

TRUTH AND MODES OF COGNITION IN BOETHIUS: A NEOPLATONIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT. Boethius does not accept the principle of realism that considers truth as the adaptation – or adequation – of the subject to the knowable object, and instead defends that knowledge should be studied by relating it to the capacity of the cognoscente subject. Thus, truth is relative to the faculty or level of knowledge in which we stand, since each faculty – each level of knowledge – has its own object: the material figure for the senses, the figure without matter for the imagination, the universal for reason and the simple form for intelligence. But this epistemological relativism is moderate, precisely because of its hierarchical character. Therefore, although in a sense truth is manifold, the perfect truth, proper to divine knowledge, includes and surpasses all others. In order to cement the architecture of this system of relativisation of knowledge, Boethius starts from a Neoplatonic interpretation of the simile of the line of the *Republic* (VI.510a-b) and Plato's *Timaeus*, but not completely tied to it. The beings endowed with knowledge are ordered according to the Neoplatonic hierarchy of cosmic realities.

KEYWORDS: Boethius, truth, modes of cognition, consolation, Neoplatonism.

* This paper is part of the Spanish R & D Project (Ref. FFI2013-43070-R) and the activities of the UAM Research Group: “Influences of Greek Ethics on Contemporary Philosophy” (Ref. F-055).

Truth, according to Thomas Aquinas, is the adequation between the intellect, as the faculty of knowing, and the thing that will be known (*Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei*).¹ According to Plato's allegory of the cave, we are only able to know things for what they are insofar as we direct our gaze straight (ὀρθῶς) at the

¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*. Quaestio 1, Articulus 1. Don-daine (1970–1976, 6).

Ideas. The “straightness” (ὀρθότης) of the gaze is the condition of knowing things for what they are.² For Aristotle, *logos* is only true (ἀληθές) insofar as it is not articulated contrary (ἐναντιῶς) to things, but in accordance with them.³ But, for this equation to occur, the knowable thing must be manifest in its essence (*ousia*) beforehand.⁴ If it were not manifest beforehand in its essence (*ousia*), in other words, if there were not already something intelligible in what will be known, the *logos* could not address that thing, nor could it make it manifest by being in accordance with it, nor be true by dint of this adequation. Thus, according to Aristotle, the manifest character of the thing in its essence is the foundation of truth as the adequation of intellect in accordance with the knowable thing⁵. This is what Volkmann-Schluck (1979, 286–288) calls “fundamental ontological truth”. According to Heidegger (1930, 183), *logos* can only be adequated to the knowable thing because it is already manifest in its essence.

Boethius, as Michon (2015, 145) suggests, focuses on the question of how a spirit can know its object. The explanation is almost unavoidable due to the rejection of the principle of realism, by which knowing consists of representing what is as it is, overshadowing the issue of the nature of knowledge. The fatalistic argument from which Boethius deviates considers knowledge to be the adaptation – or adequation – of the subject to the known object; he, however, defends the notion that it is best to study cognition in terms of its relationship to the cognoscence subject. Thus, Boethius upholds a relativism of truth, since each faculty, each level of knowledge, has its own object –for the senses it is the material figure, for the imagination it is the immaterial figure, for reason it is the universal, and for the intelligence it is the simple form – (cf. Marenbon 2005, 28–31). Therefore, “x is F” could be true for A, but false for B –what allows us to understand that “x is true” would be real for God, but false for us human beings. Truth, therefore, is relative to the faculty or to the level of knowledge from which it is viewed. The hierarchical nature of this epistemological relativism is precisely what makes it moderate. And although truth, in a sense, is multiple, the perfect truth, characteristic of divine knowledge, includes and surpasses all others.

² Cf. Platon, *Respublica* VII.515c; 517c. For Heidegger (1930/31; 1942), the “thematic object” of the cave metaphor is the ὀρθότης of the eye of the soul (ψυχή) together with its successive gradation, which correspond to the successive gradation of the unveiling of the entity, the highest of which resides in the Idea.

³ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysica* IX.9.1051b4–5.

⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* IX.10.1051b22–1052a2.

⁵ Cf. Schüssler (2004).

1. Modes of cognition

De Libera (1999, 245) highlights the importance of book V of the *Consolation* to understand Boethius' solution to the problem of universals. It is precisely in these pages, written during the gentle last few weeks of his life, that Boethius starts to transform his "poorly formulated bad theory" into a "well formulated good theory". De Libera focusses on a passage largely overlooked by modern academics, where Philosophy attempts to show Boethius the inconceivable cognitive abilities of intelligence, distinguishing between two levels of cognition that he himself has experienced: imagination and reason (cf. *Consol.* V.5.5–12).⁶

In his *Consolation*, Boethius does not resort to mathematical abstraction, but rather to a principle formulated by Iamblichus (cf. Marenbon 2003, 204), called the "Principle of Modes of Cognition": Whatever is known is not understood according to its power, but rather according to the faculties of those who know it.

The cause of which error is because thou thinkest that all that is known is known only by the force and nature of the things themselves, which is altogether otherwise. For all that is known is not comprehended according to the force which it hath in itself, but rather according to the faculty of them which know it.⁷ (V.4.24–25; trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 387–389).

This is the principle on which Boethius bases the architecture of his system of relativization of knowledge, in which he identifies three levels of cognition – intelligence, reason, imagination and the sense(s). Each level of cognition has its own object of cognition. For example, the object of reason is the abstract form, and the object of imagination is image (cf. Marenbon 2003, 132–134). In this way, not only does the nature of the object control the type of faculty used, but the type of faculty determines the mode of cognition. Therefore, applied to all forms of knowledge, knowledge of the object as such corresponds to three exact modes that, in turn, address three types of speculative cognition: the *rationabiliter* mode concerns hylomorphic realities in their totality; the *disciplinaliter* mode concerns mathematics, in other words, the same abstract realities of motion and corporeality; the *intellectualiter* (theological) mode is the domain of God, who is without movement and non-corporate (cf. *De Trinitate* II).

The *disciplinaliter* mode corresponds specifically to human knowledge, whatever its object. The *intellectualiter* mode is that of knowledge turned towards di-

⁶ Moreschini (2005, 153 1.21–154, 1.54).

⁷ "[24] Cuius erroris causa est quod omnia quae quisque novit ex ipsorum tantum vi atque natura cognosci aestimat quae sciuntur. [25] Quod totum contra est: omne enim quod cognoscitur non secundum sui vim sed secundum cognoscentium potius comprehenditur facultatem." (Moreschini 2005, 149, 1.70–75).

vine simplicity. Reason is a faculty “apart”; it is not the knowledge of this simplicity, but it is the only mode with a kind of foreknowledge of the higher faculty. Man, the image of God, participates of the senses, imagination and reason, and tends towards the fourth faculty –intelligence.

This same principle, albeit with a different formulation, can be found in Ammonius’ commentary on Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*, the former being largely the inspiration for Boethius’ *Consolation*.⁸ For Boethius, things, in the cognitive process, are not known in terms of their essence, but in terms of the knower’s cognitive faculties. “Seest thou now how all these in knowing do rather use their own force and faculty than the force (*sua potius facultate*) of those things which are known?” (*Consol.* V.4.38; trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 391). All judgement is the act of the judge, and each mode of cognition must fulfil its role on the basis of its own capacity and not that of others (V.4.39). This same theory, which will play a key role in the scholastic doctrine of knowledge, is also, according to Obertello (1974, I, 511–513), found in the works of Proclus.⁹ The knower’s cognitive faculties follow an upward path, which underpins both the presentation of Philosophy and the path of the prisoner himself, reflecting the scheme of the “line” in Plato’s *Republic* (VI.510a-b).¹⁰ Likewise, beings endowed with knowledge are ordered according to the Neoplatonic hierarchy of cosmic realities. On the bottom rung of this hierarchy we find the senses (*sensus* = ἀίσθησις), these are followed by imagination or presentation (*imaginatio* = φαντασία), then reason (*ratio* = διάνοια), and finally intelligence (*intellegentia* = νοῦς) (V.4.28). Boethius makes a clear distinction between reason and intelligence: *ratio* represents a discursive reasoning; *intellegentia*, however, is intuitive, and corresponds to Plotinus’ *noûs*, who knows without resorting to a discursive exercise.¹¹

⁸ Cf. Klingner (1921, 107); see Spanish trans. Pérez Gómez (1997, 304, n. 46).

⁹ Cf. Proclus, *Elementatio theologica* 124; and *De providentia* (*Tria opuscula*), 64. Cf. Obertello (1974, I, 518–520). See Dodds’s commentary (1963, 266–267) to prop. 124, concerning the knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* and *sub specie temporis*.

¹⁰ He links evidence, clarity and truth by means of Proclus’ light metaphor. The sun analogy in Plato’s *Republic*, comparing Good with the sun, gives him the wherewithal to equate light with truth (cf. Proclus, *Comm. in Platonis rem publicam* I.276.23 ff.), based on the following etymology: σαφής = clear + φάος (light), and ἐναργής = ἐν + ἄργος (brilliant white); cf. Chantraine (1999) s.v. ἐναργής.

¹¹ Cf. Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae* IV.6.17. In the *Consolation*, reason (*ratio*) is one of the faculties of knowledge. However, in his commentaries on the works of Aristotle, particularly *On Interpretation*, Boethius gives it the meaning of passive intellect, as opposed to active intellect, in a theory of cognition that differs from that set forth in the *Consolation*. Likewise, intelligence (*intellegentia*), in this latter work, guides the soul towards the realm of the intelligible, while in Boethius’ commentaries intelligence is char-

The following table is based on a diagram put forward by Tisserand (2000, 38):

Intelligence	Reason	Imagination	Sense
divine being	human being	mobile animals	immobile animals
considers (<i>contuetur</i>)	evaluates (<i>perpendit</i>)	judges (<i>iudicat</i>)	judges (<i>iudicat</i>)
the simple form itself due to the spirit's pure eye			
the species itself that is in the singulars due to a universal consideration			
the figure alone, without matter			
the figure situated within matter			

According to Boethius' own classification of the four distinct modes of cognition, based on Porphyry's *Introduction to Categories*,¹² man is surveyed differently by the senses, the imagination, reason or intelligence (V.4.27). The senses, typical to animals with no motion and are equivalent to senses such as sight, evaluate the figure (*figura* = σχῆμα) within matter; imagination, typical to animals capable of motion and which consists of the mental power to create images of unseen objects, evaluates the figure alone, exclusive of matter; reason, meanwhile, which "exclusively belongs to humankind" (V.5.4) and rises above the particular to the general, evaluates the specific form (*species* = εἶδος) in matter (V.4.28-29), and the "eye of intelligence", typical and specific to the "divine being" (V.5.4)¹³ rises still higher, and goes beyond the bounds of the universal to contemplate the form itself (V.4.30)¹⁴, by its own simplicity (*simplicem formam* = ἰδέα)¹⁵, with no contact with matter.

acterised as being one of the mechanisms with which the soul produces articulate, meaningful sounds. Cf. Magee (1989, 148–149).

¹² Cf. Courcelle (1967, 220).

¹³ About the opposition between *tantum* and *sola*: "ratio vero humani tantum generis est, sicut intellegentia sola divini", (Boethius, *Consol.* V.4.4), see Magee (1989, 142–145).

¹⁴ Some years later, Boethius, taking his inspiration from Alexander of Aphrodisias, defined the *animus* as a "mental power" (*intellectus*), producer of concepts; cf. Boethius, *In Isagogen* II^a, I.11. Cf. Galonnier (2013, 55–56); De Libera, *Segonds* (1998, LXVI–LXVII). The "mental power" of the intellect performs two operations that are, in fact, just one: it captures the intelligible form irrespective of matter, and apprehends universals.

¹⁵ In his first commentary on the *Isagoge*, Boethius compares *theologia* with a *vera philosophia*, in other words, with a theoretical philosophy that deals with *intellectibilia*

Reason, being a higher faculty than the senses, does not need the latter to know an object. Each higher cognitive level includes the preceding level, while, conversely, the lower level includes neither the subsequent level nor the object known by it (V.5.31). Only God knows man's actions under the mode of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*), because intelligence sees all things formally (*formaliter*) with a unique gaze of the spirit (*illo uno ictu mentis*) (V.4.33).

Thus, Boethius establishes three levels of knowledge that connect and bring together, in a way, the ontological and epistemological dimensions. We can establish a correspondence between the Boethian triad – reason, imagination and the sense(s) – seen from the perspective of different species of animals (*Consol.* V.5.12–18), and the Chalcidian triad – spirit (*mens*), intellect (*intellectus*) and the senses (*sensus*), examined from the perspective of children (Chal. *in Ti.* 208). In this threefold topic, Boethius correlates the two “extremes” – reason and the senses – following a mathematical ratio developed by Plato in his *Timaeus*¹⁶ (*Con-*

(νοητά), God and disembodied souls, which he defines as a tension towards the contemplation of them (cf. *In Isagogen* I^a, I.3). This is, therefore, the summit of speculative-theological science, which behaves *intellectualiter* and devotes to abstract and immaterial objects without motion (cf. *De Trinitate* II).

¹⁶ According to Rand (1904), Boethius took his inspiration for the *Consolation* from Plato's *Timaeus*. More recently, Bakhouché (2003, 21) suggests that Boethius knew of *Timaeus* through Chalcidius, in the same way as he had previously known the *Categories* through Marius Victorinus. Nevertheless, unlike the Aristotelian logical treatise, he did not have enough time to translate and comment on the Platonic dialogue. In both Chalcidius' *Commentary on Timaeus* (162; 176) and the *Consolation* (IV.6.80; V.5.24–27), Boethius clearly states his unwavering faith in the sovereign and omniscient divine Good. Boethius considers God to be a supreme Good. For this reason, the ontologisation of the notion of God is only apparent, first, because it connects henology and agathology, and secondly, because it states that the categorisation of God involves a transformation of all attributes, that is, as was later specified in the 12th century, a transcategorial or transsubstantial approach, to the extent that the substance of God is transsubstantial. Cf. Zamora Calvo (2010, 78–84).

Klingner (1921, 40–43), however, suggests he was directly influenced by Proclus rather than by Plato's actual text. This interpretation was maintained for the most part by Courcelle (1943, 285–288), who connects Proclus with his disciple Ammonium the Alexandrian scholar. In doing so, Courcelle draws a textual parallel between Boethius (*Consol.* IV.3.12) and Proclus (*in Ti.* I.378.18). Shiel (1990, 355–366), meanwhile, links Boethius with Proclus and Syrianus.

The crux of the matter, as Gersh (1986, 701–705) suggests, is that Boethius does not seem to qualify as an orthodox Proclean. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of his dialogue, with its original proposals and solutions, shows that he was to a certain extent inspired, though not bound, by the late Neoplatonic tradition. For example, in his commentary on

sol. IV.6.78–83). To complete the series, the mathematisation of philosophical concepts requires the introduction of a third term which will play the role of intermediary and of a harmonic, proportional arithmetic mean. This is the intervention of the senses in the first pair, and the reference to the intermediaries between God and men; perpetuity, located between time and eternity; and chance, finally, that functions as “extreme” with respect to providence.

2. *Disciplinaliter*, in mathematical terms

According to the principle of the modes of cognition, truth must always be multiple, and man, by reason, tries to transcend the multiple; but transcending the multiple means rising above reason. Proclus assigns different meanings to the term ἀλήθεια according to the division of the real, that is, each of the four ontological gradations – he One, the intelligibles, the intellectives, the soul – has its own truth. The truth according to the One is the most luminous; in the intelligible, it is the first and direct expression of being, and illuminates the intellectives. Evidence, as visibility, is a characteristic of beings (*Theol. Plat.* I.26.116.8 and V.23.84.12). Beings belonging to a divine class, first concealed in the invisible and the unity, become visible as they emerge. The light from the Good “from invisible becomes visible (ἐξ ἀφανοῦς γίγνεται φανερόν)” (IV.12.40.6), unknowable and hidden, when it remains in the “sanctuaries” of the gods, at the end of the first intelligible triad, manifests after the procession in the second intelligible–intellectual triad, and exists manifestly (ἐκφανῶς) in the third triad (III.22.81.2–4).

Setting out the method he intends to use in his *De hebdomadibus*, Boethius says the treatise will be modelled on mathematical discourse: “I have first put

Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, Boethius, when quoting a passage from *Timaeus* (29b4–5), follows the lead of Ammonius (*CAG*, IV.5, p.154, l.16 ff.), who relies on Plato's physical dialogue to interpret the Aristotelian theory of truth as the correspondence between word and thing (cf. Courcelle 1967, 165). Here, however, Boethius is not only thinking of *On Interpretation*, since he re-uses a commonplace of neo-Platonic exegesis, bearing in mind Plato's *Timaeus* and probably, as a cross-reference, Proclus' commentary on this work. Boethius was also probably aware of the commentary on *On Interpretation* written by Syrianus, Proclus' master, so a direct contact between Boethius and contemporary Greek commentators from the Syrian school cannot be ruled out. Ebessen (2009, 47–48), meanwhile, considered a direct contact with the Peripatetics Andronicus, Aspasius or Herminus to be wholly impossible. In fact, Boethius cites Syrianus in his commentary on *On Interpretation* (cf. Meiser, 1877-1880: vol. 2: 18, 26 ff.). Besides which, Ammonius' father, Hermias, was also a disciple of Syrianus (cf. Goulet 2000, s.v. “Hermeias d'Alexandrie”). If we look at the dates, this hypothesis is plausible, since Proclus died in 485; his disciple Ammonius, son of Hermias, settled in Alexandria in around 479; Boethius was born in 480, and his first works were published in around 500.

forward terms and rules on the basis of which I will work out all the things that follow, as is usually done in mathematics and similar sciences" (*Hebdo.* prooemium 6).¹⁷ The noetic status of each of the terms and rules is a "common understanding of the spirit (*communis animi conceptio*)", defined as a statement that each approves when it is heard.¹⁸

Boethius tries to solve a metaphysical-theological problem using axiomatic methods, in other words, by making deductions from notions and primary propositions, which are intelligible intuitions, in the sense that these truths are not revealed through reasoning (*διάνοια*), but perceived directly by intelligence (*νοῦς*). Thus, they correspond to what Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (II.223.1.5 and 339.1.2 Diehl), calls common notions (*κοινὰ ἔννοιαι*) or axioms (*ἀξιώματα*).

Boethius seems to use the principles in a topical sense, in other words, as "places" in the argument. These places, in mathematical terms, are not only the subject of a social consensus, but also intelligible evidence that must introduce an argument. Boethius calls these principles "hebdomadads", and prefers to comment on them privately, keeping them in his memory, rather than sharing them with those who, out of perversity and impudence, permit nothing to be composed without jest and laughter¹⁹. For this reason, he echoes Plato's fear that writing will indiscriminately disclose a doctrine that will be the subject of scorn and ridicule from those readers who understand nothing of what is written.

In his proems to *De Trinitate* (1–7)²⁰ and *Contra Eutychem et Nestorium* (10–13),²¹ Boethius addresses exclusively a small, select group using carefully chosen words that steer clear of any attempt to popularize difficult or sublime ideas. Thus, by obscuring the meaning with deliberate conciseness, the hebdomadads will be understood only by those who are worthy (cf. *Hebdo.* prooemium 5).²² In the 12th century, the Greek term *ἀξιωμα* is translated as *dignitas*, making "axiomatic" language the most appropriate for those who are "worthy" of this knowledge.²³

¹⁷ "Ut igitur in mathematica fieri solet ceterisque etiam disciplinis, praeposui terminos regulasque quibus cuncta quae sequuntur efficiam." Tisserand (2000, 123); see trans. Picasso Muñoz (2002, 26).

¹⁸ Cf. Boethius, *De hebdomadibus*, prooemium 7; Tisserand (2000, 125).

¹⁹ Cf. Boethius, *Hebdo.* prooemium 4; Tisserand (2000, 122–123).

²⁰ Tisserand (2000, 137–139).

²¹ Tisserand (2000, 65).

²² Tisserand (2000, 122–123).

²³ Cf. Alain de Lille, *Regulae caelestis iuris*, prooemium § 8, 123 Häring. See the beginning of Gilbert of Poitiers' commentary on Boethius' *De hebdomadibus*: the supreme *dignitas* of wisdom is only revealed to those who are worthy of it, and therefore the *digni-*

Likewise, by deliberately using “concision” (*brevitas*) as a means of concealment, Boethius marks his opposition to the *abundantia* pursued by orators.²⁴ The concise approach protects disclosure from those who are unworthy of it. “So I purposely use brevity and wrap up the ideas I draw from the deep questionings of philosophy in new and unaccustomed words which speak only to you and to myself, that is, if you deign to look at them.” (*De Trinitate*, prooemium 6).²⁵

The term *hebdomad* itself is not used quantitatively –seven being the number of parts of a lost work of Boethius or the number of days required for reflection–but symbolically, according to Proclus’ interpretation. The number seven corresponds to Athena, that is, to philosophy, so the hebdomad is “the light from the Intellect” (Procl. *in Ti.* II.95.2), and also the title of a work attributed to Proclus.²⁶ As the hebdomad is connected with the monad, it allows us to discover the plurality of unity. Thus, we can translate “hebdomads” as “intellections”, in other words, insights into intelligible, primary truths that are not gained from an argument, but are obtained immediately by intelligence. In view of this link between Boethius and the diadochos of Athens, any reference to the hebdomads is restricted to a small, select group of scholars, composed of those initiated in Proclean Neoplatonism within a school that strives to safeguard the Hellenic *paideia* within the Empire.

Boethius, in fact, is the first to use the word *quadrivium* to define knowledge based on the four sciences –arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. For Theodorici’s *Magister Officiorum*, the aim of all study should be the essence (*essentia*),

tates (axioms) escape the ordinary man. Cf. Häring (1981, prooemium § 7); and Solère (2003b, 322–323).

²⁴ Cf. Cic. *Or.* XIV.46.

²⁵ “Idcirco stilum brevitate contraho et ex intimis sumpta philosophiae disciplinis novorum verborum significationibus velo ut haec mihi tantum uobisque, si quando ad ea convertitis oculos, conloquentur.” Tisserand (2000, 138); trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester (1973, 5); and Spanish trans. Picasso Muñoz (2002, 52). Cf. Armstrong (1967, 544); Lerer (2014, 205). The philosophical doctrines referred to by Boethius in this passage are fundamentally Platonic and Aristotelian, transmitted mostly by the Neoplatonists, after all, Boethius aimed to translate all the works of Plato and Aristotle in order to demonstrate the similarity of their doctrines.

²⁶ The number seven or hebdomad τῆς τετραδος ἢ πρὸς τὴν ἑβδόμαδα συμπάθεια (Plu. 2.1027f) signals the affinity between the hebdomad and the tetrad (Proclus, *Comm. in Platonis Cratylum* 167.91). Περὶ ἑβδομάδος is the title of a work attributed to Proclus (*Theol.Ar.* 43). In Judeo-Christian literature, it signifies the divine principle, identified with the soul (ψυχή) (Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 6.32.9), as a sacred number in the tradition (Gregory of Nyssa, *Homiliae de creatione hominis* 56.8). See in particular Solère (2003a), and Brisson (2004).

which he in turn divides into continuous and discontinuous. Continuous essence is that which is not divisible into smaller units; discontinuous essence, meanwhile, is that which is made up of smaller elements. Within continuous essence, he proposes studying the immobile magnitudes (*magnitudines*), in other words geometry, or the mobile magnitudes, which characterizes astronomy. Discontinuous essence has its basis in multiplicity (*multitudo*), and can be divided into that which exists in itself, such as the different numbers that constitute arithmetic, and that whose existence is conditioned by the former, which defines music.²⁷

3. Blindness, and self-forgetfulness

Man loses his nature when he forgets what it is or, more precisely, because he forgets that human beings partake of the divine essence. This is a cognitive forgetfulness: forgetting what man is. Now, this forgetfulness of nature itself represents a first step towards vice, before man loses his true nature or, more accurately, the divine part of his nature (cf. Dougherty 2004, 283–284).

Bad actions derive from a misdirected look, which implies blindness (cf. *Consol.* IV.4.26–31). When man directs his gaze not at truth, but at matter, he risks becoming a beast. Therefore, blindness refers not only to happiness, but also to the perfection of human nature (IV.4.31): he that completely abandons the truth in favour of passions behaves like a blind man who has forgotten he ever possessed the ability to see and who believes he has everything, as he has forgotten he previously knew the truth. Thus, he finds himself in a state of “double ignorance”, consisting of not knowing that he does not know, which is how Socrates describes Alcibiades.²⁸ To know something outside oneself, one must first know

²⁷ Cf. Boethius, *De Institutione Arithmetica*, 1.1.4. The *Institutio arithmetica* and *Institutio musica* are all that is left of this Boethian project. The treatise *De geometria* was wrongly attributed to Boethius. With regard to astronomy, Boethius' *Institutio*, as Cassiodorus (*Variae* I.45.4) points out, is a translation of Ptolemy. Likewise, Boethius' two scientific works can, in a sense, be considered revised translations: the foundations of arithmetic are a version or rather an adaptation of the writings of Nicomachus of Gerasa, and the foundations of music come from works by Aristoxenus of Tarentum and Ptolemy.

²⁸ For Courcelle (1975, 15–25) and Van der Meeren (2012, 74), it is a “second degree” ignorance, also called “double ignorance” in the sense of “duplicate” or “repeated”: being unaware of what we are reveals a radical ignorance that prevents us from knowing anything else.

In the first part of *Alcibiades I*, Socrates' questions lead the young man to admit that he does not know himself, in a broad sense, since he is not aware of what he is, of his role in the *polis*, or of his position respect to others. In the second section, Socrates guides Alcibiades to towards the acquisition of self-knowledge in a strict sense, in other words, philosophical knowledge. Socrates goes on to say that the self is objective and imperson-

oneself. Socrates' words to young Alcibiades echo in the explanation of the real cause of the disease and blindness of Boethius:

“Now I know,” quoth she, “another, and that perhaps the greatest, cause of thy sickness: thou hast forgotten what thou art (*quid ipse sis, nosse desisti*). Wherefore I have fully found out both the manner of thy disease and the means of thy recovery; [...]” (I.6.17; trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 167).

Philosophy diagnoses Boethius as “suffering from lethargy (*lethargum patitur*), the common disease of deceived minds” (I.2.5). This kind of pathological sleep, which is given the technical medical term *lethargus*, refers to the momentary forgetfulness of “what is” (I.2.6). To cure himself, Boethius needs a kind of *anamnesis*, in other words, he needs to restore his memory and recognise his mistress, Philosophy. To do this, he needs to wipe his eyes, “dimmed with the cloud of mortal things” (I.2.6). As Neoplatonists argue, the main cause of self-forgetfulness is the contact between the soul and the body. Also, according to Burkert (1962, 345), this cleansing of the eye has a symbolic function, and can be found in the Eleusinian mysteries and is perpetuated in the New Testament. When the prisoner forgets who he is, he heads towards vice, attracted by the deadly passions that blur reason and cause self-forgetfulness.

Then I said that I did very well like of Plato's doctrine, for thou dost bring these things to my remembrance now the second time,²⁹ first, because I lost their memory by the contagion of my body (*memoriam corporea contagione*), and after when I was oppressed with the burden of grief (*cum maeroris mole pressus amisi*). (III.12.1; trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 287).³⁰

Passions corrupt the heart with their poison and flagellate the human mind (IV, m. 2, v. 6–7). Human nature is torn between two extremes: the animal, on the one hand, and divinity, on the other. As Van der Meeren (2012, 162–163) observes, this is a recurring theme in protreptic literature, particularly in the fragments of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*,³¹ in Galen's *Protrepticus (Exhortation to Medicine)*,³² and in the pseudo-Plutarchian *De liberis educandis*.³³ In line with these texts, Boethius

al, so knowing involves an understanding of reality as a whole. First, he identifies the self with the soul, and affirms that self-knowledge is the knowledge of the soul, not the body (cf. Plato, *Alcibiades* 1.128a–130c). Later, based on this self-knowledge, he eliminates everything related to individuality and personality. Cf. Zamora Calvo (2015).

²⁹ Boethius expounded it for the first time in *Consol.* I.6.

³⁰ Cf. Machan (2005, 132).

³¹ Cf. Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* V.35.14–36.13 Pistelli.

³² Cf. Galenus, *Protrepticus* IX.4–5.

³³ Cf. [Plutarch], *De liberis educandis* VIII.

considers weakness to characterise the corporeal aspect of human nature, which is the source of man's tendency towards animality; the tendency towards the divine in human nature, however, is consistent with the good that characterizes power. Self-forgetfulness represents the first stage of moral and ontological decline, because forgetting man's nature is tantamount, in a way, to misunderstanding one's own nature, which leads inexorably to vice. Both the loss and recovery of self-knowledge depend on a noetic act that Philosophy compares to orienting the eye (IV.4.29), which transforms the individual into a beast when directed toward Earth – the passions – or into the one of the most precious realities, when directed toward heaven - the eternal law of good.

The literary genre of the *Consolation of philosophy* has its roots in Platonic dialogue, as Philosophy, who plays the role of a new Socrates, leads the prisoner from the state of an indignant man to that of a human being, fully trusting in the divine providence, calmly accepts his fate.

4. Recourse to eternity

God's eternity is a characteristic of divine knowledge, and allows Boethius to establish the principle of the modes of cognition. If God believes that uncertain future events will inevitably (*inevitabiliter*) occur, or may even not occur, He is wrong; this is something you cannot think or even enunciate (cf. *Consol.* V.3.23). But if He sees these future events for what they are, in other words, He knows them even whether they are likely to materialize or not, how can foreknowledge be described if it does not encompass what is certain and true? (V.3.24).

For Boethius, both options are unacceptable. God cannot be attributed with either error or uncertainty.

But if nothing can be uncertain (*nihil incerti*) to that most certain (*certissimum*) fountain of all things, the occurrence of those things is certain, which He doth certainly know shall be (*certus eorum est eventus, quae futura firmiter ille praescierit*). (V.3.27; trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 379).

Foreknowledge implies the need for all future events, including human choice. According to Marenbon (2003, 125–145), in this double-edged dilemma, Boethius distinguishes two distinct problems: the compatibility of foreknowledge and freedom, and the nature of divine knowledge. Philosophy would have solved the problem of compatibility thus: by ruling out the principle of realism, knowledge of the contingent is possible. As regards the question of the nature of divine knowledge, Philosophy says at the beginning of prose 4: “The cause of which obscurity is for that the motion of human discourse cannot attain to the simplicity of the divine knowledge, which if by any means we could conceive, there would not remain any doubt at all.” (V.4.2; trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 383).

The principle of modes of cognition establishes the relative nature of knowledge according to the faculties and the nature of the knower. Divine eternity, closely linked to the question of divine knowledge, allows us to understand that God sees the future as men see the present.

Eternity is that which has no beginning or end. Boethius distinguishes the term *aevum* (eternity) from *perpetuitas* and the adjective *perpetuus* (perpetual), which refer to that which lasts forever but has a beginning, as in the case of the world. If the government of God is “perpetual” (*Consol.* V.1), only God, who has had no beginning, is eternal and immutable, while time is wholly related to change. Therefore, that which is eternal remains immobile in itself, and, by situating time, also situates the becoming that coincides with the cosmos where “all things move” (Van der Meeren 2012, 116). Man is effectively in one place; God, however, being omnipresent, is not in one place, but every place is present *as if* He should occupy it, although he cannot be accommodated in one place. The same applies to time, as when God is said to be “always”, He is not only considered to be entirely in the past, in the present and in the future. “Wherefore, if we will give things their right names, following Plato, let us say that God is everlasting and the world perpetual.” (V.6.14).³⁴ The difference between *sempiternity*, which in Platonism is time as perpetual motion - like the sky, the stars and the universe, including here the soul in its cycles of transmigration - and *eternity*, which, using Plotinian terminology,³⁵ expresses the αἰών, perfect endless lifetime, that is, as Boethius defines it: “*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*” (V.6.4; cf. Siebert 2011). It means, therefore, the perfect possession of a life without limits, and this possession is at the same time (*simul*) complete (*tota*).

Thus, Boethius defines eternity as life, excluding limitations. Nevertheless, succession is not explicitly denied, as the term *simul* implies that all “moments”

³⁴ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 37d.

³⁵ In Plotinus’ treatise 45 (III, 7) *On eternity and time*, eternity corresponds to the second hypostasis (Intelligence), and time is the third (the Soul). On this point, Plotinus relies on the *Timaeus*, a dialogue which formed the basis of the *Parmenides*, thus producing a hermeneutical transfer between them, which is especially evident in the third hypostasis.

If eternity is the life of intelligence, time is the essentially successive life of the Soul. This is because, unlike Intelligence, the Soul does not contain within itself the object of its contemplation, i.e., intelligibles, so its life is not, unlike that of the former, total and permanent possession of itself, but, in contrast, restlessness or dissatisfaction that leads it to look outside for what it lacks inside (cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.4 [28] 16.26–27). However, in a way, the Soul is eternal, because it arises from and contemplates Intelligence. By attempting to imitate the perfect eternity of Intelligence, it necessarily produces time, which is an inferior image of eternity. Therefore, for Plotinus, the production of the Soul is a diminished contemplation that takes place over time.

of life are simultaneous, in other words, eternity possesses all life simultaneously. God, however, is not temporal (V.6.6), and this contrasts the idea of “at the same time complete” (*tota simul*) concerning the eternity with the successive possession of life by the temporal being (V.6.8).

However, Boethius does not rule out the existence of unlimited time, that is, eternity in a temporal sense, which he calls *perpetuity*. The eternal being has that time without limit as the present, because it sees the past, present and future at the same time, simultaneously.

Wherefore, (1) since every judgment comprehendeth those things which are subject unto it, according to its own nature, and (2) God hath always an everlasting and present state (*deo semper aeternus ac praesentarius status*), (3) His knowledge also surpassing all motions of time, remaineth in the simplicity of His presence, and comprehending the infinite spaces of that which is past and to come, considereth all things in His simple knowledge (*in sua simplici cognitione considerat*) as though they were now in doing (*quasi iam gerantur*). (V.6.15; trans. Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1973, 403)

God’s knowledge of what for us is the future should not be called pre-sight (*praeventia*, where the *prae* prefix indicates something previous in time), a knowledge that is *prior* to its object, but rather *foresight* (*providentia*, where *for* indicates something previous in space) (V.6.16): God sees and foresees all things. Located far from the smallest things, He sees everything in perspective, “from the lofty apex of the universe” (V.6.17).

If we compare the human present with the divine present, we can see that, in both, what is contingent can be known at the time it occurs, being necessary due to the fact that it is present, but without being non-contingent, since it is not necessary before it occurs (V.6.18–20). For this reason, divine foreknowledge does not alter the nature of things or their property, and sees them in its presence, as they will occur at some point in time (V.6.21).

Thus, in his discussion of the difference between perpetuity and eternity, Boethius opposes the Aristotelian notions of the eternity of the world, and returns to a more “orthodox” interpretation of the *Timaeus* by distinguishing between motionless eternity and perpetuity, that is, eternity moving from a source. Having been sentenced to death, Boethius deals with this problem from the dialectic perspective of the paradigm and the image (V.6.38–45). The relationship between time and eternity is similar to that which exists between the intelligible world and the sentient world. Eternity, which is the model, is defined as a stationary permanence, motionless; time, however, which is the degraded image of eternity, is characterized by the absence of permanency. Time, because of its perpetual gliding, never stops, so the present does not exist, as it is but an illusion that strives to imitate divine permanence.

5. Conclusion

Boethius uses the “semantics of look” to refute the hypothesis that divine knowledge would impose a necessity on known events. God sees all events, both those that need to occur and those that occur due to free choice, as occurring in an eternal present, without beginning or end. Men see events occur in the temporary mode, as opposed to timelessness and eternity, which constitute the specific perspective of the divine eye (cf. *Consol.* V.6). With a single glance of his intelligence (V.6.22)³⁶ God can distinguish what happens by necessity from what is contingent, just as we can simultaneously see and distinguish a necessary event – like the sun rising in the sky at dawn – from a voluntary action, like a man walking on the earth. The divine eye (*divinus intuitus*) does not in any way alter the quality of things that are truly present from its perceptive, but which, in terms of their condition over time, are in the future (V.6.23). Although God knows the possibilities the man considers before embarking on an action, divine science, which sees everything clearly, does not consist of a determination of the future, but of a knowledge of the present; man’s cognition, however, is subject to the time mode (*sub specie temporis*), in other words, to the division of past, present and future.

The relativisation of truth in Boethius is a consequence of his refusal to accept the principle of realism that considers truth as an equation. Likewise, truth relative to our particular level of knowledge implies a relativisation of knowledge: A and B know x, but each according to his faculty or level of knowledge: *a* for A, *b* for B. A may know that “*a* is F” while B judges that “*b* is not F”. For example, the senses judge that x – addressing Socrates – is not universal; imagination judges it to be a faun; reason, however, does not judge that Socrates is universal, but knows Socrates to be the universal *man*, and evaluates that *man* – conceived from Socrates – is universal; and intelligence, a trait of the divine, considers the simple form of Socrates by means of the pure eye of the spirit.

As Thomas Aquinas says in his *De Veritate*,³⁷ with which we began, God is the *artifex* that creates things according to the essences or forms that He previously holds in His understanding. The divine intellect is the measure of created beings, and these are measured by and for him. Therefore, the creation of things concerns their pre-existing suitability with respect to their form, which God holds in Himself. With Boethius, the old theory of the ontological foundation of truth begins to give way to a theological foundation based on the hierarchy of modes of cognition. However, many questions remain unanswered, as can be seen from the

³⁶ Cf. Boethius, *Consol.* III.9.24 and V.4.33.

³⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*. Articulus 2. Dondaine (1970–1976, 7).

abrupt and surprising appeal he makes to the reader at the end of *Consolation*: “There is, if you will not dissemble, a great necessity of doing well imposed upon you, since you live in the sight of your Judge, who beholdeth all things (*cum ante oculos agitis iudicis cuncta cernentis*).” (*Consol.* V.6.48).

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