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Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* and Putting One’s Life into Perspective

Last month the new crop of freshman arrived on all of our campuses, and I’m sure yours also brought with them a variety of questions: How do I know what to major in? Why can’t I see my course schedule? My dad says I should get an MBA to get a higher salary – is that right? Why don’t we have more cable channels in the dorms?

Today my concern is not so much the questions themselves, but the range of the questions. We may be tempted to roll our eyes at some of these queries, but they do reflect the uniquely human ability to think across a spectrum of time and concerns, some immediate and frankly pretty inconsequential, and some larger and more important for our long-term well-being. We ask questions of equal breadth throughout our lives to try to make sense of what is happening to us; to put our life events into a comprehensive and meaningful narrative. Not surprisingly, we are more likely to pose questions of meaning and purpose when things are not going well: a death of a loved one, an illness, the loss of a job, natural disasters, tragic events in the news. Whether to ourselves, friends, clergy, doctors, or like Lear, shaking one’s fist at the storm in the night, we want to know, “Why is this happening? Why to me? What have I done to deserve this? What can I do about it?”

Very few people in our culture face the immediate concerns of Boethius. Sadly, we have recently witnessed horrible examples of public executions, but Boethius’ fate may seem so outside the realm of experience of us and our students that we might dismiss it as irrelevant or unimaginably out of reach. I would argue, however, that Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* takes advantage of the interstitial space between secular and religious approaches to try to come to terms not only with the end of life but with a perspective on one’s place in the human journey. Boethius contemplates with sadness and regret what he sees as a life of wasted work, but Lady Philosophy (without any mention of Christ or explicitly Christian values) helps him see that he is one thread in an enormous tapestry which has form, logic, and beauty that he cannot – and perhaps should not -- be able to see.

This set of concepts would be huge and difficult for anyone, especially a person of college age, to grasp. As instructors, we all deal with texts and concepts like this: whether the lesson is Kant, the Bible, or theories in the natural sciences, sometimes we all walk out of the classroom saying to ourselves, “Are they ever going to get it? Can they get it?” Today I will address some ways in which Boethius, and other texts and ideas, may eventually be meaningful for our students and, perhaps more importantly, by which we can come to grips with the fact that it is perfectly fine that we never see that result in our own time with these students.

First, we need to consider what it means to “put one’s life into perspective.” The phrase implies a larger view of the perceived object and a consideration of a number of events and experiences in relation to one another. Further implied, then, is the necessity of having a number of events and experiences to view, and also the sense that these matters may be troubling to manage and understand. Their level of experience is the initial issue when dealing with one’s life as an eighteen to twenty-two year old; as we would hope, most of their lives up to now have been blissfully full of supportive and healthy families and an exhilarating progress toward adulthood. There are many, many exceptions, of course: a few days ago one of my students buried her mother after a thirteen year battle with breast cancer; a friend of my son’s, also in college, has already had two surgeries for a cancerous brain tumor. We do not want to see any of our students faced with these situations, and we hesitate to dwell on the inevitability of loss and sadness just to get students to take their readings seriously. And it doesn’t work anyway: if we can’t get them to read the syllabus properly for next week, our chances of getting them to prepare for the vicissitudes of adult life seem slim to none. So do we turn Boethius into a way to cope with losing a student government election or facing a conduct violation charge in order to make him “relevant” now?

I’m going to put that question aside for a moment to outline Boethius’ own experiences and the perspective to which he eventually comes. Fortunately, some aspects of this text make it easier to teach than other readings. It is blessedly short, first of all, and his personal tragedy is stark and clear. In 522 A.D., Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius was a Master of Offices at Emperor Theodoric’s court in Ravenna. The late Roman Empire was, however, a precarious place and institution. Due to the deep divide between the Eastern and Western churches and the paranoia created by the crumbling of the centuries-old power structure, within a year Boethius found himself accused of treason, stripped of his office, imprisoned, and executed in 524 (possibly by having a rope tied around his head and tightened until his eyes bulged out and his skull cracked. But I digress). Despite Boethius’ dire situation, his extensive learning and literary range does not desert him in this text: the *Consolation* is not a merely a prose narrative but an amalgam of lyric forms, Homeric and Vergilian epic, Plato’s cosmology from the *Timaeus*, and allusions to over a dozen figures of classical history and mythology. While Christian beliefs are not mentioned, suggestions of several parables surface to provide philosophical and theological fullness to Boethius’ conversation with Lady Philosophy. His haunting conversations were explored later in Old English poetry, the Old French *Roman de la Rose*, and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, and had translators as illustrious as Queen Elizabeth I herself.

Part of what has touched readers for a millennium and a half is Boethius’ tangible, almost tactile response to his situation. He is, in this memoir/apology/meditation/consolation, understandably whiny about his imminent fate. He begins, “I used to write cheerful poems, happy and life-affirming, / but my eyes are wet with tears and the poems are those / that only grieving Muses would prompt me to compose, / heartbreaking verse from a suffering, heartbroken man” (1). He complains to Lady Philosophy that he has been falsely accused (probably true), that he has always supported the right cause in the face of political corruption, and that he has not behaved in his own interests. His reputation and life’s work is ruined, and he is to die soon. He is, literally, looking for “consolation.” What he gets from his supernatural advisor, however, is not exactly what he expects. Lady Philosophy begins by telling him, in no uncertain terms, that he got precisely what he should have anticipated: “You should have recognized that [your good fortune] was never in your control”; “You knew the mutability of Fortune,” and “If you submit your neck to her yoke, you cannot then complain about what happens to you or how the mistress you have yourself chosen is treating you badly” (39). These are the terms in which Boethius frames the questions I posed; essentially, why this and why me?

Philosophy responds by guiding him to through several stages of understanding about the futility of bemoaning his particular situation. First, he must give up the idea of earthly success or contentment as a right or even as a source of happiness. “Happiness is a good thing, surely, but it is a mood and no matter how pleasant it may be, one cannot prevent its passing when it will, as moods do” (40). The temporal nature of good Fortune should immediately make it suspect to humans, and she leads him to see that perfect happiness can only be found, as we might expect, in the goodness and perfection of God. But the bulk of the central section of the text is not the most challenging part of the *Consolation* for students. Although he couches these issues idiosyncratic terms, Boethius shows himself to be a faithful student of Aristotle and the Bible when discussing the ultimate good and our attraction to it, and readers will encounter similar notions in numerous classical and Christian texts. In Section VI, however, Boethius and his guide begin to address an iteration of his queries about the causes and purpose of human events that is often expressed now: in its annoying contemporary terms, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Although she rarely uses the language of predestination, Philosophy’s lesson is theologically familiar: the providence of God arranges all things, it is achieved through the working out of fate “in the unfolding of time” (132), and human beings, while rational, are bound by their temporality and physicality and are not capable of comprehending God’s eternally present understanding of the universe. Thus, while we cannot know it, what we see as “good” and “bad” events in our lives are, in fact, all “right” events: minute but vital elements in the proper working out of the universe. Philosophy’s final spiritual lesson, while simple and elegant, is also the most difficult for the average person to swallow: “God has prescience and is a spectator from on high, and as he looks down from his eternal present, he assigns rewards to the good and punishments to the wicked.” Her last words warn him, and us, against our human tendency to see life and act only on our level and in our terms: “Do not be deceived. It is required of you that you do good” (175).

So do these ideas, frustrating and dour to a young mind, make the *Consolation* a futile text for undergraduate teaching? This can be a discouraging thought for several reasons. We face the classroom challenges of trying to put texts and ideas into historical and intellectual context and steering our students away from oversimplifying. We also face institutional challenges of proving that those classroom efforts are effective, especially if we operate in a culture of meeting quantitative standards of evalution within a sixteen week time frame. How can we realistically expect our students to absorb in a few months the depths of the literature, philosophy, or practical or theoretical information that we work so hard to address in higher education? I neither advocate the cop-out of claiming “If they learn something fine; if not, fine,” or a reading list mentality of “You’re reading this for your own good.” Rather, it can be healthy for us as teaching professionals to remain aware of the lengthy and sometimes invisible process of cognitive development and the ability of our students to absorb what we are teaching. The larger picture starts with the work of William G. Perry, the Harvard educational psychologist who spent fifteen years identifying stages of intellectual growth in college students. Perry starts from Piaget’s concept of “décalage”: the use of analogy to expand meaning which can work in different directions of development. “Vertical décalage” “manifests itself in the ‘lifting’ of a pattern of meaning from a concrete experience and using it as an analogue for meaning at a level of greater abstraction” (88), while “horizontal décalage” denotes students’ ability to “transfer the more advanced patterns of thought learned in one area to areas in which they have been thinking more simplistically” (89). Perry’s research determined that people in their late teens and early twenties go through nine stages of processing complex and contradictory information, from the black and white “Dualistic” stage, in which they seek “the” right answer, to “Constructed Knowledge,” characterized by the ability to integrate knowledge as an ongoing and evolving activity that can be applied to increasingly complex problems and that does not necessarily seek a definitive answer. In the most mature stage of cognitive ability, Perry explains, students – and as adults throughout their lives -- become comfortable with the continuing need to seek inquiry and reorient themselves with new information: Perry says “Order and disorder may be seen as fluctuations in experience” (95).

The *Consolation* is a text which must be taught within these terms. As the maturing brain breaks down the dualistic approach to complex human issues, replacing that mental framework is a slow and multi-stage process. The distance, both temporal and experiential, between Boethius and 21st century teenagers is vast, but with increasing ability to analogize both horizontally to emerging events and vertically to a more comprehensive understanding of those events, students, and later as adults, may be able to develop an adaptive and stabilizing life perspective.

Isn’t this actually what we are striving for in teaching core texts? To have them affect our students’ lives past the date of their graduation? Some of the mantras of a liberal arts education (all of these, by the way, are in the Furman mission statement, and those of several other institutions in attendance here this weekend) are sayings such as “Educating the whole person,” Educating for lifelong learning,” and, to quote our mission statement: “Integration of knowledge into a meaningful synthesis.” These statements imply that, despite the current pressure that we all feel to produce “measurable outcomes” (one of my least favorite phrases) after a few semesters of study, we really don’t expect or even want students to learn everything from us in four years. As liberal arts academics, one of our goals is to push our students to see further than their own needs and interests, both in terms of service to others and the value of their vocational choices. We need to give them the tools to deal not with the questions they know now, but the questions they can only have in the future.

Core texts can be used to puzzle them, disturb them a little, annoy them. The *Apology*, the *Nicomachean Ethics,* and thousands of other philosophical, theological, and literary works were not written simply to be the subject of tens of thousands of scholarly articles. Similarly, Boethius did not write the *Consolation* so I could stand up here today and talk to you about it. These texts are meant to be used by human beings to make sense of their lives. Not now, but years after our students leave us when they find the need to put the events of their lives in some perspective, will be the point at which the rubber meets the road for all of that admissions tour and mission statement language. The fact that the *Consolation* cannot be meaningful for college students is exactly why we teach it to them now.

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