

TIME AND ETERNITY FROM PLOTINUS AND BOETHIUS TO EINSTEIN

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to show that the views on time and eternity of Plotinus and Boethius are analogous to those implied by the block-time perspective in contemporary philosophy of time, as implied by the mathematical physics of Einstein and Minkowski. Both Einstein and Boethius utilized their theories of time and eternity with the practical goal of providing consolation to persons in distress; this practice of *consolatio* is compared to Pierre Hadot's studies of the "Look from Above", of the importance of concentrating on the present moment, and his emphasis on ancient philosophy as providing therapy for the soul, instead of mere abstract speculation for its own sake. In the first part of the article, Einstein's views are compared with those of Plotinus, and with the elucidation of Plotinus' views provided in the Arabic *Theology of Aristotle*. The second part of the article studies Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, which, contrary to recent interpretations, is indeed a genuine consolation rather than a parody thereof. The *Consolation* shows how the study of the Neoplatonic philosophical curriculum can lead the student along the path to salvation, by awakening and elaborating his innate ideas. To illustrate this doctrine, a passage from the little-known Pseudo-Boethian treatise *De diis et praesensionibus* is studied. Finally, after a survey of Boethius' view on fate and providence, and Aristotle's theory of future contingents, I study Boethius' three main arguments in favor of the reconcilability of divine omniscience and human free will: the distinction between absolute and conditional necessity, the principle that the nature of knowledge is determined by the knower, and finally the doctrine that God lives in an eternal present, seeing past, present, and future simultaneously. This last view, developed primarily from Plotinus, is once again argued to be analogous to that advocated by contemporary block-time theorists on the basis of Einsteinian relativity. God's supratemporal vision introduces no necessity into contingent events. Ultimate, objective reality, for Boethius as for Plotinus and Einstein, is atemporal, and our idea that there is a conflict between human free will and divine omniscience derives from a kind of optical illusion, caused by the fact that we cannot help but think in terms of temporality.

KEYWORDS: Plotinus, Boethius, Einstein, Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a way of life, Philosophy of time, Aristotle, future contingents, free will, predestination, innate ideas, Pseudo-Boethius, *De diis et praesensionibus*, necessity, Proclus, Porphyry.

I. EINSTEIN AND THE *PLOTINIANA ARABICA*
ON TIME AND ETERNITY

1. Panofsky on Serapis

In a classic article,¹ Erwin Panofsky dealt with the interpretation and ancient sources of the painting entitled “Allegory of Prudence”, now in London’s National Gallery. Attributed to Titian,² this work depicts a male head with three faces – elderly, middle-aged, and young – which is associated with the heads of a wolf, lion, and dog respectively. The work’s Latin inscription: “The present acts prudently on the basis of the past, lest it disfigure future action”³ makes it clear that the three animal heads correspond to the three main divisions of time: past, present, and future.

Before giving a history of the manifestations of this symbolism throughout the Middle Ages and into the period of the Counter-Reformation, Panofsky sketches its ancient origins. He identifies the main source of this iconographical tradition in a passage from the fifth-century Latin author Macrobius (*Saturnalia* I, 20, 13-16), adding that other details of the painting are to be sought in ancient cult statues and other figurative representations of the Hellenistic Egyptian divinity Sarapis.

Macrobius informs us that the statue of the Alexandrian god Serapis or Sarapis, who is to be identified with the sun, was accompanied by the figure of a three-headed animal. Of the beast’s three heads, the largest one in the middle was that of a lion; on the right was the head of a dog, and on the left that of a wolf. All three heads were surrounded by a serpent, whose head reached up to the god’s right hand, by which he dominated the monster like a dog on a leash. Macrobius tells us that of the three animal heads, the lion signifies the present because of its power, violence, and burning impetuosity; the wolf’s head signifies the past, since the past snatches away the memory of things; finally, the dog represents the future, which flatters us with hope like a fawning pet. Macrobius gives no interpretation of the serpent that surrounds this beast, but since we are told that time obeys its *auctor*, we must, I think, understand that Serapis/Sol is the creator of time. Panofsky,⁴ following Macrobius, therefore interprets Titian’s image as follows:

¹ Panofsky 1993.

² I am not concerned here with the correctness of this attribution, which Panofsky holds to be unquestionable. Wind (1968², 260 & n. 4) is inclined to attribute the painting to Titian’s disciple Cesare Vecelli.

³ EX PRAETERITO / PRAESENS PRVDENTER AGIT / NI FVTVRAM ACTIONEM DETVRPET.

⁴ Panofsky 1999, 22: “Si un serpent entoure le corps d’où sortent les trois têtes, il est l’expression d’une plus haute unité dont présent, passé et avenir ne sont que les modes: la temporalité dont l’absence de début et de fin a très tôt été symbolisée par un serpent de «l’éternité» qui se mord la queue”.

If a snake surrounds the body from which the three heads emerge, it is the expression of a higher unity, of which present, past, and future are only the modes: temporality, whose lack of beginning and end was symbolized early on by a snake biting its tail.



I think Panofsky is essentially right, with one exception: rather than “temporality” or duration, the serpent probably signifies the absence thereof; that is, eternity. If this is right, we thus have a conception, dating from the fourth or fifth century AD at the latest, in which time is considered as secondary to and embraced by eternity. On this view, time, with its divisions of past, present, and future, is an epiphenomenon, while the fundamental reality underlying it is identified as eternity or timelessness (Greek *aiôn*, Latin *aeternitas*).

2. Einstein als Beichtvater (Einstein the Confessor)

A current debate in the philosophy of time is that between advocates of the so-called block universe view, otherwise known as eternalists, and those, known as presentists, who defend the reality of the passage of time and of its division into past, present and future. I will not enter details of this debate here, but I would like to sketch the contemporary origin of this idea in the theories of Albert Einstein, then compare it with a manifestation of a similar idea, first in Plotinus and then in the Medieval Arabic adaptation of Plotinus' *Enneads* that circulated under the title of the *Theology of Aristotle*. In the process, we'll glimpse some of the ethical implications of the controversy in both ancient and modern discussions.

A popular literary genre in ancient philosophy was that of the *consolatio*, in one variety of which the philosopher provided arguments intended to alleviate the grief of someone who had recently suffered the loss of a loved one.⁵

Whether he knew it or not, Albert Einstein was continuing this tradition when, in 1949, he wrote to a Rabbi whose young daughter had died:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe", a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us [...] our task must be to free ourselves from this prison [...].⁶

Pierre Hadot called attention to this text in a book first published in 2001. As he points out there, the idea that many of our worries and sufferings come from our false sense of isolation from the whole constituted by the universe is typical of Einstein, who elsewhere writes that to determine a human being's value, we must discover the degree to which he has liberated himself from himself.⁷ Hadot relates this attitude to the ancient spiritual exercise of the "look from above", in which we imagine flying high above the scenes of our daily life, in order to realize the pettiness of our day-to-day worries and anxieties. We all have a natural tendency to consider

⁵ Examples include Cicero's (lost) consolation to himself; Seneca's three consolations, addressed to Marcia, daughter of the Roman historian Cremutius Cordus; to his mother Helvetia, and to Nero's freedman Polybius; and Plutarch's *Consolation to Apollonius*. The most famous and influential example is no doubt Boethius' *Consolation of philosophy*, which we'll investigate below.

⁶ Einstein's quote was cited by Pierre Hadot in a book of interviews published in 2001 (p. 263), but it proved hard at first to track down Einstein's utterance. As he wrote at the time (op. cit. 263-4): "Michael Chase and I have searched for years in Einstein's published works. Impossible to find it". I was finally able to identify the source and include in my revised translation of Hadot's book: it comes from W. Sullivan, "The Einstein papers: a man of many parts", *New York Times*, March 29, 1972. See Hadot 2011, 169; 205 n. 4.

⁷ "The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained to liberation from the self". Einstein 1949, 7.

ourselves the center of the universe, interpreting everything in terms of our own likes and dislikes: what we like is good, what we don't is bad. If it rains on a weekend, then that's bad, because it spoils our plans for a picnic: we do not take into consideration the fact that the rain may be good for the region, territory, or country as a whole. For ancient schools of thought such as the Sceptics, by contrast, the key to happiness, says Hadot, is to “strip off man completely, or liberate oneself entirely from the human point of view”.⁸ In Antiquity, Hadot writes elsewhere, “philosophy was held to be an exercise consisting in learning to regard both society and the individuals who comprise it from the point of view of universality”,⁹ and “philosophy signified the attempt to raise up mankind from individuality and particularity to universality and objectivity”. Hadot went on to discuss the notion of a “practical physics”, the goal of which was, by contemplating the vast spaces of the universe, to be able to put human worries and problems into perspective, and thereby gain peace of mind. Hadot liked to quote Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations* 9, 32) in this regard: “You have the power to strip off many superfluous things that are obstacles to you, and that depend entirely upon your value-judgments; you will open up for yourself a vast space by embracing the whole universe in your thoughts, by considering unending eternity”.

Michele Besso had been Einstein's closest friend since the days when the two were fellow-university students at Zurich, then worked as patent clerks in Bern. After a lifelong friendship, in which Besso served as the main sounding-board for many of Einstein's most revolutionary ideas, Besso died in March 1955, only a month before Einstein's own death, whereupon Einstein wrote a letter of consolation to Besso's family:

Now, with his departure from this strange world, he has slightly preceded me once again. This means nothing. For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present and future has only the meaning of an illusion, albeit a persistent one.¹⁰

For Einstein, then, at least at this late stage of his life, it seems that ultimate reality is eternal, and time – a mere illusion. It follows that death is also a mere epiphenomenon, that is, a surface phenomenon without substantial reality or importance: As Porphyry claimed in his *Sentences*, time is a *parupostasis*. It is worth quoting the exegesis of this quote by Einstein given by the philosopher of science Michael Lockwood (2005). According to Lockwood, our grief at the death of a loved one has three primary motivations. Two of these cannot be alleviated by Einsteinian physics: (1) the thought that we shall never see the deceased person again, and (2) the idea that a

⁸ Cf. Hadot 1995, 112-113.

⁹ Hadot 1995, 242.

¹⁰ “Nun ist er mir auch mit dem Abschied von dieser sonderbaren Welt ein wenig vorausgegangen. Das bedeutet nichts. Für uns gläubige Physiker hat die Scheidung zwischen Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft nur die Bedeutung einer, wenn auch hartnäckigen, Illusion”. Einstein to Vero and Mrs. Bice, March 21, 1955, Einstein Archive, reel 7-245. My translation.

valuable life has been cut short.¹¹ Einstein's consolation is, says Lockwood, directed at a third source of grief: the notion (3) that the dead person “no longer exists, is simply not there anymore”. This last source of grief, Lockwood continues, derives from the fact that we equate existence *tout court* with existence now, at the present moment. However, such a view “makes sense only if we think of time in a way that physics shows to be mistaken”. Einstein contends, and Lockwood agrees, that the terms “past”, “present” and “future” do not express objective differences in time, but relative differences, in the same sense as such terms as “to the east”, “here” and “there” express relative differences in space. But if this is so, says Lockwood, people who *have lived* in other times are analogous to people who *are living now* in other places. It follows that

death is not the deletion of a person's existence. It is an event, merely, that marks the outer limit of that person's extension in one (timelike) spatio-temporal direction, just as the person's skin marks out the limit in other (spacelike) directions (...) Einstein is urging us to regard those living in times past, like those living in foreign parts, as equally out there in space-time, enjoying the same flesh-and-blood existence as ourselves. It is simply that we inhabit different regions of the continuum.

What could have led Einstein and his interpreters to talk this way?

3. Einstein on time: the theoretical background

One of my favourite films from the 1970's was the Swiss director Alain Tanner's *Jonas who will be 25 in the year 2000*. In one scene, a high-school teacher walks into his class with a length of blood sausage and begins to chop it into slices with a meat-cleaver: each slice, he explains, can be considered a moment in history. If, following Einstein's theory of special relativity as modified by his former math teacher Hermann Minkowski, we imagine reality as a four-dimensional spacetime continuum, then we can imagine the sausage as representing a world-tube, or the three-dimensional trajectory traced by a person or thing as he, she or it travels through spacetime. In the case of a conscious being, each slice of the sausage can be imagined as a “now” from that being's perspective, containing everything in the universe he/she/it considers to be simultaneous at that instant. Yet the compatibility between what two or more moving observers consider to be simultaneous, and even the ob-

¹¹ It is not clear to me why Einstein's consolation cannot be directed to source (2) as well. Another possible consolation for source (2) might be the claim that that the goodness and/or happiness of a life do not depend on temporal duration: it might be claimed that an instant of maximal goodness or happiness is equivalent in value to any arbitrary duration of such goodness/happiness. See, for instance, Plotinus, *Enneads* I 5, 7, 22-26: “Happiness... must not be counted by time but by eternity; and this is neither more nor less nor of any extension, but is a ‘this here’, unextended and timeless”. On this notion in Epicureanism, taking up notions from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, K 3, cf. Krämer 1971, 187ff.

jectivity and meaningfulness of the very notion of simultaneity, were among the first casualties of Einstein's special theory of relativity, published in 1905.

This theory, which showed that instead of representing the world we live in as specified by four dimensions, three for space and one for time, we must think of spacetime as constituting an indivisible whole, led to a number of other paradoxical results. At speeds close to that of light, time slows down and the length of objects contracts. Most interestingly for our theme, what one observer perceives as space, another one in motion may perceive as time: thus, time and space may transform into one another. Finally, depending on whether or not they are in motion with regard to one another, another observer may not consider as simultaneous two events that seem clearly simultaneous in my own reference frame; likewise, he, she or it may consider an event that seems to me to be in my future as having already occurred in his/her or its past.

To exemplify these ideas, I'd like to offer a variation on a thought-experiment presented by Brian Greene (2004). Imagine if you will that I am standing here, but that a friend is standing on a planet 10 billion light years away. Each of us has a handheld device called a simultanophone, which provides a constantly-updated list of all the spacetime events its owner considers to be simultaneous at each instant – for instance, right now my simultanophone lists “Barack Obama going for a walk, Queen Elizabeth snoring, the sun rising over Australia, etc., etc”. Now, my friend, although he is very far away, is – for all intents and purposes – immobile with respect to me: that is, we share the same reference frame. The list of events on his simultanophone is therefore identical to mine, and we consider the same events to be simultaneous. Suppose, however, that my friend gets up and decides to go for a brisk jog away from me: his simultanophone will now indicate events under the subheading “earth” that *my* phone indicates took place 150 years ago, and should he decide to jog in my direction, his simultanophone will list events that my phone says lie 150 years in the future. Let's say, moreover, that my friend owns a supersonic car, and decides to hop in and drive away from me at a speed of 1000 miles per hour. His simultanophone will now list events that happened 15,000 years ago in my perspective; and if he should slam on the brakes, turn around, and gun his engine in the other direction, that is, toward me, his list of simultaneous events will include events that, as far as I am concerned, lie 15,000 years in the future.

As if these results aren't odd enough, Einstein's theory of special relativity also states that there's no reason why either viewpoint – mine or my friend's – should be considered right and the other wrong: both simultaneity lists are equally valid. There is no basis on which to decide between them.

Such phenomena are far from being the only relativistic effects affecting time and simultaneity: others are brought about when one observer is imagined to travel at speeds approaching the speed of light, such as the famous twins paradox. But the simultaphone phenomenon seems particularly revealing. In the words of Brian Greene (2004, 138-39):

If you buy the notion that reality consists of the things in your freeze-frame mental image right now [i.e., in my example, the list of simultaneous events that appears on your simultaphone], and if you agree that your now is no more valid than the now of someone located far away in space who can move freely, then reality encompasses all of the events in spacetime.

In other words, if another observer in motion with regard to me can *already* regard as present to him events that *I* think are in the future, then there's a sense in which future events *already* exist, and past events *still* exist. In the words of Greene, "Just as we envision all of space as really being out there, as really existing, we should also envision all of time as really being out there, as really existing, too (...) the only thing that's real is the whole of spacetime".

As Paul Davies has written, such considerations seem to leave us no choice but to consider that "events in the past and future have to be every bit as real as events in the present. In fact, the very division of time into past, present and future seems to be physically meaningless. To accommodate everybody's nows (...) events and moments have to exist 'all at once' across a span of time" (Davies 1995, 71). Or in the words of Hermann Weyl (2009):

The objective world simply is, it does not happen. Only to the gaze of my consciousness, crawling upward along the life line of my body, does a section of this world come to life as a fleeting image in space which continuously changes in time.

If we leave aside the scientists and turn to literature, perhaps the best portrayal of the block-time view appears in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when Billy Pilgrim describes the perspective of the Tralfamadorians:

The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on earth that one moment follows another like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.

Once again, we are reminded of Pierre Hadot's "view from above", by means of which, the soul is "capable of observing the totality of space and time", and "has no fear even of death" (Hadot 1995, 242). The view from above turns out to resemble what Huw Price (1996) has called the "view from nowhen", that is, the ability to consider reality as characterized by the simultaneity of the block-time view, rather than the fleetingness of a flowing "now".

4. Time and Eternity in Plotinus and the *Plotiniana Arabica*

One could go on to follow the ramifications of Einstein's views in contemporary debates within the philosophy of science between presentists (those who believe only the present exists) and eternalists. Here, one would have to discuss MacTaggart's influential distinction between A-series (a series of events that are relative to the present, such as "one year ago", considered less real) and B-series (events that have

permanent temporal labels, such as “New Year’s Eve 2011”, considered more real), and go on discuss the views of such current advocates of block-time as Huw Price and Julian Barbour. But that will have to be the topic of another publication.

Instead, I’d like to consider what I think are some similar views to that of Einstein in Plotinus, the third-century CE founder of Neoplatonism, and an adaptation of his thought in the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, a ninth-century Arabic work that was highly influential on Islamic thought.

The broad outlines of Plotinus’ thought are well known: from the ineffable first principle imperfectly known as the One or the Good, reality emanates forth timelessly and eternally, like light from a lamp. This emanation first produces the Intellect (Greek *nous*), which contains the Platonic forms of sensible reality. Since it is unchanging, the Intellect is characterized by eternity (Greek *aiōn*), which can be considered the life of the intellect.¹² More precisely, Plotinus describes eternity as “that unchanging life, all together at once, already infinite, completely unswerving, standing in and directed toward the one”,¹³ or else as “life in rest, in the same thing and identically, already infinite”.

From the hypostatized Intellect derives the hypostasis of Soul, and it is not until this stage that time appears upon the scene. Originally consubstantial with the Intellect, the Soul eventually gets tired of remaining in the intelligible world and contemplating the intelligible Forms. Some force or faculty within it feels curiosity and a desire to become independent and individualized. As a result, it “temporalizes itself”, creating the sensible universe at the same time as it creates time. Whereas eternity can be said to be the life of the intellect, time is the life of the soul.

I find it interesting that according to Plotinus, there’s an ethical element to the distinction between time and eternity. Soul abandons Intellect and creates time because it’s unsatisfied with its lot – its eternal contemplation of the forms and proximity to the One – and wants more. But the very fact that time and/or the soul always wants something more explains why it’s never complete, never really what it is, but always one-thing-after-another.¹⁴ Eternity, by contrast, is already precisely what it is, and therefore has nothing further to seek for. Whereas eternity is the satisfied repose of something that already is all that can be, already possessing, all at once,

¹² This idea probably derives from Plato’s *Timaeus* 37d, where Plato writes the following about the Intelligible Being (in Greek *to autozōiōn*), that is, the world of forms that served as model for the Demiurge’s creation of the world: “for the nature of the living being (*toū zōou*) happened to be eternal”. *Aiōn* originally meant “life-span”.

¹³ *Ennead* III 7 (45), 11, 3-5: τὴν ἀτρεμῆ ἐκείνην καὶ ὁμοῦ πᾶσαν καὶ ἄπειρον ἤδη ζωὴν καὶ ἀκλινῆ πάντῃ καὶ ἐν ἐνὶ καὶ πρὸς ἐν ἑστῶσαν. Armstrong’s translation here is surprisingly poor.

¹⁴ Thus, Plotinus can say (III 7 (45), 13, 26) that time “runs along or together with” (*συνθεῖ καὶ συντρέχει*) the soul. Eternity, in contrast, “does not run alongside time or extend itself along with it” (*οὐ συμπαραθέων οὐδὲ συμπαρατείνων αὐτῇ*, *ibid.*, 44-45).

everything it could ever desire,¹⁵ time is the headlong, endless pursuit of something more, since by definition it cannot possess everything it desires all at once.

This, as Pierre Hadot has repeatedly stressed, is a key theme in Greek moral thought. Most of us are unhappy most of the time precisely because we are never happy with what we've got, but always believe that we need something else in order to be happy: the result of this spiritual restlessness is, of course, that we are never actually happy but postpone our happiness indefinitely to that hypothetical future in which we will win the lottery, get that big promotion, or finally be able to buy that new I-Phone. Should we ever actually achieve any of these things, of course, we derive only the most fleeting enjoyment from them, because by that point our hopes, desires and acquisitiveness have seized upon another object, which, once again, we are convinced will bring us happiness.

4.1. Plotinus on "always"

One of the points Plotinus emphasizes when trying to make clear the difference between time and eternity is the potentially misleading function of the word "always" (Greek *aei*). We see this in a passage from *Ennead* III 7 [45] 6, where, speaking of eternity, he writes¹⁶:

So it does not have any "this and that"; nor, therefore, will you be able to separate it out or unroll it or prolong it or stretch it; nor, then, can you apprehend anything of it as before or after. If, then, there is no before or after about it, but its "is" is the truest thing about it, and itself, and this in the sense that it is by its essence or life, then again there has come to us what we are talking about, eternity. But when we use the word "always" and say that it does exist at one time but not at another, we must be thought to be putting it this way for our own sake; for the "always" was perhaps not being used in its strict sense, but, taken as explaining the incorruptible, might mislead the soul into imagining an expansion of something becoming more, and again, of something which is never going to fail. It would

¹⁵ Cf. *Ennead* V, 1, 4, 13: "Why should it [sc. the Intellect] seek to change when all is well with it? Where should it seek to go away to when it has everything in itself?"

¹⁶ Οὐκ ἔχει οὖν ὅτιοῦν [τὸ] ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο, οὐδ' ἄρα διαστήσεις, οὐδ' ἐξελίξεις, οὐδὲ προάξεις, οὐδὲ παρατενεῖς, οὐδ' ἄρα οὐδὲ πρότερον αὐτοῦ οὐδέ τι ὕστερον λαβεῖν ἔχεις. Εἰ οὖν μήτε πρότερον μήτε ὕστερον περὶ αὐτό, τὸ δ' «ἔστιν» ἀληθέστατον τῶν περὶ αὐτὸ καὶ αὐτό, καὶ οὕτω δέ, ὅτι ἐστὶν ὡς οὐσία ἢ τῷ ζῆν, πάλιν αὖ ἡκεῖ ἡμῖν τοῦτο, ὃ δὴ λέγομεν, ὁ αἰών. Ὅταν δὲ τὸ αἰεὶ λέγωμεν καὶ τὸ οὐ ποτὲ μὲν ὄν, ποτὲ δὲ μὴ ὄν, ἡμῶν, ἕνεκα [τῆς σαφηνείας] δεῖ νομίζειν λέγεσθαι· ἐπεὶ τό γε αἰεὶ τάχ' ἂν οὐ κυρίως λέγοιτο, ἀλλὰ ληφθὲν εἰς δῆλωσιν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου πλανῶ ἂν τὴν ψυχὴν εἰς ἕκτασιν τοῦ πλείονος καὶ ἔτι ὡς μὴ ἐπιλείψοντός ποτε. Τὸ δὲ ἴσως βέλτιον ἦν μόνον τὸ «ὦν» λέγειν. Ἀλλὰ ὡσπερ τὸ ὄν ἀρκοῦν ὄνομα τῆ οὐσίας, ἐπειδὴ καὶ τὴν γένεσιν οὐσίαν ἐνόμιζον, ἐδεήθησαν πρὸς τὸ μαθεῖν καὶ προσθήκης τοῦ αἰεὶ. Οὐ γὰρ ἄλλο μὲν ἐστὶν ὄν, ἄλλο δὲ τὸ αἰεὶ ὄν, ὡσπερ οὐδ' ἄλλο μὲν φιλόσοφος, ἄλλο δὲ ὁ ἀληθινός· ἀλλ' ὅτι τὸ ὑποδυόμενον ἦν φιλοσοφίαν, ἢ προσθήκη τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ ἐγένετο. Οὕτω καὶ τῷ ὄντι τὸ αἰεὶ καὶ τῷ «ὦν» τὸ αἰεὶ, ὥστε λέγεσθαι «αἰεὶ ὦν»· διὸ ληπτέον τὸ αἰεὶ οἶον «ἀληθῶς ὦν» λέγεσθαι καὶ συναιρετέον τὸ αἰεὶ εἰς ἀδιάστατον δύναμιν τὴν οὐδὲν δεομένην οὐδενὸς μεθ' ὃ ἤδη ἔχει· ἔχει δὲ τὸ πᾶν.

perhaps have been better only to use the word “existing”. But, as “existing” is an adequate word for substance, since, however, people thought becoming was substance, they required the addition of “always” in order to understand [what “existing” really meant]. For existing is not one thing and always existing another, just as a philosopher is not one thing and the true philosopher another, but because there was such a thing as putting on a pretense of philosophy, the addition of “true” was made. So too, “always” is applied to “existing”, that is “*aei*” to “*on*”, so that we say “*aei on* [aion],”, so the “always” must be taken as saying “truly existing”; it must be included in the undivided power which in no way needs anything beyond what it already possesses; but it possesses the whole.

The Greek word for eternity is *aiôn*, and a popular etymology, current at least since the time of Aristotle, analysed it as deriving from *aei* (“always”) + *ôn* (“being”), so that eternity would mean “always being”. The temptation, then, is to think of what’s eternal as something that just exists for a long time, and perhaps forever. But this is wrong, says Plotinus: what is eternal is not what exists for a long or infinite time, that is, what has a long or infinite duration, but what has no duration at all. What’s eternal or in eternity is not in time, but has an existence that is atemporal or durationless.

5. Plotinus *apud Arabes*

Sometime in the first half of the 9th century CE, a group of translators at Baghdad, centered around the great philosopher Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (ca. 801-873) set about translating a number of Greek philosophical texts into Arabic. Among these was the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, a text which, although purporting to be by Aristotle, in fact consisted in a series of paraphrased extracts from the last three books of Plotinus’ *Enneads*, together with explanatory glosses and interpolations. Scholars are still divided as to the exact origin and purpose of this work, but the fact remains that it ended up being extremely influential on subsequent Islamic philosophy.¹⁷

In the eighth treatise of this work, the author of the *Theology* is discussing the ways we can come to know the Intelligible world. If we wish to see this world, he writes, we should begin by looking at the soul, which contains things like the senses and the intelligence. We are to abandon sense and follow intelligence, for although sense allows us to know such individual beings as Socrates, intelligence allows us to grasp the universal man (*al insān al-mursal* p. 11, 9 Badawī). In this world, the soul possesses universal notions only by means of discursive reasoning, which starts out from specific premisses and continues, following logical steps, until it reaches a conclusion. Things are different in the intelligible world: there, one can see the universal ideas with one’s one eyes (*‘iyānān*), since everything is fixed, stable and perpetual. The author continues as follows:

¹⁷ See, for instance, M. Aouad 1989.

Plotinus, <i>Ennead</i> , V, 1, 4	Translation Armstrong (Loeb Classical Library), modified	<i>Theology of Aristotle</i> , p. 111, 12f. Badawi = 107-108 Dieterici = vol. II, p. 269, §120-121 Lewis	Translation Lewis (in <i>Plotini Enneades</i> , vol. II, Paris-Brussels 1959)
ἀλλ' ἐν αἰῶνι πάντα, καὶ ὁ ὄντως αἰὼν, ὃν μιμεῖται χρόνος περιθέων ψυχὴν τὰ μὲν παριείς, τοῖς δὲ ἐπιβάλλων. Καὶ γὰρ ἄλλα καὶ ἄλλα αὖ περὶ ψυχὴν· ποτὲ γὰρ Σωκράτης, ποτὲ δὲ ἵππος, ἔν τι αἰεὶ τῶν ὄντων· ὁ δὲ νοῦς πάντα. Ἐχει οὖν [ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ] πάντα ἔστωτα ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ, καὶ ἔσ τι μόνον, καὶ τὸ «ἔστιν» αἰεὶ, καὶ οὐδαμοῦ τὸ μέλλον— ἔστι γὰρ καὶ τότε— οὐδὲ τὸ παρεληλυθός—οὐ γάρ τι ἐκεῖ παρελήλυθεν— ἀλλ' ἐνέστηκεν αἰεὶ	...all things are in eternity, and the true eternity, which time imitates, running round the soul, letting some things go and attending to others. For around Soul things come one after another: now Socrates, now a horse, always some one particular being, but Intellect is all things. It has therefore everything standing in the same thing, and it merely is, and its “is” is forever, and nowhere does the future exist, for then too it is – nor the past – for nothing there has passed – but they are always present (<i>enestêken</i>)	<i>wa-innamā hiya</i> <i>qā'ima faqaṭ, wa-l-</i> <i>qiyām hunāika</i> <i>dā'im bi-lā zamān</i> <i>māḍin wa lā ātin,</i> <i>wa-ḍālika anna al-</i> <i>ānī hunāika ḥāḍir</i> <i>wa-l-muḍiy</i> <i>mawjūd</i>	Cleave to mind, be- cause sense knows only individual things, such as Socra- tes and such-and- such a horse; sense is only capable of ap- prehending articular things, whereas mind lets you know what 'man' is in general, and what 'horse' is in general...the sub- stances in that noble world being all of them permanent and abiding in one thing of them; they are simply permanent. Existence ¹⁸ there is everlasting, without time past or future, because the future there is present and the past existent

As is often the case, the Arabic paraphrase of Plotinus contained in the *Theology of Aristotle* here says basically the same thing as Plotinus, only a bit more explicitly. Plotinus says the Intellect “is” is forever, that it has no place for the future or for the past. The Arabic Paraphrast comes right out and says why this is the case: if there is no past or future time in the Intelligible world, as Plotinus stated, it is because the future there is present and the past existent.

I submit it would be hard to find a pithier summary of the “block universe” view we have found emerging from Einstein and developed by physicists and philosophers over the past century or so, than the formulation “the future is present and the

¹⁸ “Permanence” Lewis. But the Arabic *qiyām* can also mean ‘existence’ or ‘subsistence’; cf. Wehr s.v.

past existent". The difference, and it is an important one, is that Plotinus and his paraphrast reserve this durationless mode of being for the intelligible world, allowing the sensible, phenomenal world in which we all live to be characterized by flowing time. Defenders of the block universe view, for their part, tend to speak instead of reality vs. illusion: reality is tenseless, whereas our perception of that reality, is, owing to some psychological or physiological quirks of our nature, artificially tensed and divided into past, present and future. The distinction may be more terminological than substantive, however: both Plotinian Neoplatonists and contemporary eternalists agree that the fundamental nature of reality is timeless, while the passage of time is, in some sense, a secondary, derivative, or illusory feature of our experience.

6. Conclusion: some thoughts on methodology

We thus seem to have found a close parallel between conceptions of time set forth, on the one hand, by a third-century CE Egyptian-born Neoplatonist and his followers, and, on the other, by a German Jew from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Now, of course, someone might accept the broad outlines of what I've just presented, but respond by saying "So what?" It seems quite unlikely that Einstein ever read Plotinus, much less the *Plotiniana Arabica*. Why is it interesting that two thinkers, so different in history, cultural, linguistic and intellectual background happened to come up with similar ideas?

One might answer that one possible explanation of this coincidence is that the ideas in question are simply correct: Einstein came up with them on the basis of his scientific training, Plotinus on the basis of his philosophical studies and, perhaps, his personal mystical experience. Or perhaps we don't need to hazard such a risky proposition, and can content ourselves with adopting Max Jammer's (1999, 212) view that

there persist throughout the history of scientific thought certain ideas, patterns, or paradigms that may have been influential, even if only subconsciously, on the construction of a new theory (...) a study of such anticipations can provide some information about the ideological background that supported the formation of the new theory.

This study of "the informative importance of anticipations", which the historian M. Sachs (1973) has called "invariant ideas with respect to change from one contextual framework to another", may thus be one a number of methods capable of shedding light on the scientific theories that shape our modern world.

II. BOETHIUS ON TIME, ETERNITY, PROVIDENCE AND PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE

Born sometime between 475 and 480, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius made it his life's work to provide the Latin-speaking world with complete access to Greek philosophical instruction. To do so, he set out to do nothing less than translate into Latin and comment upon all of Aristotle and Plato. He was not able to complete this plan, however, partly because he also wrote a number of other important treatises, on music, astronomy, geometry, and theological issues, and partly because his life was cut short when he was accused of treason in 524 under the reign of Theodoric,¹⁹ thrown in jail, and condemned to death.²⁰ It seems to have been in prison, or perhaps merely under house arrest,²¹ that Boethius wrote his most famous work, the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Here, following an ancient philosophical and literary tradition, he mobilized the resources of philosophy to provide comfort for someone in a difficult position. Yet this consolation was addressed not, as was customary, to a friend, acquaintance or family member, but to himself.²² Unlike most of the Greco-Roman tradition of consolation, however, Boethius' *Consolation* is staged as a dialogue, written in prose interspersed with verse, between the imprisoned Narrator – Boethius himself – and a female personification of Philosophy.

Few ancient works have been subject to such divergent modern interpretations. Although its title and content seem to place it squarely within the literary genre of the consolation,²³ some influential commentators have claimed that the *Consolation*

¹⁹ In 493, Theodoric defeated the Herulian Odoacer – who had deposed the last Roman Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476 – and established himself as ruler over Ravenna. Under Theodoric's reign, Boethius became consul in 510, then *magister officiorum* in 522.

²⁰ More specifically, he came to the defence of the senator Albinus, accused of treason in 524 for corresponding with the Byzantine emperor Justin. Boethius seems to have been tried and convicted *in absentia* at Rome, perhaps on the basis of forged letters, and executed, perhaps by being clubbed to death, in Pavia; cf. Tränkle 1973. Beets (2005, 19) avers that Boethius died “sous la torture”, but does not reveal the source of his information.

²¹ Scheible, for instance (1971, 3), doubts that such a work could have been completed without access to a library.

²² This was not unheard-of in the Greco-Roman tradition of consolations; cf. Gruber 178, 27; Erler 1999, 116; Chadwick 1981, 224; Bechtle 2006, 267.

²³ I adopt Donato's definition of a consolation as “a text that (i) manifests the author's awareness that language has therapeutic power and (ii) tries to heal by employing whatever argument, register of language, or linguistic device the author deems appropriate for the case at hand”. Donato's work, excellent for its analyses of the first part of the *Consolation* and for its account of the history of consolation as a literary genre, virtually ignores the contemporary philosophical context and must therefore be supplemented by the works of Baltes, Erler, and Beierwaltes. In particular, Donato's denial (p. 14 n. 49) of the relevance of the doctrine of *anamnêsis* is, I believe, quite mistaken; cf. e.g. Schmidt-Kohl 1965, 18ff, citing *Cons.* 3.c11.15-16.

of *Philosophy* is in fact a parody of a consolation.²⁴ In particular, the philosophical arguments of the work's second half are held to be deliberately feeble, in order that the reader may conclude that philosophy is ultimately unable to provide consolation.²⁵ I believe that this viewpoint is profoundly wrong-headed, and based on inadequate knowledge of the literary genre of the consolation and, above all, of the nature and structure of the Neoplatonic philosophical curriculum at the end of Antiquity. In what follows I'll argue that Boethius' *Consolation* is an excellent example of the ancient conception of philosophy as therapy for the soul: as such, it uses both rhetorical techniques and rational arguments in a way that echoes the progressive nature of the Neoplatonic philosophical curriculum. In the second part of this paper, I'll discuss the three main arguments Boethius uses to try to resolve the apparent conflict between divine prescience and human free will, paying particular attention to the way he mobilizes Neoplatonic definitions of time and eternity.

1. Boethius on philosophy as therapy

That philosophy was often considered as capable of providing therapy for the soul has been pointed out in a number of important publications.²⁶ This was especially true of the Hellenistic period, in which the various Schools concentrated their attention on teaching students how to achieve happiness during their earthly existence. It has been argued that in Neoplatonism, the emphasis shifts from this world to the next, in that the main concern is henceforth how to ensure the soul's flight from the sensible and return to its intelligible homeland.²⁷ Far from being discarded, however, the Hellenistic teaching on how to ensure terrestrial happiness, including the notion of philosophy as therapy of the soul, were preserved, but relegated to the status of a preliminary ethical instruction to be administered to students before they embarked on the properly philosophical study of Aristotle and Plato.

In the Neoplatonic schools of Boethius' time,²⁸ students began by receiving a pre-philosophical ethical training, based on such works as the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*, the *Manual* of Epictetus,²⁹ or the speeches of Isocrates and Demosthenes. Only after completing this training did they advance to the study of logic, in the form of Porphyry's *Isagoge*, followed by Aristotle's *Organon* in the order in which we read it

²⁴ From a formal viewpoint, the *Consolation's* mixture of poetry and prose is held to be more characteristic of Menippean satire, while its various parts seem so different that some have thought the work was a clumsy combination of two or three quite different sources.

²⁵ Most influentially, this is the view of John Marenbon (2003a, 146-163; 2003b; 2005). See also Relihan 2007, and the critical discussion of these views in Donato 2012.

²⁶ Cf. Voelke 1993; P. Hadot 1995; and the literature cited by Druart 2000, 25.

²⁷ Erler 1999; cf. Theiler 1964.

²⁸ On this curriculum, see I. Hadot *et al.*, 1990.

²⁹ The first part of Simplicius' commentary on this work, like the first part of the *Consolation*, is devoted inter alia mastering one's emotions; cf. I. Hadot 1996; Erler 1999, 114-115.

today. The student then moved on to what was sometimes called the “Lesser Mysteries” of philosophy, viz. Aristotle’s works on physics and psychology (*De Caelo*, *Physics*, *De anima*), culminating in his *Metaphysics*, before moving on to the “Greater Mysteries” in the form of a selection of Plato’s *Dialogues*, culminating in the *Timaeus* and, as the ultimate metaphysical revelation, the *Parmenides*.

Boethius’ *Consolation* contains, as it were, an illustration of this Neoplatonic philosophical curriculum in action. In the person of the Narrator, who, although he is a philosopher, has forgotten almost all he learned as result of his personal misfortunes,³⁰ we have an example of a philosophical beginner who must first be purified of his mistaken beliefs and the consequent emotions of bitterness, self-pity, lethargy and despair. The fact that he is a professional philosopher, however, allows Philosophy to give him an accelerated course, as it were, and introduce him, after he has begun to recall his philosophical knowledge by the middle of the book, to some of the more difficult and advanced questions of metaphysics, culminating in the discussion of the relation between divine omniscience and human free will. It is likely that the *Consolation* as we have it is incomplete, and that the missing final part would have described the Narrator’s ultimate philosophical liberation, consisting in his return to the intelligible Fatherland and/or the vision of God in which, for Boethius as for Augustine, ultimate happiness consists.³¹

Following an ancient philosophical tradition, Philosophy begins her therapy with easier, more elementary philosophical remedies before moving on to more heavy-duty philosophical considerations.³² The work’s first part corresponds to what’s been called a “praeparatio platonica”,³³ in which philosophical *topoi* culled from a variety of philosophical schools,³⁴ usually in the form of brief, easily memorizable sayings, are used to provide a preliminary ethical purification before the student, in this case, Boethius as Narrator, is ready to be initiated into more difficult philosophical arguments. In the book’s second half, then, Philosophia uses a combination of arguments that are by no means lacking in rigor or persuasiveness, in order to come up with a solution to the age-old problem of the apparent conflict between human free will and divine omniscience that is, I believe, as philosophically respectable as any that have been suggested. It is, moreover, a solution that receives some support from the findings of contemporary physics.

³⁰ In the words of Druart (2000, 26), he is “a slightly disabled learner” of philosophy.

³¹ On the incomplete nature of the *Consolation* as we have it, cf. Tränkle 1977; Baltes 1980, 333ff. Contra: Lerer 1985, 232ff. On happiness in Augustine, cf. Beierwaltes 1981.

³² Donato 2012, 28, citing *Cons.* 1.5.11-12; 1.6.21; 2.1.7-9; 2.3.4; 3.1.4. As Druart points out (2000), the same distinction between lighter/easier and weightier/more difficult remedies is to be found in al-Kindi’s *Art of dispelling sorrows*.

³³ Erler 1999.

³⁴ On this “paraenetic eclecticism” (P. Hadot 1995, 124), cf. I. Hadot 1969, 3 n. 18; 21 n. 71; 44; 54 n. 86; 82-83.

The work begins with the Narrator³⁵ complaining to Philosophy about the main cause of his suffering: his loss of his freedom, possessions, and good name, and the injustice of a world in which evil men are allowed to prosper, while the good – here of course the Narrator is thinking primarily of himself – are forced to submit to all kinds of undeserved indignities, from loss of possessions and honors to exile, imprisonment and even death. The Narrator asserts that he has no doubt that the world and all the events occurring within it are governed by God and His divine Providence,³⁶ but the apparent triumph of injustice almost makes him doubt the goodness of the divine economy.

The Narrator must be cured of this wallowing in self-pity, which has led him to forget himself.³⁷ Thus, after he has been allowed to unburden himself by complaining about his problems, Philosophy begins the process of consolation which will restore him to the philosophical knowledge he had once acquired but now, under the stress of prison and imminent death, has forgotten.³⁸

For a Neoplatonist, this forgetfulness is crucial. While the soul's initial descent into the body is not generally considered a misfortune or a sin,³⁹ its involvement with the material world and consequent subjection to the passions, which lead it to forget its divine origin, is held to be morally culpable as well as disastrous. Only by turning within⁴⁰ can the soul remember its divine origin and thus begin the arduous⁴¹ upward path back to its intelligible homeland.

³⁵ I will henceforth refer to the personage who recounts the *Consolation* in the first person singular as “the Narrator”, in order to distinguish this literary persona from the historical Boethius.

³⁶ This knowledge is the sign that the Narrator still retains a *scintillula* of the divine knowledge he enjoyed as a pre-incarnate soul, and which will allow him, by means of the *redux ignis/ anagôgos erôs*, to rise back up out of his current fallen state toward the intelligible, and then the *summum bonum* (*Cons.* I.6.3-20; cf. Baltes 1980, 326), homeland of the soul.

³⁷ Cf. 1.2.6; 1.6.18 (*oblivio sui*); Baltes 1980, 325. This is almost certainly the meaning of Philosophy's brusque dismissal of the Muses (1.1.7-12), who have been inspiring the elegiac poem in which Boethius pours forth his sorrows.

³⁸ Cf. 1.2.3-5; 1.6.7-20; 3c.12; 4.1, etc., Donato 2012, 14.

³⁹ Cf. Theiler 1966, 289ff., citing especially Synesius, *De insomniis* 8, 3, vol 1, p. 283 Lamoureaux/Aujoulat; Pfligersdorffer 1976, 141.

⁴⁰ Cf. Boethius, *Cons.* 2.4.22-3: Quid igitur o mortales extra petitis intra vos positam felicitatem? ...Estne aliquid tibi te ipso pretiosius? On the importance of self-knowledge, cf. Theiler 1966 217f.; P. Hadot 1968, I, p. 91 n. 1; Simplicius, *In EE*, 30, p. 302, 32ff. ed. I. Hadot (1996): τὸ Γνώθι σαυτὸν τοῦ θεοῦ παράγγελμα... ὃ καὶ ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος πάσης ἐστὶ φιλοσοφίας καὶ εὐζωΐας. Cf. Ambrose, *De Isaac* 4, 11 (perhaps following Porphyry, cf. Dörrie 1964): ea [sc. anima] insurgens de corpore ab omnibus fit remotior atque intra semet ipsam divinum illud, si qua insequi possit, scrutatur et quaerit.

⁴¹ Cf. Porphyry, *Ad Marc.* 6-7.

2. Boethius and the Neoplatonic theory of innate ideas

The background here, it seems to me, is the Neoplatonic doctrine according to which the pre-existent soul enjoys contemplation of the intelligible world⁴² as it accompanies the chariots of the gods in their journeys around the supracelestial place (*hyperouranios topos*, *Phaedrus* 247a),⁴³ but then becomes dissatisfied and turns its attention toward the lower regions of matter and the sensible world. In the instant it does so, the soul is provided with a vessel (Greek *okhêma*⁴⁴) made of a pneumatic substance intermediate between air and fire, which allows it to be transported through the celestial spheres⁴⁵ and also serves, during its earthly existence, as the intermediary between soul and body. Finally, when the soul reaches earth it is “sown” within a body (*in caelum terramque seris*, *Cons.* 3. c9), which, owing to the darkness and heaviness it derives from matter, obstructs the soul’s memory, so that it can no longer recall the visions of the intelligible world it enjoyed prior to its incarnation, nor can it perceive the order within the world (5. c3.8ff.).⁴⁶ Yet all is not lost: although it is buried deep within the body, the soul retains a spark of divine fire or light, which Boethius refers to as the *semen veri* (3. c11.11); *redux ignis*, or *scintillula animae* (1.6.20).⁴⁷ This spark needs only to be revived by means of teaching, as if by blowing air on warm ashes (*uentilante doctrina* 3. c11.11-12).

This inner spark of truth, which Boethius describes as our inner fortress (4. c3.33ff.), to which the sage withdraws in times of trouble, constitutes the center of mankind and of the soul (4. c3.34ff.; 3. c11.11-14). It is the locus of happiness

⁴² Cf. Boethius, *Cons.* 5. c3, 20-24:

*An cum mentem cerneret altam
pariter summam et singula norat,
nunc membrorum condita nube
non in totum est oblita sui
summamque tenet singula perdens?*

⁴³ The seat of God, according to Boethius (*Cons.* 4. c1.16ff.; 3. c2.17f).

⁴⁴ Cf. Boethius, *Cons.* 3. c9: *levibus curribus*; Ambrose, *De Isaac* 8, 67: *currilia illa animarum*.

⁴⁵ In Porphyry’s version of this theory, which was common to Gnosticism, Hermetism and the *Chaldaean Oracles*, the soul acquires specific features of its character as it descends through each of the planetary spheres. Cf. Chase 2004.

⁴⁶ The Neoplatonists often symbolize this state of forgetfulness by speaking of the drink of forgetfulness offered to souls as they enter the material world; cf. Theiler 1966, 289f. This forgetfulness is made worse, during the soul’s terrestrial existence, by the “twin founts” of pleasure and pain: cf. Synesius *Hymn* I, 658f. ἰδίων τ’ ἀγαθῶν ἔπιεν λάθαν; Porphyry, *De abstinencia* I, 33: δύο πηγαὶ ἀνεῖνται πρὸς δεσμὸν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐνταῦθα, ἐξ ὧν ὡσπερ θανασίμων πωμάτων ἐμπιπλαμένη ἐν λήθῃ τῶν οικείων γίγνεται θεαμάτων, ἡδονὴ τε καὶ λύπη.

⁴⁷ Cf. Augustine, *Contra acad.* 1.3; *De ord.* 1.1.3; *De trin.* 10.3.5: *An aliquem finem optimum, id est securitatem et beatitudinem suam, uidet per quandam occultam memoriam quae in longinqua eam progressam non deseruit, et credit ad eundem finem nisi se ipsam cognouerit se peruenire non posse?* Cf. Porphyry, *On abstinence* 3.27.

(2.4.22), our proper good (2.5.24), truth (3. c11.1ff.; 5. c3.20f.; 5. c4.24ff.), freedom (2.6.7), peace, and security (2. c4.19f.; 2.6.7). As the obligatory starting-point⁴⁸ for our metaphysical ascent back to the source of our being, it represents our unbroken link with the intelligible world.

The question of how we can remain in contact with the intelligible even when the soul is incarnated in a terrestrial body was one that always preoccupied the Neoplatonists. Plotinus solved it, at least to his own satisfaction, by his doctrine of the undescended part of the soul: although our lower or vegetative soul, seat of such psychological faculties as sensation, representation, memory, and discursive thought, comes down from the intelligible world at the moment of incarnation and is thenceforth present throughout the body, the higher part of the soul, intellect (*nous*) or intuitive thought, always remains above in the intelligible world.⁴⁹

Plotinus' successors almost unanimously rejected this view, and to replace it Plotinus' student Porphyry⁵⁰ seems to have reactivated the Stoic doctrine of innate ideas as modified by Antiochus of Ascalon and later by the *Chaldaean Oracles*. A good summary of this doctrine is provided by a work ascribed to Boethius but now usually considered pseudonymous, the *De diis et Praesensionibus*⁵¹:

For we consist of two things, soul and body. The soul is immortal. If it is immortal, it descends from the divine things. But if it descends from the divine things, why is it not perfected by the possession of all virtues? Let the state of this matter be drawn from the very sanctuaries of philosophy. For the soul, before it is wrapped in the garment of bodily contact, examines *in that watchtower of its absolute purity* the knowledge of all things most perfectly. However, once it sinks into this body of clay, its sharp vision, obscured by the darkness of earthy mingling, is rendered blind to the clarity of its inborn vision. However, the seed of truth lies hidden within, and is awakened as it is fanned by instruction. For they say it can by no means happen that from childhood we have notions, which they call *ennoias*, of so many and such great things inserted and as it were sealed upon our souls, unless our soul flourished in its cognition of things before it was incarnated. Nor does the soul fully see these things, when it suddenly entered such an unaccustomed and turbulent abode; yet once it collects itself and becomes refreshed in the course of the ages of life, then it recognizes them by remembering. For after the soul is ensnared and enveloped by some thick cover of

⁴⁸ Cf. *Cons.* 3.3.1: Vos quoque, o terrena animalia, *tenui licet imagine* uestrum tamen principium somniatis uerumque illum beatitudinis finem licet *minime perspicaci* qualicumque tamen *cogitatione* prospicitis, eoque uos et ad uerum bonum naturalis ducit *intentio*...

⁴⁹ *Enneads* 9 (VI, 9), 5, 7-9. On this doctrine, cf. Sorabji 2004, vol. 1, 3(e), 93ff.

⁵⁰ For Porphyry's doctrine of the innate concepts (*ennoiai*), see for instance *Ad Marcellam* 25-26: the Intellect has established the divine law in accordance with the concepts for the sake of salvation; it has imprinted and engraved them in the soul from the truth of the divine law (ὁ δ' αὖ θεῖος ὑπὸ μὲν τοῦ νοῦ σωτηρίας ἕνεκα ταῖς λογικαῖς ψυχαῖς κατὰ τὰς ἐννοίας διετάχθη (...) ὁ νοῦς τὰς ἐν αὐτῇ ἐννοίας, ἃς ἐνετύπωσε καὶ ἐνεχάραξεν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ θείου νόμου ἀληθείας).

⁵¹ Stangl (1893) declared the work to have been written as a completion of Boethius' lacunary *Commentary on Cicero's Topics*, probably in the first half of the twelfth century. I know of no more recent study of the *De diis et Praesensionibus*.

the body and undergoes some forgetfulness of itself, when thereafter it begins to be wiped clean and denuded by study and instruction,⁵² then the soul reverts and is called back to the manner of its nature (...) Socrates declares all this more clearly in the book entitled *Meno*, asking a certain little boy some geometrical questions about the dimensions of a square. He answers them like a child, yet the questions are so easy that by answering little by little he reaches the same result as if he had learned geometry. Socrates will have it that follows from this that learning is nothing other than remembering. He explains this much more accurately in the speech he gave on the day in which he left this life.⁵³

In post-Porphyrion Neoplatonism, it is this divine spark or inner seed⁵⁴ that provides the link between the fallen, incarnate human soul and the intelligible world. In Proclus, it develops into the doctrine of the “One within us”, which is itself a development of the Chaldaean concept of the “flower of the intellect” (*anthos noou*), a faculty of the soul that allows contact with the ineffable,⁵⁵ while in the Latin world, following Augustine, it becomes the doctrine of the *acies mentis*.⁵⁶

⁵² This is a key point: intellectual pursuits, perhaps the study of the liberal arts, can begin to wipe off (*detergeor* = Greek *apomassô*) the stains that accrue to the soul – or more precisely, to the soul’s astral body – in its descent through the spheres toward incarnation. On the cycle of the liberal arts, which, in their codification by Porphyry, were to be studied before embarking upon a philosophical education, see I. Hadot 1984.

⁵³ Pseudo (?) -Boethius, *De diis et praesensionibus*, in I. C. Orellius – I. G. Baierus, eds., *M. Tulli Ciceronis Scholiastae*, I, Turici: Typis Orellii, Fuesslini et Sociorum, 1833, p. 390, 35–391, 24: duobus enim constamus, anima et corpore. Anima immortalis est. Si immortalis est, a divinis descendit. Si ergo a divinis descendit, cur omnium virtutum habitu perfecta non est? Quod quale sit, ab eiusdem philosophiae adytis eliciatur. Anima enim necdum in contagionis corporeae indumento evoluta, in illa absolutissimae puritatis suae specula omnium rerum peritiam perfectissime considerat. Postquam autem in hoc luteum corpus obruitur, acies eius terrena admixtionis tenebris caligosa ab illa suae ingenitaeque visionis claritudine caecatur. Latet tamen introrsum semen veri, quod excitatur ventilante doctrina. Aiunt enim nullo modo fieri posse, ut a pueritia tot rerum atque tantarum insitas atque quasi consignatas in animis notiones, quae ennoias vocant, habemus, nisi animus ante, quum incorporaretur, in rerum cognitione viguisset. Neque ea plane videt animus, quum repente tam insolitum tamque turbulentum domicilium immigravit: sed quum se recollegit atque recreavit per aetatis momenta, tum agnoscit illa reminiscendo. Postquam enim quodam crasso corporis tegimine irretita anima et circumfusa quandam sui oblivionem subierit, quum deinde studio ac disciplina detergeri coepit atque nudari, tunc in naturae suae modum animus revertitur atque revocatur (...) Quod totum evidentius declarat Socrates in illo libro, qui Menon inscribitur, pusionem quandam interrogans quaedam geometrica de dimensione quadrati. Ad quae sic ille respondit, ut puer: et tamen ita faciles interrogationes sunt, ut gradatim respondens eodem perveniat, quasi geometrica didicisset. Ex quo effici vult Socrates, ut discere nihil aliud sit nisi recordari. Quam rem multo accuratius ille explicat in sermone, quem habuit eo die, quo excessit e vita.

⁵⁴ Cf. Synesius, *De Insomniis* 4, 40 (*endothen sperma*); *Dion* 9, 16.

⁵⁵ On this doctrine, see, for instance, Gersh 1978 119-121, with further literature; Beierwaltes 1985, 275f.

⁵⁶ For references, cf. Hankey 1999, 35 & n. 162.

In the *Consolation*, therefore, Philosophy will attempt to fan the smothered spark of the Narrator's soul, reviving his memories of his pre-incarnate intellectual visions by words which, to quote Simplicius "uttered forth from the [teacher's] concept (*ennoia*), also move the concept within [the soul of the student], which had until then grown cold".⁵⁷ The passage from Simplicius, which complements the passage from the Pseudo-Boethius we have just studied, is worth quoting:

As for the soul, when it is turned towards the Intellect, it possesses the same things [sc. as the Intellect] in a secondary way, for then the rational principles (*logoi*) within it are not only cognitive, but generative. Once, however, the soul has departed from there [sc. the intelligible world], it also separates the formulae (*logoi*) within itself from beings, thereby converting them into images instead of prototypes, and it introduces a distance between intellection and realities. This is all the more true, the further the soul has departed from its similarity to the Intellect, and it is henceforth content to project (*proballesthai*) notions which are consonant with realities. When, however, the soul has fallen into the realm of becoming, it is filled with forgetfulness⁵⁸ and requires sight and hearing in order to be able to recollect. For the soul needs someone who has already beheld the truth,⁵⁹ who, by means of language (*phônê*) uttered forth from the concept (*ennoia*), also moves the concept within [the soul of the student], which had until then grown cold⁶⁰ (...) For intellections (*noêseis*) which proceed forth from other intellections⁶¹ also cause motion immediately, connecting the learner's intellections to those of the teacher, by becoming intermediaries (*mesotêtes*) between the two. When intellections are set in motion in an appropriate way, they fit realities, and thus there comes about the knowledge of beings, and the soul/s innate *eros*⁶² is fulfilled.

Let's return to the *Consolation*. After the introductory first book, Philosophy's consolation takes place in three stages from books 2-5.⁶³

1. In *Cons.* 2.1-4, the Narrator's soul is purified of its false beliefs.

⁵⁷ Cf. Hoffmann 1987.

⁵⁸ The theme of forgetfulness goes back ultimately to Book 10 of Plato's *Republic* (621a-c), with its myth of the plain of Lèthê.

⁵⁹ That is, according to Hoffmann (1987, 83ff.), the philosophy teacher. Cf. Proclus, *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, §235, 8-10 Westerink = vol. 2, p. 285 Segonds.

⁶⁰ On the *logoi* in the soul – portions of the *nous* which is the substances of the intelligible Forms – as a spark buried in ashes, the rekindling of which constitutes the process of learning, cf. Philoponus, *Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, p. 4, 30ff. Hayduck.

⁶¹ Sc. those of the teacher.

⁶² On the soul's innate *erôs* for knowledge, derived ultimately from Plato's *Symposium*, cf. Proclus, *Theol. Plat.*, I, 25, vol. I, pp. 109, 10-110, 8 Saffrey/Westerink; *In Tim.*, vol. I, p. 212, 21-22 Diehl.

⁶³ Baltes 1980, 326-327, who shows the parallel to the scheme utilized in the *Didaskalikos* of Alcinoos (2nd-3rd cent. CE). For an alternative analysis, cf. Courcelle 1943, 280: (1) in Book two, Boethius is brought back to the self-knowledge of which he'd been temporarily deprived; (2) from Book III to halfway through Book IV, he is reminded of the proper end of things. Finally, (3) from the last part of Book IV to the end of Book V, he is informed of the nature of the laws that govern the world. Cf. Zambon 2003.

2. Stage two has two further subdivisions. In the first (*Cons.* 2.5-8), the Narrator's innate natural concepts are awakened and brought to light; while in the second (*Cons.* 3.1-8), these concepts are purified and made to appear as starting-points for further progress.

3. Finally, from *Cons.* 3.9 to the end of the work, the Narrator learns the doctrines which are to perfect his soul.

3. Boethius on Providence and Fate

Throughout the first four books of the *Consolation*, Philosophy uses a mixture of rhetorical persuasion and philosophical *topoi*⁶⁴ to console the Narrator and reassure him that despite appearances to the contrary, there really is a benevolent, divine Providence behind the apparent injustices of life's events. Yet the problem of the suffering of the just and the flourishing of the unjust⁶⁵ has not yet been solved, and continues to trouble the Narrator. Beginning with the second half of Book IV, therefore, Philosophy discusses the themes of providence, fate, and free will. An initial distinction is to be made between providence and fate: Providence, characterized by simplicity and simultaneity, is the plan in the divine mind that embraces all things at once, while fate is the way, in which that plan unfolds in the sensible world, subject as it is to time and space. Providence is to fate as being is to becoming.⁶⁶ Like spheres⁶⁷ rotating around a pivot, where the central sphere approaches the simplicity of the center and acts as a pivot for the rest, while those farthest away from the center sweep out greater distances, so the closer beings are to the simple center of provi-

⁶⁴ Philosophy's consolatory *topoi* include a discussion of the nature of Fortuna; the ordinary, unsurprising nature of what is happening to the Narrator; a reminder of his previous successes and honors; and the ultimate insignificance of such honors. Cf. Donato 2012.

⁶⁵ A question that is discussed as the sixth of Proclus' *Ten problems concerning Providence*. Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 466d-481d, cited by Zambon 2003, n. 79.

⁶⁶ Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.3, 5.14-25 = Sorabji 2004 4b1; Proclus, *On Providence*, 10, 13-14 = Sorabji 2004 4b5; Sharples 1991, 29-31.

⁶⁷ Boethius, *Cons.* 4.6.15: *Nam ut orbium circa eundem cardinem sese vertentium etc.* In his translation of the *Consolatio*, Guillaumin (2002, 172, 64) is categorical: "Il s'agit bien de «cercles», *orbes*, et non pas de sphères". Yet when Boethius quotes Parmenides (*Cons.* 3.12.37: "sicut... Parmenides ait ... rerum *orbem* mobilem rotat"), he clearly renders the Greek σφαῖρα by *orbis*. As far as 4.16.15 is concerned, modern translators are pretty well unanimous: Lazam (1989) and Vanpeteghem (2005) translate *orbium* by "cercles", Moerschini (1994) by "circonferenze", Chitussi (2010) and Dallera (1977) by "cerchi", Gegenschatz/Gigon by "Kreise". It is also true that Boethius' closest immediate model, Proclus, *Ten doubts concerning providence* 5, 23ff., speaks of a *kuklos*. Yet I believe Boethius has deliberately modified his Greek model and chosen to speak of spheres: only spheres, not circles, rotate around an axis (*cardo*). Perhaps following Porphyry, Proclus envisaged the relation between universe and its place (*topos*) as that between two concentric spheres, one (immobile) of light and the other (mobile) containing matter: cf. Simplicius, *Corollary on Place*, in Simplicius, *In Phys.*, p. 612, 28ff. Diels.

dence,⁶⁸ the more they are removed from the intricate chains of fate. For Boethius, the main goal of this image seems to be to emphasize that while all things subject to Fate are also subject to Providence, the reverse does not hold true.⁶⁹ Fate is characteristic only of the spatio-temporal world, so that the possibility remains open to mankind, by rising up to the level of Intellect, of freeing himself from Fate.⁷⁰

In fact, we have the following analogies⁷¹:

Under jurisdiction of <i>providentia</i>	:	Under jurisdiction of <i>fatum</i>
center	:	sphere
being	:	becoming
eternity	:	time ⁷²
providence	:	fate
intellect	:	reason

In each of these cases, the items listed in the right-hand column can be viewed as an unfolding, development or emanation of the items in the column on the left. Viewed in another way, the left-hand column represents a condensed, concentrated version of the right-hand column.

⁶⁸ Cf. Chalcidius, *In Tim.*, ch. 145, p. 183, 18f. Waszink: et divina quidem atque intellegibilia quaeque his proxima sunt secundum providentiam solam, naturalia vero et corporea iuxta fatum.

⁶⁹ As I. Hadot points out (2001, p. CLI), the doctrine of the subordination of fate to providence is common to all Neoplatonists. Cf. Chalcidius, *In Tim.*, ch. 143-147, for instance p. 182, 4 Waszink: fatum quidem dicimus ex providentia fore, non tamen providentia ex fato. Boethius' immediate source is likely Proclus; cf. *De providentia*, III, 13 in the Latin translation by Moerbeke: [providentiam] omnibus superstantem intelligentialibusque et sensibilibus superiorem esse fato, et que quidem sub fato entia et sub providentia perseverare (...) que autem rursus sub providentia non adhuc omnia indigere et fato, sed intelligentialia ab hic exempta esse.

⁷⁰ Liberation from fate was a main goal of Hellenistic religion and philosophy; cf. Festugière 1944-1954. According to Arnobius (*Adversus Nationes* 2.62), such liberation was what was promised by the *viri novi*, who may have been followers of Porphyry; cf. Courcelle 1953. But as Theiler has pointed out (1966, 102 & n. 235) freedom from fate was also promised by the Christians; cf. Tatian, *Ad Graec.* ch. 9, p. 10 Schwartz; Marius Victorinus, *Ad Galat.*, PL 8, col. 1175. According to Clement of Alexandria (*Extracts from Theodotos* 74, 2) Christ descended to earth in order transfer those who believed in him from fate (*heimarmenê*) to providence (*pronoia*). Like the Roman emperor according to Firmicus Maternus (2, 30, 5) so the Chaldaean theurges claimed to be above fate and the influence of the stars; cf. Theiler 1966, 292.

⁷¹ Boethius, *Cons.* 4.6.15-17; cf. Bächli 2001, 22; Bechtle 2006, 271.

⁷² On the relations between being and eternity on the one hand, and time and the sensible world on the other, cf. for instance Proclus, *In Tim.*, 3.28.11-14.

We have here a kind of résumé of the late Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation. Entities are conceived as existing in concentrated (Greek *sunêirêmenon*), unextended, point-like form in the intelligible world, before being “unwound” like a ball of thread, “unrolled” like a carpet, or “unfolded” like a sheet of papyrus, into the temporally and spatially extended form they assume in the sensible world.⁷³

4. Boethius on predestination and free will

4.1. Aristotle on future contingents

The Narrator now finds himself confronted by a question similar to the one that arises in the case of contemporary block-time theory. If, as many contemporary philosophers believe, the entire future course of events is already laid out and already “exists” in a sense that is arguably just as strong as the sense in which the past and present exist, the problem arises of what becomes of human free will. If there is to be free will, we usually think that what seem to us to be our freely chosen decisions must have some causal efficacy: they must make a *difference* in the world, and if we had chosen to take some decisions other than the ones we actually did, we believe that the world would have turned out differently, to however slight an extent. Yet if the future *already* exists, how could our future decisions possibly change it? Similarly, says the Narrator in Boethius’ *Consolation*, if God is omniscient, He knows everything that will happen, including the thoughts, desires, inclinations and decisions of my own mind. If He knows *already*, for instance, that I will get up at 8.00 AM tomorrow, how could I possibly be free to choose to sleep until noon?

An excellent summary of this view is attributed to the Stoics by Chalcidius⁷⁴:

⁷³ For Proclus (*In Parm.* 1217.17f.; *In Tim.*, 3.26.23f.; 43.17), primary time, which he calls first (*prôtistos*), absolute (*apolutos*), and without relation (*askhetos*), remains itself immobile, before it develops (*anelittôn*) into the time that is counted. For Simplicius, *In Phys.*, p. 1155, 15f. Diels, time and temporal things “unwind (*ekmêruetai*) their integrality in accordance with motion and coming-into-being”, cf. Damascius *De princ.* I., p. 4, 23; 141, 25; 158, 7; 164, 15; 214, 17; 282, 23; *In Parm.*, 89, 5-13; 151, 28; *On time, space, and number*, quoted by Simplicius in his *Corollarium de tempore*, *In Phys.*, 9, p. 780, 30 Diels. In addition to *ekmêruô*, other Neoplatonic terms designating this process include *anelittô/anelixis*; *anaptussô/anaptuxis*. Cf. Boethius, *Cons.* 4.6., where providence is defined as *temporalis ordinis explicatio*. This notion has its origins as far back as Cicero, for whom (*De divin.* 127) future events develop *quasi rudentis explicatio*.

⁷⁴ Chalcidius, *In Tim.*, c. 160, p. 193, 17-194, 4 Waszink, translation Den Boeft 1970, 47: Aiunt: “Ergo, si deus cuncta ex initio scit, antequam fiant, nec sola caelestia, quae felici necessitate perpetuae beatitudinis quasi quodam fato tenentur, sed illas etiam nostras cogitationes et uoluntates, scit quoque dubiam illam naturam tenet que et praeterita et praesentia et futura, et hoc ex initio, nec potest falli deus, omnia certe ex initio disposita atque decreta sunt, tam ea quae in nostra potestate posita esse dicuntur quam fortuita nec non subiecta casibus”. These concerns were already current in Origen’s day; cf. the fragment of his *Commentary on*

So, if God knows all things from the beginning, before they happen, and not only the phenomena of heaven, which are bound by a fortunate necessity of unbroken blessedness as by a kind of fate, but also those thoughts and desires of ours; if he also knows that, which is contingent by nature, and controls past, present and future, and that from the beginning, and if God cannot be mistaken, the conclusion must be that all things are arranged and determined from the beginning, things said to be within our power as well as fortuitous and chance events.

Although this passage from Calcidius is probably extracted from Stoic objections against the *Timaeus*, it is clearly a version of the famous problem of future contingents, set forth most influentially by Aristotle in ch. 9 of his *De interpretatione*. Aristotle's argument goes something like this: all assertoric statements are either true or false. But if we apply this universally valid principle to the case of individual future events, that means that the statement "There will be a sea-battle tomorrow", is also true or false right now. If that statement is true now, however, then it seems to be *necessarily* true that there will be a sea-battle tomorrow; while if the statement is *false* now, then it seems to be *impossible* for there to be a sea-battle tomorrow. In either case, there is no room for chance here – everything is pre-determined or fore-ordained – and therefore none for free will. The occurrence or non-occurrence of the sea-battle tomorrow is already predetermined, and there's nothing we can do about it. Aristotle solves the problem, at least in his own view, by stating that while it is necessary now that either (p) there will be a sea-battle tomorrow or (\sim p) there will not be a sea battle tomorrow, i.e. in modern logical notation

$$N(p \vee \sim p)$$

Yet it is not the case that it is necessary now that (p) be true, and it is also not the case that it is necessary that (\sim p) be true, i.e.

$$\sim(Np) \wedge \sim(N\sim p)$$

Mountains of books have, of course, been written on this chapter of Aristotle's *De interpretatione*.⁷⁵ In Antiquity, the Stoics accepted that the proposition "There will be a sea-battle tomorrow" is true today, so that the occurrence/non-occurrence of the sea-battle is already fixed now, while the Epicureans maintained that the statement is neither true nor false. Against these and other views, Boethius, following Ammonius, will argue that statements about future contingents are true or false, but are so indefinitely (Greek *aoristôs*).⁷⁶

Genesis preserved by Eusebius, *Evangelical Preparation* 6.11.31ff. Cf. Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De fato* 30.

⁷⁵ For contemporary interpretations, see Sorabji 1980; Gaskin 1995, Blank *et al.* 1998, Seel 2001.

⁷⁶ Sharples 2009, 211.

4.2. *Boethius on divine omniscience vs. human free will*

To solve the conflict between divine omniscience and human free will, Boethius, in the final book of the *Consolation*, will make use of three principles, all of which he takes from earlier or contemporary Greek philosophy, although it can be argued that his own particular way of combining them makes his solution original and distinct. These are

1. The distinction between absolute and conditional necessity;
2. The principle that the nature of knowledge is determined by the nature of the knower, rather than by the nature of the thing known⁷⁷; and finally
3. The notion that God experiences all of time as we experience the present; in other words, that God experiences all of time, past, present, and future, simultaneously, or that God lives in an eternal present.

Let's go over Boethius' three principles in order.

4.2.1. The distinction between absolute and conditional necessity⁷⁸

Boethius distinguishes between two kinds of necessity.⁷⁹ Absolute necessity is that which is involved in statements like "the sun will rise tomorrow" or "all living beings have a heart", or "all men are mortal": they are true independently of any condition, such as when they are uttered or who utters them. Other propositions are true with only conditional necessity: "Socrates is sitting down", for instance, or "Plato is going for a walk" is necessarily true while (and only while) Socrates is in fact sitting down and Plato is in fact going for a walk, respectively. The same is true for phenomena like chariot races: the drivers' skillful maneuvers are necessary while I am observing them, but they were not necessary beforehand, since they are the result of the drivers' free will. Thus, things and events that are simply necessary are so because of their own nature; things and events that are conditionally necessary are so owing to extrinsic or accidental circumstances.

This argument is in fact based on an adaptation of the Aristotelian definition of knowledge: if I *know* something, then the object of my knowledge *necessarily*⁸⁰ is the

⁷⁷ Scholars refer to this as either the Iamblichus principle or the Modes of Cognition principle. Cf. Ammon. *In De Int.* 135.14-137.1 = Sorabji 2004 3a10; Huber 1976, 40ff.

⁷⁸ Cf. Obertello 1989, 95ff.; Weidemann 1998; Bechtle 2006, 274f.

⁷⁹ Weidemann (1998) has, I believe, convincingly refuted the idea (Sorabji 1980, 122) that Boethius' distinction between simple and conditional necessity amounts to the distinction between *necessitas consequentiae* and *necessitas consequentis*.

⁸⁰ As Weidemann points out (1998, 198), Boethius' addition of the modal operator "necessarily" transforms Aristotle's consequentiality relation of *being* into a consequentiality relation of *necessity*.

way I know it to be, simply because that's the way knowledge (Greek *epistêmê*, Latin *scientia*, Arabic *'ilm*) is defined – at least in one of its many Aristotelian senses.⁸¹

One Aristotelian text that is important in this regard is this one from the *De interpretatione* (19a23-6):

That what exists is when it is, and what does not exist is not when it is not, is necessary.⁸²

For Aristotle, there can be *epistêmê* in this strict sense – the sense, that is, in which such knowledge is always true (*Apo* II, 19, 100b18) – only of universals.⁸³ Indeed, the reason why knowledge is bereft of falsehood is that it is *necessary* for things to be in the way knowledge understands them to be.⁸⁴ This is clear, for instance, from a passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI, 3, 1139b20-25):

We all suppose that what we know is not capable of being otherwise (...) therefore the object of knowledge is of necessity. Therefore it is eternal, for things that are of necessity in the unqualified sense are all eternal⁸⁵; and things that are eternal are ungenerated and imperishable.

The reason this distinction is important is as follows: the Narrator reasons that (1) necessarily, if an event *p* will happen, then God foresees it ($N(p \rightarrow F(G, p))$); and (2) necessarily, if God foresees *p*, it will happen ($N(F(G, p) \rightarrow p)$). Note that the necessity here bears upon the entire implication: it is a *necessitas consequentiae*. It has been argued⁸⁶ that Boethius now makes a simple logical mistake, inferring from (1) and (2) that (3) if *p*, then necessarily God foresees *p* ($p \rightarrow NF(G, p)$), and (4) if God foresees *p*, then necessarily *p* ($F(G, p) \rightarrow Np$), where in both the latter cases the necessity bears upon the consequent (*necessitas consequentis*).

I believe this analysis is mistaken. Boethius does believe both (3) and (4) are true, but they are true only *conditionally*, where the condition is God's knowledge. In other words, the necessity imposed by God's knowledge of a future event is of the same kind as that which necessitates that Socrates be sitting when I know he is sitting: such conditional necessity (*kath' hupothesin* in Greek⁸⁷; *secundum praecessionem* in the Latin of

⁸¹ "It is impossible for that of which there is knowledge in the absolute sense to be otherwise <than it is>," says Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics* (I, 2 71b9-15), which led Thomas Waitz to comment (II, 302) that "veram scientiam non dari nisi eorum quae aeterna sint nec umquam mutantur".

⁸² Τὸ μὲν οὖν εἶναι τὸ ὄν ὅταν ᾗ, καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν μὴ εἶναι ὅταν μὴ ᾗ, ἀνάγκη. Cf. Frede 1972.

⁸³ Cf. *Metaph.* K 1, 1059b26; 2, 1060b20; B 6, 1003a15; M 9, 1086b5.10; 1086b 33; *Anal. pr.* 31 87b33, *De an.* 2.5417b23; *EN* 7, 6, 1140b31; 1180b15. This is perhaps why the Narrator begins by speaking not of knowledge but of opinion, only to slip into talking about knowledge by virtue of the (Platonic!) equivalence true opinion = knowledge.

⁸⁴ Cf. *Cons.* 5.3.21: Ea namque causa est cur mendacio scientia careat, quod se ita rem quamque habere necesse est uti eam sese habere scientia comprehendit.

⁸⁵ Cf. *De Caelo* I, 12, 281a28-282a4.

⁸⁶ Graeser 1992; Marenbon 2003a, 533ff.

⁸⁷ Cf. Eustratius, *In EN VI*, p. 293, 1-2 Heylbut (CAG 20): ὡς εἶναι τὰ ἀπλῶς ἐξ ἀνάγκης πάντα αἰδία. ἀπλῶς δὲ λέγομεν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ὅσα μὴ καθ' ὑπόθεσιν ἐξ ἀνάγκης, οἷον τὸ

Chalcidius⁸⁸) imposes no constraint upon Socrates, but simply concerns the nature of knowledge.⁸⁹ As Boethius will claim, such future events can be said to be necessary with regard to God's knowledge but free with regard to their own nature.

These considerations go some way toward explaining the key point of how God can know future events, which are by their nature indeterminate, in a determinate way. The reason why this seems counter-intuitive to us is that we believe there can only be knowledge of things that are certain, so that if God has certain knowledge of future events, such events must already be decided. Yet this view presupposes at least two further assumptions: that knowledge is determined by its object, and that God's knowledge of the future is like ours. Boethius' additional two principles will attempt to undermine both these assumptions.

4.2.2. The principle that the nature of knowledge is determined by the nature of the knower

Like his opponents the Stoics, the great Peripatetic philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias had considered it axiomatic that modes of knowledge are conditioned by the objects of their knowledge.⁹⁰ In the case of future contingents, it follows from this principle that the gods can possess only an open, uncertain, or indeterminate knowledge of future events, which are by their nature open, uncertain, and indeterminate. The Middle Platonists and the fifth-century Latin author Chalcidius agreed that God or the gods can have only a contingent knowledge of what is contingent.⁹¹

According to such Neoplatonists as Proclus and Ammonius, probably the most immediate influences on Boethius,⁹² it is because we assume that the gods' knowledge is like ours that we end up with either the Stoic view that everything is determined in advance, or the Peripatetic view that providence extends only as far as

καθησθαί τινα ἔστ' ἂν κάθηται ὁ καθήμενος, ἐξ ἀνάγκης εἶναι λέγομεν τὸ καθῆσθαι αὐτόν, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ ἀπλῶς ἀλλ' ἐξ ὑποθέσεως (“thus, all things that are simply by necessity are perpetual [*aidia*]. We call ‘simply by necessity’ whatever is not hypothetically (*kath' hupothesein*) by necessity: for instance, the fact of sitting; as long as the seated person is sitting, we say that the fact that he is sitting is necessary, yet not simply but by hypothesis (*ex hupotheseôs*)”).

⁸⁸ Chalcidius, *In Tim.*, p. 186, 15 Waszink.

⁸⁹ In the words of Bächli 2001, it is an “epistemological necessity”.

⁹⁰ Huber 1976, 13f., citing Alexander, *De Fato* 200, 15ff.

⁹¹ Chalcidius, *In Tim.*, c. 162, p. 195, 1-17 Waszink.

⁹² Cf. Proclus, *De decem dubitationibus* 7; *De prov.* 64, 1-4 Ammonius, *In de interpretatione* 132, 6ff.; 135, 16-19. Zambon (2003) has made a persuasive case for the argument, against Courcelle, that many elements in Boethius' thought derive from his reading of Porphyry rather than any hypothetical sojourns in Athens or Alexandria. In the present case, however, the parallels between Boethius and Proclus/Ammonius seem so close that influence of the latter on the former seems highly likely, unless we were to postulate the existence or some otherwise unknown source (a lost work, or part of a work, on providence by Porphyry?) common to both Boethius and Proclus/Ammonius.

the sphere of the moon. In fact, says Proclus, the reverse is true: it is not the nature of the known objects that determines knowledge, but the nature of the cognitive faculties of the knower. Thus, for instance, the gods know the objects of their knowledge in a manner that is superior to the ontological status of the objects they know⁹³:

Every god has an undivided knowledge of things divided and a timeless knowledge of things temporal; he knows the contingent without contingency, the mutable immutably, and in general all things in a higher mode than belongs to their status (...) their knowledge, being a divine property, will be determined not by the nature of the inferior beings which are its object but by their own transcendent majesty (...)

Proclus states the same view in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*⁹⁴:

(...) the gods themselves know what is generated (*genêton*) in an ungenerated way, and what is extended in an unextended way, and what is divided undividedly, and what is temporal atemporally, and what is contingent necessarily.

Yet that this doctrine of the dependence of knowledge on the knower's cognitive faculties goes back at least to Porphyry is, I believe, implied by a passage from the latter's *Sententiae*⁹⁵:

...to that which is by nature multiple and endowed with magnitude [i.e., the sensible. – MC] the partless and non-multiple [i.e., the intelligible] is endowed with magnitude and multiplicity [i.e., with the characteristics of the sensible] (...) to that which is naturally partless and non-multiple [the intelligible] that which has parts and is multiplied [the sensible] is partless and non-multiple [i.e. has the characteristics of the intelligible]...

This passage is difficult, and has occasioned quite a bit of discussion, but its gist seems clear: the way *x* appears to *y* depends not upon *x*, but upon *y*. According to standard Platonic doctrine, intelligible or incorporeal realities (*x*) are in themselves partless, non-multiple and unextended, while material and corporeal realities (*y*) have the opposite characteristics: they are divided, multiple and extended in space and time. What Porphyry claims, in his clumsy, jargon-laden language, is that to *y*, *x* appears as endowed with the properties of *y*. To *x*, by contrast, *y* is endowed with the

⁹³ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 124, p. 110, 10-13 Dodd; translation Dodds, p. 111: Πᾶς θεὸς ἀμερίστως μὲν τὰ μεριστὰ γινώσκει, ἀχρόνως δὲ τὰ ἔγχρονα, τὰ δὲ μὴ ἀναγκαῖα ἀναγκαίως, καὶ τὰ μεταβλητὰ ἀμεταβλήτως, καὶ ὅλως πάντα κρειττόνως ἢ κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν τάξιν. εἰ γὰρ ἅπαν, ὅ τι περ ἄν ἦ παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς, κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν ἔστιν ιδιότητα, δῆλον δῆπουθεν ὡς οὐχὶ κατὰ τὴν τῶν χειρόνων φύσιν ἐν τοῖς θεοῖς οὐσα ἢ γνώσις αὐτῶν ἔσται, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν ἐκείνων ἐξηρημένην ὑπεροχήν.

⁹⁴ Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 352, 5-8 (my translation): αὐτοὶ δὲ οἱ θεοὶ καὶ τὸ γενητὸν ἀγενήτως καὶ τὸ διαστατὸν ἀδιαστάτως ἐγνώκασιν καὶ τὸ μεριστὸν ἀμερίστως καὶ τὸ ἔγχρονον διαωνίως καὶ τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον ἀναγκαίως.

⁹⁵ Porphyry, *Sententiae* 33, in Brisson *et al.*, 2005, vol. I, p. 346, 21-33 = p. 36, 12-37, 5 Lamberz. Translation J. Dillon, loc. cit., vol. 2, p. 816-817: τῷ μὲν ἄρα πεπληθυσμένῳ φύσει καὶ μεμεγεθυσμένῳ τὸ ἀμερές καὶ ἀπλήθυντον μεμεγέθυνται καὶ πεπλήθυνται (...) τῷ δ' ἀμερεῖ καὶ ἀπληθύντῳ φύσει ἀμερές ἐστὶ καὶ ἀπλήθυντον τὸ μεριστὸν καὶ πεπληθυσμένον (...)

properties of *x*. To sensible reality, which is divided, pluralized and located in space, intelligible reality – in itself bereft of these characteristics and qualified by their opposites – appears as endowed with plurality and magnitude.

For Porphyry, then, at least at the time he wrote the *Sentences*, it seems that the way an object of knowledge appears to a knower is determined not by the object's characteristics, but by the cognitive faculties of the knower. All the more strange then, is the testimony of Proclus, who writes, immediately after the passage quoted above⁹⁶:

Let us not think, then, that knowledge is characterized by the objects of knowledge, nor that what is not fixed is not fixed among the gods⁹⁷, as the philosopher Porphyry says – for he affirmed that which would have better left unsaid – but that the mode of knowledge becomes different along with the differences of the knowers.

According to Proclus' testimony, then, Porphyry (wrongly) believed that it is the known object, not the knower that determines the mode of knowledge.

I can see only two possibilities of resolving this apparent contradiction. Either Proclus has misunderstood Porphyry, attributing to him, for instance, a Peripatetic doctrine upon which Porphyry may have been reporting; or else Porphyry's commentary on the *Timaeus* was an early work, and he later changed his views on this subject under the influence of Plotinus. More research would be needed to enable a choice between these two alternatives.

In any case, the view that knowledge depends on the knower, not the object of thought, became standard Neoplatonic doctrine after Iamblichus. According to Proclus' student Ammonius, since all things are present to the gods in an eternal now,⁹⁸ their providence, like their creative activity, is exercised without the change implied by ratiocination or deliberation, but by their very being (*autôî tôi einai*). Since their own nature is determinate, the gods know all things, including future contingents, in a determinate way. Boethius, then, following his Greek sources, concludes that “all that is known is comprehended not according to its power, but rather according to the faculty of the knowers”.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 352, 11-16 = Porphyry, *In Tim.*, fr. 2.45 Sodano: μη γὰρ οἰηθῶμεν, ὅτι ταῖς τῶν γνωστῶν φύσεσιν αἱ γνώσεις χαρακτηρίζονται, μηδ' ὅτι τὸ μὴ ἀραρὸς οὐκ ἀραρὸς ἐστὶ παρὰ θεοῖς, ὡς φησὶν ὁ φιλόσοφος Πορφύριος – τοῦτο γὰρ αὐτὸς ἐκεῖνος ἀνεφθέγγατο, ὅπερ τ' ἄρρητον ἄμεινον – ἀλλ' ὅτι ταῖς τῶν γνωσκόντων διαφοραῖς ἀλλοῖος γίνεταί τῆς γνώσεως ὁ τρόπος.

⁹⁷ In other words, Porphyry allegedly claimed that what is in reality not fixed or established (*mê araros*) also appears to the gods in the same way: as non-fixed or indeterminate (*mê araros*). This is precisely the position of Alexander of Aphrodisias.

⁹⁸ Ammon., *In De int.*, p. 133, 25: ἀλλὰ πάντα παρ' αὐτοῖς ἐν ἐνὶ τῷ νῦν ἐστὶ τῷ αἰωνίῳ ἰδρυμένα. Cf. Chalcidius, *In Tim.*, ch. 25, p. 76, 4-5 Waszink: temporis item species praeteritum praesens futurum, aevi substantia uniformis *in solo perpetuoque prasenti*. Waszink 1964, 43, 47, 70 traces the source of this Chalcidian chapter back to Porphyry.

⁹⁹ Boethius, *Cons.* 5.4.25; cf. 5.4.38; Huber 1976, 40ff.; Den Boeft 1970, 53ff.

4.2.3. The notion that God lives in an eternal present

Now that it has been established that knowledge is determined by the knower, Boethius moves on to deducing God's mode of cognition from His nature. God is eternal (*Cons.* 5.6.2.10-14), and this leads us to Boethius' definition of eternity, perhaps the most famous and influential ever formulated in the Western tradition: Eternity is the perfect possession, all at once, of unlimited life (*Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*).¹⁰⁰ This definition can be better understood, Philosophy claims, by comparison with temporal things: whatever lives in the present proceeds, when it is present, from the past to the future, and nothing constituted within time can equally embrace the complete extent of its life. Temporal beings cannot yet apprehend the future, while they have already lost the past. Even in today's life, Philosophy continues, you mortals live in no more than that mobile, transitory moment. Whatever is subject to time, even if, as Aristotle thought was true of the world, it never begins nor ends, should not be called eternal, for it does not embrace all at once the extent of its life, even if it should last forever: it doesn't yet possess the future, and it no longer possesses the past. What does deserve to be called eternal is what comprehends and possesses the entire fullness of unlimited life, lacking nothing future nor past: in full possession of itself, it must always both remain present to itself, and have present to itself the infinity of mobile time. People are wrong to conclude from Plato's statements that this world had neither beginning nor end¹⁰¹ that this makes the world co-eternal with its creator¹⁰²: it's one thing to lead a life through an unlimited period, as Plato says of the world, and quite another to have equally embraced the total presence of limitless life, as is proper to the divine mind. The world cannot properly be called eternal, therefore, but should be called perpetual.¹⁰³

5. Boethius on the eternal now

God, Boethius continues, is not greater than created things by the mere quantity of time, but by the characteristic property of his simple nature. As Plotinus had already

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* III 7 (45), 11, 3-5: Eternity is "that unchanging life, all together at once, already infinite, completely unswerving, standing in and directed toward the one". For a complete list of the parallels between *Consolation* Book V and *Ennead* III 7 (45), cf. Beierwaltes 1967/1981, 198-200.

¹⁰¹ Presupposed here, as if it went without saying (as indeed it did for the late Greek Neoplatonists) is the view that Plato's creation narrative in the *Timaeus* is to be understood symbolically or allegorically.

¹⁰² Origen was accused of making the creation coeternal with God: cf. Methodius, *On generated things*, ap. Photius, *Library* 302a30ff.

¹⁰³ On this distinction, cf. Chase 2011, 127-130.

argued, Time's infinite motion tries vainly to imitate the presential status of immobile life, but cannot equal it, so that it sinks from immobility into motion, and into the infinite quantity of past and future. Unable to equally possess the complete plenitude of its life, temporal beings strive to fill this void by constantly accumulating an unending series of transitory instants. Perhaps we can use a modern analogy: let's assume Bill Gates is not just rich, but infinitely rich. Then time's attempt to equal eternity would be analogous to, and as futile as, trying to equal Bill Gates' infinite wealth by saving, say, a penny a day. Nevertheless, since time bears within it, in the guise of the present moment, a kind of image of eternity's eternal present, it lends to whatever it touches the appearance of existence.¹⁰⁴

5.1 Boethius and the Neoplatonic theory of time

To understand this notion, we need to bear in mind the basic structure of the Late Neoplatonic theory of time.¹⁰⁵ Beginning with Iamblichus, the Neoplatonists proposed a three-level hierarchy, in line with the doctrine of the triple universal, according to which each Intelligible Form or Idea has three phases: unparticipated, participated, and in the participants.¹⁰⁶ Corresponding to the unparticipated Form is Eternity (Greek *aiôn*), followed by two kinds of time: corresponding to the participated Form, an intellectual time that is stable, motionless, partless, and generative; and corresponding to the participants, the time we experience in the sensible world, which is generated and constantly flowing.

This inferior time flows from the future into the past along the sides of a triangle (**Table 1**), and only at the vertex of the triangle does the flowing now that constitutes our present moment touch the immobile Intellectual time, which is a direct emanation from, and therefore an image of eternity. This is, as it were, the metaphysical background for Boethius' assertion that the now represents our only point of contact with eternity, an idea he shares with his near-contemporary Damascius, for whom the present instant is a "trace of eternity" (*ikhnos aiônion*) at which eternity comes to be within time (*en khronôi to aei on estin*).¹⁰⁷

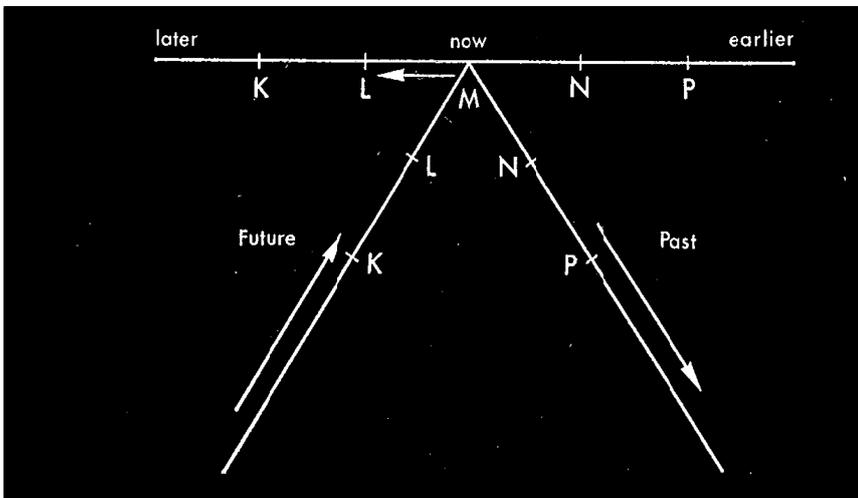
¹⁰⁴ *Cons.* 5.6.12: huius exigui uolucrisque momenti, quae quoniam manentis illius praesentiae quendam gestat imaginem, quibuscumque contigerit id praestat ut esse uideantur.

¹⁰⁵ The best exposition of this difficult theory is probably Sambursky/Pines 1987; cf. Sorabji 1983, 33-45.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Iamblichus, *In Tim.*, fr. 60 Dillon; Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 24.

¹⁰⁷ Damascius, *In Parmenidem* II, 12³.c¹, vol. III, p. 189, 20 Westerink-Combès. Cf. already Proclus, *In Tim.* III, p. 44, 21-22 Diehl: "Everything is present in the now" (*Kai en tôi nun to pan*). Similarly, although more colorfully, Meister Eckhart describes the now as "a taste of time" (*Nû...ez ist wol ein smak der zît*, cf. *Werke*, ed. N. Largier et al., 2 vols., Frankfurt a.M. 1993, vol. 2, p. 48). On the concept of the eternal now in the philosophy of Proclus, cf. Roth 2008.

Table 1



Since, according to Boethius' second principle, every nature understands what's subject to it according to its own nature, and God's nature is always eternal and praesential, it follows that his knowledge remains in the simplicity of his presence, embracing the infinite extent of the past and future, considering everything in his simple cognition as if it were happening now.¹⁰⁸ The presence by which God discerns everything should be characterized, Boethius informs us, not so much as foreknowledge (*praescientia*) of the future as knowledge of a never-deficient instant; it should be called providence (*pro-videntia*) rather than foreknowledge, where the prefix *pro-* can be interpreted as a kind of spatial priority rather than a temporal one.¹⁰⁹ From his supratemporal vantage point, God sees all the temporal events in the world's history simultaneously, like clothespins on a laundry line, or the slices of a sausage or a loaf of bread. The events we see as occurring in succession, one after another, or in *taxis* (to speak in Aristotelian terms), God sees as simultaneously present and separated only by their *thesis* or position.

We see here several themes that are present *in nuce* in Plotinus, and are more fully developed in such post-Plotinian thinkers as Iamblichus and Damascius:

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Cons.* 5.c2.11-12: quae, sint, quae fuerint, veniantque/uno mentis cernit in ictu.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Cons.* 5.6.17: Unde non praevidentia sed providentia potius dicitur, quod porro a rebus infimis constituta quasi ab excelso rerum cacumine cuncta prospiciat. Boethius is very fond, particularly in Book V, of the term *prospicio* in the sense of "look forward or into the distance, look out, look, see" (Lewis & Short s.v. I) for designating the divine vision. Cf. *Cons.* 5.2.11: Quae tamen ille ab aeterno cuncta prospiciens providentiae cernit intuitus; 5.3.4: Nam si cuncta prospicit deus neque falli ullo modo potest; 5.3.28: ... diuina mens sine falsitatis errore cuncta prospiciens; 5.4.33: ...illo uno ictu mentis formaliter, ut ita dicam, cuncta prospiciens. As Bächli points out (2001, n. 83), Boethius uses the verb *prospicere* "mit Bezug auf den quasi-zeitlosen 'Blick von oben'". On the spiritual exercise of the "View from above" in ancient philosophy, cf. Hadot 1995, 238-251.

1. In order to overcome time and perceive eternity, we must eliminate the difference between them: that is, we must convert space into time.¹¹⁰ In our everyday phenomenal experience, space is characterized, as Aristotle affirms, by position (*thesis*) or the fact that all its parts are simultaneously present; time by order or succession (*taxis*), i.e. the fact that no two of its parts exist simultaneously. In contrast, Boethius' near-contemporary Damascius taught that we can learn to perceive "integral" or "intellectual time", which exists simultaneously as a whole.¹¹¹

2. One way to achieve this perception of time as simultaneously existent is to concentrate on the present moment. As we've seen, as the "nows" or instants of phenomenal time surge forth from the future, only to disappear into the past, there is an instant at which they touch immobile, stable, intellectual time, which is itself an emanation of eternity. In the midst of time, we can experience a glimpse of eternity thanks to the present moment, which is not point-like, according to Damascius, but is divisible and has a certain extension (*diastêma*).

Thus, while Boethius seems mainly to follow Plotinus, perhaps through the intermediary of Porphyry, as far as his doctrine of time and eternity is concerned, the *Consolation* nevertheless shows traces of familiarity with post-Plotinian developments of that doctrine, particularly those of Iamblichus and Damascius.

6. Boethius and Relativity

I believe that Boethius' use of the principle that God lives in an eternal present involves notions very close to those mobilized in the current debate in the philosophy of time between eternalists, or advocates of the block-time view, and presentists, who defend the objective reality of the flow of time. For the Block-timers, who take seriously the view of reality as a four-dimensional continuum as set forth by Einstein and Minkowski, all the moments of time exist simultaneously, so that the past continues to be, while the future already is, just as real as the present. Presentists, in contrast, subscribe to the common-sense view that time flows: only the present is real, while the past is no longer and the future is not yet real. In a nutshell, Boethius will argue that God views reality from the block-time perspective (which, of course, also corresponds to an objectively true picture of reality), while we humans see things from a presentist perspective.

It is only the element of time that introduces what seems to be a contradiction between God's universal foresight and our free will. In other words, it is only because we imagine that God knows our *future* acts and thoughts *beforehand* that we believe,

¹¹⁰ Likewise, in a mystical narration by the Iranian philosopher Qāzī Sa'īd Qummī, "succession becomes simultaneity, and time becomes space, as a function of that sublimation which brings it to a more and more subtle state" (Corbin 1969). It is, of course, a basic postulate of Einsteinian special relativity that temporal coordinates can be transformed into spatial ones, and *vice versa*; see for instance Davies-Gribbin 1992, 79-82.

¹¹¹ Cf. Galpérine 1980.

since only what is certain can be known, that our acts and thoughts are already determined. As we've seen, Boethius' ingenious solution will consist in denying that God *fore-knows* or *fore-sees* anything at all.¹¹² Since the future tense does not apply to Him or to His knowledge, he sees all things as if they were present; and since the mere fact of our observing human actions in the present imposes no necessity on such acts, neither does God's omniscient vision and knowledge of all our acts and thoughts – past, present or future – necessitate those acts and thoughts. God sees all the moments of the world's history, and hence, all the moments of our lives, spread out before him at once. If he distinguishes between, say, my decision to rob a bank tomorrow and my actual robbing of the bank, it is not because one event is chronologically "later" than another, but because they occupy different positions in the series of spacetime events, all of which are simultaneously present to God's vision. It is in this sense that one might say that God sees the world the way Einstein and Minkowski taught us, in the first decades of the 20th century, to see space and time: the world consists not of a three-dimensional space and a separate one-dimensional time, but of a four-dimensional spacetime manifold, consisting of spacetime events. Although God does not see these events as *temporally* prior or posterior to one another, he can perfectly well perceive their *causal*, *logical*, and *ontological* anteriority or posteriority. Likewise, Boethius argues, God can tell which events are necessary (the sun's rising), and which are contingent (my going for a walk), just as a human being simultaneously observing necessary and contingent events in the present is able easily to distinguish them. This is what allows Boethius to conclude that God's foreknowledge (*praevidentia*) should in fact be called *pro-videntia*, where the prefix *pro-* may connote priority in space, not time. If we could raise ourselves up to this Gods-eye view, we would see that there is no conflict between divine omniscience and our free will, since God's supratemporal vision introduces no necessity into contingent events. Our idea that there is such a conflict is, almost literally, an optical illusion, caused by the fact that we cannot help but think in terms of temporality.

Boethius' view of God's ontological state as an eternal present, developed primarily from Plotinus' theory of time as eternity as presented in *Ennead* 3.7, is thus the crowning jewel in the argumentative apparatus Boethius uses to solve the conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom of the will. There is no such thing as divine *praescientia* (foreknowledge): God sees all things in an eternal present, whereby he distinguishes between past and present events not by their *chronological* order or occurrence, but their *casual* anteriority or posteriority. His knowledge of events that seem to us future is therefore no impediment to our freedom, any more than my observation of a man crossing the street imposes any necessity on him. To be sure, if I *know* that he is crossing the street at time *t*, then it is *necessary* that he be crossing the street at time *t*, but this kind of factual, conditional, or epistemological necessity, based as it is on the Aristotelian definition of knowledge and the fact that things must neces-

¹¹² Cf. *Cons.* 5.6.16-17: *praevidentiam...non esse praescientiam quasi futuri sed scientiam numquam deficientis instantiae rectius aestimabis.*

sarily be *as* they are *when* they are, imposes no constraints on the man in question. As I observe the man walking and a contemporaneous sunset, I know immediately that the former is a free act originating in the individual's volition, while the latter is a necessary event. Likewise, God's vision observes all our thoughts and acts, past, present and future, as if they were simultaneously present, but like our human vision this divine vision imposes no necessity on what it observes, and like our own vision, God's vision is perfectly capable of distinguishing, among the phenomena it observes, between the necessary and the contingent.

It has been objected¹¹³ that this characterization of divine knowledge entails that I know something God does not know: I know which events are past and which are future. But this seems to me to be incorrect, or at least misleading. First of all, from a divine perspective, the past-present-future distinction has no objective reality but is a mere illusion caused by our limited conceptual apparatus. Alternatively, if we wished to say that this division is objectively real, it is so only in the sense that the distinction between "x is standing to my left" and "y is standing to my right" is real: these are mere relations that depend on my individual perspective at a given instant. Likewise, what I consider past and future depends merely on my perspective as a temporal being. To claim that God is unaware of such relational properties does not seem to present a serious challenge to his omniscience.

I submit, moreover, that it is not even true that God is unaware of the past-present-future distinction. As we have seen, Boethius' conception of divine vision corresponds rather closely to the way reality should be viewed from the perspective of relativistic physics, that is, as a four-dimensional spacetime continuum. Here, the history of the world and of any individual object can be envisaged as a world-tube, where each instant can be viewed as a three dimensional slice of the tube. Given that any spatio-temporal event can be identified on the tube by a series of four coordinates, it would be easy for God to situate on my world-tube my instantaneous existence in my Paris study at, say, 12:43 on May 2, 2013. But it would be just as easy for him to deduce that an event x, which can be situated at a point on the tube corresponding to my study at 12:32 on May 1, would be in what *I consider* the past, and that an event occurring in the same place at 12:32 May 3 would be in what *I consider* the future. True, God would not "know" that a given event *is* past or future, because such alleged facts are not genuine objects of knowledge but at best mere relational properties, and at worst illusions. We must bear in mind that, for Aristotle and for Boethius, for x to be *known* implies that x is not only *true* but *necessarily true*. But it is not *true*, much less *necessarily true*, that a given event is past or future with regard to me: such a viewpoint is merely an illusion caused by my partial, limited temporal perspective. Similarly, if a stick partially submerged in water looks bent to me, we would not say that an omniscient God "knows" that the stick is bent, but that He knows that the stick *looks bent to me*.

¹¹³ Sorabji, in Blank *et al* 1998.

7. Conclusion

Far from being a parody or a conglomeration of unconvincing arguments thrown together any old way, Boethius' *Consolatio* represents a meticulously crafted whole, although it may be an unfinished one. In its first half, it shows how philosophy, which is a way of life rather than a mere series of abstract arguments, can be used as therapy of the soul. It does so by providing an illustration of the Neoplatonic philosophical curriculum in action, whereby, after an initial moral purification from false ideas and opinions, the beginning philosophy student's innate ideas are gradually awakened and reactivated, thus rendering his soul capable of undertaking the return to its intelligible homeland. In the work's second half, the narrator, now restored to his status as an advanced student of philosophy, is presented with a coherent set of arguments intended to show why and how divine omniscience does not jeopardize human free will. This is done by a skillful interweaving of the distinction between absolute and conditional necessity, the principle that knowledge is conditioned by the knower rather than the object of knowledge, and the principle that God's eternal mode of being grants Him a cognitive mode whereby He sees past, present and future as given simultaneously in an eternal present.

Finally, lest this latter point be dismissed as mere Neoplatonic mysticism, I have argued that it corresponds to the view that seems to be a virtually inescapable consequence of special relativity. As a number of contemporary scientists, historians, and philosophers of science have concluded, if Einstein and Minkowski are right, the passage of time we seem to experience is in fact an illusion, and reality must be represented from the perspective of block-time, in which all spacetime events, regardless of whether they seem to us to be past, present, or future are, as it were, laid out in advance and endowed with equally objective existence. Boethius speaks of the possibility of raising oneself up to this Gods-eye view of things,¹¹⁴ and he is echoed by the theoretical physicist Thibault Damour:

The structure of the theory of relativity suggests that if one could free oneself from the thermodynamic and biological constraints that condition us, in everyday life, to live reali-

¹¹⁴ Boethius, *Cons.* 5.5.12: Quare in illius summae intellegentiae cacumen si possumus erigamur. Bächli (2001, 45f & n. 102) argues on the basis of 5.5.11: 'Si igitur uti rationis participes sumus ita diuinae iudicium mentis habere possemus', that human beings possess the *intellectus* as an inherent faculty: "Nach Boethius verfügen wir als vernünftige Wesen über ein «Kriterium» (*iudicium*) zur Beurteilung des göttlichen Geistes". But Bächli is basing himself on the reading *possumus* at p. 154, 45 Moreschini, a reading supported only by Ms. N = Neapolitanus = Napoli, Bibl. Naz. G IV 68 *post correctionem*: Mss. O² M L Ha T N W C V² H A and B have *possemus*, while Mss. O K T F V H²A²G have *possimus*. Moreschini rightly prints *possemus*, a subjunctive which indicates a remote possibility. Thus, here at least Boethius is not claiming we can have such a faculty (habere *possumus*), but discussing what *would* happen if we *could* or *did* have it (habere *possemus*). On the question of whether the intellect is constitutive part of man, cf. Magee 1989, 141-149.

ty in the form of a “temporal flux”, one could, by analogy, “super-live” our life “in a block”, as a part of the four-dimensional space-time block of Minkowski.

To give some idea of what such a perception might be, I’d like to conclude by comparing two texts, one attributed to Mozart,¹¹⁵ the other by Boethius:

My brain catches fire, especially if I am not disturbed. It grows, I develop it more and more, ever more clearly. The work is then finished in my skull, or really just as if, even if it is a long piece, and *I can embrace the whole in a single glance*, as if it were a painting or a statue. In my imagination, I do not hear the work in its flow, as it must appear in succession, but *I have the whole in one block*, as it were. What a gift! Invention, elaboration, all that happens within me as in a magnificent, grandiose dream, but when I manage to super-hear the assembled totality, that’s the best moment (...) it is perhaps the greatest benefit for which I must thank the Creator.

For as a craftsman, taking beforehand in his mind the form of the thing to be made, carries out the effect of his work, and leads it through the orders of time *what he had seen simply and in the mode of the present*, so God arranges the things that are to be made singly and stably through providence, but he administers the very things he has arranged through fate in a multiple, temporal way.¹¹⁶

Thanks to his genial intuition, Mozart (or his plagiarizer) was able to view his finished work all at once (cf. Boethius’ *uno ictu*¹¹⁷) in his mind, in a manner completely free of temporal succession. Similarly, Boethius’ craftsman first perceives the whole of his product simply and in a manner characteristic of the present (*praesentarie*), then sets about realizing this preconceived image within space and time. Boethius’ God acts in an analogous way: From the summit (*cacumen*) of his lofty vantage-point, God perceives, through his providence, the totality of the world’s occurrences as simultaneously present. He then realizes this divine plan in the spatio-temporal order by means of Fate, or the inexorable chain of causes and events. Yet fate has no

¹¹⁵ Cited by Jean and Brigitte Massin (1970, 474). The authenticity of this text, first published by Rochlitz in 1815, is subject to caution. I thank M. Thibault Damour for pointing out this reference to me.

¹¹⁶ Boethius, *Cons.* 4.6.12: *Sicut enim artifex faciendae rei formam mente praecipiens mouet operis effectum et quod simpliciter praesentarieque prospexerat per temporales ordines ducit, ita deus prouidentia quidem singulariter stabiliterque facienda disponit, fato uero haec ipsa quae disposuit multipliciter ac temporaliter amministrat.* Cf. Proclus, *On Providence* 12, 65: “Your machine, which uses cylinders, pulleys and corporeal materials, did not exist corporeally in your foreknowledge, but here imagination contained, in an incorporeal and living way, the logos of what was to be, whereas the machine came into being corporeally, put together out of inner knowledge which was not such. If this is how things are in your creation, what would you say of the fore-knowledge of the gods, in which pre-exists what is, for us, is ineffable, truly indescribable and impossible to circumscribe...the gods know divinely and intemporally what depends on us, and we act as we naturally tend to do, and what we choose is foreknown to them, not by the term in us, but to the one in them”.

¹¹⁷ The Latin *uno ictu* almost certainly corresponds to the Greek *haplêi epibolêi*. On the meaning of this expression in Proclus, cf. Roth 2008, 318f.

access to the innermost citadel of human freedom: while my act of walking may be determined by cause and effect, my decision to go for a walk is completely free of all determinism.¹¹⁸

While most contemporary advocates of the block-time view, including Einstein, seem content to accept that this perspective implies a universal determinism, Boethius thus suggests a possible way out. Only time,¹¹⁹ or rather the notion of time, gives us the impression that divine omniscience implies predestination, with its concomitant assumptions of determinism and lack of human freedom. Through the study of the Late Neoplatonist philosophical curriculum, perhaps with the addition of divine grace, Boethius believes we can achieve the “View from above” that would allow us to view reality as it truly is in itself: timeless and eternal. Should we reach this goal, we will see that the alleged conflict between divine prescience and human free-will was as illusory, albeit just as persistent, as time itself.

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¹¹⁸ Bächli 2001, 37f.; Bechtle 2006, 272–273.

¹¹⁹ Sorabji (1998) argues that it is the irrevocability of the gods’ knowledge that implies that my future acts are already determined. As he points out, however, the notion of irrevocability seems tied to that of the irreversibility of time’s flow: take away the latter and the former would seem to disappear.

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