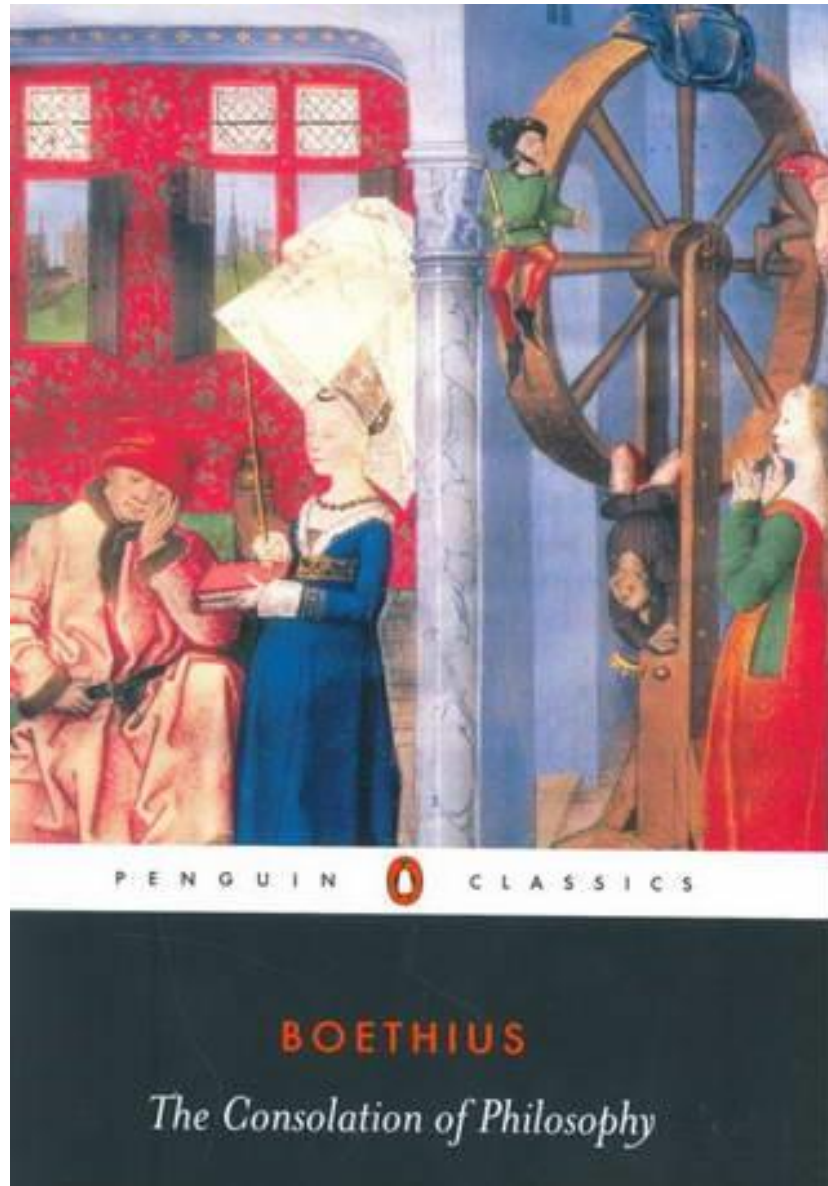


## A Summary of The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius



## A Summary of *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius

Prentice Hall, 1962

ISBN: 978-0023464508

Summary by Cara Whitaker, written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd.

[You can purchase the full text at Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

## About the Author

Early tradition holds Boethius to be a martyr for the Christian faith. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius became an orphan at the age of seven. He was then reared in the household of the aristocratic family of Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus. As a part of his education, Boethius was extremely well educated, fluent with Greek, and familiar with the works of Greek philosophy. He then married Symmachus's daughter Rusticiana. Boethius made great mathematical contributions in his day through his writings on mathematics. He composed numerous theological and philosophical commentaries, culminating in his greatest work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. He attempted to translate and commentate on all the works of Plato and Aristotle, hoping to provide a synthesis of these two important Greek philosophers. This synthesis, however, was never achieved as Boethius died before he could complete his translation into Latin of Plato. Boethius, under the reign of Theodoric, became head of all the government and court services. In this governmental capacity, Boethius strived to mend the relationship between the Church in Rome and the Church in Constantinople. This is said to be the reason why he fell from the favor of Theodoric, who was an Arian. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius was charged with treason because of his faith. Symmachus, Boethius' foster father and father-in-law, defended him against the charges but then he was charged. Both were later executed. Boethius is buried in the same Church as St. Augustine in Pavia, Italy.

## General Overview

*The Consolation of Philosophy* was written from the cell of the imprisoned Boethius. It is a dialogue between Lady Philosophy and the imprisoned and downcast Boethius. There are many echoes of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus that run throughout this unique piece of prison literature. Boethius demonstrates both the goodness of the universe in his semi-proof for the existence of God and the fleetingness of this world. His main argument is the fleetingness and the unreality of all earthly greatness and the superior desirability of mental reality.

*The Consolation of Philosophy* is divided into five books. Each book contains sections consisting of both verse and prose.

## Book One

Boethius is first presented to the reader as he is in a state of desolation in his cell. Adverse fortune has affected him in such a manner as to lower him to the level of a prisoner of the state by doing his duty. For him, Poetry is the only comfort, or at least so he believes. Another consolation comes to him, the majestic appearance of a woman who reveals herself to be Lady Philosophy: "While I silently pondered these things, and decided to write down my wretched complaint, there appeared standing above me a woman of majestic countenance whose flashing eyes seemed wise beyond the ordinary wisdom of men." She, the epitome of the human reason, has come to oppose his other comfort, Poetry. Whereas poetry only offers the emotional comforts from the Muses, Lady Philosophy is able to provide the only true consolation for human misery.

Lady Philosophy, "Mistress of all virtues," begins her teaching by establishing the thesis of her argument: the wise man stands above good and bad fortune, serene in the strength he derives from self-mastery. She reminds Boethius of his former devotion to her in wisdom and that all of her best followers have suffered in a similar manner to him. Boethius, so steeped in thought of his own plight fails to see the wisdom that can be gleaned from the advice of Lady Philosophy. He proceeds to enter into the particulars of his situation. He entered into a life of public service because of Plato who asked for a government by the wise and selfless: "You yourself proposed the course I have followed when you made Plato say that civil governments would be good if wise men were appointed rulers, or if those appointed to rule would study wisdom." It was exactly the people whom he wished to replace that were his downfall, wicked selfish politicians. He is appalled by the fact that in his situation the wicked seem to have prevailed over the just.

Boethius universalizes his downfall. “Fortune ought to have been shamed, if not by the innocence of the accused, then at least by the villainy of the accusers.” He himself has been ruined but it is not in ruin that he takes the greatest offense; it is in the general attack upon wisdom and virtue that is seen in his downfall. Those representing the irrational and evil forces have prevailed over the good and just. This, for Boethius, seems to be a victory for the forces of evil everywhere. Because of the supposed triumph of evil in his circumstance, more good men will lose to the forces of evil. “I complain now of the attacks of the wicked men against virtue; the reason for my surprise is that they have accomplished what they set out to do. The desire to do evil may be due to human weakness; but for the wicked to overcome the innocent in the sight of God – that is monstrous.”

Lady Philosophy, however, remains unimpressed with Boethius’ self-pity. She posits that Boethius has a greater weakness than she first suspected. He was not driven from wisdom, but has willingly banished himself from it by clinging to false values. Lady Philosophy does grant that everything he has said of his treatment is true, but she calls him a fool to posit that justice as he sees it, temporal rewards and punishments based on merit, will be found in the fleetingness of this world. She tells him, though, that due to his degree of despair he is in no state to consent to her arguments; she must gently lead him down the path of wisdom.

The first premise that she establishes is the governance of the world by Divine Providence. The world is not governed by chance. This is the first step in Lady’s philosophy’s cure of Boethius’ state of despair. Boethius has forgotten both the nature and purpose of man and cannot therefore understand the calamities that have happened to him. “You are confused because you have forgotten what you are, and, therefore you are upset because you are in exile and stripped of all your possessions. Because you are ignorant of the purpose of things, you think that stupid and evil men are powerful and happy.” She, however, will make use of her first posited truth, which concerns Divine Providence, in order to lead him from darkness into the light of truth.

## Book Two

In book two, the reader is introduced to Lady Fortune and her nature. What is her nature? Her nature is the changeable and the fleeting. Boethius should have learned this from his personal experience with her. Lady Fortune is not one to be trusted because once a man trusts her and is deceived, he should have learned his lesson. “If you will recall her nature and habits, you will be convinced that you had nothing of much value when she was with you and you have not lost anything now that she is gone.” Whatever Lady Fortune bestows on man, she can just as easily take it away. She is depicted as a wheel. One can be high in her gifts but then have them completely taken away. But one must remember that temporal possessions are never man’s own; they are merely gifts of Lady Fortune on loan. Lady Fortune herself says thus, “You should be grateful for the use of things which belonged to someone else; you have no legitimate cause for complaint, as though you lost something which was your own...they obey me as servants obey their mistress: they come with me, and when I go, they go too.” Man came into this world lacking everything and it is thusly that he will leave. It is presumptuous on his part to cling too closely to Lady Fortune and her possessions. The only certain characteristic of Lady Fortune is her mutability.

Intellectually, Boethius acknowledges the validity of Lady Philosophy’s argument, but in his condition it is no comfort. Lady Fortune then examines what she classifies as extraordinarily good fortune up to this point in his life. If Boethius examines his life he will see that until now he has enjoyed many great graces from Lady Fortune, namely his adoption, his wife, and his good sons. He is no longer in the great graces of Lady Fortune, but her reign over him ends after his death. Boethius responds by saying that the worst part of his misfortune is his memory of his past fortune. Lady Philosophy then responds by saying that the most precious piece of fortune that Lady Fortune has given him, his family, has remained unharmed.

If Lady Fortune is unable to provide for man what constitutes human happiness then how is happiness on earth attained? Human happiness in this life is impossible to achieve. No one can ever attain every object of his desire or be sure that he will keep them. Happiness cannot be found in an external reality in the temporary gifts

of Lady Fortune. Lady Philosophy says thus concerning this, “Your error is painfully evident if you suppose that a man can improve himself by adding ornaments that are not his own. It cannot be done; for if a thing attracts attention by added decoration, that which is added is praised, but that which is covered and disguised remains as base as before.” The closest participation in happiness that man can achieve is within himself in the intellectual realm. Also, the human soul is immortal, so how could it be satisfied with a happiness that ends with the death of the body?

What are these transitory goods in which men commonly seek happiness? These goods include material possessions, wealth, power, and honor. One cannot find happiness in material possessions because one can never fully possess them; one cannot fully find happiness in wealth because it itself is just a means to something else; and one cannot fully find happiness in power and honor because they must be bestowed by someone who is not capable of recognizing true, good, and purpose. The goodness that can be found in all of these goods is the goodness found in the individual’s exercise of these gifts for the common good.

Boethius then responds to this speech by Lady Philosophy by saying that he never sought any of these transitory goods for the sake of himself, “You know that ambition for material things has not mastered me; but I have desired the opportunity for public service so that my virtue should not grow old and weak through lack of use.” However, she responds, you did revel in the glory that you received as a result of your public service. It is true, she remarks that excellent men who are serving the common good deserve glory but all men should remember that the only constancy of Lady Fortune is her inconstancy. When the soul, freed from the body, looks upon what it held dear in its earthly life, it will see it all as insignificant. Lady Philosophy’s ultimate conclusion in book two is that bad fortune is more profitable for man eternally. Good fortune tends to enslave the one on whom it is bestowed, while bad fortune fosters a detachment from mutable, earthly things.

## Book Three

Boethius receives all of Lady Philosophy’s advice in a more receptive manner than his initial dialogue with Lady Philosophy. He professed to have been strengthened by her most recent wisdom and seeks more. She then tells him that through wisdom she will lead him to true blessedness. It is in accord with man’s nature to seek happiness, but perfect happiness can only be found through the possession of a supreme good in which all goods are possessed. This supreme good contains within itself all the lesser goods and will completely fulfill all of man’s human desires. It is the folly of men in life to mistake these partial goods for this supreme good because these false goods do contain some good but are not the supreme good.

All of the lesser goods – riches, honor, power, fame, or bodily pleasures – are worthy of a desire because they are good but man must recognize their place. “These limited goods, which cannot achieve what they promise, and are not perfect in embracing all that is good, are not man’s path to happiness, nor can they make him happy in themselves.” Man’s problem in relation to these various goods arises when he treats them as if they are the supreme good. Lady Philosophy then readdresses why they are all fleeting. All of these earthly goods can be deceptive because they can never provide the happiness that man seeks in them. It is due to man’s fallen state that he seeks happiness in these multiple parts of goods but not initially the supreme good. Man can only find that happiness that he is seeking in the supreme good, God.

Lady Philosophy then proceeds to present her argument for the existence of one supreme good. In this poem, Lady Philosophy first requests the inspiration of God, the perfect good and source of all happiness. A supreme good must exist, she says, because without a standard of perfection we could not realize the imperfections that are all around and the imperfections in the temporal goods that man seeks. Since by definition God is good, containing no imperfections, He must be the supreme good. As the supreme good, then He must be the source of happiness for all men. “If we are to avoid progression *ad infinitum*, we must agree that the Most High God is full of the highest and most perfect good. But we have already established that perfect good is true happiness; therefore it follows that true happiness has its dwelling in the Most High God.” If this is true, however, in

order for man to become truly happy he must become as Godlike as possible. God is both the supreme good and the source of man's happiness. All other partial and apparent goods are merely aspects of God's goodness.

Unity, according to Lady Philosophy, is the principle of universe. There is perfect unity found in God who is the principle of existence. Everything in the world strives for unity and to fall from unity is to die. All things in the world, as they are ordered to one, are ordered to God who is the supreme good. All those, then, who seek happiness as is found in the perfect unity of God, will find happiness. All those who seek the disunity found in temporal possessions will not find happiness.

## Book Four

Boethius has listened to Lady Philosophy's well-presented argument and acknowledges its truth but then asks her how evil can exist. How is there evil in the world when the world is governed by the One who is perfect goodness? Also how is it that the evil in the world is not punished and is able to trample virtue? He says thus, "Here, though, is the greatest cause of my sadness: since there is a good governor of all things, how can there be evil and how can it go unpunished. . . That this can happen in the realm of an all-knowing and all-powerful God who desires only good must be a cause of surprise and sorrow to everyone." Evil, she then says, does not go unpunished. Lady Philosophy defends her premise saying, "The good are always powerful and the evil always weak and futile, that vice never goes unpunished nor virtue unrewarded, that the good prosper and the evil suffer misfortune."

All men seek happiness but it is only the good men who can obtain happiness and the evil or wicked men are powerless to obtain happiness. Evil men seek to attain happiness through their feeble means, which are unnatural and ineffectual. They are blinded by their ignorance and weakened through their vice. What is evil but a privation of a due good? Is it a lack of existence? The ability to do evil is a weakness and not a strength or power. Humans naturally seek happiness or the good. Only good men can achieve the good because they are the only ones who have the power to attain it. The punishment of the wicked is their wickedness. She says thus, "Anyone acting that way loses not only his strength but his very being, since to forsake the common goal of all existence is to forsake existence itself." The wicked lose their humanity because human nature is to be good and the wicked are no longer good; to be wicked is to not fully be human.

Boethius again concedes to Lady Philosophy's argument but laments the fact that the wicked are still permitted to hurt good men and go unpunished. Lady Philosophy responds to this by saying that the wicked are punished by the fact that they are wicked. Their wickedness will never permit them to be happy. Also, she says, the wicked are unhappier if they remain unpunished than if they are punished, since just punishment is in itself a good. She declares, "The wicked receive some good when they are punished, because the punishment itself is good inasmuch as it is just; conversely, when the wicked avoid punishment, they become more evil." This good found in punishment would lessen the evil found in their unhappiness because it would turn them on the correct path to the attainment of true happiness.

Lady Philosophy then further defends this argument that, she says, seems to be so contrary to what the ordinary man would think to be true. This, she proposes, is because ordinary men tend to consult their feelings on a subject rather than the proper nature of something. The final point that Lady Philosophy adds to this is that the wicked are sick with a disease of the soul. Because they are sick, the wicked ought to be regarded with compassion rather than hatred by the good. "Viciousness is a kind of disease of the soul, like illness in the body. And if sickness of the body is not something we hate, but rather regard with sympathy, we have much more reason to pity those whose minds are afflicted with wickedness, a thing worse than sickness." Also, punishment should be seen as a cure for the wickedness of the soul, which is the sickness of the wicked.

Boethius does not like this argument. He is unable to reconcile himself to a situation in which good men suffer the punishments that are fit for evildoers. In a world not governed by God's providence, but by chance, this

seems fine, but the world is governed by God. Philosophy acknowledges that this does seem to be a problem for man, but it should also be regarded as a mystery. The greatest philosophical problems, she says, involve the mysteries of Providence and Fate and Divine Foreknowledge and the freedom of the human will. She will try to solve this problem as best she can but it is still a mystery.

Everything that comes into being and happens in the world, she says, happens in the unchanging mind of God. The government of all mutable natures, as in the mind of God, is called Providence. This same government, looked upon with a reference to the temporal, is called Fate. The distinction between Providence and Fate has been made. "Providence is the immovable and simple form of all things which come into being, while Fate is the moving connection and temporal order of all things which the divine simplicity has decided to bring into being." Providence is the Divine Reason by which things are ordered and Fate is this same government observed in the temporal sphere of man. Fate may seem disordered at time, yet it is because man cannot see God's providential ordering of things. Lady Philosophy's final conclusion in all of this is that all fortune is good: "You can make of your fortune what you will; for any fortune which seems difficult either tests virtue or corrects and punishes vice." Men just fail to see that fortune either rewards or tests the good men or corrects and punishes the wicked.

## Book Five

As Boethius has accepted all of Lady Philosophy's arguments so far, he asks, what are we to make of chance "if chance is defined as an event produced by random motion and without any sequence of causes, when I say that there is no such as chance?" She sets out to properly define chance. Chance is not an event without causes, but an event whose causes are neither foreseen nor expected. It is defined as, "an unexpected event brought about by a concurrence of causes which had other purposes in view." This is followed by how there can be free choice in a world that is governed by divine providence.

Lady Philosophy says that every free nature must have free will because man can see that he is able to make decisions. "There is free will," she says, "and no rational nature can exist which does not have it. For any being, which by its nature has the use of reason, must also have the power of judgment by which it can make decisions and, by its own resources, distinguish between things which should be desired and things that should be avoided." She says that the exercise of free will depends on the clarity of judgment and the integrity of the will of the one who is choosing. Men who have previously made the decisions that lead to a vicious disposition have a hard time seeing things clearly and choosing clearly. Vicious men by choice have a harder time choosing the true good.

Boethius then raises another question: if man can control the outcome of events how does God have a foreknowledge of those events? If man cannot choose his actions then God would be responsible for man choosing evil. Lady Philosophy replies to this by saying that man is unable to understand the simplicity and perfection in Divine knowledge. They presume that God knows in the same manner that they do. Man however in his method of knowing has limitations that God does not. Humans will regard future events as uncertain, something that God does not. Man may regard the future as uncertain, something not at all true with God. God's divine intelligence sees and knows all in His omniscience. God, properly speaking, does not even have foreknowledge; He knows all of eternity in His one act of knowledge of the world. Lady Philosophy says, "He sees all things in His eternal present as you see some things in your temporal present. Therefore, this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and properties of things; it simply sees things present before it as they will later turn out to be in what we regard as the future." It is in this manner that He sees things which happen necessarily and through the free choice of man.

What God sees in His one act of knowing must happen but, in the case of man's free choice, the only necessity found in that event is God's knowledge of it. It is not to be found in the nature of the act itself. All things will happen accordingly that God knows will happen but some of these things are a result of man's free will. The

freedom that is found in man imposes upon man an obligation to act virtuously since vice is a punishment and a decline from the nature of man himself. All of man's actions are done in the sight of a Judge who rewards and punishes according to His perfect knowledge. Lady Philosophy's final encouragement to Boethius reads, "Therefore stand firm against vice and cultivate virtue. Lift up your soul to worthy hopes, and offer humble prayers to heaven. 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."