THE IMMATERIAL THEURGY OF BOETHIUS

by

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In memory of my mother

Jane Veronica Curran

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to understand the efficacy of prayer in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Prayer is man's *commercium* with the divine realm, and so prayer is higher than human thought. The highest stage of prayer in the *Consolation* is similar to that in Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*: man becomes aware of his own deficiency compared to the divine and so turns to prayer. Lower prayers are also effective because they are both immaterial theurgy and spiritual exercises. The circles throughout the work are a crucial instance of these prayers. They constantly purify the Prisoner's soul of false notions, and restore it to its true state. They lead the Prisoner to discover that his activity of thinking is a form of theurgy. The *Consolation* reveals that in the life of philosophy there is a mutual interdependence between thought, prayer and theurgy.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

DM Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*

EEC Proclus, *In Primum Euclidis Elementorum Librum Commentarii*

ET Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Boethius uses many different metres for his poetry in the *Consolation of Philosophy*: the set of four poems that I am examining are acatalectic anapestic dimeters. Their shared metre is symbolic of the connection they have in their content. It is beyond the scope of my argument to give a proper account of the all different metres in the *Consolation* and the possible connections between them. Scholars are divided about how seriously the metrical connection between poems should be taken,[1] but none appear to have doubted the strong link between the four acatalectic anapestic dimeters. I shall primarily be looking at them in terms of the circles that appear in them. Despite selecting these specifically, I shall be looking at them within the larger context of the *Consolation*, in order to incorporate the evolution of the themes explored more fully in other parts. Nevertheless, I believe that these poems together are linked by more than just the same metre. Read beside one another they make a concrete argument that man can imitate the cosmic order of the heavens through his own natural action. Both the heavens and natural action are represented by rotating circles.

Of the thirty-nine poems in the work, the Prisoner composes only four, and two of them, the third and fourth, are the first and last of the anapestic dimeter poems.[2] This alone demonstrates an exceptional quality to the poems. In the first anapestic dimeter, 1m5, the Prisoner wishes that the realm of human affairs were as structured as the rotation of the heavens. He even goes so far as to say that God orders all of creation except for man. The next

[1] The traditional view of the arrangement of the metres comes from Joachim Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), especially his chart on page 21. More recently, Stephen J. Blackwood has proposed a restructuring of Gruber's system in "The Meters of Boethius: Rhythmic Therapy in the *Consolation of Philosophy*" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2010).

[2] I have chosen to refer to Lady Philosopher's interlocutor as 'The Prisoner,' in order to keep his opinions separate from those which Boethius himself holds.

two poems in the set (3m2 and 4m6), spoken by Lady Philosophy, demonstrate that the circular order of the heavens is present throughout nature, even in man. The final anapestic dimeter is delivered by the Prisoner, and is the only poem of his outside of Book 1. It begins as an attempt to solve the question of human free will and God's foreknowledge, but quickly becomes a demonstration of human thought caught in an *aporia*. Lady Philosophy praises the Prisoner for his attempt and says that his activity has the circularity of the heavens.

For Boethius, circles represent order and a connection to the divine. Each book of the *Consolation* uses circles in a different way, but taken together the circles represent a thing's natural activity. Both thinking and praying are circular activities, but prayer is the greater of the two because it is man's *commercium* with the divine. The highest type of prayer can be used to help overcome an *aporia*. However, by demonstrating that men have these circles in their lower faculties Lady Philosophy points to a second type of prayer. My argument is that the different circles present throughout the work are actually a form of immaterial theurgy. As his faculties improve, the Prisoner contemplates the circles at different levels of understanding and is brought to higher levels. Ultimately, Lady Philosophy shows him that these circles are in his natural activities, which means that the Prisoner no longer needs to contemplate external occurrences of the circles, like the heavenly rotations, but can find consolation through the divinity in his own thoughts and prayers. Proper thought should be a kind of inner theurgy and prayer.

My second chapter is devoted to examining the Syrian philosopher Iamblichus (240-325AD), especially his *De Mysteriis* and its doctrine of theurgy. The work was written as a refutation of the philosopher Porphyry's skeptical 'Letter to Anebo,' and is seen as the seminal

work on theurgy in the ancient world.[3] Iamblichus explains to Porphyry that he misunderstands the necessity of theurgy for salvation. Because the soul has wholly descended into the body (a belief that Porphyry does not share), man's thinking is imperfect. He does not have the proper faculties to save himself, because unaided thought will only arrive at an *aporia*; theurgy is man's only way to salvation. There are two kinds of theurgy, material and immaterial, and all men, except in the most extraordinary cases, require both to be purified. Defending material theurgy, which involves cult rituals, is the main focus of Iamblichus' work, but there is a discussion on the highest form of immaterial theurgy. When man has discovered the true worthlessness of his own station, he awakens the *sumbola* in his own mind and turns to prayer spontaneously. When this occurs, the embodied soul has no prejudices or assumptions to keep it from union with the divine.

My third chapter concerns the precursors to Boethius' circles and the different modes of knowing in Plato, Plotinus and Proclus. In Plato's *Timaeus*, Socrates explains that sight is the greatest of human senses because it enables men to look at the heavenly rotations. By observing the movement of these perfect spheres, man will be able to repair the movements of his own thoughts. By studying physical phenomena, one learns that the truth of things is not in their occurrences but in the higher principles found in more advanced forms of study. As one progresses through the modes of knowing, from astronomy to metaphysics, there should be a corresponding development in the soul of the knower. Plato's *Laws* explains why the circle is appropriate as an symbol of *nous.* The circle, by not having a beginning or end, is the shape that best symbolises objectivity and the overcoming of perspective. The second part of the chapter is an Iamblichean reading of Plotinus. Plato emphasised the circumference in his

[3] For background on Iamblichus and *De Mysteriis* see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 1-8.

circles, but Plotinus is more interested in its centre. For him, man is a circle and the centre is his highest essence. Plotinus uses spiritual exercises to encourage the reader to align his centre with the higher divine centres. Iamblichus did not agree with Plotinus' doctrine of the undescended soul, but he may have recognised these exercises as the ritualised immaterial theurgy discussed in *On the Mysteries*. The section of the chapter on Proclus' *Commentary on Euclid's Elements* demonstrates how that philosopher blends the approaches of both Plato and Plotinus. For him the appropriate study of lower sciences should lead one upwards to the unity present in philosophy. As one contemplates the circle with different faculties, one discovers its immaterial truth. Truth is not found in the observation of the heavens but in the universal principles that explain them. For Proclus, circular movement is symbolic of procession, reversion and remaining. Circles take on a special mystical significance by representing such divine principles. By discovering the truth of circles, man also gains greater knowledge about the divine laws. For all three of these thinkers the ascent of the mind can only properly succeed with a corresponding ascent of the soul. One must learn that the importance of the circles is not in their outward manifestations, but is found in the mind. These three philosophers disagree on many things, but they all privilege the immaterial truth of the circle, and the key role it plays in the salvation of the thinker.

The fourth chapter will begin my analysis of the *Consolation*. It is primarily devoted to a close reading of the acatalectic anapestic dimeter poems in order to demonstrate their linked argument. Together, they show that circular movement and divine order, like that visible in the heavens, is the best kind. As the work progresses, the Prisoner considers different circles with different faculties. Near the beginning, he observes the heavens with his senses. Later, when Lady Philosophy reveals that all things engage in circular movement in their natural activities,

the Prisoner learns to abstract universal laws from particular examples. Man has a unique position in the order of things: unlike other things in nature, he does not naturally engage in his circular activity, but must first identify it and then make a conscious decision to participate in the activity. In Book 5, Lady Philosophy shows that thinking is the circular activity proper to the Prisoner. Despite this unaided human thought only reaches an *aporia* about divine matters, and so does not answer the questions necessary for consolation.

The fifth and final chapter is devoted to Boethius' doctrine of prayer and explains how man may overcome *aporia* and receive full consolation. Prayer is revealed to be not only a natural circular activity, but, in fact, the greatest of those belonging to man. Prayer is man's *commercium* with the divine and it is necessary for consolation and salvation. Boethius' highest form of prayer occurs when man has perfected his thinking but realises that he cannot properly reconcile universal laws and individual perception. Man's prayer at this moment is like that of Iamblichus' highest prayer, in which awareness of man's deficiency awakens man's own inner theurgy. When the Prisoner's thinking is perfected and functions like a rotating circle, then he has activated his inner *sumbola*, and so his thought is a kind of sacred activity. As the Prisoner's faculties progress throughout the work, the circles that he recognises become less and less external to himself. When he finds these ordered rotations in his own mind, he learns that he cannot ascend any further by means of his own power. The constant and increasingly advanced contemplations of the circles are spiritual exercises that awaken the divine circles within the practitioner. The circles found in external things are lower theurgy that purifies the Prisoner and leads him to the divine part in himself. Likewise, lower prayers, as circular activities, are effective because they are a form of immaterial theurgy.

Although scholars have attempted to draw connections between Boethius and the liturgy of his time, I am not aware of any studies that attempt to place his hierarchy of science in the context of immaterial theurgy. My thesis will show that Boethius evokes many different stages of the Platonic tradition in the *Consolation*. Like Plato and Proclus he emphasises the special significance of circles and the way in which their sacred importance develops the soul of its thinker. Iamblichus has very little discussion of what is involved in immaterial theurgy. By incorporating Plotinus' thought experiments within an Iamblichean context, Boethius makes contemplation of the circles crucial to the consolation at the end of the work. The circles are immaterial theurgy which purify the thinker. When man discovers the circles in himself, there should be a mutual interdependence between correct thought, prayer and theurgy.

CHAPTER 2: IAMBLICHUS ON THEURGY

HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

Iamblichus addressed the *De Mysteriis* to Porphyry to correct his misconceptions about the nature of theurgy and human thought. Feichtinger explains, "Iamblichus . . . accuses Porphyry of pride, i.e., of overestimating the soul and her capacities, of trying to go directly for immaterial cult and union with the One without having the humility to pass through all the necessary preparatory stages."[4] Man, for Iamblichus, cannot have such a privileged position. Human knowledge is too removed from its object to lead to any kind of union:

> Effective union (ἕνωσις) certainly never takes place without knowledge (γνῶναι), but nevertheless it is not identical with it. Thus, divine purity does not come about through right knowledge, in the way that bodily purity does through chastity, but divine union and purification actually go beyond knowledge. Nothing, then, of any such qualities in us, such as are humans contributes in any way towards the accomplishment of divine transactions. (*DM* 2.11.98)[5]

Correct human thinking, when contemplating the highest things, functions negatively. It is able to strip away the errors and prejudices of the embodied soul but it cannot offer positive content. The positive content and salvation must come from an exterior source, which necessitates theurgy. Smith writes, "Iamblichus . . . did not think that human νοήσις could attain its pure united form without the aid of the gods. Unaided human thought always stands outside the object it contemplates or reaches out towards (ultimately god). It is only through the divine

[4] Hans Feichtinger, "Οὐδένεια and *humilitas*: Nature and Function of Humility in Iamblichus and Augustine," *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 142.
[5] Greek text and English translations of the *De Mysteriis (DM)* are from Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, eds. and trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

causality that the barrier can be broken down, the human be made divine and united with the divine."[6] The broken soul in Iamblichus is not able to reach the gods unaided, and so ascent and salvation are only possible through the agency of the gods.

For Iamblichus, knowledge of divinity is entirely possible, but not through human activity. Near the beginning of the *De Mysteriis*, he corrects Porphyry:

> You . . . seem to think that knowledge of divinity is that of the same nature as a knowledge of anything else, and that it is by the balancing of contrary propositions that a conclusion is reached, as in dialectical discussions. But the cases are in no way similar. The knowledge of the gods is of a quite different nature, and is far removed from all antithetical procedure, and does not consist in the assent to some proposition now, nor yet at the moment of one's birth, but from all eternity it coexisted in the soul in complete uniformity. (*DM* 1.3.10)

Despite the broken and infected nature of the embodied soul, there is still a divine part that has not been lost. The soul's divine remnant is a conduit by which true knowledge and salvation may be received. The knowledge of the divine is within man but it must be activated by an external source.

By establishing the soul as infected by the body and generation it follows that man would not have the capacities to judge theurgy. Iamblichus demonstrates how one is granted higher knowledge, despite this limitation. In a kind of prayer near the beginning of the *De Mysteriis*, the Syrian proclaims:

> let the human soul join itself to [the gods] in knowledge on the same terms, not employing conjecture or opinion or some form of syllogistic reasoning, all of which

[6] Andrew Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition: A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 88.

> take their start from the plane of temporal reality, to pursue that essence which is beyond all these things, but rather connecting itself to the gods with pure blameless reasonings, which it has received from all eternity from those same gods. (*DM* 1.3.9)

The sequential manner of human thought is not sufficient to understand, let alone explain, divine truths. The union necessary for divine knowledge is not possible through human processes. Salvation can only come from an external source awakening the knowledge of the union already present in the soul. It is through prayer that the theurgist opens himself up for this divine grace.

THE HIGHEST PRAYER

All the forms of true theurgy work because of the divinity in the rites themselves, not because of the human agent. Through immaterial theurgy man can activate the *sumbola* within himself, but even these receive their power from an external source. Iamblichus holds that in these rituals, intellection and the purity of the soul are just auxiliary (συναίτια) causes. He continues: "[T]he things which properly arouse the divine will are the actual divine symbols (συνθέματα). And so the attention of the gods is awakened by themselves, receiving from no inferior being any principle for themselves of their characteristic activity" (*DM* 2.11.97). Man is able to participate in theurgy but he is not the agent of its success. Man's purity may help but it is not actually responsible: "the spiritual cause requires no actualization of the lower to achieve its own perfection, for it is a simple permanent act with no element of potency within

its nature."[7] Smith expresses it thus: "in ritual there is no caller and called. There is a full unification in the highest theurgy."[8] The kinship between the divine and material aspects of the mystical rites is complete. Through the sacred rituals discussed in the *De Mysteriis*, man is purified and finally brought to union. There is a distance between human knowledge and its object, a gap that does not exist between proper theurgy and its divine source.

For Iamblichus, the salvation of the human soul comes about through both material and intellectual forms of worship. Because man is both body and soul, both must be purified in order to ascend. The Syrian writes that there is:

> The necessity of the double mode of worship; for the one type will be simple and immaterial and purified from all taint of generation, that which relates to unpolluted souls, whereas the other is filled with bodies and every sort of material business, that which is proper to souls which are not pure nor released from all generation. And so I postulate two sorts of sacrifice; the one which is that of men who are entirely purified, which would only arise rarely . . . the other being material and corporeal and based on alteration, as is suited to those still in the grip of the body. (*DM* 5.15.219)

He goes on to list the different levels of dependency or material theurgy: he says it is possible not to need material theurgy at all, but this is very rare. Porphyry's mistake is to believe that every human soul is in fact uncontaminated and so the lower sort of purification is not necessary.[9] Iamblichus *does* say that some people do not need lower theurgy for salvation, but that they are extremely rare (*DM* 5.15.219). The instances are too rare to warrant much

[7] Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 44.
[8] Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, 84.
[9] See Beate Nasemann, *Theurgie und Philosophie in Jamblichs* De mysteriis (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1991), 202.

attention from the Syrian. Because the soul is infected by the body, theurgy is necessary to purify both of them, something not possible through human thought alone.

The lower rites of theurgy are necessary in order to progress to the higher and (in all but the rarest cases) to maintain the proper level of purification: "[W]e do not deal with the body on an intellectual and incorporeal plane, for the body does not relate to such modes of treatment; it is, rather, through participating in what is akin to itself, through bodies, in fact, that a body is nourished and purified" (*DM* 5.16.219). As theurgical matters are discussed theurgically, so the body must be dealt with corporally. Material theurgy treats the body so that one may progress properly to intellectual theurgy. All correct theurgy (both material and immaterial) follows the law of 'like to like,' and so intellectual theurgy cannot save the body. For almost all men physical theurgy is a necessity: there are aspects of the body that are not controlled by even the highest philosophers.

Union with the divine, insofar as it is possible for man, is the highest aim of prayer. Iamblichus often discusses prayers as they pertain to sacrifices but he gives special importance to prayers without material accompaniment. He writes to Porphyry:

> After declaring that pure intellects are 'unbending and not mingled with the sensible realm,' you raise the question as to whether it is proper to pray to them. For my part, I would hold the view that it is not proper to pray to any others. For that element in us which is divine and intellectual and one - or, if you so wish to term it, intelligible - is aroused, then, clearly in prayer, and when aroused, strives primarily towards what is like to itself, and joins itself essential perfection. (*DM* 1.15.46)

In all theurgy the caller and the called are one and like is brought to like. Shaw clarifies, "Strictly speaking the theurgists did not call down the gods with their prayers; the gods were already present in the invocations."[10] In frequent association with the gods, man does not so much ascend to the gods as reclaim his essential nature. Intellectual knowledge does not come by material means but through immaterial communion with the gods. By associating frequently with the gods, man's soul is increasingly purified and he is restored to his divinity. Prayer is a kind of immaterial theurgy in that it leads to union with the gods.

The striking elements of prayer, compared to material theurgy, are its inner nature and source. About prayers of petition, Iamblichus explains:

> Because we are inferior to the gods in power and in purity and all other respects, it is eminently suitable that we entreat them to the greatest degree possible. The consciousness of our own nothingness (οὐδενείας), if one judges it in comparison with the gods, makes us from ourselves (αὐτοφύως) turn to supplications; and by the practice of supplication we are raised gradually to the level of the object of our supplication, and we gain likeness to it by virtue of our constant consorting with it, and, starting from our own imperfection, we gradually take on the perfection of the divine. (*DM* 1.15.47-48)

Prayer brings about the same effects as other theurgy. It still contains the ritual elements of a sacrifice, but instead of physical objects it uses invocations and mental *sumbola*. Only when the divine part of man is unencumbered by worldly ideas is it able to summon its own *sunthemata*. Shaw writes:

> When the soul fully recognized its nothingness it was stirred to pray, and any presumption that it had the capacity to reach the gods would prevent its occurrence.

[10] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 111.

> Before its conjunction with the divine the human soul had to recognize the unbridgeable gulf that separated it from the gods, and the recognition of this limitation was the only genuinely theurgical act that Iamblichus allowed to the soul.[11]

It is when the soul realises the hopelessness of its situation that it is brought into fuller union with the divine. True awareness that salvation can only come from an external source is both the problem and the solution. This highest prayer is a theurgical rite in which man by himself is able to call upon salvation external to himself. Iamblichus describes the soul aware of its own nothingness as turning to prayer αὐτοφύως, a word that Shaw translates as "spontaneously,"[12] and Clarke, Dillon and Hershbell as "naturally."[13] In fact, someone aware of his own nothingness produces the prayer himself from his own nature. Man cannot reach intellect through his own power, but he can invoke higher powers without the use of external theurgy. The materials for the ritual are within himself and only need to be uncovered.

The only theurgical act of the soul comes from knowing the limits of human knowledge. The human soul is not the cause of theurgy's success and so the highest prayer is a complete supplication to the gods for help: "the various forms of ritual and prayer are not attempts to incline the divine power towards man . . . but the gods' free bestowal of illumination."[14] This act can only be activated αὐτοφύως when man is aware of his own nothingness: otherwise, external theurgy is needed. Shaw writes:

> Clearly, spontaneous prayer could not derive from discursive deliberation. . . . Yet to awaken this divine power the soul had to establish a limit (*to peras*) on its

[11] Ibid., 111-2.
[12] Ibid., 111.
[13] *On the Mysteries*, 1.15.47.
[14] Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 43.

> unlimited pretense to know (*to apeiron*). The soul's turn to prayer, in short, was the awakening of its divine *sunthēma*. . . . In its unity, the One of the soul was always in a state of prayer, joining itself to itself, yet the soul participated in this union only in moments of theurgy and through the medium of prayer.[15]

Proper philosophical education is a necessary cleansing of man's innate prejudices and assumptions. At its best it ends in an *aporia* and is not able to offer positive content. This realisation leads to a moment of hopelessness in which all hindrances are stripped away and the divine part of the soul is activated. The soul is almost brought back to the state it inhabited before embodiment.

In the *De Mysteriis* Iamblichus is not especially concerned with immaterial theurgy other than the very highest form. To fill this gap, Gregory Shaw[16] and Zeke Mazur[17] both propose that lower forms of incorporeal theurgy can be found in the writings of Plotinus, re-examining him as a practitioner of 'Iamblichean' theurgy. They believe that the thought experiments or spiritual exercises found throughout the *Enneads* are actually sacred rites. The images that Plotinus uses are indeed the *sumbola* of the mind of the theurgist, as with the highest prayer of Iamblichus.[18] Whereas the highest prayer fully activates the *sumbola*, these thought experiments are less powerful moments of activation. They are not invocations *per se* but, like material theurgy, they are the arrangement of certain symbols and signs in order to strengthen the connection with the gods. These lower inner *sumbola*, like all theurgy, still receive their power from the gods. The highest prayer is man's only natural theurgical act while these lower rites are performed by the mind with *sumbola* that are not self-generated.

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[15] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 112.
[16] Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos: Pythagorean Theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999):121-143.
[17] Zeke Mazur, "*Unio Magica*: Part II: Plotinus, Theurgy and the Question of Ritual," *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 29-56.
[18] Ibid., 49.

Like material theurgy, these rituals have varying degrees of effectiveness and so those of Plotinus are not the highest form. Not all practitioners of immaterial theurgy are ready for or capable of the highest prayer. Only the very highest theurgists do not require material theurgy. Whereas material theurgy "frees our rational soul from the confines of the body,"[19] proper prayer is the means by which the soul can free itself. By contrast, lower immaterial theurgy frees the soul by using already-established *sumbola* in an incorporeal rite.

Theurgical prayer restores to the soul the proper life of the mind. In the rites of theurgy, especially prayer, "[t]he soul actualizes another life, that is a life of intellectual activity."[20] The life of the mind is not abandoned by using theurgy, but instead is taken up again at a higher level. Only with correct knowledge can one engage in proper prayer and contemplation, and this alone does not preclude the need for material ritual. Man cannot resolve the *aporia* he reaches by himself: divine intellect will only come to him through the help of theurgy. Awareness of one's nothingness is crucial because it establishes the correct limits of the soul and with this awareness the soul can then engage in the highest theurgy. The soul cannot reach the divine by means of its own thought, as Porphyry suggests. Instead, for the Syrian, proper contemplation is prayer: through proper immaterial theurgy man may be given intellectual knowledge. Salvation of the mind is only possible through a combination of prayer and philosophical thought.

CONCLUSION

For Iamblichus, man does not in himself have the necessary knowledge to invoke the gods properly. The soul in its natural state is always in prayer, but the embodied soul cannot achieve the same state. Iamblichus holds that for embodied souls the lower forms of theurgy

[19] John F. Finamore, "Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy," *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 91.
[20] Ibid., 88.

are required: even the highest philosophers find them necessary for purification. For the Syrian, the embodiment of the soul, the impossibility of full union and the limits of human thought are fundamental. Awareness of one's nothingness can only truly be attained with these doctrines. At that moment there are no barriers between the soul and proper prayer. Man's salvation cannot be through his own action and so he turns wholly to the gods for redemption.

Many of Iamblichus' doctrines of intellectual theurgy and prayer are found in the *Consolation*. Boethius also presents a system in which the highest prayer is possible only with the knowledge of man's deficiency. The circles throughout the work are equivalent to the lower forms of intellectual theurgy. In my next chapter I shall continue the discussing immaterial theurgy through examining the circles in Plato, Plotinus and Proclus. On one level, these philosophers use circles as spiritual exercises for the reader's development, but on another level they all observe that they have a divine importance. For them, the spiritual exercises are equivalent to Iamblichus' inner theurgy.

CHAPTER 3: PRECEDENTS OF THE CIRCLE

INTRODUCTION

Physical, immaterial and metaphorical circles and spheres are found throughout ancient philosophy. In Plato's *Timaeus*, Socrates explains that astronomy is important because it points the way to philosophy. Astronomy is the study of the movements of the heavens, which for theological and philosophical reasons were regarded as circular, and through this science man can improve the rotations of his own mind. This comparison of the mind's operations to a sphere or circle is not just a fanciful image but is given import in the *Laws*, where the Stranger presents ordered thought as circular rotation.

Proclus pursues similar ideas in his *Commentary on the Elements of Euclid*. He presents a hierarchy of sciences, the ascension through which permits man to discover the truth about the figures of astronomy and geometry. He presents the circle as the greatest of the shapes, one that is present in all levels of being, even above physical reality and extension. For him, cyclic activity is not only like correct thought, but is actually an imitation of the highest causes. The difference between his view and that of Plato is the interest in the centre, an interest which Proclus shares with Plotinus. For these two philosophers, man has a 'centre,' which is the highest, most definitive part of him. By focusing on his centre, man does not forget himself in external things.

Boethius picks up on all of these conceptions of the circle. The unifying aspect of all of these circles is that they inspire the reader to progress in his knowledge and overcome his own limited perspective. There is a spiritual resonance in the use of the circles: they are not simply

epistemological but also theurgic. The circles are spiritual exercises or immaterial rites in the way that they purify the subject by means of internal *sumbola*.

Pierre Hadot argues that in ancient philosophy spiritual exercises are a striving to overcome subjective experience. He writes that a spiritual exercise is "an attempt to liberate ourselves from a partial, passionate point of view — linked to the senses and the body — so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demands of the Logos and the norm of the Good."[21] Although they make philosophical arguments, the ancient philosophical texts are intended to actually change the reader. Philosophy is meant to purify the philosopher of the externalizing prejudices of embodied life:

> [A]ll spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The "self" liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought.[22]

The goal of philosophy is to bring the practitioner to a state in which he is sufficiently developed so as to be able to discover and be open to truth. Hadot specifically mentions Plato, Plotinus and Proclus as writing specifically to effect change in the souls of their audience.[23] I shall show that the circles throughout these thinkers' writings are tools for the purification of the soul and spiritual ascent. They all argue that the particular occurrences of circles in nature are not important compared to the truth discovered through properly studying mathematical spheres.

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[21] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Andrew I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1987), 94-5.
[22] Ibid., 103.
[23] Ibid., 104-5.

PLATO'S *TIMAEUS*: THE INSPIRATION OF THE CIRCLES

In the *Timaeus*, Socrates says that although philosophy is the greatest of man's activities, the lower sciences are needed to arrive at that final stage of knowledge. He argues that the senses are crucial for proper knowledge:

> Vision, in my view, is the cause of the greatest benefit to us, inasmuch as none of the accounts now concerning the Universe would ever have been given if men had not seen the stars or the sun or the heaven. But as it is, the vision of day and night and of months and circling years has created the art of number and has given us not only the nature of time but also means of research into the nature of the universe. From these we have procured philosophy in all its range, than which no greater good ever has come or will come, by divine bestowal, unto the race of mortals. (47 A-B)[24]

There is a hierarchy of sciences with philosophy at the top. Surprisingly, Socrates suggests that numbers are merely inventions used to express what is found in nature. Through observing nature man is able to perceive and abstract natural patterns that exist separately from specific occurrences. The crucial point is that man has mathematics, natural philosophy and philosophy through the study of the heavenly rotations.

The celestial revolutions are not only important for science and understanding, but they are also needed for the development of the soul. Socrates maintains:

> God devised and bestowed upon us vision to the end that we might behold the revolutions of reason in the heaven and use them for the revolvings of the reasoning that is within us, these being akin to those, the perturbable to the imperturbable; and that, through learning and sharing in calculations which are correct by their nature,

[24] Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

> by imitation of the absolutely unvarying revolutions of the God we might stabilize the variable revolutions within ourselves. (47 B-C)

The correct thoughts of the soul are like the circles of the heavens. By perceiving universal truths, the soul of the 'astronomer' begins to free itself from subjective experience. By observing the heavens, he sees that his own rotations are lacking in relation to the higher movements. Astronomy is valued here as a passage into the higher studies.

In the *Republic*, Socrates stresses the importance of mathematics and its branches for the education of the philosophers in the ideal city. Just as importantly, he vetoes certain studies. Burnyeat writes, "[Socrates'] black list includes Pythagorean harmonics, contemporary mathematical astronomy, mathematical mechanics and . . . mathematical optics. However subtle and rigorous these studies would all keep the mind focused on sensible things."[25] While it seems to contradict the best course in the *Timaeus*, the astronomy that is taught in the ideal city is not based on the observations of the heavens. Burnyeat writes, "The new astronomy will be a purely mathematical study of geometrical solids (spheres) in rotation (528a, e), a sort of abstract kinematics."[26] Burnyeat calls this "an astronomy of the invisible."[27] The purpose of this science is to direct man's mind to the higher principles of things beyond what is evident to sense. Socrates says:

> I . . . am unable to suppose that any other study turns the soul's gaze upward than that which deals with being and the invisible. But if anyone tries to learn about the

[25] Myles Burnyeat, "Plato on Why Mathematics is Good for the Soul," in *Mathematics and Necessity: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. Timothy Smiley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.
[26] Ibid., 12.
[27] Ibid., 12.

> things of sense, whether gaping up or blinking down, I would never say that he really learns – for nothing of the kind admits of true knowledge. (529 B)[28]

Although he speaks of directing man's mind upwards, this movement is metaphorical: one does not actually look up to learn about spherical motion. The astronomy of the city is based on idealised motions of the heavens, in order that philosophers not pay attention to sensible things alone. The actual study of astronomy is irrelevant to the idealised study of perfect rotations. Man should not wish to base his mind's rotations on particular occurrences.

The study of these sciences leads the astronomer to an objectivity in his own experience. In the *Timaeus*, Socrates says:

> for the divine part within us the congenial motions are the intellections and revolutions of the universe. These each one of us should follow, rectifying the revolutions within our head, which were distorted at our birth, by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the universe, and thereby making the part that thinks like unto the object of its thought, in accordance with its original nature, and having achieved this likeness attain finally to that goal of life which is set before men by gods as the most good both for the present and for the time to come. (90 C-D)

If man wishes to achieve the best life, he must discern the heavens with thought, not just his senses. Festugière writes that, despite the long physical explanations of the *Timaeus*, this is the true *telos* of the work: "le vrai but du *Timée* n'est pas la physique comme telle, mais que . . . la physique du monde doit aboutir à une physique de l'homme, qui permettra de savoir avec

[28] Plato, *The Republic II: Books VI-X*, trans. Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

exactitude quel doit être le comportement de l'homme."[29] All of the information about the cosmos that Socrates imparts over the course of the dialogue is meant to improve the souls of his listeners. The senses are not sufficient to understand the movements of the sky, and indeed there is nothing true to understand in sensible experience. By using these observations, man discovers the higher sciences, astronomy of the invisible and finally philosophy. As the mind discovers the immaterial nature of truth, the soul makes a corresponding ascent beyond the sensible world.

PLATO'S *LAWS*: THOUGHT AND THE CIRCLES

A complementary passage in Book X of Plato's *Laws* explains why the analogy between man's thought and circular rotation is so important. The Stranger says that, of all the different kinds of motion, spherical rotation is the most like thought. He says that they are similar in the following ways: "both mov[e] regularly and uniformly in the same spot, round the same things and in relation to the same things, according to one rule and system – reason, namely, and the motion that spins in one place" (898A-B).[30] This passage occurs in the context of a discussion about whether the heavens and men both have ordered souls or erratic souls (897). The Stranger and the Athenian decide that the heavenly movements are orderly while the souls of men are disordered. In conjunction with the passages from the *Timaeus*, the section takes on an imperative tone. Once man recognises what good order is, he must improve himself

[29] A. J. Festugière, *Le dieu cosmique*, vol. 2 of *La révélation d'Hermès Tristmégiste* (Paris: Libraire Lecoffre, 1949), 97.
[30] Plato, *Laws: Volume II, Books VII-XII*, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

and his own soul's rotations. As his thinking becomes more ordered and circular, his soul will also become more similar to the ordered souls of the heavens.[31]

What is more important about this section from the *Laws* is the way in which it offers an explanation of the importance of the circle, as opposed to another geometrical figure. The Stranger says, "of these two motions, the motion which moves in one place must necessarily move always round some centre . . . this has the nearest possible kinship and similarity to the revolution of reason" (898A). The crucial point here is that there is rotation around a centre. Plato takes this to mean that there is an objective character to circular rotation, as there is no variation. Lee writes:

> Through this feature of rotation, the image conveys a compelling sense of a fully focused and yet totally distributed, or non-localized, consciousness: for the whole circumference is orientated at once and as a whole, 'about' and towards the circle's center. There is thus a kind *of cancelling of perspectivity* effected by the image.[32]

An idealised circular rotation contains all lower perspectives by being in all places at once. In this way thought should also be able to examine its object objectively. Burnyeat writes that for Plato, "Opinion is the best you can achieve when dealing with qualified or perspectival being."[33] Whereas the lower forms of knowledge, such as opinion and sense perception, are by definition incomplete, the proper movement of the mind will grasp its object without perspective. By seeing the object from all different viewpoints according to the same method,

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[31] See Lynne Ballew, *Straight and Circular: A Study of Imagery in Greek Philosophy* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1979), 98. Pages 84-98 of this book offer a much more comprehensive account circular imagery throughout Plato's corpus than I have time for in this chapter.
[32] Edward N. Lee, "Reason and Rotation: Circular Movement as the Model of Mind (Nous) in the Later Plato," in *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*, ed. W.H. Werkmeister (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976), 81.
[33] Burnyeat, "Why Mathematics," 21.

man is able to overcome the limits of his senses. Other modes of perception are not uniform, and so only give a partial picture.

When man makes his thinking circular, he is able to overcome his limited perspective and achieve a universal mode of knowledge. However, the circle also suggests divinity and completeness. In the *Timaeus*, Socrates explains that the demiurge created the world as a perfect sphere (33B). Reis writes:

> According to the Plato of the *Timaeus* (34 a 2f) and the *Laws* (897 d 8-898 a 6) the circle or rather the unceasing circular motion is the image . . . of intellect (νους) which through the regular circling of the heavenly bodies manifests itself as a principle of cosmic order. However, this reasoning presupposes the superiority of circular motion to all other kinds of motion which in the eyes of Plato is only a consequence of its self-sufficiency and sameness.[34]

Actual circular or spherical rotation is complete because there is no difference between the moments in it. Lee writes that, circling "is a motion that does not move towards *any* goal — not even itself." He goes on to explain, "It is thus not a motion that could be 'incomplete' whenever short of that goal, but one that can be complete at every moment of its course."[35] The path or method of rotation is always uniform. Uniformity represents the self-sufficiency and unity that is impossible in the sublunar realm.

It is worth briefly pointing out here that, while Aristotle believed that circular motion was the best kind of motion (*Physics*, 223b19f),[36] scholars are divided about whether the best thought is circular for him. Lee believes that when, in the *De Anima*, Aristotle rejects the idea

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[34] Burkhard Reis, "The Circle Simile in the Platonic Curriculum of Albinus," in *The Perennial Tradition of Neoplatonism*, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy: De Wulf Mansion Centre, Series I: XXIV, ed. John J. Cleary (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 243.
[35] Lee, "Reason and Rotation," 78.
[36] Noticed by Ballew, *Straight and Circular*, 132.

of *nous* as circular rotation, he actually reads Plato's use of the circle too spatially.[37] Furthermore, Ballew argues that despite Aristotle's rejection, he actually does value repetition and revolution in human thought as the best way for man to become divine.[38] She believes that, in this area, the philosopher owes much more to Plato than he claims.

For Plato, the astronomy of the heavens is dependent on something outside of itself and based in a realm where true knowledge is not possible. True knowledge comes through thought, which has its own astronomy of things unseen. As a spiritual exercise, circular thinking is an overcoming of circumstance in the way that the astronomy of the invisible is an overcoming of the rotations in the sky. In the *Timaeus*, the privileging of sight over the other senses is asserted in order to move the mind toward philosophy. Man's calculations of the movements of the sky will turn his thoughts towards mathematics and philosophy. The astronomy of the invisible gives man an idealised object of study, upon which he can base his own soul's rotations.

PLOTINUS AND THE CENTRE OF THE CIRCLE

Those spiritual exercises in the *Enneads* that feature circles give a special importance to the centre. In *Ennead* II.2 he observes that the whole rotation of a sphere is possible only because of the centre and so the centre is the most important part. Plotinus writes that that "Insofar as he derives from the All, man is a part, in so far as men are themselves, each is a proper whole" (II.2.2.4-5).[39] The cosmos has a centre around which the heavens turn: man, therefore, has a centre around which he turns and upon which he should base his action.

[37] Lee, 'Reason and Rotation,' 84.
[38] Ballew, *Straight and Circular*, 133.
[39] Plotinus, *Enneads II 1-9*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

Plotinus continues, "'centre' (μέσον) is not to be understood in the same way when one is speaking of the nature of soul as it is when one is speaking of a body: with soul the centre is the source from which the other nature derives, with body 'centre' has a spatial meaning. So one must use centre analogically" (II.2.2.7-10). He uses the circle as a spiritual exercise to reorient the soul. The centre of a man is his essential, divine element; if man knows this, he will not forget his true self in external things such as his body or possessions.

In *Ennead* VI.9 the circle, when applied to men, is offered as way to order one's life. The centre of a spatial sphere is just a point, but concerning the analogical centre of a human soul, Plotinus writes:

> [The human soul's] natural movement is, as it were, in a circle around something, something not outside but a centre, and the centre is that from which the circle derives, then it moves around this from which it is and will depend on this, bringing itself into accord with that which all souls ought to, and the souls of the gods always do; and it is by bringing themselves with it that they are gods. For a god is that which is linked to that centre, but that which stands far from it is a multiple human being or a beast. (VI.9.8.3-10)[40]

For Plato, the circle represents perfect order because its edge and rotation are perfectly even and unbroken. Plotinus shifts the importance of the circle by making the rotation always directed in relation to the centre: there is no perfectly even edge of the sphere without a centre to ground it. In the same way, the soul must always be attentive to its highest part, its source. Plotinus writes:

[40]Plotinus, *Enneads VI. 6-9*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

> [S]ince part of us is held by the body . . . we lift ourselves up by the part which is not submerged in the body and by this join ourselves at our own centres to something like the centre of all things . . . and we are at rest. (VI.9.8.16-22)

The circle from II.2 restores the proper sense of self to man. The circle from VI.9 is about a higher kind of union with regards to the One. Man must connect what is most divine within himself to that which is highest. The circle works to strip away all of the irrelevances of the soul while at once redirecting it. The focus is on the most essential parts of man and his existence.

As noted above, Shaw and Mazur associate Plotinus' spiritual exercises with Iamblichean immaterial theurgy. The circle imagery is not arbitrary. Shaw writes that inner theurgy should generally be understood within the context of Iamblichus' Pythagorean writings. He suggests that, because Pythagorean gods were numbers, intellectual theurgy had a mathematical basis, an idea which he sees supported by Proclus and Damascius.[41] This mathematical basis gives Plotinus' image spiritual resonance. According to Iamblichus, in divine rites gods take control of their worshippers in a circular way (*DM* 3.6.113).[42] Shaw writes, "For Iamblichus, to become spherical was to be assimilated to the *Nous*, so the spherical experience of the theurgist was a symptom of his or her deification. The sphere held a special significance for Pythagoreans as the most complete theophany."[43] The sphere is the highest of the geometric symbols. The circles are the *sumbola* used in these rites because they are sacred. The spiritual exercises seek to make man into circles, in imitation of the highest principles. Plotinus is always aware of the hierarchy of sciences, and so for him the visible spheres of the heavens serve to teach man about true mathematical circles. Once the immaterial

[41] Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos," 132-133.
[42] ἐν κύκλῳ. Noticed by Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos," 134.
[43] Ibid., 134.

truth of circles is grasped, the spiritual exercises can have a stronger effect. Neither astronomy nor mathematics is the highest knowledge or the goal of man: they are both the expression of a higher, unified truth. The study of the celestial spheres leads to the recognition of one's own centre; this, in turn, is part of the recognition of the centre of the cosmos.

PROCLUS: THE HIERARCHY OF SCIENCES

In his *Commentary on Euclid's Elements*, Proclus wrestles with the same questions as Plato about the relation between astronomy and the higher sciences. Mathematics holds a key role in the hierarchy. Mathematics is:

> recollection of the eternal ideas in the soul; and this is why the study of that especially brings us the recollection of these ideas is called the science concerned with learning (μαθηματική). (*EEC* 46)[44]

For Proclus, mathematics occupies a necessary intermediate step on the ladder of sciences, between the knowledge of causes and the study of the physical world. Beierwaltes writes, "Reinigung und Befreiung zur Erkenntnis des Ganzen aber bestehen darin, daß Mathematik durch Eliminierung von Raum und Zeit, durch Abstraktion von Sinnlichem und Zufälligem die Sphäre der Idee als wahrhaft seienden Kreis oder als wesenhafte Gerade sehen laeßt."[45] Mathematics uses the physical things around it for the inspiration to discover the true forms. Proclus' understanding of mathematics depends on a higher realm of knowledge. Mathematics

[44] Proclus, *In Primum Euclidis Elementorum Librum Commentarii*, ed. Godofredi Friedlein (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1873). I follow the standard pagination. English translations are taken from *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, trans. Glenn R. Morrow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).
[45] Werner Beierwaltes, *Proklos: Grundzü*ge *seiner Metaphysik* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1965), 168-9.

points to a realm of pure being beyond numbers: as with Plato, mathematics discovers truth through negation of particulars.

In Procline philosophy, mathematics has two levels: arithmetic and geometry. These follow Proclus' general rule for the ordering of sciences: the more complex the science, the lower it is.[46] Geometry is lower because it is a science based on images, rather than pure number like arithmetic, and so it is easier for an embodied soul to learn. Proclus writes:

> The imagination, occupying the central position in the scale of knowing, is moved by itself to put forth what it knows, but because it is not outside the body, when it draws its objects out of the undivided center of its life, it expresses them in the medium of division, extension, and figure. For this reason everything that it thinks is a picture or a shape of its thought. It thinks the circle as extended, and although this circle is free of external matter, it possesses an intelligible matter provided by the imagination of the matter itself. This is why there is more than one circle in the imagination, as there is more than one circle in the sense world; for with extension there appear also differences in size and number among circles and triangles. (*EEC*, 52-3)

If there is an idea or definition of 'circle' above geometry, it is not one with measurements. The imagination contains circles of all sizes because it is the faculty at the level of pure shape. The paradox of geometry is that it is not sensible yet is still extended.[47] Arithmetic is neither sensible nor extended: the numbers exist apart from any demonstration or image and have no physical or sensible correspondent.

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[46] Glenn R. Morrow, Introduction to *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, by Proclus, trans. Glenn R. Morrow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), xl.
[47] Ibid., xxxiii.

Proclus' mathematics cannot grasp the causes. Instead it deals with its subject matter in a discursive way. MacIsaac writes, "Proclus' general account of discursive reason (*dianoia*), is that it is a projection of the *logoi* which constitute the essence (*ousia*) of the soul."[48] Mathematics is an expression of a higher truth but it does not contain its truth in a simple unity: the highest truths are divided by mathematics and expressed as number or shape. Arithmetic must demonstrate the components of its sum just as geometry gives spatial expression to arithmetic. Part of the exegetical character of this is pedagogical. Ian Mueller explains that "being hypothetical does not mean that [mathematics] is ignorant of its principles but only that it takes them from the highest science and uses them without proof to derive consequences from them."[49] A proper mathematician is aware of the limitations of the science and the ways in which it points beyond itself. Iamblichus makes a point of separating the philosophical, the theurgical and the theological. Similarly, Proclus recognises the different areas and limitations of each mode of knowledge.[50]

In Proclus' system, the more complex a science is, the further it is from the truth, and the easier it is for a student to understand. Arithmetic is simpler in that it removes circumstance and shape from its investigations, but its sensible aspect is precisely what makes geometry easier for a soul to grasp. O'Meara writes that arithmetic's "principles possess greater simplicity, unity, than those of geometry." He continues, "In this way arithmetic stands nearer to metaphysics, whereas geometry finds itself nearer the middle point between metaphysics

[48] Gregory MacIsaac, "*Phantasia* between Soul and Body in Proclus' Euclid Commentary," *Dionysius* 19 (2001): 129.
[49] Ian Mueller, "Mathematics and philosophy in Proclus' Euclid commentary," in *Proclus, lecteur et interprète des anciens*, eds. Jean Pépin and H.D. Saffrey (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), 306.
[50] For a discussion on how Iamblichus' division of the modes of knowledge relates to mathematics see, Daniela Patrizia Taormina, *Jamblique: critique de Plotin et de Porphyre: quatré etudes* (Paris: Libraire Philosophique J. Vrin, 1999), 136-139.

and the material world, thus more adapted to the capacities and needs of the ascending soul."[51] As mathematics stands between the intelligible and physical realms, so geometry stands between different forms of knowledge. O'Meara explains, "the inferiority of geometry *vis-à-vis* arithmetic, i.e. its recourse to extension, also makes it more accessible to the human soul. In the figures of geometry the soul can better grasp its innate principles because these principles are expressed a lower, more image-like, level."[52] Imagination is present only in embodied souls. Geometry is lower than arithmetic because it uses imagination and so relies on the senses. Imagination is only a problem when it fully replaces the higher truths that should be discovered through arithmetic and metaphysics. Geometry should be used to discover the truth from the sensible, just as arithmetic should then discover pure number from geometry. Moving from arithmetic to geometry is a movement away from simplicity and unity and towards multiplicity and subjectivity.

As with Plato, Proclus' astronomy of the physical world is not highly ranked but can inspire the ascent of the soul. Proclus writes that nature's craftsmanship is greater than man's and so astronomy is better than a study of the gods' statues because the heavens exhibit shapes that, "bear the likeness of intelligible forms; and they copy in their rhythmic choruses the bodiless and immaterial forces resident in the figures" (*EEC*, 137). The visible heavens are only copies of the higher object of study, and so they should inspire the astronomer. Proclus' goal is the same as that of Socrates: to direct the mind's gaze upwards while avoiding the literal interpretation of the metaphor.

The prior science is always more unified and simple: "[G]eometry comes into being before spherics, as rest produces motion" (*EEC*, 37). The study of the circle evidently must

[51] Dominic O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 168.
[52] Ibid., 167-8.

properly fall to geometry, which deals with pure shape outside of circumstance. Plato presents higher astronomy as being inspired by the imperfect motions of the heavens, but Proclus shows that the questionable 'knowledge' of physical phenomena is contained in its true form by its prior science.

PROCLUS: THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CIRCLE

This hierarchy of sciences is important to understand the important position that Proclus gives to the circle in his writings. In his *Elements of Theology*, Proclus says this about cyclical movement: "All that proceeds from any principle and reverts upon it has a cyclic activity. For if it reverts upon that principle whence it proceeds it links its end to its beginning, and the movement is one and continuous, originating from the unmoved and to the unmoved again returning" (*ET*, 32. 11-15).[53] Cyclical or circular motion is participation in procession and reversion: by partaking in a circular activity an incomplete thing becomes complete and vice versa.[54] Circular action is a microcosm of the highest principles of existence. Speaking about the concept of procession in relation to the hierarchy of sciences, Charles writes, "A l'égard des trois grands <<moments>> de l'être – demeurer en soi, procéder, se convertir – la *dianoia* est évidemment liée par Proklos as demeurer, et la φαντασία au procéder."[55] She concludes that to complete the image, "les mathématiques présentent en elles-mêmes un mouvement semblable à celui que Proklos dénommen général <<conversion>>."[56] Mathematics is the means to return back to proper *dianoia*, and geometry is merely a lower

[53] Proclus, *The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text*, trans. E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).
[54] Stephen Gersh, *ΚΙΝΗΣΙΣ ΑΚΙΝΗΤΟΣ: A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 82.
[55] Annick Charles, "Sur le charactère intermédiare des mathématiques dans le pensée de Proklos," *Les Études philosophiques* 22 (1967): 72.
[56] Ibid., 73. She goes on to note that *analyse* seems the equivalent in *the Elements of Theology*, but that mathematics has an internal reversion while *analyse* 'returns' past *dianoia* to the principles themselves.

expression of mathematics because geometry uses imagination. Geometry proceeds from the simple highest knowledge into complexity, just as actual astronomy is more complex by taking place in the sensible world.

For the Neoplatonists generally, and Proclus specifically, the circle was an expression of the concept of procession. Gersh writes that, "the spiritual world (to which the doctrine of [remaining, procession and reversion] primarily applies) transcends the spatial world of geometry yet through the medium of analogy points, straight lines, and curves can be held to approximate certain inexpressible truths."[57] The geometric symbols are tools to ascend beyond the material: only after one's ascension can one understand the complete truth of geometry and the circle. Proper study of geometry and mathematics should be a spiritual exercise, by symbolising in the soul the truth that is immaterial and inexpressible.

For Proclus, the circle has a different symbolism than it does for Plato. Proclus writes, "Should we not reply that what describes the circle is not the line, but the point that moves about the stationary point? The line only defines its distance from the center, whereas what produces the circle is the point in circular movement" (*EEC*, 107). Plato presents the circle as an unbroken, perfect movement around a point; Proclus uses it to convey a wider range of meanings by equating the centre with a source. Beierwaltes writes, "So ist der Mittelpunkt das eigentlich treibende Moment dieser von ihm selbst ausgehenden und in ihn rueckkehrenden Bewegung: Ursprung (ἀφ' οὗ) und Ziel (πρὸς ὅ), Anfang und Ende ineins, das durchtragende Prinzip seiner selbst und des Kreises."[58] Plato is not as interested in the point that the circle revolves around as he is in the uniformity of this movement. For Proclus, a circle *is* the centre.

[57] Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 72-3.
[58] Beierwaltes, *Proklos*, 174-5.

Proclus conceives of the circle as one of the highest principles that applies to all levels of being. He writes:

> The centers and the poles of all the spheres symbolize the wry-necked gods by imitating the mysterious union and synthesis which they effect; the axes represent the mainstays of all the cosmic orders, since they hold together the unities and revolutions in the visible cosmos, as the intelligible centers hold together the cosmos of the intelligibles; and the very spheres are likenesses of the perfecting divinities, joining end to beginning and surpassing all other figures in simplicity, uniformity, and perfection. (*EEC*, 91)

Proclus, like Plotinus, presents circles as having a theurgic basis. Circles are superior to other geometric figures, but they are the most perfect of the figures in the ways that they resemble the gods. Perfect spheres are the only fitting spatial representations of divine beings. Circles are the summit of geometry and so they are the gateway to the immaterial realm. Mathematics should be a spiritual exercise in the way that it leads man to the incorporeal realm of truth. Proclus also speaks about the circle as akin to holy relics. Following Iamblichus, he also espouses a doctrine of immaterial theurgy and it is clear here that the proper study of mathematics also functions as a theurgic practice. By connecting the circles to gods there is an implicit invocation of higher powers when engaging in geometry properly: the circles themselves are an expression of the immaterial truths which man wishes to penetrate.

Proclus presents a scale of being in which the higher is more circular and lower is more akin to the straight line (*EEC*, 146-8). Each thing receives its circularity, or highest part, from that which is above it. As something returns to its higher power, it becomes more circular: “Circular angles imitate the causes that enwrap intelligible diversity in a unity, for circular

lines ever bending back on themselves are images of Nous and intelligible forms" (*EEC*, 129-30). As things become more unified they are less mixed and so more circular. Cyclical movement is an imitation of the gods and also a return to simplicity. Gersh writes that for the Neoplatonists and especially Proclus, "one mode of description involves the equations of centre with remaining, straight line with procession, and circle with reversion."[59] The task that Proclus is presenting to his readers is to make themselves more circular and therefore more divine. This is why it is imperative that man understand that the truth of the circles is not simply in material occurrences. To become more circular means to be participating in the divine causes.

The study of the sciences should be an imitation of procession and reversion, drawing the soul above the physical realm and returning it to the simplest of the sciences. For Proclus, the truth of the circle is only fully made known when one has progressed beyond geometry, and the circle is understood in its unity. By approaching the sciences philosophically, they become spiritual exercises. As the centre of the circle is discovered, one should also discover the centre of truth and man. As one discovers the true nature of circles, he should become more circular himself, more closely imitating the higher causes. A proper study of the sciences should, just as theurgy does, lead to the purification of the soul and unity with the gods. The circle, as an expression of divine truths, straddles these two realms. On the one hand, it is the key to understanding that truth does not exist in sensible experience. On the other hand, it is a holy symbol that man should seek to imitate.

[59] Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 73.

Conclusion

With Plato, Plotinus and Proclus, the actual study of mathematics and astronomy is secondary to the effect that these sciences can have on the soul. In the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, Plato wishes to direct the reader's mind upwards so that he can compare the rotations of his mind to those of the heavens. Thus, a perfectly ordered soul is a perfect circle: the constant, uniform movement represents the objectivity of thought. Plotinus focuses on the centre of the circle, hoping that the reader will use this as a metaphor to discover his own centre. This centre should then be moved towards the centre of the universe in a unification of the highest part of man with the highest principle of all. Proclus demonstrates that the proper study of circles should lead one through the sciences towards higher truths and into participation with the gods. The circle, for him, is the geometrical form of the highest principles, and so man should treat the study of it as a holy activity. All three philosophers focus on the soul. The circle is meant to inspire man to achieve the same kind of order. The spiritual exercises begin with the circles, first physical and then mathematical where the circling of the highest principles are imaged, and these, especially in Plotinus and Proclus, have a theurgic character. Proclus especially encourages his followers to make the activities of their souls because of the divine principles they represent. Boethius' *Consolation* makes use of many different kinds of circles and all of them, in some way, represent the movement from subjective experience to objective truth through the sciences.

A central problem in the *Consolation* is the reconciliation of particular instances with universal laws. In his work Boethius presents a hierarchy of sciences found in the earlier thinkers discussed here, which brings the Prisoner from the subjective to the objective. The Prisoner begins with astronomy and is inspired by the circles he finds there to correct the

rotations of his mind. Thus the Prisoner discovers that thinking is a circular activity. However, as I shall show in the next chapter, this alone is not sufficient for true consolation.

CHAPTER 4: POETRY AND CIRCLES

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine a set of four interrelated poems in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.[60] 1m5, 3m2, 4m6 and 5m3 are the only anapestic dimeter poems in the work.[61] Together, they represent a continuing discussion of natural action and circular and spherical imagery. Here Boethius is evoking the tradition present in Plato and the Neoplatonists in which circular action is the best kind, and the objectivity of proper thought is represented by a sphere. The Prisoner's ascent occurs by means of his continual reinterpretation of circles.

Of the *Consolation*'s thirty-nine poems, the Prisoner only delivers four: 1m1, 1m3, 1m5 and 5m3. 1m1 is the opening of the work, composed before Lady Philosophy appears; 1m3 is a retrospective narrative poem describing the Prisoner's recovery of vision after Lady Philosophy dries his eyes with her dress. Neither of these poems is properly part of the actual dialogue of the *Consolation*. 1m5 and 5m3 are the only poems spoken aloud by the Prisoner to Lady Philosophy herself.[62] The exceptional nature of these poems is reflected in their content, which charts the progress the Prisoner is able to make in his thinking. In 1m5 the Prisoner sees nothing of the heavens' circular order in the activities of men. Lamenting his misfortune and the state of the world, he prays for God to order the rewards and punishments of men with the same firmness as the rotating heavens. In the next two anapestic dimeter poems, 3m2 and 4m6, Philosophy explains the correct understanding of the cosmos. These poems show that correct natural action is akin to a circle, insofar as the actor is united to its beginning and end. In 5m3,

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[60] Portions of this chapter and the next first appeared in an earlier form in "The Circular Activity of Prayer in Boethius' *Consolation*," *Dionysius* 29 (2011): 193-204.
[61] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 21.
[62] See John Magee, "Boethius' Anapestic Dimeters (Acatalectic), with regard to the structure and argument of the *Consolatio,*" in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs*, ed. Alain Galonnier (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2003), 150.

with his newly acquired knowledge, the Prisoner takes up the same complaint as he did in 1m5, but now he finds his question's philosophical essence: how does one reconcile universal truth with singular experience? His answer comes from Philosophy in the poem 5m4, which reveals how man can engage in his true natural activity.

In the final book of the work, the Prisoner learns that there are four modes of knowing. As the Prisoner's own faculties improve, so does his engagement with the different kinds of circles. The *Consolation* takes up spheres at different epistemological levels, and the Prisoner studies circles by means of different sciences. The movement is akin to Proclus' hierarchy of sciences: as the work progresses the sciences move away from the physical towards the goal of a unifying form of knowledge. Similarly, Boethius agrees with Proclus that these sciences should not be practiced for their own sake; they are instead steps in a philosophical ascent. As man perfects his activities, his thinking more accurately resembles the objective sphere described by Plato. Engaging in one's natural activity is engaging in one's divine activity, and so the Prisoner must go through a series of spiritual exercises involving various circles. The aim of these exercises is to leave the realm of subjective experience and ascend to objective thought, which is symbolised most aptly by a sphere.

MODES OF KNOWING AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE *CONSOLATION*

Near the end of the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy reveals that *omne enim quod cognoscitur non secundum sui vim, sed secundum cognoscentium potius comprehenditur*

facultatem (5, 4, 25).[63] The four different levels of knowing are sense, imagination, reason and intellect. She defines them thus:

> *Neque enim sensus aliquid extra materiam valet vel universales species imaginatio contuetur vel ratio capit simplicem formam; sed intellegentia quasi desuper spectens concepta forma quae subsunt etiam cuncta diiudicat, sed eo modo quo formam ipsam, quae nulli alii nota esse poterat, comprehendit*. (5, 4, 32)[64]

Of these modes of knowing, intellect alone understands its object in a unified manner. Sense has only impressions of its object; imagination holds together all sense impressions of an object in order to grasp its shape. In intellect, the divine knowledge holds all things together in a unity. Man is a rational animal and so reason is the highest faculty naturally available to him. Reason should connect the universal forms to their particular instances, though the Prisoner has forgotten his own true faculties as the *Consolation* begins. The *Consolation* generally, and the acatalectic anapestic dimeter poems specifically, show the Prisoner's return to his own faculties.

Elaine Scarry has argued that each book of the *Consolation* represents a different faculty (1: sense, 2: imagination, 4: reason, 5: intellect), excepting Book 3 which represents all of them.[65] The imagery and method of each book restores that faculty and imparts knowledge from that level of knowing. Michael Fournier takes this theory further and connects each book

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[63] "Everything which is known is not done so through its own power but is only able to be understood according to the power of the knower." The Latin text is from Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae. Opscula Theologica*, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Munich: Bibliotheca Teubneriana, 2005). All English translations from Boethius are my own except where noted.

[64] "For sense has no power at all outside of matter, and imagination does not look at the universal shapes nor does reason grasp the simple form; but intellect, as if looking down from above, distinguishes all things below it when it has grasped the form, in the way by which it comprehends the form itself, which is able to be known by nothing else."

[65] Elaine Scarry, "The External Referent: Cosmic Order. The Well-Rounded Sphere: Cognition and Metaphysical Structure in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy,*" in *Resisting Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

and the mode of knowing associated with it to one of the sciences of Boethius' *quadrivium*, as laid out in his *Institutio Arithmetica*: astronomy (sense), music (imagination), geometry (reason) and arithmetic (intellect).[66] Against Scarry, Fournier holds that Books 3 and 4 are in fact both concerned with reason and geometry. He writes, "Geometry has a twofold orientation. The principles of geometry can be used as axioms in the investigation of the sensible world, and the sensible world is known insofar as it is an image of the mathematical. Geometrical forms can also be investigated insofar as they are themselves images of higher intelligible realities."[67] As the discussion of the *Consolation* progresses, and the Prisoner approaches intellect, his form of knowledge relies less on sense experience and more on the principles of the mind. I shall show that each of the anapestic dimeter poems also corresponds to this division of sciences in the different Books.

The similarity between this structuring of the *Consolation* and Proclus' ordering of sciences is striking, and throughout the *Consolation* these modes of knowing play similar roles to the ones they play in the Euclid commentary. The lower physical sciences direct the mind of the Prisoner upward to the incorporeal sciences and finally to the divine. As with Proclus, the more empirically-based the science, the less truth it contains: "Arithmetic is the foundation without which the other three would have no standing."[68] The truth in the highest of these sciences filters through in a much reduced way into the sensible world.

The Prisoner's progress in the sciences is towards unity in knowledge. As he discovers his own beginning and end in God, simultaneously he relearns the essence of his own

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[66] Michael Fournier, "Boethius and the Consolation of the Quadrivium," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 34 (2008): 1. Boethius' ordering of the sciences can be found in Boèce, *Institution Arithmetique*, ed. and trans. Jean-Yves Guillaumin (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995): 1, 1.
[67] Fournier, "Quadrivium," 10.
[68] Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 73.

knowledge of the world. For Boethius, "Arithmetic studies multitude in itself, while Music studies it in relation to something else (*ad aliquid*). Geometry studies immovable magnitude, Astronomy moveable."[69] For Proclus, astronomy is, similarly, the lowest rung on this ladder of sciences, but in the end mathematics is only a bridge between physics and metaphysics.[70] The circles of the *Consolation* change as the Prisoner experiences each science. Arithmetic represents the highest science, the one which unifies the divided. The correlation to Proclus is not simply hierarchical but also philosophical. Proper scientific endeavour should not be done for its own sake but always with the highest truth in mind. Socrates studies the heavenly motions to correct the rotations of his own mind: the Prisoner is led through the hierarchy of sciences in order to gain philosophical understanding.

1M5: THE PRISONER'S COMPLAINT

The first poem of the anapestic dimeters is the prayer at 1m5, which follows a long lament by the Prisoner about his current state. In it, he sings:

O stelliferi conditor orbis,
qui perpetuo nixus solio
rapido caelum turbine versas
legemque pati sidera cogis. (1m5,1-4)[71]

God is the efficient cause of the heavens and also the direct agent of their spinning. The Prisoner sees this same circular order and structure in all things except for man. The clearest

[69] Ibid., 73.
[70] Ibid., 106.
[71] "Founder of the star-bearing sphere, resting on your everlasting throne, you turn heaven in a swift rotation and compel the stars to obey the law."

articulation of the problem is at lines 25-7: *Omnia certo fine gubernans / hominum solos respuis actus / merito rector cohibere modo.*[72] The Prisoner claims that God could order man as strictly as the heavens but has decided against it. He believes that it is because of this that the good suffer and the wicked prevail. Comparing the effects of Fortune with the ocean, the Prisoner ends his prayer thus**:** *Rapidos, rector, comprime fluctus/ et quo caelum regis immemsum/ firma stabiles foedere terras!* (1m5, 46-8)[73] He wants man's earthly rewards and punishments to be as well-ordered as the tides or the rotation of the stars.

The complaint is the result of a difficulty in reconciling universal ideas with particular experiences; this is the problem present to man as a rational animal. Reason discovers the universal in the particulars, but unlike intellect it cannot completely reconcile them. "As is clear from the opening of the *Consolation*, the exile grasps both the concept of universal order and the concept of man as a rational animal: his difficulty originates in his inability to comprehend their relation (1. m.5, pr.6)."[74] Soon after 1m5, the Prisoner says that he cannot imagine that the world operates according to chance (1, 6, 3-4). For him, only the realm of man is not guided by providence. He sees the universal order in that which is around him but cannot apply it to his own circumstances, as his faculties are not sufficiently developed. At this stage he is still operating at the level of sense. He sees order in the heavens but does not see it in the world of man. If the Prisoner's thinking were fully developed he would be able to understand the universal principles at work in the things he experiences through sense.

As shown in Chapter 3, there is a history of the heavenly spheres representing perfect order and, as Reis argues, the circle is for Plato a symbol of the overcoming of individual

[72] "Governing all things with a determined limit, leader, you refuse to restrain the acts of man with the limit they deserve." *Omnia certo fine gubernans / hominum solos respuis actus / merito rector cohibere modo.*
[73] "Steersman, check the rapid waves and keep the earth steady with that firm covenant with which you rule the boundless heavens."
[74] Scarry, "The External Referent," 146.

perspective.[75] In this way, the circles that the Prisoner observes are the goal of his development. The Prisoner wishes to know how his subjective experience can be reconciled with the universal principles that philosophy teaches. The *Consolation* can be seen as the account of the Prisoner's development towards circularity. By the end of the work, he is both engaged in ordered action like the heavens and he has overcome his individual perspective. At 1m5, the Prisoner thinks this perfect position is wholly removed from his life and, generally, the world of human affairs.

Nevertheless, despite the error of his complaints, there is a way in which the prayer at 1m5 is an important step in the Prisoner's progress. The *Consolation* opens with the Prisoner praying to Death for relief.[76] But at 1m5 the Prisoner has at least been able "to turn to the appropriate agent of relief, God."[77] The Prisoner is not praying correctly but he is praying to the right power, as his discussion of the heavens reveals. In the *Timaeus*, vision is man's greatest gift from the gods so that he can watch and study the cosmic rotations.[78] In the Platonic dialogue, studying the heavens is meant to inspire man to improve his thinking and to fix the rotations of his own soul. At 1m5, he thinks that God simply refused to make man as ordered as the heavens, but he is at least able to see the cosmic order and compare it to his own life. In relation to the *Timaeus*, Lady Philosophy has cast herself as a "nouveau Socrate," by urging the Prisoner to watch the heavenly rotations in order to repair his own.[79] Her task is to show that his sense experience alone is not true compared to the universal patterns she will uncover.

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[75] Reis, "The Circle Simile," 243-4.
[76] Michael Fournier, "Boethius *pro se de magia*," *Dionysius* 29 (2001): 209.
[77] Thomas F. Curley III, "The *Consolation of Philosophy* as a Work of Literature," *The American Journal of Philology* 108 (1987): 358.
[78] *Timaeus*, 47A-C.
[79] Béatrice Bakhouche, "Boèce et le *Timée*," in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs*, ed. Alain Galonnier (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2003), 11.

3M2: THE HYMN TO NATURE

Though the logic is worked out before this, the hymn to Nature at 3m2 is Lady Philosophy's metrical response to the earlier complaint of 1m5. Unlike the prayer of the Prisoner, this poem is one of praise. It uses the principles of reason to explain the function of nature in a way that begins to show why the Prisoner's complaint at 1m5 does not make sense. Lady Philosophy begins:

> *Quantas rerum flectat habenas*
> *natura potens, quibus immensum*
> *legibus orbem provida servet*
> *stringatque ligans inresoluto*
> *singula nexu*. (3m2, 1-5)[80]

Philosophy must first make clear what nature is: she presents a world in which everything is held in chains that cannot be broken. God does not directly control the turning of each star, as the Prisoner believes at 1m5, but instead everything is directed by itself towards its own proper end.

Philosophy presents four examples of things engaging in their natural activity. The first three (7-30) are a lion, a bird and a young tree, all of whose natural actions have in some way been constrained by man. Each seeks to return to its nature. These varied examples are the *singula* of the Prisoner's perception.[81] They are individual examples in nature that Lady

[80] "Powerful Nature directs the great reins of things, and, by these laws, prescient Nature preserves the great orb and, binding each thing, draws them tight with an unbreakable knot."
[81] Helga Scheible, *Die Gedichte in der* Consolatio Philosophiae *des Boethius* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1972), 83.

Philosophy uses to demonstrate universal law by revealing the similarities between them. The fourth and final image makes this clearest: *Cadit Hesperias Phoebus in undas, / sed secreto tramite rursus/ currum solitos vertit ad ortus* (3m2, 31-3).[82] Astronomical imagery is found throughout the *Consolation*, but Lady Philosophy's use here is a reply to 1m5. Unlike the earlier natural examples in the hymn, the sun cannot be hindered from its proper course and nature.[83] It will always be engaged in its natural circular action by itself without interruption. God is not the direct cause of the *revolution* of the heavens, as the Prisoner thinks at 1m5, but the final cause. He does not turn the heavens the way Fortune cranks her wheel (2m1,1), but instead all things are self-motivated. The Prisoner wishes in 1m5 that God would control the affairs of man the way he controls all other things. Here the Prisoner learns that in fact all things operate according to their nature towards God.

Immediately after the example of Phoebus, Philosophy concludes the prayer:

Repetunt proprios quaeque recursus
redituque suo singula gaudent
nec manet ulli traditus ordo,
nisi quod fini iunxerit ortum
stabilemque sui fecerit orbem. (3m2, 34-8)[84]

The proper nature of all things is represented, like the rotation of the sun, as a circle in which the beginning and end are united. It is no coincidence that God is seen as the beginning and end of all things: in 3m6, similar language establishes God as that which one's nature seeks. The

[82] "Phoebus sets into western waves but returning by a secret passage he turns his chariot again to his habitual ascent."
[83] Thomas Curley, "How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*," *Interpretation: a Journal of Political Philosophy* 108, (1987): 258.
[84] "All things seek their own ways back and rejoice in their return; no order is given to anything, except that which joins the origin to the end, and makes it a stable orb."

poem begins, *Omne hominum genus in terris simili surgit ab ortu: / unus enim rerum pater est, unus cuncta ministrat* (3m6,1-2).[85] Nature moves all things back to their origin, which is God, and, thus embracing one's nature is to return to one's beginning. 3m2 plays with this idea by having the final lines end with *ortum* and *orbem*; the circle is embraced because it unites the beginning and the end. All things seek their origin and end in God, a fact that reflected in Boethius' wordplay, which highlights the affinity between the words 'circle' and 'origin.' At 1m5 the Prisoner wishes that man were as ordered as the circles of the heavens. At 3m2 Philosophy says that everything's proper nature is circular. John Magee explains that, "progress is circular."[86] At 3m2, Philosophy conspicuously leaves out man as an example, which seems to imply that man is removed from his natural order.[87] Man prevents himself from pursuing his own natural action, just as he can restrain the lion, bird and sapling. These three examples of restraint are like the Prisoner who has been kept from his own natural self by his forgetfulness. Phoebus cannot be prevented from completing his natural action: the sun is the perfect example of how a thing returning to its origin forms a circle.

The nature examples of 3m2 correspond to the hierarchy of sciences. Book 3 is equivalent to the lower form of geometry in which physical objects are measured and calculated. In 3m2, Lady Philosophy examines the actions of plants, animals and the heavens and demonstrates their circles. The Prisoner learns how to extract these circles from the actions of things. This is not actual geometry *per se* but it is equivalent in that it finds perfect incorporeal ideas in material examples. As geometry takes a middle position between the physical and incorporeal realms, so the method here uses examples in nature to explain greater

[85] "Every kind of man on earth springs from the same origin, for there is one father of everything, who governs all things."
[86] Magee, "Boethius' Anapestic Dimeters," 162.
[87] Blackwood, "The Meters," 129; Curley, "How to Read," 258.

truths. Whereas in 1m5 the Prisoner sees the heavenly circles and complains that man does not function in a similarly ordered way, here Lady Philosophy engages in 'geometry' to show that there are actually perfect circles in nature. If 3m2 were at the level of sense it would simply record the actions of things: instead the argument has progressed to a stage where man can find universal patterns and truth in the world around him. It is in 4m6 that man is able to see himself as part of that order.

4M6: MAN AND THE COSMIC ORDER

In the later sections of book 4, Lady Philosophy uses concentric circles to explain the relation between providence and fate. Providence, where all hope to arrive, is the pivot around which the trappings of fate rotate. She says:

> *Nam ut orbium circa eundem cardinem sese vertentium qui est intimus ad simplicitatem medietatis accedit ceterorumque extra locatorum veluti cardo quidam, circa quem versentur, exsistit, extimus vero maiore ambitu rotatus, quanto a puncti media individuitate discedit tanto amplioribus spatiis explicatur, si quid vero illi se medio conectat et societ in simplicitatem cogitur diffundique ac diffluere cessat: simili ratione quod longius a prima mente discedit maioribus fati nexibus implicatur ac tanto aliquid fato liberum est quanto illum rerum cardinem vicinius petit*. (4, 6, 15)[88]

[88] "For, as the innermost one of orbs turning themselves around the same centre approaches the simplicity of the centre and exists as a pivot around which those outside of it turn; but the outer one turns with a greater revolution, spread out over a greater space the more it is divided from the indivisible centre. But if it connects and joins itself to that midpoint, it is collected into the simplicity and stops defusing itself and being defused: in like manner that which is distantly separated from the first mind is entwined in the greater webs of fate and is free from fate to the extent that it seeks more closely the centre of things."

The outer spheres are still caught in the trappings of fate, and this is symbolised by the larger rotation that they need to make. Providence is the still centre around which fate rotates and upon which it depends. Plotinus and Proclus emphasise the fact that a circle emanates from its centre: the size of the circumference does not determine whether it is a circle or not. Boethius' concentric circles evoke the Neoplatonic system of procession, reversion and remaining.[89] In 3m2, natural circular action is presented as uniting the end and the beginning. The implication of 4m6 is that this is not enough. The goal is not simply engaging in natural action but also improving, that is, moving inward and closer to the unity of the centre. To follow the image to its logical end, the Prisoner should want to be engaged in circular action, but now with as small a circumference as possible. The smaller his own rotation, the closer he is to the still centre of providence.

4m6 also uses circles as a symbol of natural function, especially in reference to the heavenly spheres and the concentric circles of fate and providence. The poem resolves the imagery of the earlier poems of the set and points to the way in which man's role is different from other living things. 4m6 begins with a description of the order present in the cosmos, from the heavens to the earthly elements and the seasons. Philosophy relates this all to a love present in all things, found in the natural cycles from God. She sings:

nam nisi rectos revocans itus
flexos iterum cogat in orbes,
quae nunc stabilis continet ordo
dissaepta suo fonte fatiscant.
Hic est cunctis communis amor
repetuntque boni fine teneri,

[89] See Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 73.

quia non aliter durare queant

nisi converso rursus amore

refluant causae quae dedit esse (4, VI,40-8).[90]

All things seek their end in circular action so that they might not be separated from their origin, which is God, their first and final cause. The constant changes of nature and the seasons are both recast as cycles. Magee writes that Boethius' imagery here reinterprets the Wheel of Fortune in a new light: "Fortune's constancy, like that of the seasons, *is change*."[91] Not only are circles seen as natural, proper action, but earlier negative circles are taken up into this new understanding. The Prisoner hates Fortune at the beginning, but this is because of his incorrect perspective. The Prisoner only has access to his own singular experience and so at 1m5 he does not understand the true nature of Fortune. What seems to him through his senses to be chance events, he discovers to be the constant upward and downward movement of a wheel, as regular as the heavenly rotations. Fortune is only faultlessly engaged in her own natural, circular action. Like Phoebus, her best action takes the form of circular movement. 4m6 is a kind of climax in the work. It is, in fact, the last full celebration of cosmic order in the *Consolation*,[92] and so it resolves many of the questions about the heavens brought up in 1m5.

Despite Philosophy's praise, by 4m6 the astronomical and Phoebus imagery is no longer heralded as the perfect exemplar of circular action. Boethius ends 3m10 by writing:

splendor quo regitur vigetque caelum

vitat obscuras animae ruinas;

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[90] "For if [God] did not renew their right paths and compel them to curve into circles, the stable order which now holds them, they would fall to pieces, divided from their font. This love is common to all things: they seek to be held by their good end, because they cannot endure unless the causes that gave them being flow back with returning love."
[91] Magee, "Boethius' Anapestic Dimeters," 159.
[92] Gerard O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 171.

hanc quisquis poterit notare lucem

candidos Phoebi radios negabit. (3m10,15-8)[93]

Whereas in 3m2, Boethius uses Phoebus as a prime example of something operating according to its natural laws, here he points out that there is something beyond the natural; despite its divine name, the sun is still only natural. The passage in 3m10 about Phoebus is mirrored strikingly in the next poem 3m11. There, Lady Philosophy advises that to discover the highest end one should turn one's own mind into a circle in order to discover a light brighter than the sun. She sings:

Quisquis profunda mente vestigat verum

cupitque nullis ille deviis falli

in se revolvat intimi lucem visus

longosque in orbem cogat inflectens motus

animumque doceat quicquid extra molitur

suis retrusum possidere thesauris;

dudum quod atra texit erroris nubes

lucebit ipso perspicacius Phoebo. (3m11,1-8)[94]

This bright light, identified as deriving from the heavens, is now also found within man. It is found by means of circular action and thought directed inward. In 3m2 Phoebus is the ultimate example of something engaged in unbroken natural action. Now, greater 'lights' are found

[93] "The brilliance with which heaven is guided and thrives escapes the dark ruins of the mind; anyone able to notice this light will deny that the rays of Phoebus are bright."

[94] "Whoever searches for the truth with lofty reflection and does not wish to be deceived by erroneous paths, should turn the light of his innermost vision upon himself, and compel the great movements [of the soul], turning them into a circle, and should teach his mind to obtain within its own treasuries that which it strives for outside itself. That which the dark cloud of error formerly covered will shine more clearly than Phoebus himself."

above it in God, and even in man's own soul. This Phoebus imagery is crucial for the interpretation of 4m6.

Astronomical imagery in 4m6 is important because it is meant to mirror the concentric circles around the pivot of providence, discussed just before at 4, 6. Man possesses a light brighter than the sun, and so, just as the heavenly motions always rotate in the same way, there is a suggestion that man is able to move closer to the pivot. The planets and stars will always follow the same route; though man may not be able to reach the centre, he can move away from the outermost of the circles and the trappings of fate. Unlike other creatures, man has free will. His thinking is represented by a circle but, unlike Phoebus, man has the freedom to move closer to the still centre.

Like Proclus' hierarchy of sciences, studying the heavenly movements is simply a stage in a progression to higher forms of knowledge and awareness. At 1m5 the Prisoner relies on sense to see the sky, and he only begins to think about the heavenly movements abstractly. Lady Philosophy wants him to improve his own rotations when he sees the heavenly spheres, yet the study of physical phenomena is not enough. The concentric circles of fate described by Philosophy are considered at the level of geometry. The circles exist without matter and so there can be many around the same point. Lady Philosophy uses an image in which the size of the circles varies, but the centre remains as both beginning and end. Like Proclus' system, the study of circles is now entirely removed from the physical world. In 3m2 circles are discovered in all things; at 4m6 it is shown that the structure of the cosmos is a system of concentric circles, some closer to and others farther from God. Book 4 begins with the Prisoner saying that the greatest cause of his grief is that the universe is good but that evil seems to go unpunished (4, 1,3). The concentric circles resolve this complaint by showing that the

trappings of Fate are determined by providence. The closer one is to the still centre of providence, the more entrenched one is in God's order. The farther from the centre, the more likely one is to believe that there is no pattern in Fortune's gifts.

4m6 builds upon the arguments of 1m5 and 3m2 by reminding the Prisoner that he is not ordered like the unerring planets or fixed concentric circles but is in fact more divine. Though Phoebus is constantly turning in a fixed course, he cannot improve or move any closer to God. Man is able to expand and contract his circle and so his onus is not simply to engage in circular action, but also to try to create a circle with a rotation as small as possible around the pivot. God, as the pivot, is the necessary centre point that is both origin and end for all circles. God both inspires the turning of the natural circles and draws those of man closer to Himself.[95]

5M3 AND ITS ANSWER

5m3 seems an unsatisfying conclusion to the quartet as it asks more questions than it answers: "the mood of *aporia* dominates [it]."[96] It is the first poem that the Prisoner has sung since 1m5 and together these are the only two poems that he sings directly to Lady Philosophy. This connection between them hints at how, despite the Prisoner's progress, the complaint has the same source. Both poems wish to reconcile the particular and the universal but at different levels of understanding. 5m3 begins with a long set of questions commencing with the conflict of free will and divine foreknowledge but quickly becoming an investigation of man's capacity to know. The poem ends thus:

[95] The Neoplatonic tradition characterises this kind of returning circular action as a spiral (Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 74). Though I see no direct use of the spiral in the *Consolation*, it is a useful image for circular rotation approaching its own centre.
[96] O'Daly, *The Poetry*, 175.

Igitur quisquis vera requirit

neutro est habitu; nam neque novit

nec penitus tamen omnia nescit,

sed quam retinens meminit summam

consulit alte visa retractans,

ut servatis queat oblitas

addere partes. (5m3, 25-31)[97]

5m3 presents a philosophical problem, and is a demonstration of human thought at its limit. The human mind is unable to bring together the universal idea and particular example into a unity. The Prisoner has progressed through his lower faculties and has arrived at his own highest capacity. Despite this great improvement, the Prisoner finds himself in a situation like that of 1m5 again, in that he cannot fully reconcile the universal and particular. His final poem to Philosophy reframes the same question as his first one, but now at a higher level of engagement.[98]

The difference is that in the later poem the Prisoner no longer doubts the providence of God, but now points out that he simply does not understand its workings. 5m3 shows that human thinking cannot wholly unify the universal and the particular because it is too sequential. His reason is equivalent to abstract geometry which still uses shapes and, unlike arithmetic, cannot unify multitudes. The Prisoner's reasoning improves greatly over the course of the *Consolation*, but this final problem cannot be answered by his own investigations. This

[97] "Therefore whoever searches for the truth is in neither state; for he neither knows nor is utterly ignorant of all things, but retaining the whole he remembers it and examining again what he has seen he considers it from above so that he is able to add the forgotten parts to the things remembered."

[98] "[T]his latter verse [5m3] section poses essentially the same question as the former [1m5] – what is the relationship between the realm of unchanging being and the unpredictably various world of humanity – but it does so in a less personal and emotional terms and with greater self-consciousness and epistemological sophistication" (Curley, "How to Read," 250).

poem is the last significant thing that the Prisoner says in the work, and so this poem represents the last word from rational man.

Curley goes further, connecting 1m5 with 1m6 and 5m3 with 5m4. He writes that 1m5 is the Prisoner laying out a problem while 1m6 contains the solution, though he cannot yet recognise it. Curley summarises the positions of 1m5 and 1m6, "As Boethius the character sees it, mankind is in exile because God's order does not extend to the realm of human affairs; while from Philosophy's point of view, man has exiled himself by failing to conform to the order inherent in the nature of things."[99] In response to the Prisoner's complaint, 1m6 presents the firm cycle of the seasons and the ensuing disaster for things that do not follow the natural cycles.[100] Curley believes that 5m3 and 5m4 mirror this progression, signaled by the fact that their metres are the same as the other two poems, (acatalectic anapestic dimeter followed by glyconic).[101] At 5m3 the Prisoner has progressed to a point where, though he cannot yet understand the workings of God's providence, he approaches it with reason and inquiry instead of complaints and anger.

The circles of the *Consolation* reach their completion in 5m4, by connecting thinking with proper natural action. Over the course of the work, Lady Philosophy changes the Prisoner's perception of the circles by moving them from the heavens into the human mind. Thus in 5m4 they are crucial to human knowledge and proper self-relation. In reply to the Prisoner's description of the human mind, Lady Philosophy sings:

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[99] Ibid., 256.

[100] *Signat tempora propriis /aptans officiis deus / nec quas ipse coercuit / misceri patitur vices. / Sic quod praecipiti via / certum deserit ordinem / laetos non habet exitus* (1m6, 16-22).

[101] Curley, "How to Read," 232, 260. Seth Lerer also points out that the prose sections before 1m5 and 5m3 also correspond to this system; 1,4 and 5,3 are both long speeches by the Prisoner laying out the problem that end with their respective poems (Seth Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue: Literary Method in* The Consolation of Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 220).

quae vis singula perspicit

aut quae cognita dividit?

quae divisa recolligit

alternumque legens iter

nunc summis caput inserit,

nunc decedit in infima,

tum sese referens sibi

veris falsa redarguit? (5m4, 18-25)[102]

The activity of the mind moves in a circular way from the universal to the particular, and so it too is natural action like the movement of the heavens. The movement between these different poles is represented by circular rotation. When the rotations of man's mind resemble the rotations of the heavens, his thinking is objective. As in Plato's *Laws*, the perfect rotation of thought is an overcoming of individual perspective. Despite the Prisoner's achievement, there is a unity of knowledge unavailable to reasoning (and geometry) that is symbolised by arithmetic. 4m6 suggests that man's natural action is greater than that of Phoebus because he freely chooses it. Here at 5m3 man's natural action is properly presented, and at 5m4 it is identified as a circle. As in the *Laws*, the Prisoner has successfully made his own mind into a circle.

In 1m5 the Prisoner thinks that God acts as an efficient cause of the turning of the heavens and wishes that He would act the same way towards men. In 5m4 the theme is resolved because the human mind is explicitly called an efficient cause: *Haec est efficiens magis / longe causa potentior / quam quae materiae modo / impressas patitur notas* (5m4, 26-

[102] "What power looks at singular things or divides known things? What recollects things that are divided, taking each route alternately, now putting its head into the highest things, now descending into the lowest things, then returning to itself and disproving false things with the truth?"

9).[103] As efficient cause, the mind is now responsible for its own rewards and punishments. The circles show that this kind of thought is an activity entirely natural to it. It is not God that punishes and rewards man. Instead each man does it to himself through his own actions: the efficient cause is much greater than the passive receiver. The natural and right action of a thing brings about its happiness. This action is compared to that of the circular motions of the heavens or a firm and unbreakable cycle like that of the passing seasons. The Prisoner begins by wanting God to control all things but learns that each thing brings about its own rewards and punishments. In 5m4, Philosophy demonstrates that the action of thought is as circular as the astronomical examples, and therefore a natural and right activity for man. Man brings forth his own rewards and punishments, but unlike other things, has the freedom to do so. This is symbolised by the fact that, unlike the astronomical examples, man can expand and contract his circular action. The tighter his circle, the closer he is to his centre and the more he does natural actions that return him to his origin.

CONCLUSION

As a whole the anapestic dimeter poems arrive at the conclusion that the rewards and punishments which the Prisoner wants all people to receive are inseparable from men's own actions. In 5m4, circles are brought from the heavens, where they exist in 1m5, into the natural processes of the human mind. God is no longer conceived as something which controls the heavens and ignores the physical world. Now the divine laws, symbolised by circles, are understood to be present in all things, and each thing creates its own rewards and punishments. These circular activities connect man to his end and origin, and so make man more godlike.

[103] "This is the efficient cause, much more powerful than that which receives engraved stamps as matter does."

Man has a privileged position in the cosmos because, more than anything else, he can change the size of his circle around the pivot.

5m3 is kind of climax in the *Consolation* as the anapestic dimeter poems all demonstrate different levels of knowing with which to interpret the circles. Based on Proclus' hierarchy of sciences, the *Consolation* moves away from physical circles to those that are purely mathematical. In 1m5 the Prisoner's complaint is based on his own sense experience. Astronomy sees the perfect order of the cycles but it cannot see that man moves in the same way. 3m2 is lower geometry, which discovers circles throughout the physical world. 4m6 and the circles of fate are based on the higher geometry, in which circles exist in thought. 5m3 is human thought at its peak, functioning as a circle but unable to reach the simple unity of the pivot and intellect. Intellect, the pivot, is the highest stage in the *Consolation*'s hierarchy of modes of knowing. Symbolised by arithmetic, it is the form of knowledge that unifies its object in a simple way. As for Proclus, the correct pedagogical method of the sciences leads to a corresponding development in the Prisoner's soul. However, Philosophy's final revelations in the last sections of the *Consolation* do not come from intellect. Man cannot reach intellect alone but must pray for divine aid.

CHAPTER 5: PRAYER

INTRODUCTION

Though there are prayers in the *Consolation*, prayer as a subject is never directly addressed for more than a few lines at a time. Nevertheless, Lady Philosophy ends the work by saying that prayers which are right (*rectus)* cannot be ineffectual (5, 6, 46-7). This final claim demands that the whole work be re-assessed in a new light to determine the basis for this remark and how it fits in with discussions of modes of knowing and circular activity. This chapter is an attempt to trace the logic of prayer in the work, in order to discern the difference between the Prisoner's prayer at 1m5 and Lady Philosophy's at 3m9. Why is one prayer 'right' and the other one not? Do inferior, misguided prayers like those of the Prisoner still serve a purpose?

In the last chapter, thinking was established as a circular activity proper to humans. This chapter will examine why prayer is in fact man's highest form of circular activity. When man reaches his thoughts' limit, his only hope of reaching the truth is to pray for it. In the highest form of prayer, man has reached the limit that only God can help him move beyond. This is the only way for man's reason to be enlightened by intellect. It is equivalent to Iamblichus' highest form of prayer, which is achieved through a knowledge of man's deficiency.

Lady Philosophy encourages prayer at every stage of man's ascent, despite the fact that she only explicitly discusses prayer as a means of receiving intellect. In fact, the interlocutors are engaged in a kind of prayer throughout the *Consolation*. The frequent reinterpretation of the circles throughout the work is a spiritual exercise and inner theurgy. The spheres purify

each of the Prisoner's faculties so that he returns to himself and is ready for the highest form of prayer.

PART 1: THE HIGHEST PRAYER

The Activity of Prayer

At 5, 3 the Prisoner makes a direct connection between prayer and natural, circular motion and describes prayer as the condition of man's communication with God. This comment is made when he imagines a world in which God's foreknowledge eliminates any possibility of human free will:

> *Auferetur igitur unicum illud inter homines deumque commercium, sperandi scilicet ac deprecandi . . . qui solus modus est quo cum deo colloqui homines posse videantur illique inaccessae luci, prius quoque quam impetrent ipsa supplicandi ratione coniungi. Quae si . . .nihil virium habere credantur, quid erit quo summo illi rerum principi connecti atque adhaerere possimus? Quare necesse erit humanum genus, uti paulo ante cantabas, dissaeptum atque disiunctum suo fonte fatiscere*. (5, 3, 34-6)[104]

The final words of the Prisoner's complaint at 5, 3 refer back to a part of the anapestic dimeter poem 4m6.[105] At 4m6, 43, the natural principles of things move in circles to return to their origin. At 5, 3, the Prisoner says that prayer is the way in which one does not fall from his

[104] "And so that sole intercourse between men and God will be removed, that is, hope and prayer for aversion . . . and that is the only way in which men seem able to converse with God and to be joined by the very manner of their supplication to that inaccessible light, even before they receive what they seek. Now if these things . . . be thought to have no power, how should we be able to be joined and cleave to him, the highest principle of all things? So it will necessarily follow, as you sang a little while ago, that human kind would, torn apart and disjoined, in pieces fall from their origin." *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).
[105] Noticed by Gruber, *Kommentar*, 383.

origin. The Prisoner says this and it is not incorrect. When Philosophy answers this complaint in later sections she saves human free will from non-existence and prayer from being useless activity: she does not disagree with his assertion here. The final words of 5, 3 connect the natural circular movements of the heavens with man's prayer. Thus, two different activities of the mind, ratiocination and prayer, are compared to the natural circular movement of the heavens.

This comment and the poem afterwards, 5m3, begin the final stage of argumentation in the *Consolation*. After this, Lady Philosophy begins her discussion of the forms of knowing in order to explain how man still has free choice. Magee argues that at this point the Prisoner has completely reversed his position from the beginning of the work. At 1m5 he "plumped for a world ruled by divine reason rather than by chance"; at 5, 3 "he feels compelled to ask whether there is any room left for chance (*casus*), by which he means unnecessitated events subject to the influence of free choice."[106] If the contingent does not exist, then prayer is pointless, and man has no *commercium* with the divine realm. If there is no *commercium* with the divine then salvation is impossible. There is no consolation without this connection because man's thinking cannot surpass its *aporia*. Prayer may be a circular activity, but if it is not an interchange then consolation is impossible. I will not examine the arguments that restore free will, but instead intend to follow the logic of prayer's efficacy throughout the work.

Just before beginning the prayer of 3m9, Philosophy says *Sed cum, uti in Timaeo Platoni . . . nostro placet, in minimis quoque rebus divinum praesidium debeat implorari, quid nunc faciendum censes ut illius summi boni sedem repperire mereamur?* (3, 9,32)[107] With Plato

[106] John Magee, "The Good and morality: *Consolatio* 2-4," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 200.
[107] "But since . . . as our Plato agrees in the *Timaeus*, one ought to implore divine help even in the smallest things, what do you suppose should be done now that we may deserve to discover the seat of the highest good?"

on her side, Philosophy claims that God should be invoked before any undertaking. Man should be engaged in prayer at all times: it is his highest activity, available to him regardless of the state of his faculties.

There are no explicit references to material theurgy in the *Consolation*, and so, if man seeks to be returned fully to himself, then prayer is necessary. Philosophy compares the Prisoner's thinking to a circle, but even this image, which evokes circular arguments and circular reasoning, suggests that human thought alone cannot be completely consoling.[108] For total salvation, help must come from an outside source. Man can at least attempt to reach beyond himself with prayer, whereas his thought cannot leave its own boundaries. This doctrine is very similar to that of Iamblichus. Though the *Consolation* does not have an explicit discussion of theurgy, Boethius' doctrine on thought's limits is like that of the Syrian's. The two philosophers both argue that human activity alone is not enough to achieve unity or salvation. As Philosophy explains, it is intellect and not reason that is able to reconcile the particular and the universal. Boethius posits that prayer, and not reason, is the only way of overcoming the limit that prevents man from reaching God.

3m9: A Prayer to God

The hymn at 3m9 receives much scholarly attention because of its content but also because it comes at a kind of mid-point in the work. The argument shifts after this hymn and the ordering of the metres of the poems seems symmetrically structured around it.[109] In it, Lady Philosophy sings about the structure of the cosmos and the descent and re-ascent of the lesser souls. She ends by asking to be lifted up to the seat of God. Unlike 1m5 it is unquestionably a

[108] See Jean-Luc Solère, "Bien, Cercles et Hebdomades: formes et raisonnement chez Boèce et Proclus," in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs*, ed. Alain Galonnier (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2003), 57-8.
[109] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 21.

prayer which is correct. 3m9, more than any other passage in the *Consolation*, demonstrates the relation between Lady Philosophy and prayer.

Magee argues that even though 3m9 is not an anapestic dimeter poem it is connected with them.[110] If included with that set, not only does it take the central position but it explicitly deals with the themes of those poems. The hymn begins with the line *O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas* (3m9, 1). This is an allusion to the second line of 1m5:[111]

O stelliferi conditor orbis

Qui perpetuo nixus solio

Rapido caelum turbine versas

legemque pati sidera cogis. (1m5, 1-4)

Both poems begin with praises of the cosmic order, but with the later poem the focus has shifted. Lady Philosophy is now taking up the same themes as the Prisoner but in an altered and corrected way. The *perpetuo solio* that the Prisoner mentions is not ignored by Philosophy, but instead placed later in the poem. After presenting the cosmos, then she asks to be taken to the *augustam sedem* (21).

Another way in which Lady Philosophy comments on the anapestic dimeter poems in 3m9 is in her use of circles. The cosmic order laid out in 3m9 is influenced by the *Timaeus* and Proclus' commentary on it.[112] After praising God's balancing of the elements, Lady Philosophy sings that God has divided Soul (*animam*) into two spheres, and that Mind (*mentem*) also rotates and moves heaven in its image (15-7). Once again, divine perfection is portrayed as circular but, more explicitly than in 3m2 or 4m6, this central hymn creates a space for man to engage in divine, circular activity. Immediately after this section Philosophy sings:

[110] Magee, "Anapestic Dimeter," 152.
[111] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 277.
[112] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 276-288.

Tu causis animas paribus vitasque minores

provehis et levibus sublimes curribus aptans

in caelum terramque seris, quas lege benigna

ad te conversas reduci facis igne reverti. (3m9, 18-21)[113]

The language of return fits in with the spheres of the heavens. Man is able to return to his origin through circular action like that of the higher principles. The Procline influence can be seen, here, as circular action is a re-enactment of procession and reversion. By moving in circles the lower souls are able to return to their origin and end. The final stages in the argument of the anapestic dimeter poems are not properly present here. Man is granted circular action but there is not yet any discussion of the later themes like the concentric circles of Fate (4m6) or what exactly man's circular action is (5m3).

The other explicit connection to the anapestic dimeter poems comes just before the ending of the prayer. Lady Philosophy asks, *Da, pater, augustam menti conscendere sedem, / da fontem lustrare boni, da luce reperta / in te conspicuos animi defigere visus* (3m9, 22-4).[114] Lady Philosophy not only brings back the seat of 1m5, 2 but also compares God to a fountain. This comparison is made only four other times in the *Consolation* including at 4m6, and 5, 3, 36.[115] As noted above, the connection between 4m6 and 5, 3 establishes prayer as a natural circular action for man. In conjunction with this, 3m9 implies that man can be lifted up to the divine seat through prayer. Lady Philosophy asks God to bring her to his seat, which shows that she is not able to ascend by herself. She cannot see God without divine help. If Lady

[113] "You animate the lower souls with the same causes, you carry them up, fitting them to light chariots, you plant them in heaven and earth, and with benign law, you make them turn around and be lead back to you with fire."
[114] "Father, allow my mind to ascend to your august seat, allow me to observe the fountain of good, allow me, when I have discovered this light, to fix the clear vision of my mind upon you."
[115] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 284-5. The other times are 3, 10, 3 and 3m12, 1. The former reference is very soon after 3m9 and refers back to the hymn.

Philosophy, whose head sometimes pierces the heavens (1, 1,2), suggests that all endeavors begin in prayer, then divine aid should be invoked in all things for mortals. Prayer is a crucial part of the philosophical life because natural powers alone are insufficient.

The doctrine of the pivot is hinted at as the hymn ends: Lady Philosophy calls God, *principium, vector, dux, semita, terminus idem* (3m9, 28).[116] These names explicitly bring out the circles of the other poems in the work, showing God to be a beginning and end to all things. As in a circle, the beginning and the end are the same. This line helps determine that Lady Philosophy is divine without being God. She echoes the final line of 3m9 when she later says, *Pennas etiam tuae menti quibus se in altum tollere possit adfigam, ut perturbatione depulsa sospes in patriam meo ductu, mea semita, meis etiam vehiculis revertaris* (4, 1, 9).[117] Lady Philosophy is not an end, for, if she were, she should in 3m9 be praying for her own arrival. She relies on God in all things, and when she sings about the *terminus*, she asks God to lift her up. Through practicing philosophy one is able to ascend, and, in that sense, Philosophy can compare herself to the divine *vector, dux* and *semita.* Philosophy is a means of ascent, and, so, at 4, 1, 9, Lady Philosophy does not describe herself as the *principium* or *terminus*. She is not the cause of the world nor is she the final end, for which *even she* strives through prayer. Prayer is the kind of circular activity that enables the lower souls to return to the divine.

The Link to the Divine

Much has been made of the lack of explicit scriptural and patristic references in the *Consolation*. Christine Mohrmann has, however, drawn connections between Boethius'

[116] "Beginning, driver, leader, pathway, end [the same]."
[117] "Thus I shall attach wings to your mind, with which it may carry itself on high, so that, with all disorder removed, you may return safe to your fatherland with my guidance, my pathway and my vehicles."

language and contemporary Christian prayers and rites.[118] Most famously, Philosophy at 3, 12, 22 makes an allusion to the Wisdom of Solomon, which the Prisoner says he is glad to hear (3, 12, 23).[119] Robert Crouse argues that the *Consolation* is rife with allusions connecting Lady Philosophy with the Wisdom of Solomon, in part because she calls herself *Sapientia* at 1, 3, 6.[120] Chadwick argues that this connection in fact cleverly makes a point of downplaying the Biblical content: "the reference to the wisdom of Solomon enforces a doctrine of natural theology, not revealed."[121]

Boethius references pagan sources openly, but the lack of scriptural or patristic authority in the *Consolation* is consistent with his method in the *Theological Tractates.*[122] For him the activity of philosophy is the most important means of purifying the soul and judging the truth. Both thinking and praying are natural functions of man and so both lead man back to his origin. By situating the subject, there is an inherent humility in proper thinking's recognition of its inferiority. As with Iamblichus, the highest prayer is achieved when the suppliant knows his true insignificant value. Prayer enables all human thinking to recognise its lesser position. Thought is necessary for ascent, but the proper philosophical life couples it with prayer.

As man's *commercium* with the divine, prayer is the means of solving an *aporia*. Magee writes that in the *Consolation*, "the references to prayer implicitly secure once and for

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[118] See, Christine Mohrmann, "Some Remarks on the Language of Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*," in *Latin Script and Letters A.D. 400-900: Festschrift presented to Ludwig Bieler on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, eds. John J. O'Meara and Bernd Naumann (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 54-61.
[119] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 308.
[120] Robert Crouse, "*HAEC IPSA VERBA DELECTANT*: Boethius and the Liber Sapientiae" in *Verità nel tempo. Platonismo, Cristianesimo e contemporaneità: Studi in onore di Luca Obertello*, ed. Angelo Campodonico (Genova: Il Melangolo, 2004): 56.
[121] Chadwick, *Boethius*, 238.
[122] Robert Crouse, "St. Augustine, Semi-Pelagianism and the *Consolation* of Boethius," *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 98.

all the possibility of some form of contact between human *ratio* and divine *intellegentia*."[123] The 'circular arguments' of human thought cannot extend beyond their limits and so prayer is necessary. Wayne Hankey elaborates, "Unless the human, defined by *ratio* which divides the One when knowing, can reach beyond itself by the prayer which also fulfills it, there would be no consolation. It is by this reaching, which must be at once within and beyond the human, that the human can be carried to the *intellectus* which understands the simple Good."[124] If prayer is man's *commercium* with the divine, it should be able to connect the human and divine forms of knowing. Without prayer, man has no escape from *aporia* nor any means of salvation. By recognising his own insufficiency, the Prisoner should pray to be enlightened just as Iamblichus' ideal theurgist strips away all interferences between himself and the divine by understanding his own deficiency. Boethius and Iamblichus insist man's thinking must be perfected to attain this knowledge, but that reason alone cannot attain it. As Kurt Flasch writes "Das Geist ist voll von eigener Bewegung . . . Er ist charakterisiert durch Selbstbezug . . . Nur im Selbstbezug unterscheidet er das Falsche vom Wahren . . . Nur dadurch findet er sein Glück."[125] The final stage of thinking for the Prisoner is for him to find the circles within himself. It is only by knowing his own faculties that he is able find a full means of ascent.

Joel Relihan argues in *The Prisoner's Philosophy* that the *Consolation* is a satirical work meant to ridicule philosophy in favour of Christianity and that "most modern readers have simply missed the joke."[126] A full discussion of his theory would be out of place here but

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[123]John Magee, *Boethius on Signification and Mind*. Philosophia Antiqua: A Series of Studies on Ancient Philosophy (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 149.
[124] Wayne Hankey, "*Secundum rei vim vel secundum cognoscentium facultatem*: Knower and the Known in *The Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius and the *Proslogion* of Anselm," in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis, (London: Curzon Press, 2002), 132.
[125] Kurt Flasch, *Das philosophiche Denken in Mittelalter: Von Augustin zu Machiavelli* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1986), 71.
[126] Joel Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius'* Consolation (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 9. For a pithy summary and critique of Relihan's theory see Danuta Shanzer,

a discussion on his theory of prayer may be helpful. In Relihan's view, "the prayer advocated at the end [of the *Consolation*] is not the philosophical path to God that Philosophy had earlier intended the prisoner to travel, but a different, Christian path that the prisoner chooses, offered grudgingly by a Philosophy forced to admit that her intended approach does not quite satisfy or console this particular patient." But Relihan is partially correct when he argues that, "there is no logical path . . . that leads from the world of human logic and perception to the divine realm."[127] For Boethius, prayer is necessary to a philosopher's approach to God. Philosophy herself relies upon prayer and encourages the Prisoner at various points in the work and there is no indication that she is reluctant to do so. She even quotes *Timaeus* as a justification for prayer, which should demonstrate that Boethius is presenting a philosophical life in which prayer and thought are intertwined. Once the limit of thought is reached, Philosophy does not 'give up,' but always prays as part of her method. The goal is to enlighten the knowledge of the supplicant, not to abandon philosophy in favour of prayer.

1m5 is not a correct prayer because the Prisoner has not tried to answer his questions yet, and his prayer is not preceding any attempt by him to do so. The Prisoner's prayer at 1m5 is not the highest form because his thinking is so deficient that he does not understand God or His relation to the world of men. He does not understand that the circular motion of the heavens is present in all things and thus, rewards and punishments are also present. The answers he seeks from God are within himself and through contemplating the circles he comes to realise this. If prayer can bridge the gap between reason and intellect, then the Prisoner, at this early point, does not yet have sufficient reason for this to take place. His reason has not yet even advanced to an *aporia*, but he still tries to question the order of the world.

"Interpreting the *Consolation*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 235-236.

[127] Relihan, *Prisoner's Philosophy*, xii.

Lady Philosophy herself prays for divine aid, and her hymn at 3m9 follows the rules set out: she prays in order to begin an endeavour and requests to be lifted where she cannot reach. Blackwood writes, "The prayer at 3, IX is reason's recognition that it must be raised to the unity it seeks by that unity itself."[128] The correct prayer is one that reminds the subject of his place in the order and makes him prepared to receive grace. If done correctly, the prayer will be circular, natural action and a recognition of man's deficiency. It tightens the circle around the pivot, even if one does not receive the knowledge of *intellegentia*. Reason can only progress so far by itself, and then prayer is necessary as a *commercium* to the divine.

PART 2: LOWER PRAYERS

Pagan Sources

The highest form of prayer has been established. However, the question remains: why is prayer necessary at all stages of the ascent and not just at an *aporia*? Is prayer effective even before man's thinking is perfected? The answer will turn out to have a theurgic character. Boethius is much more open about his use of pagan sources than he is about his Christian ones but these pagan sources too are only ambiguously theurgic in origin. For example, the unidentified quotation at 4, 6, 38, from "one more excellent than Philosophy" (4, 6, 37) may have an oracular origin.[129] More importantly, there are many quotations and allusions to Homer

[128] Stephen Blackwood, "*Philosophia*'s Dress: Prayer in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*," *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 145.

[129] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 354. Antony E. Raubitschek suspects it may be Gnostic ("*Me Quoque Excellentior* (Boethii *Consolatio* 4.6.27)," in *Latin Script and Letters A.D. 400-900: Festschrift presented to Ludwig Bieler on the occasion of his 70th birthday*, eds. John J. O'Meara and Bernd Naumann (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 62. More recently, Fabio Troncarelli has proposed that it is from the *Sibylline Oracles*, which would make this an explicitly Christian allusion ("Le Radici cielo. Boezio, La Filosofia, La Sapienzia," in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs*, ed. Alain Galonnier (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2003), 421-434). Danuta Shanzer, who argues that it is Hermetic, gives an excellent overview of the scholarship done on the quotation ("'Me Quoque Excellentior': Boethius, *De Consolatione* 4. 6. 38," *The Classical Quarterly* 33 (1983): 277-283).

in the course of the dialogue. Robert Lamberton observes that Lady Philosophy is identified with Homer in the *Consolation*: "Homer was a philosopher whose doctrines were compatible with those of Plato, so for Boethius Homeric language and myth, properly understood, yield truths about the nature of man and the universe compatible with Platonism."[130] If this is the case, not only is Lady Philosophy making relevant allusions, but her statements are actually divine revelation. Michael Fournier, using a Procline basis, goes further and argues that the five full lines of Homer in the *Consolation*, when taken together, have healing, theurgic properties.[131] Philosophy offers grace to the Prisoner when he is in need. Her pronouncements and judgments then have a supernatural weight akin to Biblical revelation.

R. M. van den Berg argues in *Proclus' Hymns* that the eponymous prayers are in fact a form of theurgy, influenced by Iamblichus' system.[132] While these prayers do not lead to unification with the henads, they do at least purify the soul.[133] Proclus' mythical hymns have a greater significance than they first appear to have, and in fact the philosopher calls their allegorical natures *sumbolon*. The images in the hymns operate according to Iamblichus' system of theurgy: they have a divine connection incomprehensible to man. Whereas Iamblichus discusses the power of ancient prayers in the *De Mysteriis*, Proclus' hymns are theurgy that he has created himself using established myths and symbols. For van den Berg, these prayers are appropriate because they incorporate both the ineffable mysteries but also a proper understanding of divinity. Man, for Proclus, is able to take mystical images and arrange them into a sacred rite.

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[130] Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 279.
[131] Michael Fournier, "Boethius and Homer," *The Downside Review* 128 (2010): 183-204.
[132] R. M. van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 92-5.
[133] van den Berg, *Hymns*, 111.

I would like to propose that something similar takes place in the *Consolation*. Considering the influence Proclus has on the structure of 3m9,[134] the highest prayer in the work, it seems that Boethius was influenced by this Procline theurgical conception of poetry and prayer. For Boethius, then, theurgy does not necessarily need an ancient origin. A new hymn in proper alignment with the divine should contain the proper *sumbola*, and thus have an effect on the theurgist. Lady Philosophy summons theurgy for the Prisoner in the prayers she sings and the circles she presents. By involving the Prisoner in the prayers and getting him to contemplate the spheres, she is involving him in the rituals.

1m1: A Prayer to Death

An important moment to present the immaterial theurgy in the *Consolation* is the opening elegy of the work, which prompts the arrival of Lady Philosophy. In many ways, "Consolation appears, unlooked for,"[135] because at the beginning of the work, the Prisoner simply wants to die. He sings:

Mors hominum felix, quae se nec dulcibus annis

inserit et maestis saepe vocata venit.

Eheu, quam surda miseros avertitur aure

et flentes oculos claudere saeva negat! (1m1, 13-16)[136]

The Prisoner wants to give himself over to Death, not philosophy. Though the Prisoner regrets that he is still alive, Fournier has argued that this alludes to an unanswered prayer to Death.[137]

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[134] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 276-288.
[135] Crouse, "Semi-Pelagianism," 95.
[136] "The Death of men is happy, who does not insert herself in the sweet years and often comes invoked in the sad years. Alas! She turns a deaf ear to my miseries and cruelly refuses to close my crying eyes."
[137] Fournier, "Boethius *pro se magia*," 209.

The Prisoner had prayed for his life to end, but Death was deaf to his call. Though the Prisoner is not given what he says that he wants, in the end he gets what he actually desires: Philosophy. As at 1m5, the Prisoner has forgotten himself to the extent that he does not even know what is appropriate in prayer. Fournier references a number of literary and magical antecedents that associate Lady Philosophy with Death but the most obvious philosophical reference is Plato's *Phaedo*.[138] Socrates says, "those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead" (64a).[139] Philosophy and Death are especially similar because they both bring about a separation of the soul from body.[140] The soul can philosophise more fully without the interference of the body, just as the Prisoner's soul does as it ascends the hierarchy of sciences, leaving behind sensation and imagination for proper reasoning. Plato's dialogue and the *Consolation* both take place in the room of someone awaiting execution. Unlike Socrates in the *Phaedo*, in the *Consolation* the condemned man has fallen into despair. However, the desire to end his embodied existence is a kind of perverse prayer or implicit desire for philosophy. Of course, the annihilation he prays for is not a real remedy. This is only found in the consolation he will get from Lady Philosophy.

There are other significant allusions in the *Consolation* that connect Lady Philosophy to Death.[141] The most relevant one is that Lady Philosophy's dress has a Π at the bottom and a Θ at the top, separated by a ladder (1, 1, 4), which traditionally represent the ascent from

[138] Noticed by Danuta Shanzer, "The Death of Boethius and 'The Consolation of Philosophy,'" *Hermes* 112 (1984): 357.
[139] Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[140] Plato, *Phaedo*, 65a.
[141] For example, soon after Lady Philosophy arrives, she clears away the Prisoner's eyes (1, 2, 7), symbolically freeing him of immediate bodily concerns. Relihan argues, "The smoke that covers [Lady Philosophy's] robes at 1.1.3 reminds the prisoner . . . of the smoke on death masks in the halls of aristocratic families" (Relihan, *Prisoner's Philosophy*, 68); Shanzer, "The Death of Boethius," 356.

πρακτική to θεωρητική.[142] Chadwick offers an interesting interpretation: "The Theta on Philosophy's dress may have been suggested to Boethius by a Theta on his own." Historical evidence indicates that "a prisoner on whom the death sentence had been decreed was required to wear regulation clothing marked with the initial letter of *thanatos*, intended either to increase his sense of humiliation or to safeguard the executioners from mistaken identity in their victim."[143] If Boethius is alluding to this practice, then the Prisoner is about to begin an ascent to the true kind of death, through philosophy. The highest philosophy is similar to death and as his robe says, his body and soul will separate through philosophy and not execution. He prays for Death to take him, but instead he is only beginning his ascent.

The hopelessness in 1m1 is not the same as the humility in Iamblichus' highest prayers. At this point the Prisoner is still associating himself with things that are external to himself, such as the benefits of good fortune, and so full contact with the divine is impossible. Iamblichus discusses lower prayers as ritualistic and the highest kind as *autophuos*. I believe that Boethius is inserting another level of spontaneous prayer between these two. The prayers of the *Consolation* are all *autophuos*, without being ritualistic. 3m9 is the most obvious example of the highest, spontaneous prayer, but even the Prisoner's prayers in Book 1 fall within this category. 1m1 is a feeble imitation of natural, circular action, but it indicates that the narrator at least understands that his current life needs to end (in some way) and that help can only come from an outside source. The prayers are *autophuos*, but he has forgotten himself to the extent that he does not even understand how his own prayers are asking for the correct things. 1m1 succeeds in calling down Philosophy because the prayer itself is genuine.

[142] Gruber, *Kommentar*, 68-9.
[143] Chadwick, *Boethius*, 225.

Though this argument is similar to that of Relihan, I do not agree with his conclusions. He holds that Lady Philosophy is not successful and does not offer consolation in the end. Her association with Death further points to her incompetence; if she succeeded, then the Prisoner would literally die in the *Consolation*, like Socrates does at the end of the *Phaedo*.[144] The Prisoner does not die in the dialogue, let alone commit suicide, and therefore Philosophy's cure fails. I believe that, as in 1m5, the Prisoner receives what he asks for in the opening elegy but not in the way that he immediately wants. He wishes for his life to end but discovers that the advantages of death are accessible through philosophy.[145] This does not need to be shown through a literal death or suicide.[146] Though 1m1 and 1m5 are not ideal prayers like 3m9 they are still effective in forcing the Prisoner to realise that he must turn to a source outside himself. The Prisoner's prayers are answered and he gets what he actually wants, whether he knows what he desires or not. Theurgy operates in spite of the human: the Prisoner's prayers call upon higher powers even though he has forgotten his true nature. In both cases the Prisoner's prayer is answered even though both prayers are misguided.

Spiritual Exercises

Pierre Hadot argues that learning how to die is at its core a spiritual exercise. The *Consolation'*s early connection to the *Phaedo* places it firmly in this tradition. Hadot says about the *Phaedo*: "Training for death is training to die to one's individuality and passions, in

[144] Relihan, *Prisoner's Philosophy*, 69.
[145] This does not mean an anticipation of the afterlife as Simon Critchley posits (*The Book of Dead Philosophers*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 81). As I argued in my last chapter, the rewards and punishments from God are present in man's own actions. The *Consolation* does not discuss what happens after literal death in any concrete way.
[146] For an in-depth discussion of the Neoplatonic reconciliation of philosophy as a pursuit of death with the prohibition against suicide, see Sebastian Ramon Philipp Gertz's *Death and Immortality in Late Neoplatonism: Studies on the Ancient Commentaries on Plato's* Phaedo (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

order to look at things from the perspective of universality and subjectivity."[147] As death is a destruction of the body, so Philosophy strives to bring about similar freedom in her followers. All that relates to one's individual experience is not appropriate to objective understanding. As the Prisoner ascends, he abandons sense-based science like astronomy for fully rational inquiry. The *Consolation* moves from the particulars of sense to the objectivity of reason and intellect. The reference to Death in the very first poem establishes the work as one of spiritual exercises.

Hadot identifies the dialogue as a philosophical genre especially appropriate for spiritual exercises because it invites the reader to see himself as interlocutor.[148] In the *Timaeus,* Socrates is inviting the reader, not just his companions, to direct his mind inwards and upwards. Davidson argues that, "the consolation is an ideal genre in which to observe the ancient practice of philosophy,"[149] because it hopes to change the life and thought of the reader through different spiritual exercises. By associating Lady Philosophy with Death and by making the *Consolation* a dialogue, Boethius is inviting his readers to enter into the discussion of the work. The *Consolation* is a kind of spiritual inheritor of the *Timaeus*, both in its similar use of astronomy and mathematics and in the effect it should have on the reader. The whole dialogue can be seen as a kind of spiritual exercise led by Lady Philosophy. She appears to the Prisoner in a time of turmoil to restore his faculties and his proper relation to death. Despite references to the Prisoner's own life, he is an unnamed Everyman. The reader is supposed to be engaging with the spiritual exercises and philosophical arguments along with the Prisoner.

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[147] Hadot, *Philosophy*, 95. I have removed the original italics.
[148] Ibid., 93.
[149] Andrew L. Davidson, Introduction to *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, by Pierre Hadot, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1987), 22.

Blackwood also connects the restoration of faculties to spiritual exercises. To heal the Prisoner's *entire* soul, Lady Philosophy "begins with her dress: she wipes away the tears of the prisoner who weeps and cannot recognise his doctor." Blackwood continues, "To the orator she uses rhetoric, to the musician she sings, to the father she speaks of prospering sons and to the husband of a faithful wife. To the logician and mathematician, she gives corollaries and precision, and to the lover of wisdom, she appears as Wisdom herself."[150] Lady Philosophy addresses each of the Prisoner's faculties and aspects of his soul. Beginning with the wish for Death and ending with the knowledge of intellect, the whole work is a spiritual exercise designed to correct and turn the Prisoner and the reader. In this way, the *Consolation* as a whole can be read as a kind of prayer. Blackwood writes that Lady Philosophy's attention to the Prisoner, "awakens him to the awareness that each level of his personality is a reaching upward." Thus, he argues, "The whole personality, in all levels and at each moment, is a kind of prayer, an awareness of itself as love turning, flowing back again to its origin, as freedom and end."[151] Lady Philosophy's task is to turn the Prisoner's entire being towards the Good. If his sense and imagination are not ordered then his reason cannot be; if his reason is not ordered then he cannot receive intellect. As the Prisoner develops, so should the reader. All faculties should be ordered in relation to one another and this should lead the narrator and the reader upwards. Prayer is an awareness of one's own limitations and thus a supplication to a higher power. The proper use of every faculty should be a spiritual exercise: ordering the self, restoring objectivity and learning the soul's limitations. An awareness of his limitations will lead man to learn that consolation can only come from an outside source.

[150] Blackwood, "*Philosophia*'s Dress," 144.
[151] Blackwood, "*Philosophia*'s Dress," 151-2.

Theurgic Spheres

The constant but always-changing circles in the *Consolation* are clear examples of spiritual exercises. The Prisoner returns to his true self by reinterpreting the circles at every stage of his ascent. From heavenly rotations to inner action and nested spheres, as the Prisoner's faculties return, his understanding of circles deepens: "The hierarchical distinction and systemization of being and knowledge implies the systematic therapy of *Philosophia*. Each activity of the prisoner's soul must be treated according to what it is — sense, imagination, reason, and intellect."[152] Things are known according to the mode of the knower: with each new concept that the Prisoner understands his soul improves. Whereas Plotinus' visualisation exercises are fully self-generated, the Prisoner perceives the circles according to different faculties and takes them within himself. By studying circles external to himself and improving his knowing faculties, the Prisoner is able to recognise the circles within himself. As spiritual exercises, the circles free the Prisoner of his body and strip his self to its essence. They lead him away from subjective, sensible experience and towards objective principles.

Mazur and Shaw have argued that the spiritual exercises of Plotinus, specifically those using circles, are a kind of inner theurgy, similar to that of Iamblichus' inner prayer. The visualisation exercises are actually a ritualistic means of engaging with the divine. Similarly, the many circles and spheres of the *Consolation* are also spiritual exercises because they inspire the Prisoner to look at them from different levels of understanding. By contemplating the circle from each level of knowledge, he is led to the pure simplicity of intellect. The inner prayer of Iamblichus is the only theurgy natural to man, but all of these exercises are at least a kind of lower theurgy, both purifying and illuminating the Prisoner. The circles, like Proclus'

[152] Blackwood, "The Meters," 281.

hymns, are a kind of *sumbola*. Proclus and Plotinus are able to create their own *sumbola* and theurgy in their hymns and exercises. The difference in the *Consolation* is that the Prisoner has not created the circles himself: they come to him by means of Lady Philosophy's grace. She has a level of divine authority, so when she directs the Prisoner's gaze towards the heavens, it is actually a sacred ritual. When she presents a new circle or sphere, she is leading the Prisoner into the next stage of contemplation and ascent. The circle has a divine origin and as man becomes more divine he is more circular. As the Prisoner progresses, his own circles become activated. Iamblichus' highest prayer comes when the theurgist awakens the *sumbola* in the soul. Similarly, the Prisoner's development climaxes with the realisation that the circle, as a divine symbol of order, is activated through his own thought and prayer.

At the beginning of the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy arrives and clears the Prisoner's eyes. This symbolically allows him to see the heavenly rotations, which inspires the complaint at 1m5. By continually observing, imagining and thinking the different circles that Philosophy presents, the Prisoner is led into himself and purged of his false opinions. As the argument progresses and the faculties become more objective, the circles become increasingly internal. The repetition of the circles is the constant renewal of the spiritual exercises, but each time at a higher level.

Lady Philosophy advocates constant prayer, and the circles explain how she keeps the Prisoner in this state. By constantly meditating on circles throughout his ascent, he awakens his inner *sumbola*. At the end of the work, the Prisoner is told that thinking and praying are circular actions: that is, they are his inner theurgy. When the Prisoner is restored to himself he is engaged in constant circular activity: he has made his life a prayer. The circles are not simply images but are actually prayers that connect the Prisoner to the divine. The final

anapestic dimeter poem shows that the Prisoner has the circle *sumbola* within himself; he no longer needs to look for circles external to himself, or imagine them. The rotation of his mind should in fact function as theurgy and prayer.

Iamblichus says that only the greatest philosophers do not require purification from lower forms of theurgy. The Prisoner, as an Everyman, is not one of them. The Syrian is of course generally speaking about material theurgy as the lower kind, the kind that purifies the body. Boethius, on the other hand, is presenting a system of lower, inner theurgy: that is, a way to purify one's beliefs and faculties in preparation for the highest form of prayer and theurgy. In the *Consolation*, the purity of the mind through inner theurgy renders the purity of the body irrelevant. The death that comes by means of spiritual exercises and philosophy is what separates the mind from the body, and so, for Boethius, the body's purity is not necessary for ascent. The two philosophers advocate different kinds of lower theurgy at all levels of ascent. The difference is whether the rite is material or not.

Inner theurgy explains how earnest prayers, even when misguided, are a link to the divine. The Prisoner's thinking does not need to be perfected to awaken the *sumbola* within himself, and that is why the divine Philosophy answers the implicit prayer at 1m1. The theurgic spheres enable the Prisoner to be in a constant state of prayer and always in the process of purification. The philosophical life is one of thought and prayer, and the theurgic spiritual exercises create a way for all of man's faculties to partake. Thus, at 1m5, when the Prisoner reflects on the motion of the heavens, he is, if only just, engaged in a sacred activity.

Conclusion

Man's natural reason is inherently divisive. Prayer, on the other hand, is present and successful from the opening elegy of the *Consolation* and is reaffirmed in the last lines. In the first poem and also in 1m5, the Prisoner is confused and prays for the wrong things but, despite himself, he desires good things. In 1m1 he prays for Death, which arrives in the form of Philosophy; in 1m5, he wishes for God to control the world of man, not understanding that He does so through the retribution inherent in natural action. In both cases, without realizing it, the Prisoner is yearning for the return of his faculties so that he can understand himself and the world. He can only achieve the highest form of prayer when his thinking is perfected, but prayer is still appropriate at every level. In 1m1, the Prisoner gives himself over to a higher power, but in the rest of the work this is done through the theurgic circles.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Even though he has forgotten his true self, the Prisoner's prayer for Death at the beginning of the *Consolation of Philosophy* triggers Lady Philosophy's arrival and his own recovery. Despite the level to which he has descended, he is still able, to some degree, to engage in his circular action through prayer. When Lady Philosophy arrives, she sets about repairing the circles of his mind and soul, beginning by compelling him to contemplate the heavenly rotations. As in the *Timaeus*, the heavens give man an image of perfect order, to which he should compare the movements of his mind. The Prisoner instead compares this order to the sensible appearance of this world and blames God for the disorder. Lady Philosophy discovers that her task is to show the Prisoner that this order is available to men, but that it cannot be perceived through the senses. She sets about presenting circles at different levels of perception for the Prisoner so that he will eventually be able to recognise these motions in his soul.

The height of the Prisoner's ascent is the full realisation, and consequent *aporia*, of human thought that takes place at 5m3. Knowing his limit offers the Prisoner a way forward: by understanding the true nature of his powers, the Prisoner can see that the ordered motion of the heavens is in his activities. In 5m3, the Prisoner understands that his thought alone cannot answer the question of free will that would provide true consolation. The only recourse left is prayer, but the proper, circular activity of his mind should already be an immaterial theurgic act. The realization of the problem is, in a sense, the first step to overcoming it.

Prayer is man's *commercium* with the divine. This is most clear when the Prisoner's thinking has fully progressed, but it is still true at every level. Prayer calls down Lady

Philosophy in the opening elegy, and it brings the insights of intellect at the end of the work. The circles are a means of keeping this *commercium* between man and God open and perpetually receiving the benefits of theurgy. As spiritual exercises, the circles direct the soul and, as theurgy, they purify it for ascent and strengthen the union with God.

Boethius holds a position very similar to that of Proclus. The Neoplatonist argues that as one learns the true nature of the circles, the ways in which they represent divine principles become clearer. The circles are symbols of the highest universal laws of procession and reversion; they are spatial expressions of immaterial divinity. As man becomes more divine (by progressing through the sciences towards metaphysics, for example), he becomes more circular. The contemplation of circles should be a holy activity, in which man conforms himself to the sacred symbols.

Iamblichus writes about the *sumbola* present in the human mind, which awaken only with the highest prayer. Boethius proposes that man's natural activity should activate these *sumbola*, represented as circles, at every level. The philosophical life is one that combines thought and prayer, but even the correct use of man's knowing faculties should be a kind of prayer. Similarly even the lowest prayers, if they are correct, are circular activities that should arouse the *sumbola* of the soul and provide a connection to the divine. In the fully philosophical life, thought is prayer and theurgy. The circles in the *Consolation* are an example of this unified process.

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