Carmina Qui Quondam Studio Florente Peregrimus: Why Boethius Should Be a Standard Component of General Education

Anthony J. Fredette, Fresno Pacific University

Perhaps no writer in history has better displayed the intellectual qualities that are the byproducts of a true liberal arts education than Boethius, the late Antique Roman scholar and politician executed by King Theodoric on suspicion of conspiring with the Eastern emperor. His treatises on philosophy, music, arithmetic, and other fields of educational importance may be viewed as the foundations of the medieval university system. His seminal work, the Consolation of Philosophy, was arguably the most popular text in medieval Europe. The enduring importance of the work was such that Alfred the Great, Chaucer, and Queen Elizabeth I all took it upon themselves to ensure that a scholarly translation of the work existed in Old, Middle, and Modern English, respectively. He is also notable for his extensive academic projects in translating and providing scholarly commentary on the works of Aristotle, although he never completed this ambitious endeavor and many of his commentaries are now lost. In this paper, I would like to discuss the reasons why the Consolation in particular is an essential part of the academic tradition of the university, and in this role it provides both comforting affirmation and stark criticism of paradigms found in modern higher education. Thus, it should be included in every respectable program of general education.

Let us begin by dispensing immediately with the claim that concerns, particularly those of a philosophical nature, concerning death are useless in a world in which monetary success is viewed as the reason for acquiring an education. Accomplished philosophers will be able to treat topics such as the nature and source of happiness in a
much more academically rigorous way than I will here. My intention is much more specific: I would like to discuss the practicality of philosophical concerns in education in terms of relevance, a term that is itself the subject of much undergraduate invective against general education courses. I will do this in the context of Boethius, because his systematic discussion of philosophy in particular was composed in the context of an event that is relevant to all of us: death. When we ask ourselves what the necessity of philosophy actually is, the one answer that we can all give that is universally relevant is death. Boethius shows us primarily that philosophy is relevant because we all die.

It is worth mentioning that, despite what I have already said about the universal and timeless relevance of certain philosophical concerns, the ability of individuals immersed in contemporary popular culture to apprehend philosophical truths has been a subject of both doubt and consideration throughout the span of human history. Socrates’s voluntary self-execution, as recorded by Plato, can indeed be seen as the failure of the Athenian aristocracy to grasp the archetypical philosopher’s reasons for rejecting the gods of the polis. Boethius marvels at the inability of Philosophy to be located in a specific time, presenting her in a light both foreign and formidable:

“...quamvis ita aevi plena foret, ut nullo modo nostrae crederetur aetatis...” ¹ Is Boethius’s observation that Philosophy is not of his time – and, because age does not logically decrease with the passing of time, not of our time either – a simple characterization of a long and venerable tradition of philosophical excellence, or does it also prove to be a polemical and prophetic assertion of the inability of the common man

¹...although she was so full of age that by no means could she be believed to be of our time... Boethius, Consolatio Philosophiae, 1.Prosa 1.1
to ascertain the “...statura discretionis ambiguae,”\(^2\) that is, to grasp the truths revealed by philosophy? Boethius offers a solution to this problem of popular receptivity that, when properly viewed, powerfully illustrates the value of a liberal arts education.

For Boethius, in order for a person to be receptive to the healing remedies of Philosophy, one must have the proper educational background. Philosophy says to the poetic Muses: “At si quem profanum, uti vulgo solitum vobis, blanditiae vestrae detrherent, minus moleste ferendum putarem, nihil quippe in eo nostrae operae laederentur; hunc vero Eleaticis atque Academicis studiis innutritum...”\(^3\) (By Eleatics, of course, Philosophy is referring to a school of Greek philosophy) The immediate context of this passage makes the author’s view of the ultimate benefits of education readily apparent. Lady Philosophy announces that she would not be dismayed if someone untrained in her ways were taken in by the deceptive Muses. Not only is the person uneducated in philosophy portrayed as being easily taken in by empty expressions of eloquence, but he or she is also not even an object of pity because of this perceived ignorance. This value-laden description of intellectual upbringing, which contains both a practical admonition and an idealistic concern, illustrates the fact that teaching Boethius in the classroom is a form of educational self-affirmation in that it presents students with a text that passionately presents the value of a liberal arts education.

\(^2\) ...height of unknown distinction.
Boethius, Consolatio Philosophiae, 1.Prosa 1.1

\(^3\) But, alas, if your enticements were dragging away some ignorant man, being accustomed to entertaining you often, I would consider your winning less troublesome, though of course our work would not be inhibited in this matter; but this man has been nourished by studies of the Eleatics and even those of the Academy...
Boethius, Consolatio Philosophiae, 1.Prosa 1.10
Another trend in modern universities that both Boethius and staunch advocates of the liberal arts would likely find intolerable is the absence of the study of philosophy, even and especially in disciplines in which it holds a special relevance, such as the natural sciences. To borrow from the terminology of the example just mentioned, this epidemic is difficult to precisely diagnose because it is an integral part of the postmodern mind – for whom the pursuit of absolute truth is not relevant because it does not exist – and it attacks the parts of the brain that are involved in the cost-benefit analyses of major life decisions. For those who question the practicality of philosophy, viewing it as merely the pursuit of an abstract, idealized sort of truth, Boethius offers a view of the subject more firmly grounded in concrete educational experience than the opinion held by philosophy’s detractors. When the author describes the physical appearance of the personification of philosophy, he describes two Greek letters among many that adorn her robe: Π and Θ. The Π stands for Πρᾶξις, the repetitive action and immediately applicable type of instruction from which the English words “practical” and “practice” derive. The Θ stands for Θεωρία, the consideration of underlying principle from which the English words “theory” and “theoretical” are derived. For Boethius, the abstract concept (Θεωρία) is the more important principle of learning any subject. The πρᾶξις, or mechanical action, is necessary but is not the true test of an educated individual. The supremacy of Θεωρία is made apparent by its higher position on Lady Philosophy’s robe.4 Boethius makes a dual admission here, one that both affirms and denies the efficacy of intellectual-vocational paradigms in higher education. On the one hand, the very presence of the Π on Philosophy’s garment asserts the necessity of the

4 Boethius, Consolatio Philosophiae, 1.Prosa 1.4
practical application of knowledge. On the other hand, its deliberate placement at the bottom of the garment supports the aforementioned idea that true education demands a higher level of understanding than that which is required by practice-oriented institutions. Furthermore, this symbolic description of Philosophy’s attire illustrates the mutual complementarity of practice and theory. Far from hindering the exercise of practical application, Θ’s position at the top of the series of letters ascending "...ab inferiore ad superius elementum..."\(^5\) emphasizes the fact that theory improves and perfects one’s understanding of the concepts learned through regular practice.

In addition to Boethius’s emphasis on the need for a proper education and the necessity of apprehending theory for gaining a full understanding of academic subjects, the preeminent author of the middle ages offers us one more indirect assertion about the proper end of education. This subtle statement is made by the structure of the Consolation itself. His work is written in the prosimetric form, alternating prose and poetic verse. Poetry in particular was used by Lucretius (a Golden Age Roman philosopher, author of the *De Rerum Natura*, and one of Boethius’s intellectual predecessors) for the explicit purpose of allowing his audience to more easily absorb his philosophical message. Boethius’s own use of poetry to intersperse his prose with artful summaries, philosophical allegories, and rewordings of familiar passages from classical mythology is entirely consistent with the author’s placement of some poetic Muses in the employ of Philosophy herself. An encouragement to some professional academics and an admonition to others, Boethius’s effort to make his philosophical work universally appealing and relevant reminds all who make a living in higher education that the ideas

\(^5\) ...from the lower to the higher principle...
Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, 1.Prosa 1.4
generated in the petri dish of university thought can only achieve their full potential when they reach beyond the ivory tower and begin to influence public thought and action.

The qualities of the Consolation of Philosophy that I have just outlined are powerful advocates for the study of the liberal arts precisely because they generated the ideas that gave birth to the liberal arts in the first place. It is probably no coincidence that the same period of human history that was more heavily influenced by Boethius's thought than any other, the Middle Ages, is the same period that saw the birth of the university as an institution promoting general culture and the advancement of human knowledge. To neglect Boethius in programs of general education is therefore to discard the foundational ideas for the university itself, causing students to forget or to never learn in the first place the proper end of an educated life. And what is, for Boethius, the ultimate goal of education? The answer to this question can be seen as a mission statement for the liberal arts: to be a "composito serenus aevo" who approaches life in the following manner: ".../fatum sub pedibus egit superbum/fortunamque tuens utramque rectus/invictum potuit tenere vultum,/…"

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6 …a serene man of a settled age…
Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, 1.Metrum 4.1

7 …he casts fate under his feet and, beholding both good fortune and otherwise, the upright man is able to hold his countenance unconquered…
Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, 1.Metrum 4.2-4
N.B.: The Latin translations appearing in the footnotes are my original work. Therefore, any errors or misreadings are mine alone.