

the heavens are less wonderful for their foundation and speed than for the order that rules them.⁸

'The sleek looks of beauty are fleeting and transitory, more ephemeral than the blossom in spring. If, as Aristotle said, we had the piercing eyesight of the mythical Lynceus⁹ and could see right through things, even the body of an Alcibiades,¹⁰ so fair on the surface, would look thoroughly ugly once we had seen the bowels inside. Your own nature doesn't make you look beautiful. It is due to the weak eyesight of the people who see you. Think how excessive this desire for the good of the body is, when, as you know, all that you admire can be reduced to nothing by three days of burning fever.

8. This passage must be understood in terms of the Ptolemaic explanation of the universe which was generally accepted from the second century A.D. until the time of Copernicus. According to this theory the universe was geocentric. The earth was surrounded by a series of concentric transparent spheres in each of which was fixed one of the 'seven planets', viz. the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. (Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were not discovered until the eighteenth century and later.) Beyond the sphere of Saturn lay the sphere of the fixed stars, and beyond that the *Primum Mobile*, which is caused by God to rotate on its own axis once in every twenty-four hours, the speed of the rotation being very high on account of the vast size of the sphere. As it rotates the *Primum Mobile* communicates its motion to the sphere lying contiguous to it, which is thus moved in the same direction, but at a slower speed; the motion of the sphere of the fixed stars is communicated in turn to the sphere of Saturn, and so it progresses through the other six spheres. In this way the observable motions of the heavenly bodies were accounted for, though the Aristotelian account, with which Boethius was acquainted, and the full details of the Ptolemaic account are much more complex, than this brief outline. (See for the Ptolemaic system A. C. Crombie, *Augustine to Galileo*, Mercury Books no. 3, pp. 82 ff. and for Aristotle, W. D. Ross, *Aristotle*, London, 1923 etc., pp. 96-7.) It is the abstract mathematical complexity of the system which regulates the movements of the planets which Boethius finds really wonderful, not just the physical construction of the universe or the immense speed of its rotation.

9. Lynceus was one of the Argonauts, who was supposed to have such sharp eyes that he could see in the dark and discover the whereabouts of hidden treasure. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, ii, p. 246.

10. Alcibiades, an Athenian military leader of the late fifth century B.C. was famous for his wealth and beauty and notorious for the use he made of them. A good picture of this brilliant but dissolute man is given in Plato's *Symposium* (translated by W. Hamilton in the Penguin Classics).

'The sum of all this is that because they can neither produce the good they promise nor come to perfection by the combination of all good, these things are not the way to happiness and cannot by themselves make people happy.'

'Alas, how men by blindness led
Go from the path astray.
Who looks on spreading boughs for gold,
On vines for jewels gay?
Who hides his nets on mountain tops
For a board with fish high piled?
Who sails his boat upon the sea
To hunt the she-goat wild?
The very ocean's depths men know
Beneath the waves on high;
They know which strand is rich with pearls,
Which shores with purple dye;
They know the bays for tender fish,
For shellfish where to try.
But in their blindness men know not
Where lies the good they seek:
That which is higher than the sky
On earth below they seek.
What can I wish you foolish men?
Wealth and fame pursue,
And when your toil false good has won,
Then may you see the true!'

IX True Happiness

'I have said enough to give a picture of false happiness, and if you can see that clearly, the next thing is to show what true happiness is like.'

'I do indeed see that sufficiency has nothing to do with riches, or power with kingship, respect with honours, glory with fame, or happiness with pleasures.'

'But have you grasped the reasons for this?'

'I think I can see a glimmer of them, but I would like to learn of them more clearly from you.'

'The reason is very clear. That which is one and undivided is mistakenly subdivided and removed by men from the state of truth and perfection to a state of falseness and imperfection. Do you consider self-sufficiency as a state deficient in power?'

'Not at all.'

'Of course not; for if a being had some weakness in some respect, it would necessarily need the help of something else.'

I agreed.

+ 'So that self-sufficiency and power are of one and the same nature.'

'So it seems.'

'Would you then consider a being of this kind beneath contempt, or on the contrary supremely worthy of veneration?'

'The latter, there is no doubt about it.'

'Then let us add the state of being revered to sufficiency and power, that we may judge all three to be one.'

'We must, if we care to admit the truth.'

'What do you think, then, would such a combination be unrecognized and unknown, or famous and renowned? Granted that it lacks nothing, possesses all power, and is supremely worthy of honour, ask yourself whether it would lack a glory which it cannot provide for itself and therefore whether it seems of qualified merit.'

'I can only say that in view of its nature it would be unsurpassed in glory.'

'And consequently we may say that glory is no different from the three we already have.'

'Yes.'

'If there were, then, a being self-sufficient, able to accomplish everything from its own resources, glorious and worthy of reverence, surely it would also be supremely happy?'

'How any sorrow could approach such a being is inconceivable: it must be admitted that provided the other qualities are permanent, it will be full of happiness.'

'And for the same reason this conclusion, too, is inescapable; sufficiency, power, glory, reverence and happiness differ in name but not in substance.'

'Yes.'

'Human perversity, then, makes divisions of that which by nature is one and simple, and in attempting to obtain part of something which has no parts, succeeds in getting neither the part - which is nothing - nor the whole, which they are not interested in.'

'How does that happen?'

'If a man pursues wealth by trying to avoid poverty, he is not working to get power; he prefers being unknown and unrecognized, and even denies himself many natural pleasures to avoid losing the money he has got. But certainly no sufficiency is achieved this way, since he is lacking in power and vexed by trouble; he is of no account because of his low esteem, and is buried in obscurity. And if a man pursues only power, he expends wealth, despises pleasures and honour without power, and holds glory of no account. But you can see how much this man also lacks; at any one time he lacks the necessities of life and is consumed by worry, from which he cannot free himself, so he ceases to be what he most of all wants to be, that is, powerful. A similar argument can be applied to honour, glory, and pleasures, for, since any one of them is the same as the others, a man who pursues one of them to the exclusion of the others, cannot even acquire the one he wants.'

'But suppose someone should want to obtain them all at one and the same time.'

'Then he would be seeking the sum of happiness. But do you think he would find it among these things which we have shown to be unable to confer what they promise?'

'No, I don't.'

'So that it is impossible to find happiness among these things which are thought to confer each of the desired states individually?'

'I agree, and no truer word could be spoken.'

'Then there you have both the nature and the cause of false happiness. Now turn your mind's eye in the opposite direction and you will immediately see the true happiness that I promised.'

'Even a blind man could see it,' I said, 'and you revealed it just now when you were trying to show the causes of false happiness. For unless I'm mistaken, true and perfect happiness is that which makes a man self-sufficient, strong, worthy of respect, glorious and joyful. And to show you that I have more than a superficial understanding, without a shadow of doubt I can see that happiness to be true happiness which, since they are all the same thing, can truly bestow any one of them.'

'You are blessed in this belief, my child, provided you add one thing.'

'What is that?'

'Do you think there is anything among these mortal and degenerate things which could confer such a state?'

'No, I don't, and you have proved it as well as anyone could wish.'

'Clearly, therefore, these things offer man only shadows of the true good, or imperfect blessings, and cannot confer true and perfect good.'

'Yes.'

'Since then you have realized the nature of true happiness and seen its false imitations, what remains now is that you should see where to find this true happiness.'

'Which is the very thing I have long and eagerly been waiting for.'

'But since in the *Timaeus* my servant Plato was pleased to

ask for divine help even over small matters,¹¹ what do you think we ought to do now in order to be worthy of discovering the source of that supreme good?

'We ought to pray to the Father of all things. To omit to do so would not be laying a proper foundation.'

'Right,' she said, and immediately began the following hymn.

- 'O Thou who dost by everlasting reason rule,
 Creator of the planets and the sky, who time
 From timelessness didst bring, unchanging Mover,
 No cause drove Thee to mould unstable matter, but
 5 The form benign of highest good within Thee set.
 All things Thou bringest forth from Thy high archetype:
 Thou, height of beauty, in Thy mind the beauteous world
 Dost bear, and in that ideal likeness shaping it,
 Dost order perfect parts a perfect whole to frame.
 10 The elements by harmony Thou dost constrain,
 That hot to cold and wet to dry are equal made,
 That fire grow not too light, or earth too fraught with weight.
 The bridge of threefold nature madest Thou soul, which spreads
 Through nature's limbs harmonious and all things moves.
 15 The soul once cut, in circles two its motion joins,
 Goes round and to itself returns encircling mind,
 And turns in pattern similar the firmament.
 From causes like Thou bringst forth souls and lesser lives,
 Which from above in chariots swift Thou dost disperse
 20 Through sky and earth, and by Thy law benign they turn
 And back to Thee they come through fire that brings them home.
 Grant, Father, that our minds Thy august seat may scan,
Grant us the sight of true good's source, and grant us light
 That we may fix on Thee our mind's unblinded eye.
 25 Disperse the clouds of earthly matter's cloying weight;
 Shine out in all Thy glory; for Thou art rest and peace

11. Before embarking on his account of how the universe began Timaeus says they must pray to all the gods and goddesses, for 'everyone with the least sense always calls on god at the beginning of any undertaking, small or great'. (Plato, *Timaeus* 27c, tr. H. D. P. Lee, Penguin Classics, p. 40.)

God's
role
on Platon
phil.

To those who worship Thee; to see Thee is our end,
Who art our source and maker, lord and path and goal.¹²

12. This poem, remarkable for the masterly succinctness of its majestic poetry, has long been regarded as a kind of epitome of the first part of Plato's *Timaeus*, and was especially dear to commentators of the early Middle Ages whose direct knowledge of Plato was otherwise confined to a translation of the *Timaeus* by Chalcidius. There are a number of points, however, in which the Boethian version differs from the *Timaeus* which cannot, therefore, be regarded as its only source. The epitome begins at line 4, and the following parallels with H. D. P. Lee's translation of the *Timaeus* are noteworthy: line 6, Lee, p. 42; 9, Lee, p. 44; 10-12, Lee, pp. 43-4; 13-14, Lee, pp. 49 and 46; 15-16, Lee, pp. 48, 45 and 49; 18, Lee, p. 57; 19, Lee, *ibid*; 20 and 21, Lee, pp. 57-8. For most of the passages for which there is no parallel in the *Timaeus* sources can be found in the writings of the Neoplatonists and especially Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus*. The poem, in fact, is composed in the form of a Platonic hymn to God, and is full of phrases which echo the vocabulary of the Platonic hymns. There is also some influence from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, particularly in the movement of the final lines of the poem: the introduction of the particle *for* in line 26 parallels the construction of the *Gloria* in the liturgy of the Western church and the Lord's Prayer rather than the Platonic hymns. And no one can be deaf to the echo in the final line of St John's gospel.

The following phrases need a word of comment:

ll. 7-8. Nowhere does Plato say that God carries the model of the universe in his mind; this is part of the teaching of Neo-platonism.

l. 16. 'encircling mind'. Plato does not say that the soul encircles mind. Plotinus, however, uses the figure of the dance of the imperfect around the perfect, i.e. of created soul around the uncreated mind of God.

l. 17. 'in pattern similar'. Proclus speaks of Soul as set between Mind and Body; soul is moved by Mind, i.e. God, which in a similar way itself moves Body, i.e. corporeal and concrete nature - here the firmament.

l. 18. 'lesser lives'. Proclus commenting on *Timaeus* 41d holds that there are three different kinds of souls; the 'lesser lives' of this passage are either souls enclosed in earthly bodies, or, lesser souls compared with the world soul described in lines 15-17.

ll. 19-21 contain a summary of Neo-platonic religion, the descent of the souls (figuratively spoken of as fixed in chariots in a formula taken over by the Neo-Platonists from Plato himself) from God and their ultimate ascent and return through the purifying action of fire which returns them to God.

Even, therefore, in the part of Boethius' hymn which has been seen as an epitome of the *Timaeus*, Boethius is heavily influenced by the doctrine and sacred hymns of Neo-platonism. For details see Friedrich Klingner, *De Boethii Consolatione Philosophiae*, 2te Unveränderte Auflage, Weidmann, Zurich/Dublin, 1966, pp. 38-67. And for Boethius' use of Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus*, H. R. Patch in *Speculum* VIII, 1933, pp. 41-51.

'Since, then, you have seen the form both of imperfect and of perfect good, I think we now have to show where this perfect happiness is to be found.

'The first question to ask is, I think, whether any good of the kind I defined a moment ago can exist in the natural world. This will prevent our being led astray from the truth of the matter before us by false and ill-founded reasoning. But the existence of this good and its function as a kind of fountain-head of all good things cannot be denied; for everything that is said to be imperfect is held to be so by the absence of perfection. So that if a certain imperfection is visible in any class of things, it follows that there is also a proportion of perfection in it. For if you do away with perfection, it is impossible to imagine how that which is held to be imperfect could exist. The natural world did not take its origin from that which was impaired and incomplete, but issues from that which is unimpaired and perfect and then degenerates into this fallen and worn out condition. But we showed just now that there is a certain imperfect happiness in perishable good, so that there can be no doubt that a true and perfect happiness exists.

'Which is a very sound and true conclusion,' I said.

'As to where it is to be found, then, you should think as follows. It is the universal understanding of the human mind that God, the author of all things, is good. Since nothing can be conceived better than God, everyone agrees that that which has no superior is good. Reason shows that God is so good that we are convinced that His goodness is perfect. Otherwise He couldn't be the author of creation. There would have to be something else possessing perfect goodness over and above God, which would seem to be superior to Him and of greater antiquity. For all perfect things are obviously superior to those that are imperfect. Therefore, to avoid an

unending argument, it must be admitted that the supreme God is to the highest degree filled with supreme and perfect goodness. But we have agreed that perfect good is true happiness; so that it follows that true happiness is to be found in the supreme God.

'I accept that. There is nothing in any way open to contradiction.'

'But,' she said, 'I must ask you to make sure that your approval of our statement that the supreme God is to the highest degree filled with supreme good is unqualified and final.'

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'By avoiding the assumption that this Father of creation has received this supreme good with which He is said to be filled from outside Himself, or that He possesses it by nature but in such a way as would lead you to suppose that the substance¹³ of God the possessor was a separate thing from the

13. The application of the word 'substance' in this passage may seem strange. It is, in fact, a technical term of Aristotelian metaphysics, denoting the individual thing about which assertions can be made. For Aristotle, a substance is simply a real thing which actually exists, but since in his view matter is something negative without proper characteristics of its own, that which makes things definite and distinguishable is their form. 'The sensible individuals cannot be defined owing to the material element in them, which renders them perishable and makes them obscure to our knowledge. On the other hand, substance is primarily the definable essence or form of a thing, the principle in virtue of which the material element is some definite concrete object. It follows from this that substance is primarily form which is, in itself, immaterial, so that if Aristotle begins by asserting that individual sensible objects are substances, the course of his thought carries him on towards the view that pure form alone is truly and primarily substance. But the only forms that are really independent of matter are God, the Intelligences of the spheres and the active intellect in man, so that it is these forms which are primarily substance.' (Copleston, *op. cit.*, I, ii, p. 48.) This teaching is alluded to by Boethius in his tractate *On the Trinity*, where he adds, 'When we say God, we seem to denote a substance; but it is a substance that is supersubstantial.' (Loeb Classical Library ed., p. 17.) The same sort of language is, of course, met with in the Nicene Creed where the Son is said to be of one substance with the Father.

substance of the happiness He possesses. If you thought that He received it from outside Himself, you would be able to count the giver superior to the receiver. But we are in agreement that it is right to consider God the most excellent of things.

'On the other hand, if goodness is a natural property of God, but something logically distinct from Him, whenever we speak of God as the author of creation, an able mind might be able to imagine the existence of a power responsible for bringing together the two that were separate.

'Finally, if one thing is distinct from another, it cannot be the thing from which it is perceived to be distinct. So that which by its own nature is something distinct from supreme good, cannot be supreme good; but this is something we may not hold about Him to whom we agree there is nothing superior. It is impossible for anything to be by nature better than that from which it is derived. I would therefore conclude with perfect logic that that which is the origin of all things is in its own substance supreme good.'

'Perfectly right.'

'But we have agreed that supreme good is the same as happiness.'

'Yes.'

'So that we have to agree that God is the essence of happiness.'

'Your premises are incontestable and I see that this inference follows upon them.'

'Then consider whether this, too, can be firmly accepted: that it is impossible for two supreme goods to exist separate from one another. For it is clear that if the two goods are separate, the one cannot be the other, so that neither could be perfect when each is lacking to the other. But that which is not perfect is obviously not supreme. It is therefore impossible for there to be two separate supreme goods. However, we deduced that both happiness and God are supreme goodness,

so that it follows that supreme happiness is identical with supreme divinity.'

'There could scarcely be a conclusion more true to reality, or more sure in its reasoning, or more worthy of God.'

'I will add something to it. Just as in geometry some additional inference may be drawn from a theorem that has been proved, called in technical language, in Greek a *porisma* and in Latin a corollary, I too will give you a kind of corollary. Since it is through the possession of happiness that people become happy, and since happiness is in fact divinity, it is clear that it is through the possession of divinity that they become happy. But by the same logic as men become just through the possession of justice, or wise through the possession of wisdom, so those who possess divinity necessarily become divine. Each happy individual is therefore divine. While only God is so by nature, as many as you like may become so by participation.

'What you say is beautiful and valuable, whether you give it the Greek or the Latin name.'

'But the most beautiful thing is what logic leads us to add to all this.'

'What is that?'

'Are all the many things we see included under the word happiness like parts combining to form a single body, yet separate in their variety, or is there any one of them which can fully supply the essence of happiness and under which the others may be classed?'

'Could you clarify the question by being more specific?'

'Well, we consider happiness something good, don't we?'

'Yes, the supreme good.'

'You could say the same of all of them. Absolute sufficiency is judged to be the same as happiness, and so too are power, reverence, glory and pleasure. Well, the question is this, all these things - sufficiency, power and the others - are they

good as if happiness were a body of which they were members, or is goodness a kind of heading to which they belong?'

'I understand the question which you are proposing we should ask, but I should like to hear what your answer would be.'

'This is how I would resolve it. If all these were related to happiness like limbs to a body, they would differ from one another, because it is the nature of parts that the body is one, but the parts that make it up are diverse. But all these things have been proved to be identical. So that they are not like limbs. Moreover it would appear that happiness was a body made up of a single limb, which is impossible.'

'There is no doubt of that; but I am eager for what is to come.'

'It is clear that the other properties are classed under good. It is just because sufficiency is judged a good that people want it, and it is just because it too is believed to be a good that power is sought after. And exactly the same conclusion may be reached about reverence, glory and pleasure.'

'The chief point and reason, therefore, for seeking all things is goodness. For it is quite impossible for that which contains no good in itself whether real or apparent, to be an object of desire. On the other hand, things which are not good by nature are sought after if they nevertheless seem as if they were truly good.'

'The result is, therefore, that there is justice in the belief that goodness is the chief point upon which the pursuit of everything hinges and by which it is motivated. What seems most to be desired is the thing that motivates the pursuit of something, as, for example, if a man wants to go riding for the sake of health; it is not so much the motion of horse-riding he desires as the resultant good health. Since, therefore, all things are desired for the sake of the good in them, no one desires them as much as the good itself. But we are agreed that the reason for desiring things is happiness. So that it

is patently obvious that the good itself and happiness are identical.

'I can see no reason for anyone to disagree.'

'But we have shown that God and happiness are one and the same thing.'

'Yes.'

'We may safely conclude, then, that God is to be found in goodness itself and nowhere else.'

'Come hither now all you who captive are,
Whom false desire enchains in wicked bonds;
Desire that makes her home in earthly minds;
Here will you find release from grievous toil,
Here find a haven blessed with peaceful calm,
An ever open refuge from distress.
Not all the gold that Tagus' sands bestow,
That Hermus from his glittering banks casts up,
Or Indus, on whose torrid shores are strewn
Green emeralds intermixed with dazzling pearls,
May sharpen and make bright the intellect,
But wealth in its own darkness clouds the thoughts.
For all that thus excites and charms the mind
Dim earth has fostered in her caverns deep;
While that bright light which rules and animates
The sky, will shun such dark and ruined souls:
Whoever once shall see this shining light
Will say the sun's own rays are not so bright.'

XI

'I agree, for all that you have said is established and connected by the soundest of reasoning.'

Then she asked, 'How valuable would you think it if you could come to know the good itself?'

'Infinitely valuable,' I said, 'if I should also be able to see God, who is the good.'

'I will make it clear with unimpeachable reasoning,' she said, 'provided our recent conclusions may stand.'

'They may,' I said.

'We have proved, then, haven't we, that the various things that the majority of men pursue are not perfect and good, for the reason that they differ from one another, and because they are lacking to one another and cannot confer full and perfect good. On the other hand, true good does come about when they are brought together into one form and efficient power, as it were, so that sufficiency becomes identical with power, reverence, glory and pleasure; unless all are one and the same thing they have no claim to be included among worthwhile objects of pursuit.' †

'You have proved it and there is no room at all for doubt.'

'When these objects differ, they're not good, but when they begin to be one they become good; so it comes about that it is through the acquisition of unity that these things are good, doesn't it?'

'It seems so.'

'But do you or do you not agree that everything that is good is so through participation in goodness?'

'I do agree.'

'Then you are obliged to agree by the same argument that unity and goodness are identical. For things whose natural effect is identical must have the same substance in common.' †

'I cannot gainsay it.'

'You know, then, that everything that is remains and subsists just so long as it is one, but perishes and dissolves immediately it ceases to be one?'

'How is that?'

'It is just as with living creatures: when soul and body come together and remain united, we speak of a living being, but when this unity breaks up through the separation of either component, it is clear that the living being perishes and no