

# Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

(c. 480 AD - c. 524 AD)

The Roman logician and theologian Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius is best known for his influential work "The Consolation of Philosophy." He also wrote theological treatises and transmitted to the Middle Ages portions of Aristotle's writings.



Born in Rome of an ancient family, Boethius probably received schooling in Athens or possibly in Alexandria. In any case he acquired a thorough knowledge of the Greek language and the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. He

undertook to translate the works of Plato and Aristotle into Latin with the aim of reconciling the two philosophies. This task was never completed, but Boethius did translate Aristotle's logical works and wrote commentaries on two of them.

Boethius's most important purely philosophical work is his second and longer commentary on Porphyry's *Eisagoge* (Introduction) to Aristotle's *Categories*. Therein he discusses the status of universals in a text that was to become a classic in the late Middle Ages. Concerning universals, Porphyry had raised three questions. First, are species (for example, man), genera (for example, animal), and other universals realities or mental conceptions? Second, if they are realities, are they corporeal or incorporeal? Third, if universals are incorporeal, do they exist apart from sensibles or in union with them?

In his discussion Boethius presents Aristotle's solution on universals, as explained by Alexander of Aphrodisias (ca. A. D. 200). Briefly this solution

states that species and genera are realities as well as mental conceptions. As realities, they are incorporeal and exist in union with sensible things.

Accordingly, individual men exist with substantial likenesses to one another, but what they have in common does not exist in reality apart from them. On the basis of substantial likenesses, the mind conceives of the species of man. The abstract conception is a true one, and it applies to individual men, though no species exists apart from individuals.

Plato's thesis that universals are realities that are incorporeal and exist apart from sensible things is mentioned by Boethius as an alternative but not necessarily as a preferable one. Boethius's neutrality is all the more striking when we realize that he was very much a Platonist in *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

In 510 Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king of Italy, had raised Boethius to the rank of consul. But by 523 Theodoric suspected that he was conspiring with Roman aristocrats and the Emperor in Constantinople to overthrow him. Exactly what caused Boethius to fall out of favor with Theodoric has been the matter of some conjecture. It is known that

there were Roman aristocrats interested in reuniting the Eastern and Western empires at the expense of Ostrogothic rule and that Boethius had made a contribution toward bridging the schism of East and West by writing four



tracts between 512 and 522 on divisive theological issues. (In one of them, *De Trinitate*, Boethius made use of the Aristotelian categories of substance and relation to define the doctrine of the Trinity.) Whatever the precise details may be, Theodoric had Boethius put to death for treason in 524 or 525.

**The Consolation of Philosophy** was composed by Boethius during the last year of his life while he was imprisoned in Pavia. This work is a dialogue in prose and verse between the author and Philosophia, the personification of philosophy. In it Boethius maintains that happiness can be found in the most adverse of conditions. The underpinning for such an optimistic outlook is the contrast of providence and fate. A world created by a providential God contains no possibility of evil as a reality. In achieving a cosmic order, God uses the instrument of fate, which necessitates each individual occurrence. However unfortunate a fated event may seem to a person from his limited and peripheral point of view, he still has the freedom to turn his mind to a providential God at the center of things. A man will thereby rise above the apparent misery of his circumstances and find consolation.



Boethius' tomb in Pavia, Italy