

A Consistent Consolation: True Happiness in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to defend Philosophy's account of true happiness in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Although philosopher John Marenbon claims that Philosophy provides Boethius with two conflicting accounts of happiness, this paper argues that she consistently advocates a single account of true happiness. Ultimately, the paper claims that Marenbon is mistaken in his interpretation of Philosophy account of true happiness. What Marenbon interprets as an alternate account of the nature of true happiness is actually a component of Philosophy's dialectical method and not a separate account.



Allison Glasscock is a third year philosophy major at Western Oregon University in Monmouth, Oregon. Her philosophic interests include ancient Greek and early medieval philosophy, especially the works of Aristotle and Boethius. She is currently writing her Honors thesis on Boethius' account of happiness in *Consolation of Philosophy*. When she is not reading or writing about philosophy, she enjoys studying German and Greek, going for long walks, and engaging in scintillating conversations with her friends, classmates, and family.

The Problem of Happiness

Woven amongst the myriad, tangled themes of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* is a lengthy examination of the nature of happiness. Brought low by the turning of fortune's wheel, Boethius turns to his muse, Philosophy, for an explanation of his misfortunes and asks her to show him what true happiness is. The discussion and arguments that ensue are complex. It is difficult to determine what, precisely, Philosophy claims about the nature of true happiness: Does she argue that fortune is an

important component of true happiness, or does she argue that true happiness is independent of fortune and completely self-sufficient? Put another way, does Philosophy ultimately claim that Boethius can be happy without the gifts of fortune, or does she claim that he really has lost something worth mourning?

Commentator John Marenbon argues that Philosophy makes both of these claims. He argues that instead of developing a single, unambiguous account of happiness, Philosophy provides the prisoner with two disparate views. She claims both that true happiness is independent

of fortune and that the gifts of fortune are important for true happiness. According to Marenbon, this inconsistency ultimately derails Philosophy's attempt to provide Boethius with a definition of true happiness. Her inability to advance a consistent account of true happiness renders her untrustworthy.

In this paper, I attempt to defend Philosophy's account of true happiness from Marenbon's charge of inconsistency. I argue that, despite the complexities and apparent incongruities of the text, Philosophy does advance a single, consistent account of true happiness as something independent of fortune. I begin with a brief examination of Marenbon's interpretation of *Consolation*. I then turn to an analysis of the overarching structure of Philosophy's main argument, claiming that this structure is, in its general outlines consistent. Finally, I argue that what Marenbon identifies as Philosophy's second account of true happiness is actually a component of her primary account. It is a dialectical tool designed to assuage Boethius's concerns about the gifts of fortune before presenting him with a new definition of true happiness.

Marenbon's Charge of Inconsistency

Marenbon argues that Philosophy advances both what he calls a "complex" and a "monolithic" account of true happiness. Philosophy's defense of the monolithic account of happiness takes place primarily in Book III. She begins by arguing

that the human *telos* is true happiness and that true happiness is the highest Good.¹ She further argues that God, in virtue of his character, must be identified with the highest Good.² And she concludes that, since God and happiness are both the highest Good, "God is happiness itself."³ Thus, according to the monolithic account, true happiness resides in a place (or more aptly, a being) untouchable by the vagaries of fortune.

The gifts of fortune are not necessary conditions of this sort of (monolithic) happiness. Philosophy claims that mortals deceive themselves if they expect to obtain true happiness through the gifts of fortune. She says that things such as riches, honor, kingdoms, glory, and physical pleasure "seem to give mortals images of the true good, perhaps, or some imperfect goods, but the true and perfect good they cannot bestow."⁴ Since the gifts of fortune are not necessary for true happiness, then Boethius, according to the monolithic account, has no reason to mourn his misfortune.⁵ He has lost nothing of any real or lasting value.

Contrast this radical definition of true happiness with what Marenbon calls Philosophy's complex account. This nuanced approach to happiness begins in Book II with Philosophy's discussion of fortune. Although Philosophy encourages Boethius to abandon his foolish dependence on fortune in Book II—a step towards the total self-sufficiency advocated by the monolithic view—she does not make the stronger claim that *all* the gifts of fortune are unnecessary components of true happiness. In fact, she reminds Boethius that he still possesses

1. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001): III.2.2-3.

2. Boethius, III.10.7-10.

3. Boethius, III.10.17.

4. Boethius, III.9.30.

5. John Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness: Interpreting Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*," in *Rationality and Happiness: From the Ancients to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Jiyuan Yu and Jorge J.E. Gracia (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003): 184.



a number of valuable gifts of fortune. His father-in-law, wife, and sons are all still alive, and he still has friends.⁶ Philosophy appears to suggest that since Boethius is still in possession of some gifts of fortune, he has no right to be entirely miserable; he might, in fact, have good reason to be happy. The argument that Boethius has good reason to be happy just because he still possesses some of the gifts of fortune makes hash of Philosophy's stern mandates against relying upon fortune for happiness. Contra the monolithic account, her concessions here imply that Boethius has lost (and still possesses) something of value after all.⁷ Happiness, it appears, might not be entirely free of the effects of fortune.

Marenbon argues that the fact that Philosophy develops two inconsistent accounts of happiness undermines her authority as a reliable guide to true happiness.⁸ Even if it does turn out that she ultimately favors the monolithic account rather than the complex account (as Marenbon claims she does), Boethius can have no real incentive to trust Philosophy. Why should he believe that he ought to prefer the monolithic account when Philosophy⁹ has also presented him with a second, conflicting, and in some ways more intuitive account of true happiness?

Establishing the Monolithic Account

Marenbon's argument looks formidable, but when one considers the overarching structure of Philosophy's arguments, a complex account of happiness never emerges. What does emerge is

a well-developed and consistent account of true happiness that spans both Books II and III. The account begins with a discussion of the gifts of fortune in Book II, considers false goods in III.1-9, and concludes with a definition of true happiness in III.9-12. Though Marenbon claims that Philosophy also develops the complex account of happiness through her discussion of the gifts of fortune, this is not the case. The discussion of fortune that comprises the first stage of Philosophy's argument helps to establish the monolithic (and not the complex) account of true happiness.

As Book II unfolds, Philosophy considers the gifts of fortune from three different angles. She argues that the gifts of fortune are neither instrumentally valuable nor sufficient for true happiness because (a) they are transient, (b) they cannot belong to us, and (c) they are not intrinsically good. Each of these facets of Philosophy's argument provides a negative account of what she later claims is an important characteristic of true happiness.

The claim that the transience of the gifts of fortune renders them both instrumentally valueless and insufficient, for happiness is developed in the first four sections of Book II. Philosophy argues that fortune can never result in true happiness simply because the nature of fortune is completely antithetical to the nature of true happiness. True happiness, she claims, is the highest excellence, and the highest excellence cannot be taken away. The gifts of fortune, on the other hand, *can* be taken away. Since true happiness and the gifts of fortune are

qualitatively different, the gifts of fortune will not be sufficient for true happiness, nor will they be instrumentally valuable for the person who seeks true happiness.¹⁰

This discussion of the instability (and therefore inadequacy) of the gifts of fortune in Book II blossoms into a positive account of the nature of true happiness in III.10. Philosophy has already claimed in passing that one of the characteristics of true happiness is that it is lasting, but it is not until III.10 that she advances a more sustained argument to support that claim. In III.10, she argues that true happiness is identical with God and the Good. She claims that because an imperfect good exists (i.e., since there are things in this world that we consider capable of providing at least a façade of happiness), there must also exist "a steadfast and perfect good."¹¹ Further, since God also possesses the perfect Good, God and this Good must be identical.¹² Finally, since true happiness and the Good are identical (as discussed above), "true happiness is located in this highest God."¹³ With this argument, Philosophy moves beyond discussing the nature of true happiness in negative terms (i.e., explaining that it is not and cannot be obtained through the gifts of fortune) to a more concrete definition. She argues that the stability that the gifts of fortune lack is a defining characteristic of the ideas of which true happiness is comprised: the Good that must exist is "steadfast," and God is eternal.

Philosophy's second charge against the gifts of fortune is that they do not belong to us and that therefore they are insufficient for happiness: "[W]hat is there in them [the gifts of fortune] that could ever truly belong to you mortals?" she asks Boethius.¹⁴ She cites money, jewels, and tilled fields as examples of things that, because they are external to Boethius, can never completely belong to him: money, she says, is more valuable when it is given away than when it is hoarded; the "brilliance of jewels" belongs to the jewels themselves, not to their observers; and nature operates independently of our individual wills.¹⁵ She argues that since Boethius is a rational human being, he has no need to look outside himself in order to find fulfillment or happiness.¹⁶ In fact, his reliance upon the external gifts of fortune actually devalues his nature as a rational human being.¹⁷

Like Philosophy's claims about the transient nature of the gifts of fortune, her discussion of their externality helps to establish a negative definition of true happiness. By the end of Book II, we know both that true happiness *cannot* be transient and that it is *not* found in things external to the rational human being. In III.5, Philosophy develops the latter claim in positive terms. She argues that one of the characteristics of true happiness is that it, unlike the external gifts of fortune (but like the rational human being), is self-sufficient: it is "one and simple by nature" and "has no parts."¹⁸ We will not be

6. Boethius, II.8.7.

7. John Marenbon, *Boethius* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 103.

8. John Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 176.

9. John Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 189.

10. Boethius, II.4.25.

11. Boethius, III.10.6.

12. Boethius, III.10.7-10.

13. Boethius, III.10.10.

14. Boethius, II.5.2.

15. Boethius, II.5.1-16.

16. Boethius, II.5.22-27.

17. Boethius, II.5.28-31.



able to obtain it by cobbling together bits and pieces of an inadequate fortune.¹⁹

Philosophy's third charge against the gifts of fortune is that they are intrinsically worthless: "[W]hat is there in them," she asks, "that . . . would not become worthless upon close inspection and careful consideration?"²⁰ She argues that if the gifts of fortune were inherently good, then they would never "become the possessions of those who are most despicable."²¹ However, it is clearly the case that the gifts of fortune do in fact attach themselves to wicked and despicable people: greedy people sometimes possess wealth, people lacking self-control sometimes abuse the power given them, and unrighteous people sometimes receive positions of honor.²² "It's perfectly clear," Philosophy concludes, "that there is present in Fortune nothing worth pursuing, *nothing that has a goodness that belongs to its own nature.*"²³ Thus the gifts of fortune can offer nothing to the rational, happiness-seeking individual. In virtue of their rationality (a rationality that makes them unique and links them with God), human beings ought to direct their efforts towards the procurement of things that are intrinsically good. The gifts of fortune clearly fail to meet this criterion.

This conclusion dovetails neatly with Philosophy's later argument that true happiness is the highest good. If it is the case that the gifts of fortune are not intrinsically good, then, we want to ask, what is? Philosophy's response to this potential question is to argue that true happiness is itself the Good. All human beings,

she says, "strive to reach only one single goal: true happiness. And that is *the* good thing. . . . It is in fact the highest of all good things and it contains all good things within itself."²⁴

Thus each of the primary arguments in Book II about the gifts of fortune illuminate an important characteristic of the nature of true (monolithic) happiness. The gifts of fortune are transient, but true happiness is steadfast. The gifts of fortune cannot ever truly belong to us because they are external to us; true happiness, on the other hand, is self-sufficient and can only be obtained through the use of reason. Finally, the gifts of fortune are intrinsically valueless (i.e., they are not intrinsically good), while true happiness is itself the highest Good. The definition of true happiness that emerges from this (positive and negative) characterization is what Marenbon calls the monolithic account of happiness: true happiness is steadfast, self-sufficient, and intrinsically good; true happiness is the same as the Good and God.

Philosophy's Medicinal Approach to the Monolithic Account

Since the main arguments in Book II and III work together to establish a single, consistent account of true happiness as monolithic, it seems unlikely that Philosophy would sabotage her work by introducing a competing view of happiness. But according to Marenbon, Philosophy advances a complex account

of happiness in addition to her monolithic account. He argues that she claims both that true happiness is independent of fortune and that true happiness might depend on a certain modicum of the gifts of fortune. However, although Philosophy does sometimes appear to attribute value to the gifts of fortune, the instances in which she does do not comprise a distinct account of true happiness. Instead, they are actually an important component of Philosophy's method of establishing the monolithic account.

Philosophy does not begin Book II by providing Boethius with a precise definition of true happiness. Boethius has spent much of Book I complaining about the things he has lost and the unfairness of his current situation. He is worried, upset, and clearly unready to remodel his conceptions of the universe. He does not want to know how to become truly happy; he wants to know why his life has been destroyed. Thus, although Philosophy might prefer to plunge directly into her account of true happiness (an account that she believes will be Boethius's ultimate cure), she spends Book II discussing the gifts of fortune. She takes the time to address Boethius's concerns and to wean him from his dependence on fortune-born happiness before she attempts to provide him with a concrete definition of true happiness.

Philosophy compares this graduated approach to that of a doctor prescribing a course of medicine to a patient. The patient, she says, must begin with gentle remedies before moving on to "more caustic ones;"²⁵ he must "take in and taste

something mild and agreeable" and "this will prepare the way for the stronger potions after it has been conveyed to [his] inner depths."²⁶ Thus, when Philosophy appears to suggest in Book II that the gifts of fortune are important components of Boethius's happiness, she is not actually advancing an alternate account of true happiness. Instead, she is acknowledging the worth that the gifts of fortune have according to Boethius's *current* and erroneous worldview. Philosophy begins her enumeration of the supposed goods that Boethius still has left to him by saying, "If it is this empty name of Fortune-born happiness that excites you so, you may now go over with me just how multiform and magnificent is your abundance still."²⁷ Philosophy's claim is only that, according to his faulty and fortune-dependent conception of happiness, Boethius has not lost everything. She does not claim that those things will make him truly happy.

Marenbon rejects this "medicinal approach" as a viable explanation for Philosophy's treatment of happiness in Book II. He argues that if it is the case that Philosophy administers first gentle and then stronger remedies, then Book III ought to begin with a markedly different approach than that advanced in Book II. But, he says, "the argument in Book III up to the end of prose 8 develops a line of thinking which bears out and extends the approach of Book II."²⁸

Marenbon's objection depends on a faulty characterization of the medicinal approach. It is false to assume that Philosophy's emphasis on a progression from gentle to stronger

18. Boethius, III.9.16.

19. Boethius, III.9.22.

20. Boethius, II.5.2-3.

21. Boethius, II.6.13.

22. Boethius, II.6.18-20.

23. Boethius, II.6.20 (emphasis mine).

24. Boethius, III.2.2-3.

25. Boethius, II.5.1.

26. Boethius, II.1.7-8.

27. Boethius, II.4.3-4.

28. John Marenbon, "Rationality and Happiness," 180.



remedies necessitates that Book III begin with “a different outlook” than that developed in Book II. If she is still trying to cure the same illness, then it makes sense that her stronger remedies will be an extension of the gentler ones. What the method does demand, however, is that Philosophy’s arguments grow continually stronger or, to put it in her own terms, harsher. Over the course of the text, arguments should begin to focus less on Boethius’s concerns and be more directly applicable to her own agenda.

It is just this kind of intensification of focus that we find at the beginning of Book III. Philosophy has most assuredly not changed the subject, but she has plunged deeper into it. In Book II, she discusses gifts of fortune; in Book III, she exchanges the term “gifts of fortune” for the term “false goods.” This exchange marks an important development in Philosophy’s arguments. Instead of talking about the problems surrounding the relationship between fortune and happiness, she is now talking about false happiness. And though she is still only referring to happiness in negative terms (i.e., addressing what happiness is *not* instead of defining *true* happiness), her shift in terminology has brought her closer to her ultimate goal: a definition of true happiness.

Only after weaning Boethius from his initial worries about the gifts of fortune and showing him the faults of false happiness, is Philosophy free to concretely define true happiness. And accordingly, in III.9ff, Philosophy proceeds to provide her first positive arguments for the definition of true happiness as monolithic.

A Consistent Consolation

Philosophy does indeed provide Boethius with a consistent account of true happiness. Contra Marenbon, she does not claim that happiness is both independent *and* dependent on fortune. Instead, the arguments in Books II and III constitute a single account of monolithic (fortune-independent) happiness. The discussion of the inadequacy of the gifts of fortune for true happiness in Book II provides a negative characterization of true happiness, while Book III provides a positive definition of true happiness as God and the Good. And what Marenbon interprets as a complex account of true happiness is actually a component of Philosophy’s medicinal approach. Philosophy must first convince Boethius that the gifts of fortune are not worth mourning, before she will be able to demonstrate how it is that he can be perfectly happy without them. ♦