true good, but manifold error turns you away from it. Consider for a moment whether the things men think can give them happiness really bring them to the goal which nature planned for them. If money, or honor, or other goods of that kind really provide something which seems completely and perfectly good, then I too will admit that men can be happy by possessing them. But, if they not only cannot deliver what they promise, but are found to be gravely flawed in themselves, it is obvious that they have only the false appearance of happiness (Book II, Poem 2, Prose 3).*

Evil, therefore, is unstable and fleeting because it is part of the particular (transience). The good is eternal because it is the universal - this is the logic of the soul.

*essential goodness cannot change, nor can it be destroyed*

But what is the good, especially since it is the contemplation of it that Lady Philosophy says will console the condemned Boethius and help him understand his execution?

She suggests that whatever happens will be good, because Boethius is good. Despite his execution, he will always remain innocent. His essential goodness cannot change, nor can it be destroyed. And because he is good, he is part of the eternal and the universal.

In fact, his execution will serve to highlight injustice, because he is being killed not because of his own guilt but because of the evil nature and purpose of those who have power over him.

Thus, Lady Philosophy teaches him that despite his wretched state, he cannot lose sight of the process of his own goodness, which sadly must also include his execution:

...all these goods are one and the same things; therefore they cannot be parts. Otherwise, happiness would seem to be constituted of *one part, which is a contradiction in terms.... Clearly, all the rest must be related to the good. For riches are sought because they are thought to be good, power because it is believed to be good, and the same is true of honor, fame, and pleasure. Therefore, the good is the cause and sum of all that is sought for; for if a thing has neither the substance nor the appearance of good, it is not sought or desired by men. On the other hand, things which are not truly good, but only seem to be, are sought after as if they were good. It follows, then, that goodness is rightly considered the sum, pivot, and cause of all that men desire. The most important object of desire is that for the sake of which something else is sought as a means (Book III, Prose 10).*

Consequently, everything that happens to a good man is good, even that which is seemingly evil. The sad end of Boethius the man is but the natural process of the good, since it was not his goodness that led to his execution. Rather, his death is the manifestation of the evil of others.

*existence (which includes suffering) in its entirety is good*

Thus, his execution will reveal injustice, which in time will be corrected by justice. By contributing his individual goodness, he is making possible the working out of the greater good.

In this way, Lady Philosophy gives meaning to Boethius, for she aligns his innocence with a universal goal - the striving toward the good. And it is this striving that gives a man meaning.

Lady Philosophy declares evil to be unhappiness, weakness and non-existence. Since all things seek out the good (the natural desire contained in all human beings), then evil is the failure to attain the good, the failure to fulfill the natural desire for good, because of weakness or ignorance. The result is suffering.

But how can a good man also suffer? Lady Philosophy suggests that injustice is ultimately fleeting. It only appears that good men suffer, because the human perception of things is always limited and therefore provisional.

Indeed, it is justice that ultimately pervades, which is part of the eternal good. Just as all things work toward the good, so do all things work toward justice; and thereupon do all our concepts of harmony and order depend.

Here, too, Lady Philosophy places freedom of the will - human beings do know that things will come to a conclusion, but they cannot know for certain what, or when, this conclusion may be.

*the good man always yearns to do good, no matter what that might entail*

However, this argument has limitations in that Lady Philosophy does not fully explain how freedom is to

be used and what it is for. But then that is not really her objective, for she must console a condemned man, and more importantly she must give meaning to the necessity of his death.

Because legality is also morality, Lady Philosophy assures the prisoner Boethius that existence (which includes suffering) in its entirety is good, and events happen as they must, in order to establish the universal working of the good.

Thus, Boethius is consoled by the idea that he, and his innocence, belong not to worldly injustice, but to eternal and universal justice. His life and unfortunate death are worthy components of the essential goodness of the universe.

It becomes his duty, then, to accept his role, however painful that might be, to become a contributor to eternal goodness:

*Therefore stand firm against vice and cultivate virtue. Lift up your soul to worthy hopes...If you will face it, the necessity of virtuous action imposed upon you is very great, since all your actions are done in the sight of a Judge who sees all things (Book V, Prose 6).*

In this way, the innocent individual, cut off from family, friends and society, is given meaning, for the good man always yearns to do good, no matter what that might entail:

*...since the good is happiness, all good men are made happy by the very fact that they are good. And we have already shown that those who are happy are gods. Therefore, the reward of good men, which time cannot lessen, nor power diminish, nor the wickedness of any man tarnish, is to become gods (IV, Prose 3).*

Innocence, therefore, cannot be taken away from the good man. This is true justice, in which Boethius finds his consolation. And this consolation also gives to the suffering that which is always denied the unjust - the highest expression of human worth - that is, dignity.

***(The [image](#) shows a painting by Aleksander Sochaczewski, "Farewell, Europe!" It dates from 1893).***

