

**John Marenbon, *Boethius*, (Great Medieval Thinkers Series)  
Oxford: University Press, 2003, pp. 252 + xvi. £13.99, paperback.**

Studies of Boethius often focus on particular writings and do not display the ambience of his thought. For that reason the field of Medieval Studies has long needed a book that introduces the general reader to all of Boethius's works. The present volume combines historical background with systematic analysis and thus takes an important step toward meeting this need.

Chapter One, a short introduction, raises two questions: (1) whether Boethius was a "medieval" thinker and (2) whether he was a "great" thinker. The first, of course, is decidable by how one defines the term "Middle Ages", and whatever considerations one thinks relevant here, there can be no question of the importance of Boethius's works to later medieval thinkers. He was the principal conduit through which earlier medieval thinkers knew the classical sources and his works were indispensable to later thinkers who had access to Aristotle's texts. Some measure of his influence can be inferred from the fact that the Renaissance Humanist Lorenzo Valla attacks Boethius above all classical authors as having the most profound (and, in his opinion the most toxic) influence on medieval Logic, Metaphysics and Theology. Unfortunately, Valla's ignorance of the later Scholastic logic of his contemporaries prevented him from seeing contributions to these fields that were original and not dependent on Boethius. To the second question about Boethius's greatness, Marenbon offers the full evidence of his book and invites the reader to decide for himself.

Chapter Two "Life, Intellectual Milieu and Works" locates Boethius in the complex world of late Fifth-century Rome. Marenbon shows how Boethius prepared for a life's work that drew upon four traditions: Greek Neoplatonism, Latin Philosophy, Greek Christian literature and the Latin Church Fathers. Of these,

Neoplatonism was the dominant influence, and Marenbon offers a useful précis of Plotinus's philosophy. The remaining seven Chapters are arranged around the four kinds of works that Boethius produced. (1) His textbooks on mathematical subjects became a mainstay of the *quadrivium* in the later medieval university tradition; but these are not examined in detail. (2) His translations, commentaries and texts on logic and rhetoric are the principal subjects of Chapters Three and Four. (3) His five theological *opuscula* are discussed in Chapter Five and (4) *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius's most influential work, is analyzed in detail in Chapters Six through Eight. Finally, Chapter Nine assays Boethius's influence on later thinkers. Setting aside the third and fourth chapters for the moment, I offer some comments about the others.

Boethius's theological views are contained in five small works, the *Opuscula sacra* which Marenbon designates OSI through V. Although diverse in subject matter, these works are connected because they contain rigorous discussions of special points of Christian doctrine addressed to a small circle of friends and teachers. OSIV, sometimes called *On the Catholic Faith*, is taken to be authentic and contains a history and summation of the faith. In addition to the standard topics from creation through the resurrection it gives the orthodox teaching on the Trinity and compares it to the Arian, Sabellian and Manichaean heresies. OSV attacks the heresies of Eutyches and Nestorius that are central to the split between the Eastern and Western churches. Marenbon analyzes Boethius careful argumentation that rests on the important distinction between "nature" (*ousia, substantia*) and "person" (*hypostasis, persona*). OSI, II and III are devoted to the topics of God, Predication and the Trinity. Boethius develops the view of Augustine that the Trinity is coherent and consistent with the requirements of logic. The strength of his work is to provide a rigorous philosophical summation of Christian doctrine based on Aristotelian logic as filtered through Porphyry and the Neoplatonists. Boethius sought to resolve the

apparent inconsistencies of Christian doctrine by means of logical analysis, and the *Opuscula* exhibit a certain harmony of belief – a harmony that was to be challenged when Boethius was imprisoned and eventually executed under a charge of treason.

Chapters Six through Eight are devoted to detailed analyses of the main arguments of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Chapter Six treats Books I through V.2 and the central problem of Boethius's definition of happiness. Eventually, true happiness is defined as "the perfect good" and is identified with God. Chapter Seven turns to the issues of how God rules the world and how providence is related to chance and human freedom. Marenbon's analyses of Boethius's complex arguments here are incisive and very useful for anyone who wants to follow the steps of Boethius's discourse.

Chapter Three "Boethius's Project" and Four "The Logical Textbooks and

Topical Reasoning," expound Boethius's contributions to logic and dialectic. In addition to translating all of Aristotle's logical works (his translation of the *Posterior Analytics* did not survive), Boethius completed commentaries on three works *Categories*, Porphyry's *Isagoge* (the standard introduction to the *Categories*) and *On Interpretation*. Marenbon makes useful observations on all of these works and in several places relates his discussion to current debates in the field (e.g. p. 31). Finally, in Chapter Nine he notes the vast influence that these commentaries had on later medieval philosophy. A valuable complement to Marenbon's study is the article by Osmund Lewry, O.P. "Boethian Logic in the Medieval West," (in *The Rise of British Logic*, Acts of the Sixth European Symposium on Medieval Logic and Semantics, ed. O. Lewry, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983).

Chapter Four examines Boethius's textbooks in logic and topical reasoning. Marenbon expounds *On Divisio*, the method of division (*diaeresis*) of a genus into its component species. This was, of course, the mainstay of Platonic dialectic, of Aristotelian definition, of Neoplatonic metaphysics and -- most importantly -- of Boethius's dialectical method in *De topicis differentiis*. Marenbon's expository work here is admirable and will help many toward understanding this very important area of medieval thought.

In one area, however, Marenbon seems seriously confused and misleading. He writes: "Boethius's writings on the Topics are among the most bewildering parts of his work for the modern reader, since they seem to have little in common with any part of modern logic (or with any other modern discipline), and, without some explanation, it is not at all clear what they are about, even in the broadest sense." (p. 57) Surely, the *De topicis differentiis* sets forth a calculus for solving unknowns on the basis of known factors of a syllogistic argument. It combines category-theory and the method of division in a decision procedure for constructing a syllogism on the basis of information about its major or minor terms. The work of Neils Jorgen Green-Pedersen, Otto Bird and others on the later history of the topics makes clear that many rules of topical reasoning were generalized forms of rules of *Consequentia*, i.e. inference. Thus they are related to theorems of the modern propositional calculus. Marenbon's confusions about Boethius's work extends to his account of the nature of dialectical arguments: "Yet, as will become clear, [in my opinion, it does not] many of the arguments found by the topics as Boethius presents them, though syllogistic in form, are *not* formally valid...." (pp. 58-59) Again, "Although (as will become clear) [in my opinion, it does not] topical arguments are not usually genuine syllogisms, because usually they are not valid, Boethius envisages their structure as syllogistic...." (p. 59) The purpose, if any, of Table 1 on the top of page 59 is not clear. Marenbon correctly states that the premises and so the conclusions of topical arguments need not be necessary but

only “plausible.” Then, he moves on to say that the arguments *themselves* “need not be valid but merely plausible.” (p. 60) As we have seen, he regards many as invalid. Marenbon does not justify the move from calling the premises and conclusions “plausible” to calling the arguments “plausible”. Nor does he cite the invalid arguments that he says are in Boethius’s text. If there were any, *De topicis differentiis* would be a work on sophistics and not one on topics as Boethius presents it. A sophistical argument is precisely one that appears valid but is not in fact valid, and if Boethius instructs his readers about how to compose them, his work would fit squarely in the sophistical tradition. There is a good deal of commentary on *De topicis differentiis*, and no one, to my knowledge, has claimed that it is a work in sophistical argumentation.

The strength of Marenbon’s approach to Boethius is an analytic methodology that he uses to clarify Boethius’s arguments. Here lurks a potential weakness, however. In attempting to show the coherency of Boethius’s views, Marenbon regimented his claims into a framework of demonstrative argumentation. It is at least debatable that Boethius regarded the arguments of the *Consolation* as demonstrations in any formal sense. Demonstration is continuous uninterrupted discourse; dialectic is discontinuous and proceeds by question and answer. The logical form of the *Consolation of Philosophy* is clearly the latter. After Aristotle, Boethius recognized three species of argumentation: namely, rhetorical, dialectical and demonstrative. (Aristotle, *Topica* 162a 15-18) Dialectical argumentation was subdivided into dialectical argument *simpliciter* (*epichceireme*) that begins with any proposition granted by an opponent and argues to its contradictory, aporetic argument (*aporeme*) that argues to both of two contradictory propositions on the basis of premises granted by an opponent and specious argument or sophism (*sophisma*) that appears to be valid but is not in fact valid. Rhetorical and dialectical argumentation forms are employed outside of science when a given subject matter does not fall within the

purview of a particular science. Thus, the presentation of Boethius's arguments in a quasi-demonstrative form begs the question whether he thought of his arguments in that way. Nonetheless, if the reader is mindful of these differences Marenbon's rendition is a useful exercise.

I found only a few errors of spelling and omission. Page 65.7 'form argument' should be 'form of argument.' Page 110.4up 'principals' should be 'principles'. Page 121.12 'about his' should be 'about how his'.

Critical comments aside, Marenbon's *Boethius* will remain for some time an indispensable introduction to one of the great thinkers of the Middle Ages.

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