

## HOW BOETHIUS INFLUENCED C. S. LEWIS

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**Abstract:** *In spite of C. S. Lewis's clear statement of the influence which Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* had upon him, insufficient attention has been given to it. In this essay, I will highlight ways in which Boethius's work is reflected in Lewis's, especially *The Great Divorce*. Specifically, two similarities are evident: first, the relationship of eternity, our choices, and human knowledge; and second, the role of desire in our attempts to achieve true happiness.*

**Keywords:** *C. S. Lewis, Boethius, imagination, knowledge, theological anthropology*

When *The Christian Century* asked C. S. Lewis to name ten books that have influenced him most, number seven was Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> But how did Boethius in fact influence him? Curiously, Boethius is often referred to only in passing in Lewis studies.<sup>2</sup> For example, only occasional references to Boethius are made in the recent *Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, and the only substantial point concerns Lewis's use of Boethius's solution to divine foreknowledge.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I will sketch out two additional themes that are discussed in *The Consolation of Philosophy* and that also appear in Lewis's works: knowledge acquisition, and nothingness and happiness. This shows how Lewis drew from the great Christian tradition and how he reformed Platonic philosophy to make it more in line with the Christian doctrine of the body.

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Ex Libris," *The Christian Century* 79 (1962): 719. The exact question was: "What books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life?" For the discussion of the list, see David Werther and Susan Werther, eds., *C. S. Lewis's List: The Ten Books That Influenced Him Most* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). He mentions Boethius often in his other writings but never engages his thought at length. In his essay "On the reading of old books," he mentions Boethius as one of the ancient Christian authors who has influenced him. In "Neoplatonism of Spencer," Boethius is used as a reference point.

<sup>2</sup> The exception is Chris Armstrong, "Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*," in *C. S. Lewis's List*, 135–56. He discusses, rightly in my mind, how Lewis's works reflect the answer to the exact question (about vocational attitude and philosophy of life) he was asked. Lewis does not claim that Boethius was the philosopher whom he considered the best of all, or who kept him most occupied in the scholarly sense. Nevertheless, I demonstrate that some of Boethius's ideas also make their way into Lewis's substantive thinking.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph P. Cassidy, "On Discernment," in *Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (ed. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 136–38.

## I. BOETHIUS AND LEWIS

I begin by noting something about the affinity between Boethius and Lewis. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (a. 480–c. 524) was the last of the Western Church Fathers; often he is said to be “the last of the Romans, and the first of the scholastic philosophers.”<sup>4</sup> He stood at the end of the venerable continuum that reached back to ancient Greek schools of philosophy. In his works, he represented the best of early Christian wisdom and learning. On the other hand, he was standing on the border of a new, uncertain world. Barbarians had occupied Rome, and the state was now overseen by Theodoric the Ostrogoth. Due to a conspiracy, Boethius was imprisoned and wrongly accused of treason by his political opponents. During his time in prison, he wrote his best-known work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which is a dialogue between him and Lady Philosophy, a specter and incarnation of wisdom, who visits him in his cell.<sup>5</sup> The book is a treasure trove of aphoristic wisdom. It is not particularly easy reading since it contains many sweeping treatments of complicated philosophical matters that are impenetrable for non-specialists. In general, it is an examination of the meaning of human life, and especially of suffering, and how they are linked to human choices and divine providence.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, Boethius’s fate was to die a horrible death, and one of the central themes in the book was the question of why the innocent suffer.

In his philosophy, Boethius exemplifies excellent knowledge of non-Christian philosophy; Plato is especially important for him. Some have claimed that Boethius was not that much of an original thinker, being more like a conduit who hands over things given to him by others. Even Lewis calls him “the divine popularizer” (which is something that Lewis himself was, too).<sup>7</sup> However, recent scholarship has contested the view of Boethius as a mere dilettante and defended both the originality and depth of his works.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to Boethius, see John Marenbon, *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); idem, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* [CP hereafter] (trans. W. V. Cooper; New York: Cosimo, 2007). Lewis, however, argues that the book was not written in prison, but probably before his imprisonment: “We must note that there is no trace in the *De Consolatione* of the dungeon where it was traditionally composed. The *catenis* of I. M. ii seem to be metaphorical, and the *ipsa loci facies* of I. Pr. iv is answered not, as we might expect, with some philosophical proof that all mortal habitations are in the long run prisons, but with the statement that the place which Boethius regards as *exilium* is to others *patria* (II. Pr. iv).” C. S. Lewis, *Image and Imagination: Essays and Reviews* (ed. Walter Hooper; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 137.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis finds it interesting how Boethius does not mention physical pain, even if he writes about suffering. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 177. In his letter to Mary Neylan, March 26, 1940, he briefly discusses Boethius’s Stoic attitude towards misfortunes. C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949* (ed. Walter Hooper; London: HarperCollins, 2005). See also C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 48.

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 46.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Marenbon, *Boethius*, 4.

Many themes that Boethius discusses in *The Consolation* are linked to Platonism and Augustinianism. Concerning the theme of this article, especially the notions of change and providence, of goodness and evil are developed in a critical relation to these intellectual traditions. Boethius's influence is based on his being a kind of borderline figure. In the midst of the impending death of the Empire, he is able to summarize the topics of both ancient and Christian philosophy before the so-called Dark Ages fall upon Europe. Especially in the later scholastic medieval philosophy, Boethius plays an important role as ancient doctrines and themes are handed over to the scholastics by him, and therefore he becomes a much-discussed figure in medieval theology.

Boethius's thinking is much indebted to Neo-Platonism. I underline only one thing, which is central to this rich tradition and which is crucial for the topic of this paper. Plotinus (204–270) was one of the seminal figures in interpreting Plato's thought and creating the cosmological model that is often, but slightly erroneously, dubbed "Platonic." For Plotinus, everything that exists originates from the One, or the Good, which is unchangeable, whereas the matter is evil and changeable. Soul is a mediating force, which is able to mold the physical reality by contemplating through the Intellect the idea of the One. This is supposed to explain the ascent of the individual beings who are trapped in matter back to the One. The goal of contemplation is to first realize that one's origin is not material, that is, one is a soul. Slowly gaining proper understanding grants one the vision where he or she is able to see the hierarchy of being, and, at the highest level, one is able to grasp the structure of reality without ordinary discursive thinking and thereby become one with the One. These themes are employed by Boethius in his discussion of the nature of divine immutability and human fate. Lewis puts his own spin on these ideas, but first I need to note briefly something general about Lewis's relation to Boethius.<sup>9</sup>

In his inaugural lecture *De Descriptione Temporum*, Lewis sets himself in a similar situation as Boethius (without naming him directly; openly comparing himself to Boethius would have been impudent). As he was inaugurated as the chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature, he felt like a man out of time. Assessing the times, as the title of this talk suggested, he came to the conclusion that despite the modern prejudices about the Dark Ages and the Medieval Western world, the greatest cultural lapse had taken place during his lifetime: "If one were looking for a man who could not read Virgil though his father could, he might be found more easily in the twentieth century than in the fifth."<sup>10</sup> Lewis presents himself as a specimen from the past, a sort of time-traveler, for us moderns to examine so that we might learn something from him.<sup>11</sup> He sees his role as the one who passes the knowledge

<sup>9</sup> Marenbon, *Boethius*, 11–12.

<sup>10</sup> C. S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," in *Selected Literary Essays* (ed. Walter Hooper; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1–14.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, he likens himself to Neanderthal man, or a dinosaur (*ibid.*, 13): "You don't want to be lectured on Neanderthal Man by a Neanderthaler, still less on dinosaurs by a dinosaur. And yet, is that the whole story? If a live dinosaur dragged its slow length into the laboratory, would we not all look back as we fled? What a chance to know at last how it really moved and looked and smelled and what noises it made! And if the Neanderthaler could talk, then, though his lecturing technique might leave much to be

of the past to the next generation, hoping that someone listens. Maybe Boethius felt the same.

Lewis does not refer to Boethius very often. He mentions him here and there in his letters and journals, always in a very appreciative tone, and he often displays a mastery of the Latin text. However, he only rarely engages his thought directly and at length. Lewis's most extensive treatment of Boethius can be found in *The Discarded Image*, which contains a very accessible and accurate summary of Boethius's thought.<sup>12</sup> We know that he lectured on Boethius, and that the lectures were highly regarded by Sister Madeleva, an English teacher from Notre Dame, Indiana.<sup>13</sup> In his letter to William L. Kinter, he envies his visit to Boethius's tomb in Pavia but thinks that "perhaps his shade w[oul]d be more pleased if I re[-]read the *Consolatio*."<sup>14</sup> In 1940, he wrote a thorough and learned review of Helen Barrett's book, *Boethius: Some Aspects of his Time and Work*.<sup>15</sup>

In this article, I will focus on Boethian themes as they appear in Lewis's writings without direct reference to Boethius. Michael Ward's work on Lewis's use of Ptolemaic planetary cosmology in *The Chronicles of Narnia* shows how Lewis often employs ideas and themes without direct reference to his sources.<sup>16</sup> This, of course, makes it hard to prove direct influence. Nevertheless, in this case the evidence that supports the link between Lewis and Boethius consists of three things: his open admiration and recommendation of Boethius's works, the depth Lewis shows when he discusses Boethius, and the similarity of images and linguistic formulations Lewis employs when discussing themes that Boethius also writes about. In the following, I examine a few particular themes that reflect this kind of dependence.

## II. ON THE NATURE OF HUMAN AND DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

In *Perelandra*, the space traveler Ransom meets Mars and Venus, planets who have taken an angelic form.<sup>17</sup> Here and elsewhere in his fiction, Lewis employs ancient Platonic philosophy that personified the stars.<sup>18</sup> Besides being physical stars,

desired, should we not almost certainly learn from him some things about him which the best modern anthropologist could never have told us?"

<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 75–90.

<sup>13</sup> M. Madeleva, *My First Seventy Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 75–76.

<sup>14</sup> October 29, 1950. C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963* (ed. Walter Hooper; London: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Image and Imagination: Essays and Review*, 200–209. Mark Edwards claims that Lewis discusses only *The Consolation* at length, and none of Boethius's other works are mentioned by him. Edwards, "C. S. Lewis and Early Christian Literature," in *C. S. Lewis and the Church: Essays in Honour of Walter Hooper* (ed. Judith Wolfe and Brendan N. Wolfe; T&T Clark Theology; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 29. However, Lewis mentions Boethius's *De Fide* in this review and also in *The Discarded Image*.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (London: HarperCollins, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> In *The Voyage of Dawn Treader*, Eustace observes empirically, and reductively, that "a star is a huge ball of flaming gas." But Ramandu, a personified star, answers, "[That] is not what a star is but only what it is made of." C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Fontana, 1959), 159.

they are also persons that can communicate with other beings. Ransom is, however, perplexed by their ever-changing appearance.

This is a possible allusion to the beginning of *The Consolation of Philosophy* where Lady Philosophy, personified wisdom, appears to Boethius in his prison.

While I was pondering thus in silence, and using my pen to set down so tearful a complaint, there appeared standing over my head a woman's form, whose countenance was full of majesty, whose eyes shone as with fire and in power of insight surpassed the eyes of men, whose colour was full of life, whose strength was yet intact though she was so full of years that none would ever think that she was subject to such age as ours. One could but doubt her varying stature, for at one moment she repressed it to the common measure of a man, at another she seemed to touch with her crown the very heavens: and when she had raised higher her head, it pierced even the sky and baffled the sight of those who would look upon it. (*CP* 1.1)

Boethius's image is vivid and it sticks to reader's imagination and it is possible that Lewis had it in his mind while depicting the personified planets.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Lewis connects this theme to a more philosophical point on the nature of knowledge, which is something that Lady discusses with Boethius, too.

After the angels have chosen a form that Ransom is able to perceive, he asks whether they see each other as they are. The answer given by Mars is that "only Maleldil sees any creature as it really is." Then Ransom inquires whether he is "only perceiving an appearance." The answer of Mars is that in fact, "you have never seen more than an appearance of anything—not of Arbol, nor of a stone, nor of your own body."<sup>20</sup>

In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius gives a scant but influential account of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> According to Boethius, human perception and knowledge takes place in the following stages. First, the sense organs perceive an object (*sensus*). Then, this perception is processed by imagination (*imaginatio*), which hands it over to reason (*ratio*). The result of this process is ideally knowledge, but something higher can also be achieved by virtuous observers. This is called understanding (*intelligentia*). According to Boethius, only God understands things perfectly, as he perceives things as they really are, although something like this might be possible for some

<sup>19</sup> Lewis had noted the peculiarity of this image. In *The Allegory of Love*, 84, Lewis notes that "it would be odd to class Boethius as an allegorist. On the other hand, his use of personification in the figure of *Philosophia* raises personification to a new dignity and is worthy to stand beside the Wisdom-literature of the Jews." In *The Discarded Image*, 80, Lewis notes that picturing wisdom as a woman who is both young and old is used in Claudian's *Natura*.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Perelandra*, 255. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis refers to images by acknowledging that we need them but also it is God's intention to break our images of the divine. God is "the great iconoclast." See, e.g., C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 51–53. In *Till We Have Faces*, it is also hinted that our images of the divine are slowly developing towards a greater likeness of reality. See esp. C. S. Lewis, "Till We Have Faces," in *Selected Books* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), chap. 2, IV. This may also be due to the influence of F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*, who may, in turn, be indebted to Boethius.

<sup>21</sup> Boethius, *CP* 5.4–5. Lewis explains Boethius's theory of perception in Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 88–89, 156–58.

humans, at least fleetingly. The underlying point is that knowledge acquisition is difficult and not automatic. To really understand, we must strive to understand. Facile knowledge about everyday objects is easy, but really understanding things requires a great deal of work.<sup>22</sup>

Some have seen here hints of Kantianism: we perceive only appearances, not things in themselves.<sup>23</sup> However, this is not Boethius's or Lewis's view. We do directly perceive things that are real, but our problem is only that we do not understand their true nature. The Boethian theory of perception is a version of direct realism, not Kantianism.<sup>24</sup> Lewis returns to this theme in his essay "Bluspels and Flalansferes," where he explains the relation of imagination and reason in more detail.

But it must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. It is, I confess, undeniable that such a view indirectly implies a kind of truth or rightness in the imagination itself. I said at the outset that the truth we won by metaphor could not be greater than the truth of metaphor itself; and we have seen since that all our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor.<sup>25</sup>

Lewis relies here on the Aristotelian notion of *conversio ad phantasmata*.<sup>26</sup> All knowledge is based on the sense organs receiving an image, as Aristotle states in *De*

<sup>22</sup> On virtues and knowledge, see also C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2009), 77–78.

<sup>23</sup> It is a matter of debate how to interpret Kant on this point, as Kant's epistemology builds upon medieval theories of perception. Perhaps the major difference between Kant and the classical authors is that for Kant, reality (the noumenal) is in principle not directly knowable and is intuited through the innate structures of our minds (the so-called "synthetic a priori"). In short, the ancients (and Lewis) believed in the possibility of metaphysics; Kant did not. Some modern theologians have seen that the Kantian trajectory makes traditionally understood theology impossible. See, e.g., Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Is It Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?," *Modern Theology* 14.1 (1998), 1–18. However, some have offered readings of Kant that allow the possibility of metaphysics, see, e.g., Andrew Chignell, "As Kant Has Shown ...: Analytic Theology and the Critical Philosophy," in *Analytic Theology* (ed. Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea), 117–35; Chris L. Firestone and Nathan. Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion on imagination and perception in the history of Western philosophy, see Ritva Palmén, *Richard of St. Victor's Theory of Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). I have examined Lewis's theory on religious knowledge in a more detail in my "Reason and Imagination in the Thought of C. S. Lewis," in *The Origins of Religion: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies* (ed. Hanne Appelqvist and Dan-Johan Eklund; Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft 71; Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2017), 238–52.

<sup>25</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes," in *Selected Literary Essays*, 265.

<sup>26</sup> Aquinas, *ST* I.84.7: "It is impossible for our intellect to understand anything actually, except by turning to the phantasms." In the medieval theory of perception, "convert" means the adaption of new form. When we perceive a thing, our sense organ receives the form of the perceived thing. See, e.g., Aquinas, *ST* I.78; *De Veritate* q. 10 a. 6 ad 7.

*anima* 3.7: “the soul understands nothing without a phantasm.” In other words, I can know that I see a tree in the yard because I have received a sensible image (*species intelligibilis*) of that tree.<sup>27</sup>

Human knowledge acquisition is always discursive and perspectival, and understanding requires a deepening relationship with the things we perceive. The understanding Boethius talks about reminds us of the proper stance towards the universe, which is perhaps most lucidly discussed by Lewis in his well-known account on “enjoyment” and “contemplation.”<sup>28</sup> Some things, however, are impossible for mortals to grasp as they are. Among these is the relation between human freedom and divine providence and foreknowledge.

In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius uses the following famous formulation of God’s eternity:

Eternity is the simultaneous and complete possession of infinite life. This will appear more clearly if we compare it with temporal things. All that lives under the conditions of time moves through the present from the past to the future; there is nothing set in time which can at one moment grasp the whole space of its lifetime. It cannot yet comprehend to-morrow; yesterday it has already lost. And in this life of today your life is no more than a changing, passing moment. ... God has a condition of ever-present eternity, His knowledge, which passes over every change of time, embracing infinite lengths of past and future, views in its own direct comprehension everything as though it were taking place in the present. If you would weigh the foreknowledge by which God distinguishes all things, you will more rightly hold it to be a knowledge of a never-failing constancy in the present, than a foreknowledge of the future. (5, 6)<sup>29</sup>

In *Discarded Image*, Lewis explains the Boethian view thus:

God is eternal, not perpetual. Strictly speaking, he never *foresees*; He simply sees. Your ‘future’ is only an area, and only for us a special area, of His infinite Now. He sees (not remembers) your yesterday’s acts because yesterday is still ‘there’ for Him; he sees (not foresees) your tomorrow’s acts because He is already in tomorrow. As a human spectator, by watching my present act, does not infringe upon its freedom, so I am none the less free to act as I choose in the future because God, in that future (His present) watches me acting.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge: I. Classical Roots and Medieval Discussions* (Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 48; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 37–38, 45–46.

<sup>28</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London: Fontana, 1955), 217–19; idem, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” in *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 199–203. Lewis quite early on adopted Samuel Alexander’s distinction between Contemplation and Enjoyment and rejected that imagination, pure and simple, could tell us whether what we experience is true, or that imagination could by itself reveal spiritual truths to us. The Alexanderian stance, instead, enables us to see the reality in its fullness. See also Peter J. Schakel, “Feeding the Imagination’: Lewis’s Imaginative Theory and Practice,” in *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis: Journeying to Narnia and Other Worlds* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 10–11.

<sup>29</sup> Something similar had already been suggested by Plato, *Tim.* 37d; Ammonius 1.36.1; and Augustine, *Civ.* 2.21. Sharples, “Fate,” 217.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *Discarded Image*, 89.

This same idea is repeated in many of Lewis's books, including *Mere Christianity* and the *Great Divorce*.<sup>31</sup> Especially in *The Great Divorce*, the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is tied to the human inability to rise above our place in time: "Ye cannot know eternal reality by a definition. Time itself, and all acts and events that fill Time, are the definition, and it must be lived."<sup>32</sup>

The Boethian view is supposed to grant one both genuine human freedom and divine omniscience. For God, everything happens in the "eternal now," whereas humans experience this world from the perspective of time. In *The Great Divorce*, an allegory is made between chess pieces and the observers of the game. A chess piece experiences the game from a limited perspective (the chessboard here symbolizes Time), whereas the observers see the whole board simultaneously. But these are just similes of something that is greater, and Lewis acknowledges the limits of this view, even if he uses it widely.<sup>33</sup>

The problems of the Boethian view have not escaped the attention of critics. For example, Joseph P. Cassidy argues that perhaps collapsing everything into the eternal now is not the best way to deal with the problem of creaturely freedom.<sup>34</sup> First, he thinks this does away with the intelligibility of the universe because in this view duration of time would not be real. Therefore, you end up paying too high a price for something that you cannot secure in the end, that is, human freedom, since if there is no duration, there are no choices in any meaningful sense. Second, Cassidy points out problems related to the doctrine of divine simplicity. The incarnation of God the Son should challenge the Boethian solution because that introduces a temporal event, which supposedly makes it hard for God to be completely outside of time. It is not possible here to discuss these issues, which are very complicated, and I leave it to philosophers to decide whether these problems can be solved adequately or not.

<sup>31</sup> In *Mere Christianity*, 170, Lewis writes: "Well, if that were true, if God *foresaw* our acts, it would be very hard to understand how we could be free not to do them. But suppose God is outside and above the Time-line. In that case, what we call 'tomorrow' is visible to Him in just the same way as what we call 'today.' All the days are 'Now' for Him. He does not remember you doing things yesterday; He simply sees you doing them, because, though you have lost yesterday, He has not. He does not 'foresee' you doing things tomorrow; He simply sees you doing them: because, though tomorrow is not yet there for you, it is for Him. You never supposed that your actions at this moment were any less free because God knows what you are doing. Well, He knows your tomorrow's actions in just the same way—because He is already in tomorrow and can simply watch you. In a sense, He does not know your action till you have done it: but then the moment at which you have done it is already 'Now' for Him."

<sup>32</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (London: Fontana, 1946), 115.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 166–71.

<sup>34</sup> Cassidy, "On Discernment," 136–37. He does not mention divine simplicity, but that is the theme under which these issues are typically discussed. See, e.g., James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology; London: Bloomsbury, 2016). For criticism of the Boethian view, see also Edwards, "C. S. Lewis and Early Christian Literature," 30. Boethius discusses simplicity, e.g., in *CP* 4, 6.



I would, however, suggest that perhaps this kind of philosophically satisfying solution was not exactly what Lewis had in mind.<sup>35</sup> Namely, it is debatable in what sense Boethius, or Lewis, is trying to *solve* the problem. Instead, Lewis seems to be, first, eager to point out the limitations of this view, and, secondly, he uses Boethius's view to underscore why the problem will always remain a problem for us. Lewis is trying to put us in the correct relation to the problem, as Lady Philosophy is trying to teach Boethius true wisdom, and as Mars and Venus mentor Ransom. This is also the use of Boethius's view in the end sequence of *The Great Divorce*. The Boethian view is merely "a vision in a dream," something that is at least two steps away from the reality.<sup>36</sup>

This brings us back to the nature of human knowledge and our lack of understanding (in the Boethian sense). Because we are creatures in time, we always experience the world in fragments, through things that appear to us momentarily, only to vanish a moment later. Therefore, we "have never seen more than an appearance of anything—not of Arbol, nor of a stone, nor of your own body."

### III. NOTHINGNESS AND HAPPINESS

One of the best-known ideas in *The Great Divorce* is the evanescent character of the lost souls; they gradually fade out of existence becoming shadows that have fewer and fewer person-like properties. In contrast, the souls in heaven are solid, as is everything else: even the blades of grass are razor sharp.

Now that they were in the light, they were transparent—fully transparent when they stood between me and it, smudgy and imperfectly opaque when they stood in the shadow of some tree. They were in fact ghosts: man-shaped stains on the brightness of that air. One could attend to them or ignore them at will as you do with the dirt on a window pane. I noticed that the grass did not bend under their feet: even the dew drops were not disturbed.<sup>37</sup>

The solid people are quite different:

Because they were bright, I saw them while they were still very distant, and at first I did not know that they were people at all. ... The earth shook under their tread as their strong feet sank into the wet turf. A tiny haze and a sweet smell went up where they had crushed the grass and scattered the dew.<sup>38</sup>

The book portrays, on the one hand, a movement of the damned souls towards lesser forms of existence, and, on the other hand, the ascent of the redeemed souls towards higher and more solid forms of existence. In contrast to any Pla-

<sup>35</sup> For different levels and readings of the Boethian view, see Robert Sharpley, "Fate, Prescience and Free Will," in *Cambridge Companion to Boethius* (ed. John Marenbon; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 207–27.

<sup>36</sup> In *The Discarded Image*, 83, Lewis notes, "The character of knowledge depends not on the nature of the object known but on that of the knowing subject. ... None of these faculties [sensation, imagination, reason] by itself gives us the least hint of the mode of knowledge enjoyed by its superior."

<sup>37</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Great Divorce*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

tonist form of idealism, which thinks of material existence as of lesser value, Lewis turns this hierarchy upside down: more spiritual beings are also more material than the non-spiritual. This is perhaps one of the points where Lewis introduces a new twist in his application of Christian Platonism.

But let us compare this to what Boethius writes about evil men:

... evil men are similarly deprived of all strength. For why do they leave virtue and follow after vice? Is it from ignorance of good? Surely not, for what is weaker or less compelling than the blindness of ignorance? Do they know what they ought to follow, and are they thrown from the straight road by passions? Then they must be weak too in self-control if they cannot struggle with their evil passions. But they lose thus not only power, but existence altogether. For those who abandon the common end of all who exist, must equally cease to exist. (*CP* 4.2)

The ascent and descent of souls is tied to their very natures. As evil is the corruption of good, and being is good, the souls which have originally been created as good, and for ever greater fullness of being, have no other choice but to move slowly towards non-being. Evil is unnatural: "A thing exists which keeps its proper place and preserves its nature; but when anything falls away from its nature, its existence too ceases, for that lies in its nature" (*CP* 4.2). The people may still retain the outer form of a human being but they have lost their "nature": "In this way, therefore, all that falls away from the good, ceases also to exist, wherefore evil men cease to be what they were. The form of their human bodies still proves that they have been men; wherefore they must have lost their human nature when they turned to evil-doing" (*CP* 4.2). Lewis reflects these same ideas in his review of Barrett's book: "Evil is not a *thing*, like grass or virtue, has no nature of its own, was not created, but consists always in the deprivation of some *thing*, which, in being so deprived, departs from its true nature (from 'what it is') and therefore, in a sense, tends towards nothingness."<sup>39</sup>

The fate of the good people is completely the opposite as they slowly transform towards a more god-like form: "But we agreed that happy men are as gods. Therefore this is the reward of the good, which no time can wear out, no power can lessen, no wickedness can darken; they become divine" (*CP* 4.3). These are the solid beings in *The Great Divorce*, who are transformed towards a greater likeness of the divine.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *Image and Imagination*, 137. Of course, this is a quintessentially Augustinian view of evil as a lack of substance and the privation of good. See G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). See also Armstrong, "Boethius," 150. He points out that failing to live virtuously leads to adopting a less human form of existence. For example, this is Eustace's fate as he becomes a dragon, and similar images are also used by Dante in his *Inferno*.

<sup>40</sup> *CP* 4.6.14-17: "The will is more free when it is closer to the divine mind and less affected by the fate."

The theme of transformation is connected to will and choice in *The Great Divorce*.<sup>41</sup> The visitors from hell are given a second chance, an opportunity to stay in heaven and not return to hell. Every visitor is analyzed from the point of view of their loves and desires. The fundamental problem of all the hell-dwellers is that their desires are inordinate. They either love things in ways that fail to portray true love, or they love penultimate things as only ultimate things should be loved. In their pursuit of freedom, they have lost their true freedom. They keep chasing their desire without ever being content.<sup>42</sup> The same point is made by Boethius thus:

But the power of committing crime has no possible relation to the good. Therefore it is not an object of desire. Yet, as we said, all power is to be desired. Therefore the power of doing evil is no power at all. For all these reasons the power of good men and the weakness of evil men is apparent. So Plato's opinion is plain that "the wise alone are able to do what they desire, but unscrupulous men can only labour at what they like, they cannot fulfil their real desires." They do what they like so long as they think that they will gain through their pleasures the good which they desire; but they do not gain it, since nothing evil ever reaches happiness. (*CP* 4.3)

The inordinate desires have corrupted the lost souls so that they are now unable to tell right from wrong and suffering from happiness. In *The Great Divorce*, the hell-dwellers perceive heaven as a place of suffering and long to return to hell, which they see as a "happy" place. Boethius explains that their perception is so hindered that they are unable to experience the true nature of things because their feelings get in the way. He states: "So long as they look not upon the true course of nature, but upon their own feelings, they think that the freedom of passion and the impunity of crime are happy things." Here the same point is made at length, which nicely summarizes the ethos of *The Great Divorce*:

Each therefore seeks what it deems desirable, and flies from what it considers should be shunned. Wherefore all who have reason have also freedom of desiring and refusing in themselves. But I do not lay down that this is equal in all beings. Heavenly and divine beings have with them a judgment of great insight, an imperturbable will, and a power which can effect their desires. But human spirits must be more free when they keep themselves safe in the contemplation of the mind of God; but less free when they sink into bodies, and less still when they are bound by their earthly members. The last stage is mere slavery, when the spirit is given over to vices and has fallen away from the possession of its reason. For when the mind turns its eyes from the light of truth on high to lower darkness, soon they are dimmed by the clouds of ignorance, and become turbid

<sup>41</sup> Lewis, *Great Divorce*, 63: "Ye cannot fully understand the relations of choice and Time till you are beyond both. And ye were not brought here to study such curiosities. What concerns you is the nature of choice itself: and that ye can watch them making." See also Robert F. Brown, "Temptation and Freedom in *Perelandra*," *Renascence* (1984), 52–68.

<sup>42</sup> In *Out of the Silent Planet*, the unfallen race of *brossa* also has two words for longing, *wondelone* and *blutheline*, the first being 'good' yearning and the latter 'bad.' For discussion, see Jason Lepojärvi, "Praeparatio Evangelica—or Daemonica? C. S. Lewis and Anders Nygren on Spiritual Longing," *HTR* 109.2 (2016): 230.

through ruinous passions; by yielding to these passions and consenting to them, men increase the slavery which they have brought upon themselves, and their true liberty is lost in captivity. (*CP* 5.2)

*The Great Divorce* has been a difficult book for many traditional Christians because it seems to suggest that there is a second chance after death or that the souls of the damned are annihilated. Realizing the Boethian link helps the readers understand what Lewis in fact had in mind while writing the book. It is not a treatise about the afterlife; it is a treatise about human nature.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is uncontested that *The Consolation of Philosophy* influenced Lewis as an example of a Christian philosopher's vocation. Many themes that Boethius discusses in his book are reproduced in several of Lewis's books, especially *The Great Divorce*. I have pointed out two similarities between these books, that is, the relationship of eternity, our choices and human knowledge, and the portrayal of the human condition and the role of desire in our attempts to achieve true happiness. As a suggestion for future scholarship, an area where a further similarity might be found includes, obviously, the problem of suffering.

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<sup>43</sup> For a discussion on universalism in Lewis, see Jerry L. Walls, "The Great Divorce," in *Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, 251–65. The relationship of happiness and desires is aptly discussed by Armstrong, "Boethius," 149–51.