

Boethius and the problem of evil



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The influence of Greek philosophy on the theologies of the traditional monotheisms was immense, shaping each theology's conception of God according to the doctrines of such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno. The interaction between religious and pagan philosophies was not always welcomed, however; nor were the tenets of the one sort always accommodating to those of the other. Among the conflicts caused by the exposure of traditional religions to Greek philosophy existed, and continues to exist, one of particular renown—the problem of evil. It was this problem, in the company of others, which Boethius set out to solve in his *Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius, himself a sort of convergence of Hellenic and Christian thought, would have been compelled as well as qualified to provide such a synthesis as was required by his subject matter. Before evaluating the measure of success Boethius' work enjoys in its synthesis of Christian and Hellenic thought, or in its answer to the problem of evil, we must first consider exactly the problem of evil and its origins. The problem of evil is perhaps best put by Epicurus, who is often credited with first expounding it: “Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?” Consequently, the problem of evil is the problem of the co-existence of evil in the world and a God that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. If one denies either that there is evil in the world or that God possesses any one of these properties, the problem of evil collapses. Although attempts could be made along these lines, the Christian or traditional monotheist of sound reason could deny neither a manifest reality nor a depiction of God so deeply embedded in his belief. Much of

<https://assignbuster.com/boethius-and-the-problem-of-evil/>

Christian and Islamic exposure to Greek thought in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages was tempered by later interpreters of Plato—the Neoplatonists. In fact, Neoplatonism was itself a step from stricter Platonism in the direction of religion, taking many of the religious undertones of Platonic thought and readying them for a religious interpretation. Perhaps no greater instance of this occurs than in the identification of the Form of the Good in Plato's work with the Neoplatonic One. By this identification, the Neoplatonist had begun to personify what was in Plato only the austere and abstract notion of the greatest of the perfect representations, or the Forms. This Neoplatonic interpretation in turn readied a further association made by the traditional monotheisms—that of Plato's Form of the Good with God. And so, for the traditional monotheist, God became more or less a personal embodiment of everything that was perfect—or in other words, all-perfect. Aristotle, first for the Muslims and later for the Christians, would also help to strengthen this picture of God with his notions of the Uncreated Creator or First Mover. Plotinus and other Neoplatonists also provided a sort of bridge between the divine and material realms of Plato's metaphysics in their theory of emanations. By this account, creation emerged or emanated from God's thinking, forming a material world that was spiritual like its Creator. From what has thus far been stated of Neoplatonism, it is with little surprise that the Neoplatonist often denied any existence of evil in the world; a concession, it seems, that would greatly undermine the whole Neoplatonic framework of God's nature and the nature of Creation. Such a stance regarding the problem of evil—or perhaps rather a rejection that there existed any problem of evil— would also be later adopted by Augustine. Having been strongly influenced by Neoplatonic thought, the traditional

<https://assignbuster.com/boethius-and-the-problem-of-evil/>

monotheist would have likewise found himself unable to compromise his idyllic God, yet perhaps not so comfortable as St. Augustine or Plotinus with denying the very tangible reality of evil. Boethius addresses the problem of evil in the fourth chapter of his *Consolation of Philosophy*. There, he states that the evil are in fact weak and cannot attain the supreme good of happiness, for they seek it by misguided ways. Moreover, Boethius contends that evil men cease to exist as they are and so become sub-human beasts. Because the evil are impotent, unhappy, and animal-like figures as the result of their own evil deeds, we cannot say that their actions go unpunished; for evil, like virtue, is its own reward. Boethius also tells us that the events of the world are governed by divine Providence, or Fate, as we temporal beings call it. Whereas our picture of the world is limited, God's Providence encompasses everything in a singular present. Therefore, because we are not able to see all things at once as Providence does, we often suppose that a cruel and unordered Fate rules the universe. However, even if some evil besets you it is in fact good, for it is Providence's directing you toward virtue. In his response to the problem of evil, Boethius conveys both philosophical and Christian thought. His claim that the evil are powerless because they cannot control the minds or souls of others comports well with the philosophies of the Stoic, Plato, and Neoplatonist, all of whom held (some more so than others) that affairs of the physical realm were inferior to the development or practice of the soul. From the previous chapter, we also witness the influence of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, when Boethius stresses happiness as the supreme good; a point he utilizes in Chapter Four when he says that evil men are weak and inhuman because they cannot attain the supreme good which they seek. Furthermore, Boethius' statement

<https://assignbuster.com/boethius-and-the-problem-of-evil/>

that everything that exists is good and his argument that evil has no power or substance is a mere reflection of Neoplatonic thought. There does appear, however, to be a certain Christian undertone in Boethius' undertaking of the problem of evil, particularly in his talk about Providence. There, Boethius seems to appeal more to a strictly religious conception of God, more along the lines of one revealed in the gospels than supposed in the words of Plotinus. Because Boethius fails to solve problems of a Christian sort with largely philosophical methods, I think his attempt at a synthesis is likewise unsuccessful. The response of Boethius to the problem of evil primarily fails because it does not treat the problem directly but rather seems to dance eloquently around it. Perhaps, it answers other questions, such as "Why does evil go unpunished?" or "Why are the evil often powerful and the good weak?" but it does not reconcile the existence or origin of evil with the qualities the Christian attributes to God. Also, the argument that everything is instructed by a divine Providence poses problems not only for human free will but also begs the question: why should humans be instructed toward good by some divine governance if God could have simply made them all-good in the first place? The traditional monotheistic response to the problem of evil is that human free will leads to evil in the world, as in the case of Original Sin. Nevertheless, there are several problems that result from a defense of this sort, which primarily revolve around the notion that God foreknows all choices that we will make and all events that will occur. Consequently, if we can say that a certain event or decision is known by God, then it must be true and invariable, for God is omniscient. Yet, if this is the case, then no matter what one does it would seem that they exhibit no control over their actions and hence no person truly possesses free will. This

argument lies at the center of such beliefs as pre-destination, determinism, and fatalism. In my opinion, the problem of evil cannot be successfully resolved, primarily for the reason that God's perfection is too demanding. This is evident if we only consider how many conflicts could be dismissed were God limited in his knowledge, power, and/or goodness. What significance or purpose does Creation bear to a God who at once sees its beginning, middle, and end? Why does God create people He knows are going to hell? Such questions would lack substance if God were not omniscient. Can God make a rock even he can't lift? It is dubious that we would even begin to entertain such a question if we denied God his omnipotence. And so the problem of evil is just another example of the sort of dilemma the person who attributes to God these certain properties finds himself in. Any series of responses to this problem or any other is likely to evoke an equally compelling series of counterarguments or further questions ad infinitum. But if God's perfection is the source of these problems, it is unlikely that they will disappear anytime soon, for the very notion of God seems to entail these attributes. Indeed, it seems that God comes pre-assembled with such properties and often to deny the existence of even one is to deny the existence of its possessor altogether.