The Consolation of Philosophy

BOETHIUS
c. 477–524

The Consolation of Philosophy

De consolatione philosophiae

Translated from the Latin with AI (Claude) and edited



FORAGE
forage.com

The Consolation of Philosophy · Boethius (c. 477–524)

Translated from the Latin with AI (Claude) and edited. Reading edition, Forage, September 2026. forage.com/boethius/consolation

Latin text: H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand, *Boethius: The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy* (Loeb, 1918), via the Perseus Digital Library (github.com/PerseusDL/canonical-latinLit), CC BY-SA 4.0, with obvious transcription errors corrected against the printed edition. English: translated from the Latin with AI (Claude), then edited for accuracy and consistency. Not reviewed by a human specialist. Free to reuse under CC BY-SA 4.0. The small numbers set in the text are book and section: M for a poem (metrum), P for prose (prosa), so 1.M1 is the first poem of Book I.

The original text is in the public domain. This translation is free to share and adapt under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International license (CC BY-SA 4.0): creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0

Set in Source Serif 4.

CONTENTS

Introduction ix

Book I 1

Poem 1: The prisoner's lament 1
Prose 1: Philosophy appears 2
Poem 2: A mind sunk in darkness 4
Prose 2: The diagnosis 5
Poem 3: The clouds disperse 6
Prose 3: Philosophy's old battles 6
Poem 4: The calm mind 8
Prose 4: Boethius's defense 8
Poem 5: O maker of the star-bearing sphere 14
Prose 5: Exile from the true homeland 15
Poem 6: Everything in its season 17
Prose 6: Forgetting what he is 17
Poem 7: Clouded minds 20

Book II 21

Prose 1: Fortune's nature 21
Poem 1: Fortune's proud hand 23
Prose 2: Fortune's wheel 23
Poem 2: The thirst for more 25
Prose 3: Counting his blessings 26
Poem 3: Nothing born stands firm 28
Prose 4: Happiness within 28
Poem 4: A house on the rock 32
Prose 5: The emptiness of riches 32
Poem 5: The first age 36
Prose 6: Office and power 37
Poem 6: Nero 39
Prose 7: The smallness of fame 39

Poem 7: Death scorns glory 43
Prose 8: The uses of bad fortune 44
Poem 8: Love binds the world 45

Book III 47
Prose 1: The promise of true happiness 47
Poem 1: Clearing the field 48
Prose 2: The highest good 48
Poem 2: The pull of nature 51
Prose 3: Wealth does not satisfy 52
Poem 3: The rich man's care 54
Prose 4: Office does not confer honor 54
Poem 4: Nero's honors 56
Prose 5: The weakness of kings 56
Poem 5: True power 58
Prose 6: Glory and noble birth 58
Poem 6: One origin 59
Prose 7: Bodily pleasure 59
Poem 7: The bee's sting 60
Prose 8: False paths 60
Poem 8: Ignorance of the good 62
Prose 9: True happiness 62
Poem 9: O you who govern the world 66
Prose 10: God is the highest good 67
Poem 10: The one refuge 71
Prose 11: The good is the one 71
Poem 11: Truth within 75
Prose 12: God governs by goodness 75
Poem 12: Orpheus and Eurydice 79

Book IV 81
Prose 1: Why do the wicked prosper? 81
Poem 1: The wings of the mind 83
Prose 2: The good are powerful, the wicked weak 84
Poem 2: Tyrants in chains 88
Prose 3: Reward and punishment 88

Poem 3: Circe 91
Prose 4: The misery of the wicked 92
Poem 4: Love the good, pity the wicked 96
Prose 5: Rewards reversed 97
Poem 5: Hidden causes 98
Prose 6: Providence and fate 98
Poem 6: The concord of the universe 105
Prose 7: All fortune is good 106
Poem 7: The labors of heroes 109

Book V 111
Prose 1: Chance 111
Poem 1: The Tigris and Euphrates 113
Prose 2: Free will 113
Poem 2: The true sun 115
Prose 3: Foreknowledge and freedom 115
Poem 3: The mind's search for truth 119
Prose 4: Ways of knowing 120
Poem 4: The active mind 124
Prose 5: Reason and intelligence 125
Poem 5: Upright humanity 127
Prose 6: Eternity 127

INTRODUCTION

Boethius was a Roman senator, a scholar who translated Aristotle into Latin, and chief minister to Theodoric, the Gothic king of Italy. Around 524 he was accused of treason, imprisoned at Pavia and put to death. In prison, awaiting execution, he wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

It opens with the prisoner writing sad verses, when a woman of great age and majesty appears at his bedside: Philosophy herself. She drives off the Muses of poetry and sets about curing him. Over five books she argues that Fortune's gifts were never his to keep, that wealth, office, power and fame cannot give happiness, that true happiness is God, that the wicked are never really powerful, and that God's foreknowledge leaves human beings free.

Prose and poetry alternate throughout: each prose section (*prosa*) is followed by a poem (*metrum*) that sums up or lifts the argument. The book was read, copied and translated throughout the Middle Ages — by King Alfred, Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth I among others.

Book I

The prisoner's lament
Lady Philosophy appears, hears his grievances, and diagnoses his sickness.

POEM 1: THE PRISONER'S LAMENT

In prison, Boethius writes mournful verses about his sudden fall and longs for death.

1.M1 I who once composed songs with flourishing zeal
am forced, alas, in tears, to take up mournful measures.
See: the torn Muses dictate what I must write,
and elegies wet my face with tears that are real.
These at least no terror could overpower
or stop from going with me on my road.
Once the glory of a happy, green youth,
they now console the fate of a sad old man.
For old age has come unlooked-for, hurried on by troubles,
and grief has ordered its own years to settle in me.
White hairs pour untimely from my head,
and loose skin trembles on a worn-out body.
Happy the death that does not thrust itself on people in their sweet years
but comes when the sorrowful often call it.
Alas, how deaf the ear with which it turns from the wretched;
how cruelly it refuses to close weeping eyes.
While faithless Fortune favored me with fickle goods,
one sad hour had almost drowned my head.

/ Now, because she has clouded and changed her deceitful face,
my unholy life drags out its unwelcome delays.
Why, my friends, did you so often boast that I was happy?
One who has fallen never stood on steady feet.

PROSE 1: PHILOSOPHY APPEARS

A majestic woman appears at his bedside and drives away the Muses of poetry.

1.P1 While I was silently turning these things over by myself and setting down my tearful complaint with the service of my pen, there seemed to stand above my head a woman of a most venerable face. Her eyes burned, and saw deeper than the common power of human beings; her color was vivid, with a vigor never exhausted, although she was so full of years that no one could believe she belonged to our age. Her height was hard to judge. At one moment she held herself to the common measure of human beings; at another she seemed to strike the sky with the crown of her head; and when she raised her head higher still, she pierced the very sky and baffled the gaze of those who looked at her. Her robes were made of the finest threads, with delicate craftsmanship, from an indestructible material; she had woven them with her own hands, as I later learned when she told me. A kind of dimness of neglected age had clouded their appearance, as it tends to cloud smoky portraits. On their lowest border was woven the Greek letter Π [pi], and on the highest, θ [theta].[1] And between the two letters, marked out like the rungs of a ladder, certain steps could be seen, by which one might climb from the lower letter to the higher. Yet the hands of certain violent men had torn this same robe and carried off whatever scraps each could. In her right hand she carried books, and in her left a scepter.

When she saw the Muses of poetry standing by my bed and dictating words to my weeping, she was disturbed for a

moment, and her eyes blazed fiercely. "Who," she said, "let these showgirls of the stage come near this sick man? They would not only give his sorrows no remedies but would feed them with sweet poisons besides. These are the ones who choke the rich harvest of reason's fruits with the barren thorns of the passions; they accustom people's minds to their sickness instead of freeing them. If your blandishments were leading away some uninitiated man, as you usually do, I would think it less of a hardship, since no work of mine would be harmed in him. But this man, nourished on Eleatic and Academic studies? No—be off with you, Sirens, sweet all the way to destruction, and leave him to my Muses to be cared for and healed."[2]

Rebuked by these words, that company cast its face to the ground more sorrowfully, confessed its shame with a blush, and passed sadly over the threshold. But my sight was drowned in tears and dimmed, so that I could not make out who this woman of such commanding authority was. I was stunned, and with my eyes fixed on the ground I began to wait in silence for what she would do next. Then she came nearer and sat down at the foot of my bed, and looking at my face, heavy with grief and cast down to the ground by sorrow, she lamented the disturbance of my mind in these verses.

1 The two letters are usually taken to stand for practical and theoretical (contemplative) philosophy.

2 The Eleatics (Parmenides, Zeno of Elea) and Plato's Academy: the two schools stand for the best of Greek philosophy.

POEM 2: A MIND SUNK IN DARKNESS

Philosophy laments that the man who once studied the heavens now stares at the ground.

1.M2 Alas, how the mind, sunk in the headlong depths,
grows dull, and, leaving behind its own light,
sets out for the darkness outside,
whenever, swollen by earthly winds,
harmful anxiety grows beyond measure.
This man, once free under the open sky,
used to walk the paths of heaven;
he would gaze at the light of the rosy sun,
look upon the stars of the cold moon,
and any star that makes its wandering returns,
bending through its various orbits,
he had conquered and grasped in numbers.

/ What is more, the causes why roaring
winds disturb the surface of the sea,
what spirit turns the steady globe,
or why the star that will set in the western waves
rises from the reddening east,
what tempers the calm hours of spring
so that it decks the earth with rosy flowers,
who granted that fertile autumn, when the year is full,
should flow with heavy grapes—
these he used to probe, and to set out
the various causes of hidden nature.
Now he lies, the light of his mind worn out,
his neck weighed down with heavy chains,
his face bowed low by the weight,
forced, alas, to gaze at the dull earth.

PROSE 2: THE DIAGNOSIS

She finds him stunned into silence, calls it a passing lethargy, and dries his eyes.

1.P2 "But it is time," she said, "for medicine rather than lament." Then, fixing her eyes on me intently, she said: "Are you the man who was once nourished on my milk, brought up on my food, and grew into the strength of a manly spirit? Yet I had given you such arms as would have protected you with unconquerable firmness, had you not thrown them away first. Do you recognize me? Why are you silent? Is it shame or stupor that has made you speechless? I would rather it were shame; but stupor, I see, has overwhelmed you." And when she saw that I was not only silent but altogether tongueless and mute, she gently laid her hand on my breast and said: "There is no danger. He is suffering from lethargy, the common illness of deluded minds. He has forgotten himself for a little while; he will easily remember, if indeed he has known me before. So that he can, let me wipe his eyes for a moment, clouded as they are by the fog of mortal things." So saying, she gathered her robe into a fold and dried my eyes, which were swimming with tears.

POEM 3: THE CLOUDS DISPERSE

His sight clears, like the sun breaking through after a storm.

1.M3 Then the night was scattered and the darkness left me,
and my eyes regained their former strength—
as when the stars are massed in cloud by the headlong
northwest wind
and the sky stands still under rain-filled storms;
the sun hides, and before the stars have come into the sky
night is poured down upon the earth;
if the north wind, sent out from his Thracian cave,
should lash this night and unlock the imprisoned day,
the sun flashes out, quivering with sudden light,
and strikes our wondering eyes with his rays.[3]

PROSE 3: PHILOSOPHY'S OLD BATTLES

He recognizes his nurse, Philosophy, who recalls the sages persecuted before him.

1.P3 In just the same way the clouds of sadness dissolved; I drank in the sky and recovered my mind enough to recognize the face of my healer. So when I turned my eyes on her and fixed my gaze, I saw that it was my nurse, in whose house I had lived from my youth: Philosophy. "Why," I said, "teacher of all the virtues, have you come down from the height of heaven into the solitude of my exile? Is it so that you too may be harried along with me, a defendant on false charges?"

She replied: Should I desert you, my pupil, and not share the burden you have shouldered through hatred of my name, taking part in the labor with you? It was never right for Philosophy to leave an innocent man to go his way alone. Should I, of all people, fear accusations against myself, and shudder as if something new had happened? Do you think this is the first time that

3 The Latin names the winds Corus (northwest) and Boreas (north), and the sun Phoebus (Apollo).

wisdom has been attacked and endangered among the wicked? Did I not often, among the ancients too, before the age of my Plato, fight a great battle against the recklessness of folly? And while Plato was still alive, did not his teacher Socrates, with me standing beside him, win the victory of an unjust death? After that, the Epicurean mob and the Stoic and the rest each tried to seize his inheritance, every one for his own share; and as I cried out and resisted, they dragged me about as if I were part of the spoils. They tore the robe that I had woven with my own hands, and, snatching scraps from it, went off believing that I had yielded to them entirely. Because some traces of my dress could be seen on them, ignorance supposed them to be my intimates, and through the error of the uninitiated crowd it brought some of them to ruin. You may not know of the flight of Anaxagoras, the poison of Socrates, or the torture of Zeno, because they are foreign; but you could at least have known of men like Canius, Seneca and Soranus, whose memory is neither very old nor obscure. Nothing brought them to disaster except that, trained in my ways, they seemed utterly unlike the wicked in their pursuits. So there is nothing for you to wonder at if, on this sea of life, we are tossed by storms blowing all around us, since our chief aim is to displease the worst. Their army, though large, is to be despised, since it is led by no general but is swept along at random, in all directions, by frenzied error.[4] If ever it draws up its battle line against us and presses on in greater strength, our general withdraws her forces into the citadel, while they busy themselves plundering useless baggage. And we, from above, laugh at them as they grab the cheapest of things, safe from all their furious uproar and protected by a rampart that raging folly may not hope to scale.

4 Anaxagoras was driven from Athens and Zeno of Elea tortured by a tyrant; Julius Canius was executed by Caligula, Seneca forced to suicide by Nero, and Barea Soranus condemned under Nero.

POEM 4: THE CALM MIND

Whoever has mastered hope and fear cannot be shaken by tyrants or disasters.

1.M4 Whoever, calm, with his life set in order,
has put proud fate beneath his feet,
and, looking straight at either fortune,
has kept his face unconquered,
will not be moved by the rage and threats of the sea
churning its swell up from the bottom,
nor by restless Vesuvius, whenever it bursts its furnaces
and hurls out its smoking fires,
nor by the course of the blazing thunderbolt
that so often strikes high towers.
Why are the wretched so amazed at savage tyrants
who rage without real strength?
Hope for nothing and fear nothing,
and you will disarm the anger of the powerless.
But whoever trembles in fear or desire,
being unsteady and not his own master,
has thrown away his shield, and, driven from his post,
fastens the chain by which he can be dragged.

PROSE 4: BOETHIUS'S DEFENSE

Boethius recounts his public service, the false charges against him, and his condemnation.

1.P4 "Do you take this in," she said, "and does it sink into your mind? Or are you ὄνος λύρας [an ass at the lyre]? Why do you weep, why do you stream with tears? / ἐξαύδα, μὴ κεῦθε νόῳ [speak out, do not hide it in your mind]. If you expect the physician's help, you must uncover the wound."[5]

Then, gathering my strength, I said: Does it still need pointing out? Is the harshness of Fortune raging against me not plain

enough on its own? Does the very look of this place not move you? Is this the library that you yourself had chosen as your surest seat in my house? Where you often sat with me and discoursed on the knowledge of things human and divine? Did I look like this, was my face like this, when I explored the secrets of nature with you, when you traced the paths of the stars for me with your rod, when you shaped my character and the whole plan of my life on the pattern of the heavenly order? Are these the rewards we get for obeying you? Yet it was you who laid down this principle through Plato's mouth: that commonwealths would be happy if lovers of wisdom ruled them, or if their rulers happened to love wisdom.[6] Through the mouth of the same man you taught that this is why the wise must take part in public affairs: so that the helm of cities should not be left to wicked and criminal citizens, bringing plague and ruin to the good. Following this authority, then, I wished to put into practice in public administration what I had learned from you in private leisure. You know, and so does the God who planted you in the minds of the wise, that nothing brought me to any office but the shared concern of all good men. That is the source of my grave and implacable quarrels with the wicked; and, as freedom of conscience will, in defending justice I always disregarded giving offense to the powerful. How often have I stood in the way of Conigastus as he attacked the fortunes of some weak person! How often have I thrown down Trigguilla, steward of the royal household, from an injustice he had begun, and even from one already fully carried out! How often have I put my authority in the way of danger to protect the wretched, whom the unpunished greed of the Goths was forever harassing with endless false charges! No one ever drew me from justice to injustice.[7] I

5 "An ass at the lyre" is a Greek proverb for someone deaf to what is offered; the second phrase is Homer, *Iliad* 1.363.

6 Plato, *Republic* 473c–d; the "rod" is the pointer used to draw geometrical and astronomical figures.

7 Plato, *Republic* 347c. Conigastus and Trigguilla were Gothic officials at the court of Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king of Italy. The Latin says "the barbarians"; Boethius means Theodoric's Goths.

grieved no less than those who suffered it that the fortunes of the provincials were being ruined, now by private plunder, now by public taxes. When, at a time of bitter famine, a harsh and indefensible compulsory purchase was imposed that seemed likely to devastate the province of Campania with want, I took up the fight against the praetorian prefect for the sake of the common good; I argued the case with the king looking on, and I won, so that the purchase was not enforced. Paulinus, a man of consular rank, whose wealth the palace dogs had already devoured in their hopes and ambition, I dragged from their very gaping jaws. To keep Albinus, a man of consular rank, from being seized by the penalty of a prejudged accusation, I set myself against the hatred of Cyprian the informer. Do I seem to have stirred up great enough quarrels against myself? But I ought to have been all the safer among the rest, since out of love of justice I kept nothing in reserve among the courtiers to make myself safer. And by whose accusations was I struck down? One of them, Basilius, once dismissed from the king's service, was driven by the pressure of his debts to inform against me.[8] As for Opilio and Gaudentius: the king's judgment had decreed that they go into exile for countless frauds of every kind; they refused to obey and took refuge in the sanctuary of holy buildings; and when the king learned of this, he decreed that unless they left the city of Ravenna by a set day, they would be driven out branded on their foreheads. What could be added to such severity? Yet on that very day the accusation against me was accepted, with these same men as informers. What then? Did my conduct deserve this? Or did their prior condemnation make them just accusers? Was Fortune not ashamed—if not of innocence accused, then at least of the baseness of the accusers? But do you ask what, in sum, the charge against me is? I am said to have wished the Senate to be safe. You want to know how? I am charged with having prevented an informer from delivering documents by which he would make the Senate guilty of

8 A compulsory purchase (coemptio) forced provincials to sell grain to the state at a fixed price.

treason. What then do you think, my teacher? Shall I deny the charge, so as not to be a disgrace to you? But I did wish it, and I will never stop wishing it. Shall I confess it? But the work of stopping the informer has come to an end. Shall I call it a crime to have wished for the safety of that order? The Senate itself, by its decrees about me, had made it one. But folly, always lying to itself, cannot change the merits of things; nor, by the rule of Socrates, do I think it right either to hide the truth or to grant a lie. However that may be, I leave it to be weighed by your judgment and that of the wise. So that posterity may not be ignorant of the course and truth of the matter, I have also committed it to writing and to memory. As for the forged letters by which I am accused of having hoped for Roman liberty, what point is there in speaking of them? Their fraud would have been exposed if I had been allowed to use the confession of the informers themselves, which carries the greatest weight in all such business. For what liberty is left to hope for? If only there were any! I would have answered in the words of Canius. When Gaius Caesar, son of Germanicus, said that he had known of a conspiracy against him, he replied: "If I had known, you would not have known." In this matter grief has not so dulled my senses that I complain that wicked men have plotted crimes against virtue; what utterly amazes me is that they have accomplished what they hoped. To want to do worse things may perhaps be our own failing; but that every criminal should be able to carry out against the innocent whatever he has conceived, while God looks on—that is monstrous. Hence one of your intimates asked, not without reason: "If there is a God, where does evil come from? And where does good come from, if there is not?" But granted it was only to be expected that wicked men, who seek the blood of all good men and of the whole Senate, should have wanted to destroy me too, whom they had seen fighting for the good and for the Senate. Surely I did not deserve the same from the senators as well?[9] You remember, I think—since you were

9 Gaius Caesar is the emperor Caligula (reigned AD 37–41). The question about God and evil was traditionally attributed to Epicurus.

always present and directed what I should say or do—you remember, I say, how at Verona, when the king, eager for the ruin of everyone, was trying to extend to the whole senatorial order the charge of treason laid against Albinus, I defended the innocence of the entire Senate with complete disregard for my own danger. You know that what I say is true, and that I have never boasted of it in any self-praise. For the secret of a conscience that approves itself is somehow diminished whenever someone, by showing off a deed, takes the reward of fame for it. But you see what outcome has met my innocence: instead of the rewards of true virtue I suffer the penalties of a false crime. Was there ever a confession of any crime so plain that it made the judges so unanimous in their severity that neither the error of human judgment nor the condition of fortune, uncertain for all mortals, would make some of them relent? If I had been said to have wanted to burn down temples, to slaughter priests with an impious sword, to have plotted death for all good men, the sentence would still have punished me in person, after I had confessed or been convicted. As it is, some five hundred miles away, mute and undefended, I am condemned to death and proscription for too great a zeal for the Senate. How well they deserve that no one should ever be convicted of a crime like mine! Even my accusers saw how honorable the charge was; to darken it by mixing in some real crime, they lied that I had defiled my conscience with sacrilege out of ambition for office. Yet you, planted within me, were driving every desire for mortal things from the seat of my mind, and under your eyes there could be no place for sacrilege. For every day you dropped into my ears and thoughts that saying of Pythagoras, ἕπου θεῷ [follow God]. Nor was it fitting for me to seek the protection of the vilest spirits, when you were shaping me to such excellence as to make me like God. Besides, the innocent inner sanctum of my home, the company of my most honorable friends, and my father-in-law too, a holy man as worthy of reverence as you yourself, defend me from all suspicion of this crime. But—oh, the wickedness of it!—they actually take you as their proof of so great a crime, and

I will seem to have been involved in wrongdoing for this very reason, that I was steeped in your teachings and trained in your ways. So it is not enough that my reverence for you has done me no good; you must also be torn to pieces because of the offense against me. And now comes the crowning touch to my misfortunes: the judgment of most people looks not at the merits of things but at the outcome of fortune, and considers only those things to have been wisely planned that success has commended. So it happens that a good reputation is the first thing of all to desert the unfortunate. What the talk of the people is now, how discordant and various their opinions, I hate to recall. This much only would I say: the final burden of adverse fortune is that, when some charge is invented against the wretched, they are believed to have deserved what they suffer. And I, stripped of all my goods, deprived of my offices, befouled in reputation, have suffered punishment for doing good. I seem to see the wicked workshops of criminals awash with joy and gladness; every most abandoned man threatening new frauds of informing; the good lying prostrate in terror at my peril; every scoundrel spurred on by impunity to dare crime, and by rewards to accomplish it; and the innocent deprived not only of security but even of any defense. And so I want to cry out:

POEM 5: O MAKER OF THE STAR-BEARING SPHERE

He asks why God rules the heavens by law but leaves human affairs to Fortune.

1.M5 O maker of the star-bearing sphere,
who, resting on your everlasting throne,
spin the heavens in a rushing whirl
and force the stars to submit to law,
so that now, shining with full horn,
facing all her brother's flames,
the moon hides the lesser stars,
now, pale with darkened horn,
nearer the sun, she loses her light;
and the one who, at the first hour of night,
as Hesperus leads out the chill risings of the stars,
changes again his accustomed reins
as Lucifer, pale at the sun's rising.
You, in the cold of leaf-shedding winter,
cut short the daylight to a briefer stay;
you, when blazing summer comes,
give the night swift hours.
Your power tempers the changing year,
so that the leaves the north wind's breath carries off
the gentle west wind brings back,
and the seeds that Arcturus saw sown
Sirius scorches as tall crops.[10]

10 Hesperus and Lucifer are the evening and morning star, both the planet Venus. Arcturus rises at the autumn sowing, Sirius at the height of summer.

/ Nothing, freed from the ancient law,
abandons the work of its own station.
Governing all things to a fixed end,
you refuse to restrain the acts of men alone,
as their ruler, in due measure.
For why does slippery Fortune bring
such great reversals? The innocent are crushed
by the punishment owed to crime,
while wicked ways sit
on the lofty throne, and the guilty
trample the necks of the holy by an unjust turn.
Bright virtue lies hidden, buried
in dark shadows, and the just man bears
the charge of the unjust.
Perjuries do them no harm, nor
fraud dressed up in lying colors.
But when they please to use their strength,
those whom countless peoples fear,
the highest kings, they gladly bring under.
O look now upon the wretched earth,
whoever you are who bind the compacts of the world!
No worthless part of so great a work,
we human beings are tossed on the sea of Fortune.

/ Ruler, restrain the rushing waves,
and with the compact by which you rule the boundless
heaven
make firm and steady the lands.

PROSE 5: EXILE FROM THE TRUE HOMELAND

Philosophy says he has wandered from his true homeland and needs gentle remedies first.

1.P5 When I had barked out these things in unbroken grief, she, with a calm face and not at all moved by my complaints, said: When I saw you sad and in tears, I knew at once that you were wretched and an exile. But how distant that exile was I did not

know until your speech betrayed it. You have not been driven so far from your homeland; you have wandered away. Or if you would rather be thought driven out, you have driven yourself out. For no one else could ever have had the right to do that to you. If you remember what homeland you were born in, it is not ruled, as Athens once was, by the command of the many; rather, εἷς κοίρανός ἐστιν, εἷς βασιλεύς [there is one lord, one king], who rejoices in the number of his citizens, not in their banishment. To be guided by his reins and to obey his justice is the highest freedom. Or do you not know that most ancient law of your city, which decrees that anyone who has chosen to found his home there may not be exiled?[11] For whoever is enclosed within its rampart and defenses has no fear of deserving exile; but whoever ceases to wish to dwell there ceases equally to deserve it. So it is not so much the look of this place that moves me as your look; and I do not miss the library walls adorned with ivory and glass so much as the seat of your mind, in which I once placed not books but what gives books their value—the thoughts of my books of old. As for your services to the common good, what you said was true, but little, given the great number of your deeds. Of the charges against you, whether honorable or false, you mentioned what everyone knows. You rightly thought the crimes and frauds of the informers should be touched on only briefly, since they are better and more fully celebrated on the lips of the crowd, which knows all about them. You also sharply rebuked the deed of the unjust Senate. You grieved too over the accusation against me, and wept for the loss of your damaged reputation. Last, your grief blazed up against Fortune, and you complained that rewards are not weighed out fairly according to merit. At the end of your raging Muse you prayed that the peace that rules heaven might rule the earth too. But since a great tumult of passions has fallen upon you, and grief, anger and sorrow pull you in different directions, stronger remedies cannot yet reach you in your present state of mind. So for a little while

11 Homer, *Iliad* 2.204–205. The "homeland" and "city" are the realm of reason and of God.

we will use gentler ones, so that what has hardened into a swelling under the inflow of disturbances may be softened by a gentler touch, ready to receive the force of a sharper medicine.

POEM 6: EVERYTHING IN ITS SEASON

Nature keeps a fixed order, and whatever breaks it comes to a bad end.

1.M6 When the constellation of the Crab
swelters, heavy with the rays of the sun,
then whoever has entrusted generous seed
to furrows that refuse it, cheated of Ceres' good faith,
let him go off to the oak trees.
Never go to the purple grove
to gather violets
when, under savage north winds,
the field bristles, shrieking.
Do not seek with greedy hand
to strip the vine shoots in spring
if you would enjoy grapes;
it is rather in autumn
that Bacchus has bestowed his gifts.
God marks out the seasons, fitting
each to its own duties,
and does not allow the turns he himself has bounded
to be mixed together.
So whatever abandons the fixed order
by a headlong path
has no happy outcome.[12]

PROSE 6: FORGETTING WHAT HE IS

Her questions show he believes God rules the world but has forgotten what a human being is.

1.P6 "First, then, will you let me touch on and test the state of your mind with a few little questions, so that I may understand

what method of cure to use?" "Ask whatever you like," I said, "as you judge best, and I will answer." Then she said: "Do you think this world is driven by random and chance events, or do you believe there is some rational governance in it?" "I could never suppose," I said, "that things so regular are moved by random chance. I know that God the creator presides over his work, and there will never be a day that drives me from the truth of this opinion." "That is so," she said. "You sang as much just a little while ago, lamenting that human beings alone had no share in divine care. As for the rest, you were not at all troubled that they were ruled by reason. Well, well! I am greatly surprised that you should be sick when you hold so healthy an opinion. But let us probe deeper; I suspect something is missing. "But tell me: since you do not doubt that the world is ruled by God, do you also see by what means of government it is ruled?" "I hardly understand the meaning of your question," I said, "much less can I answer what you ask." "Was I not right," she said, "that something was missing, through which, as through a breach in a rampart, the sickness of the passions has crept into your mind? But tell me, do you remember what the end of things is, or what the aim of all nature is directed toward?" "I had heard it," I said, "but grief has dulled my memory." "Yet you know where all things have come from?" "I know," I said, and I answered that it was God. "Then how can it be that, knowing the beginning, you do not know what the end of things is? But such are the ways of the passions, such is their power, that they can move a man from his place, but cannot uproot him and tear him wholly out of himself. But I would like you to answer this too: do you remember that you are a human being?" "Why would I not remember?" I said. "Then can you tell me what a human being is?" "Are you asking whether I know that I am a rational and mortal animal? I know it, and I confess that I am that." And she said: "Do you know that you are anything else?" "Nothing." "Now I know," she said, "another cause of your sickness, and the greatest: you have

12 Seed sown in midsummer, when the sun is in Cancer, fails, and the farmer must live on acorns. Ceres is the goddess of grain, Bacchus of wine.

ceased to know what you yourself are. So I have found out most fully both the reason for your illness and the way to restore your health. Because you are confused by forgetting yourself, you have grieved that you are an exile and stripped of your own goods. Because you do not know what the end of things is, you think that worthless and wicked men are powerful and happy. And because you have forgotten by what means of government the world is ruled, you suppose that these turns of fortune drift about without a helmsman—great causes not only of sickness but of death itself. But thanks be to the author of health that nature has not yet wholly abandoned you. "We have the best tinder for your recovery: your true opinion about the governing of the world, that you believe it is subject not to the randomness of chance but to divine reason. So you have nothing to fear; from this tiniest spark the warmth of life will soon shine upon you. But it is not yet time for stronger remedies; and it is well known that the nature of minds is such that whenever they cast off true opinions they put on false ones, and from these arises a fog of disturbances that confuses their true vision. So I will try to thin this fog a little with gentle and moderate soothing remedies, so that once the darkness of deceptive passions is dispelled, you may be able to recognize the splendor of the true light."

POEM 7: CLOUDED MINDS

Joy, fear, hope and grief cloud the mind, as clouds and mud hide light.

1.M7 Hidden
in black clouds,
the stars can shed
no light.
If the stormy south wind,
rolling the sea,
churns up the surge,
the water, glassy before
and like the calm
of cloudless days,
soon, with the mud stirred up,
turns foul
and blocks the sight.
And the stream that wanders
from high mountains,
flowing down,
is often stopped
by a rock broken loose,
a boulder in its way.
You too, if you wish
in clear light
to see the truth,
on a straight path
to take your way,
drive out joys,
drive out fear,
put hope to flight,
and let grief be absent.
The mind is clouded
and bound with reins
where these hold sway.

Book II

The gifts of Fortune
Philosophy speaks for Fortune: her gifts were never his to keep.

PROSE 1: FORTUNE'S NATURE

Fortune has not changed toward him; changeableness is her nature.

2.P1 After this she was silent for a while, and when her modest silence had caught my attention, she began thus: If I have fully grasped the causes and nature of your illness, you are wasting away with longing and desire for your former fortune. It is her change, as you imagine it, that has so overturned your mind. I understand the many disguises of that monster, and how she keeps up the most flattering intimacy with those she is trying to cheat, right up to the moment when she overwhelms with unbearable pain those she abandons without warning. If you recall her nature, her ways and her deserts, you will realize that you neither had anything beautiful in her nor have lost anything. But I do not think I will need to work hard to remind you of this. For you used to attack her with manly words even when she was present and flattering you, and you pursued her with sayings brought out of my sanctuary. But every sudden change in circumstances brings a kind of surge in the mind; and so it has happened that you too have fallen away a little from your tranquility. But it is time for you to take and taste something mild and pleasant, which, once it has passed inside, will open the way for stronger draughts. So let the persuasion of Rhetoric's sweetness assist us, which goes on the right path only when it does not abandon my teachings; and with her let Music, a servant born in my house, sing now lighter, now heavier measures.

What is it, then, O man, that has cast you down into grief and mourning? You have seen something new, I suppose, something unusual. You think Fortune has changed toward you; you are wrong. These are always her ways; this is her nature. Toward you she has kept, rather, the constancy that is proper to her, in her very changeableness. She was the same when she was flattering you, when she was toying with you with the lures of a false happiness. You have caught out the two-faced looks of the blind goddess. She who still veils herself from others has made herself wholly known to you. If you approve of her, accept her ways; do not complain. If you shudder at her treachery, scorn her and cast her off, since her games are ruinous. For what is now the cause of such great grief for you ought to have been the cause of your tranquility. She has left you—she whom no one can ever be sure will not leave. Or do you really think a happiness that is going to depart is precious? And is present fortune dear to you, though it cannot be trusted to stay, and will bring grief when it leaves? But if it can neither be kept at will and it makes people wretched when it flees, what is its fleetingness but a kind of sign of coming disaster? It is not enough to look at what lies before our eyes; prudence measures the outcome of things; and this same changeableness, in either direction, makes Fortune's threats nothing to be feared and her flatteries nothing to be desired. Finally, you must bear with an even mind whatever happens within Fortune's arena, once you have put your neck beneath her yoke. But if you want to prescribe a law of staying and going to the one you freely chose as your mistress, would you not be unjust, and would you not by impatience make worse a lot you cannot change? If you committed your sails to the winds, you would move forward not where your will aimed but where the gusts drove you; if you entrusted seeds to the fields, you would balance the fruitful years against the barren. You have given yourself over to Fortune's rule; you must obey your mistress's ways. Are you really trying to hold back the force of the turning wheel? But, most foolish of all mortals, if she begins to stay, she ceases to be Fortune.

POEM 1: FORTUNE'S PROUD HAND

Fortune casts down kings and raises the humble for sport.

2.M1 When she has turned the changes with her proud right hand
and is swept along like the seething Euripus,
cruel, she tramples on kings once feared,
and, deceitful, lifts up the humble face of the conquered.
She does not hear or heed the tears of the wretched,
and, hard as she is, even laughs at the groans she has caused.
So she plays, so she proves her strength,
and shows her followers a great marvel, if someone
is seen both happy and laid low within a single hour.[1]

PROSE 2: FORTUNE'S WHEEL

Speaking as Fortune, Philosophy says her gifts were only lent, and describes her turning wheel.

2.P2 I would like to discuss a few things with you in Fortune's own words. So consider whether her claim is just: Why, O man, do you charge me with your daily complaints? What wrong have I done you? What goods of yours have I taken from you? Contend with me before any judge you like about the possession of wealth and honors. And if you show that any of these belongs as property to any mortal, I will freely grant at once that what you are claiming back was yours. When nature brought you forth from your mother's womb, I took you up naked and destitute of everything, cherished you with my riches, and—this is what now makes you impatient with me—inclined to favor you, brought you up too indulgently, and surrounded you with the abundance and splendor of everything in my power. Now I am pleased to withdraw my hand. You owe thanks, like one who has

1 The Euripus, the strait between Euboea and mainland Greece, was famous for its sudden changes of current.

had the use of what belonged to another; you have no right to complain as though you had lost what was wholly yours. Why then do you groan? I have done you no violence. Wealth, honors and all such things are under my authority. Handmaids recognize their mistress: they come with me, and when I go they leave. I would boldly assert that if the things whose loss you lament were yours, you would never have lost them. Am I alone to be forbidden to exercise my rights? The sky may bring forth bright days and bury them again in dark nights. The year may crown the face of the earth now with flowers and fruits, now confound it with clouds and cold. The sea has the right now to caress with a smooth surface, now to bristle with storms and waves. Shall the insatiable greed of human beings bind me to a constancy foreign to my ways? This is my power, this is the game I play without end: I turn the wheel in its spinning circle, and I delight in bringing the lowest to the top and the top to the lowest. Climb up, if you like, but on this condition: that you do not think it an injustice to come down when the rules of my game demand it. Or did you not know my ways? Did you not know that Croesus, king of the Lydians, a little earlier a terror to Cyrus, soon became pitiable, was handed over to the flames of the pyre, and was saved by a shower sent from heaven? Has it escaped you that Paullus shed pious tears for the calamities of King Perseus, whom he had captured? What else does the clamor of tragedy bewail but Fortune overturning happy kingdoms with an indiscriminate blow? Did you not learn as a youth that δοιοὺς πίθους τὸν μὲν ἕνα κακῶν τὸν δ' ἕτερον ἐάων [two jars, the one of evils and the other of goods] lie on the threshold of Jupiter? What if you have taken more generously from the share of goods? What if I have not departed from you entirely? What if this very changeableness of mine is a just reason for you to hope for better things? All the same, do not waste away in spirit, and,

placed within a kingdom common to all, do not wish to live by a law of your own.[2]

POEM 2: THE THIRST FOR MORE

No abundance of wealth or honors ever satisfies human greed.

2.M2 If as many grains of sand as the sea, whipped by rushing winds,
churns up,
or as many stars as shine in the sky,
brought out on starry nights—
if so much wealth Plenty were to pour out, and never draw back her hand
from her full horn,
the human race would not for that reason
stop weeping its wretched complaints.
Though God, gladly granting prayers,
lavish with much gold,
should adorn the greedy with glittering honors,
what they have gained seems nothing now;
savage rapacity, devouring what it sought,
opens wide new jaws.
What reins could now hold back
headlong desire within fixed bounds,
when, flowing with generous gifts,
the thirst for having burns all the more?
He is never rich who, anxious and groaning,
believes himself in need.

2 Croesus, defeated by Cyrus of Persia, was saved from the pyre by rain (Herodotus 1.86–87); Aemilius Paullus defeated Perseus of Macedon in 168 BC. The jars are from Homer, *Iliad* 24.527–528.

PROSE 3: COUNTING HIS BLESSINGS

Philosophy reminds him of his past good fortune, above all his sons' joint consulship.

2.P3 "If Fortune spoke to you in her own defense in these words, you would surely have nothing to mutter in reply. Or if there is anything by which you can rightly defend your complaint, you must bring it forward. I will give you room to speak." Then I said: "These things are fine-sounding and smeared with the honey of Rhetoric's and Music's sweetness; they delight only while they are being heard. But the wretched have a deeper sense of their ills. So when these words stop ringing in the ears, the grief rooted within weighs down the mind." And she said: That is so. For these are not yet remedies for your illness, only soothing applications for a grief still stubborn against cure. The remedies that penetrate deep I will apply when the time is right. But so that you will not want to think yourself wretched: have you forgotten the number and measure of your happiness? I say nothing of how, when you were left without a father, men of the highest rank took you into their care; how, chosen for alliance by marriage with the leading men of the city, you began to be dear to them before you became their kin—which is the most precious kind of relationship. Who did not proclaim you most fortunate, with such distinguished in-laws, with so chaste a wife, and with the blessing of sons too? I pass over—for I prefer to pass over what is common—the honors you took up in youth that are denied to old men; I am glad to come to the singular crowning point of your happiness. If any enjoyment of mortal things carries any weight of happiness, can the memory of that light be blotted out by any mass of evils bearing down on you, however great? I mean the day you saw your two sons made consuls together, and carried from your house amid a throng of senators and the eager rejoicing of the people; when, as they sat in their curule chairs in the Senate house, you, as the speaker of the king's praises, earned the glory of talent and eloquence;

when in the circus, standing between the two consuls, you satisfied the expectations of the crowd pouring round you with a triumphal largess.[3] You outwitted Fortune, I think, while she caressed you, while she cherished you as her darling. You carried off a gift she had never granted to any private citizen. Do you want, then, to settle accounts with Fortune? This is the first time she has turned a jealous eye upon you. If you consider the number and measure of your joys and sorrows, you cannot yet deny that you are fortunate. But if you do not think yourself fortunate because the things that seemed joyful then have gone, there is no reason to think yourself wretched, since the things now believed to be sad are passing. Or have you come onto this stage of life only now, a sudden stranger? Do you think there is any constancy in human affairs, when a swift hour often dissolves a human being himself? For even if things of chance rarely keep faith in staying, yet the last day of life is a kind of death even for fortune that stays. What difference, then, do you think it makes whether you leave her by dying or she leaves you by fleeing?

3 Boethius's two sons were consuls together in AD 522.

POEM 3: NOTHING BORN STANDS FIRM

Sun, flowers and sea all change, so human fortunes cannot last.

2.M3 When the sun in his rosy chariot
begins to scatter light across the sky,
the star grows pale, its white face dimmed
by the flames that bear down on it.
When the grove, in the breath of the warm west wind,
has blushed with spring roses,
let the cloudy south wind blow its madness,
and their beauty is gone from the thorns.
Often the sea shines in calm serenity
with motionless waves;
often the north wind stirs up raging storms
and churns the water.
If the world's form rarely stands the same,
if it varies with such great changes,
trust, then, in the falling fortunes of men,
trust in fleeting goods!
It stands decreed, set down by eternal law,
that nothing born should stand.

PROSE 4: HAPPINESS WITHIN

Much remains to him, and true happiness lies within, beyond Fortune's reach.

2.P4 Then I said: "What you recall is true, O nurse of all the virtues, and I cannot deny the very swift course of my prosperity. But it is this that torments me more fiercely when I think back on it. For in every adversity of fortune the unhappiest kind of misfortune is to have been happy." "But," she said, "you cannot rightly blame things for the penalty you pay for a false opinion. For if this empty name of chance happiness moves you, you may reckon with me how many very great things you still have in abundance. So if what was most precious in the whole census of your fortune is still preserved for you, by God's gift,

unharmed and inviolate, can you rightly complain of misfortune while you keep all the better things? Yet your father-in-law Symmachus, that most precious ornament of the human race, lives unharmed; and—what you would not hesitate to buy at the price of your life—a man wholly made of wisdom and virtues, untroubled about his own injuries, he grieves over yours.[4] "Your wife lives, gentle in temper, outstanding in chastity and modesty, and—to sum up all her gifts in brief—like her father. She lives, I say, and, weary of this life, she keeps her breath for you alone; and in this one thing I would myself concede that your happiness is diminished: she wastes away in tears and grief with longing for you. What shall I say of your sons, the consuls, in whom, as far as boys of that age can show it, a likeness of their father's or grandfather's character already shines out? Since, then, mortals' chief care is to keep their lives, O how happy you are, if you recognize your goods, you who still have what no one doubts is dearer than life! So dry your tears now. Fortune does not yet hate every one of you, nor has too strong a storm fallen upon you, since your anchors hold firm, and they do not allow either the comfort of the present or the hope of the future to be lacking."

"And may they hold," I said, "I pray; for while they remain, however things may stand, I will swim out of this. But you see how much of my distinction has fallen away." And she said: We have made some progress, if you are not yet disgusted with your whole lot. But I cannot bear your fastidiousness, when you complain so mournfully and anxiously that something is lacking to your happiness. For whose happiness is so well composed that he does not quarrel with the condition of his state in some respect? The condition of human goods is an anxious thing: either it never comes in full, or it never lasts forever. One man has wealth overflowing, but is ashamed of his low birth; another is known for his noble birth, but, hemmed in by narrow means at home, would rather be unknown. One, abounding in both,

4 Quintus Aurelius Memmius Symmachus, senator and scholar; he was executed soon after Boethius.

mourns an unmarried life; another, happy in marriage but childless, is building up a fortune for a stranger to inherit. Another, gladdened by offspring, sheds sad tears over the misdeeds of a son or daughter. So no one is easily at peace with the condition of his fortune; for in each case there is something that the one who has not experienced it does not know, and the one who has experienced it dreads. Add that the most fortunate have the most delicate feelings, and unless everything is at their beck and call, being unused to any adversity, they are laid low by the smallest things; so very slight are the things that rob the most fortunate of the height of their happiness. How many do you suppose there are who would think themselves next to heaven if even the smallest share of what is left of your fortune came their way? This very place that you call exile is home to those who live here; so true is it that nothing is wretched unless you think it so, and, conversely, every lot is happy for one who bears it with equanimity. Who is so happy that, once he has given in to impatience, he would not wish to change his state? How much bitterness is sprinkled over the sweetness of human happiness! Even if it seems pleasant to the one enjoying it, still it cannot be held back from leaving when it wishes. It is clear, then, how wretched is the happiness of mortal things, which neither lasts forever among the even-minded nor wholly delights the anxious. Why then, mortals, do you seek outside yourselves a happiness that lies within you? Error and ignorance confuse you. I will briefly show you the hinge of the highest happiness. Is there anything more precious to you than yourself? "Nothing," you will say. So if you are in possession of yourself, you will possess what you would never want to lose and what Fortune could not take away. And so that you may recognize that happiness cannot consist in these things of chance, reason it out this way. If happiness is the highest good of a nature that lives by reason, and if what can in any way be snatched away is not the highest good, since what cannot be taken away is superior, then it is clear that the instability of Fortune cannot aspire to attaining happiness. Besides, whoever is carried along by this

fleeting happiness either knows or does not know that it is changeable. If he does not know, what lot can be happy in the blindness of ignorance? If he knows, he must be afraid of losing what he does not doubt can be lost; and so continual fear does not let him be happy. Or if he does lose it, does he think it of no account? Then too it is a very slight good that can be lost with an even mind. And you are the same man who, I know, is convinced by very many demonstrations, and has it firmly planted within him, that human minds are in no way mortal; and it is clear that chance happiness is ended by the death of the body. So it cannot be doubted, if this happiness can bring true happiness, that the whole human race slides into misery at the end of death. But if we know that many have sought the fruit of happiness not only by death but even by pain and torture, how can present happiness make people happy, when it does not make them wretched once it is gone?

POEM 4: A HOUSE ON THE ROCK

Build your life low and firm, safe from wind and waves.

2.M4 Whoever wants, with caution,
to build a lasting home,
steady, not to be flattened
by the blasts of the roaring east wind,
and cares to scorn the sea
that threatens with its waves,
let him avoid the summit of a high mountain
and the thirsty sands.
The one, the insolent south wind
assails with all its strength;
the others, shifting loose,
refuse to bear a hanging weight.
Fleeing the dangerous
lot of a pleasant site,
remember to fix your house firmly
on a low rock.
Though the wind thunders with ruin,
churning up the seas,
you, stored away in quiet,
happy in the strength of your rampart,
will spend your life serene,
laughing at the rages of the sky.

PROSE 5: THE EMPTINESS OF RICHES

Wealth, jewels, land and fine clothes are not truly one's own goods.

2.P5 But since the soothing applications of my arguments are now sinking into you, I think I should use somewhat stronger ones. Come, then: even if the gifts of Fortune were not fleeting and momentary, what is there in them that could ever become yours, or that does not lose its value when looked at closely and considered? Are riches precious by your nature or by their own?

What part of them, then—the gold, or a heap of money? Yet these shine more brightly when poured out than when piled up, since greed always makes people hated, and generosity makes them famous. But if what is passed to another cannot remain with anyone, then money is precious when, transferred to others by the practice of giving, it ceases to be possessed. And if all the money there is anywhere in the world were piled up with one person, it would leave everyone else without any. A voice fills the hearing of many all at once and whole; but your riches cannot pass to many without being broken up. And when that happens, they must make poor those whom they leave. O narrow and needy riches, then, which many cannot have whole, and which come to no one without the poverty of the rest! Or does the gleam of jewels catch your eye? But if there is anything special in that brilliance, the light belongs to the jewels, not to human beings; and I marvel greatly that human beings marvel at them. For what is there that lacks the movement and structure of a soul that could rightly seem beautiful to a nature with a soul and reason? Though by their maker's work and their own distinctness they draw some small share of the lowest beauty, they are placed below your excellence and in no way deserved your admiration. Or does the beauty of the fields delight you? Why not? It is a beautiful part of a most beautiful work. So we sometimes rejoice at the face of a calm sea; so we admire the sky, the stars, the moon and the sun. Does any of these touch you? Do you dare to boast of the splendor of any such thing? Are you yourself adorned with spring flowers, or does your own fertility swell into summer fruits? Why are you carried away by empty joys? Why do you embrace external goods as your own? Fortune will never make yours what the nature of things has made foreign to you. The fruits of the earth are no doubt owed to the nourishment of living creatures. But if you want to fill your need to the extent that is enough for nature, there is no reason to seek Fortune's abundance. For nature is content with few and very small things; and if you want to press its fullness with superfluities, what you pour in will become either unpleas-

ant or harmful. Now you think it is beautiful to shine in various clothes; but if their appearance is pleasing to the eye, I will admire either the nature of the material or the skill of the craftsman. Or does a long line of servants make you happy? If they are vicious in character, they are a ruinous burden on the house and bitterly hostile to their master himself; but if they are honest, how will someone else's honesty be counted among your wealth? From all of this it is plainly shown that none of the things you count among your goods is your good. And if there is no beauty in them worth seeking, why should you grieve when they are lost or rejoice when you keep them? And if they are beautiful by nature, what is that to you? For they would have pleased in themselves even if separated from your wealth. They are not precious because they have come into your riches; rather, because they seemed precious, you chose to count them among your riches. But what do you all want with such a clamor about fortune? You seek, I suppose, to drive away want by abundance. Yet this turns out the opposite for you. For more supports are needed to protect a variety of precious furnishings; and it is true that those who possess very much need very much, and on the contrary those need very little who measure their abundance by the necessity of nature, not by the excess of ambition. Is there, then, no good of your own, planted within you, that you seek your goods in things external and set apart? Is the condition of things so reversed that a creature made divine by the gift of reason thinks it can shine only by possessing lifeless furnishings? Other things are content with their own; but you, like God in your mind, seek the ornaments of your excellent nature from the lowest things, and do not understand how great a wrong you do to your creator. He willed that the human race should stand above all earthly things; you thrust your dignity down below the lowest of them. For if every good of anything is agreed to be more precious than the thing whose good it is, then when you judge the vilest things to be your goods, by your own estimation you subject yourselves to them—and that indeed is deserved. For this is the condition of human nature: it surpasses

all other things only when it knows itself, but it is brought lower than the beasts if it ceases to know itself. For other animals, not to know themselves is their nature; for human beings it comes from vice. How far this error of yours extends, which thinks that anything can be adorned by ornaments that belong to others! But that cannot be. For if anything shines by what is added to it, it is the added things themselves that are praised; what is covered and veiled by them remains, nonetheless, in its own ugliness. I, for my part, deny that anything is good that harms its possessor. Am I lying? "Not at all," you say. Yet riches have very often harmed their possessors, since all the worst men, being all the greedier for what belongs to others, think themselves alone most worthy to have whatever gold and jewels there are anywhere. So you, who now anxiously dread the pike and the sword, would sing in the robber's face if you had set out on the path of this life as a traveler with empty pockets. O the splendid happiness of mortal wealth: once you have gained it, you stop being safe![5]

5 An echo of Juvenal, *Satires* 10.19–22, on the empty-handed traveler who sings in front of a robber.

POEM 5: THE FIRST AGE

The first people lived simply and peacefully, before greed dug up gold.

2.M5 Too happy was that earlier age,
content with its faithful fields
and not ruined by idle luxury,
that used to break its late fasts
with acorns easily gathered.
They did not know how to blend
the gifts of Bacchus with clear honey,
nor to dip the shining fleeces
of the Seres in Tyrian dye.
The grass gave them healthy sleep,
the gliding river gave them drink,
the towering pine gave them shade.
No stranger yet cut through the deep sea
or, with goods gathered from every land,
had seen new shores.
Then the savage war trumpets were silent;
blood, shed in bitter hatred,
had not yet stained the fearful fields.
For why would hostile fury
want to be the first to take up arms,
when men saw cruel wounds
and no reward for blood?
If only our times would now return
to the old ways!
But fiercer than the fires of Etna
burns the seething love of possession.[6]

6 The Seres (the Chinese) were known to the Romans as the source of silk; Tyre, in Phoenicia, was famous for its purple dye.

/ Alas, who was that first man
who dug up the weight of hidden gold
and gems that wished to stay concealed—
precious perils?

PROSE 6: OFFICE AND POWER

High office and power can fall to the worst men and cannot make anyone good.

2.P6 What am I to say of high office and power, which you, knowing nothing of true dignity and power, raise to the level of heaven? If they fall to the worst of men, what eruption of Etna's flames, what flood could cause such devastation? Surely, as I think you remember, your ancestors wanted to abolish the authority of the consuls, which had been the beginning of liberty, because of the consuls' arrogance—the same ancestors who, for that same arrogance, had earlier removed the name of king from the city. But if, as very rarely happens, offices are given to good men, what is pleasing in them except the goodness of those who hold them? So it comes about that honor does not come to virtue from office, but to office from virtue. And what is this desirable and splendid power of yours? You creatures of earth, do you not consider over whom you seem to preside? Now if you saw one mouse among the rest claiming rights and power for himself over the others, how you would roar with laughter![7] And if you look at the body, what could you find weaker than a human being, whom the bite of a tiny fly, or some creeping thing working its way into the body's hidden passages, often kills? How could anyone exercise any right over another except over the body alone, and over what is lower than the body—I mean his fortune? Will you ever command a free mind? Will you ever move a mind held together by firm reason from its own state of calm? When a tyrant thought he could force a free man by torture to betray those who knew of a conspiracy against

7 The kings were expelled from Rome in 509 BC; in 451 BC the consulship was suspended in favor of a board of ten, the decemvirs.

him, the man bit off his tongue and spat it in the raging tyrant's face. So the tortures that the tyrant thought were material for his cruelty, the wise man made material for virtue. And what can anyone do to another that he cannot suffer from another himself? We are told that Busiris, who used to kill his guests, was himself slain by his guest Hercules.[8] Regulus had thrown many Carthaginians captured in war into chains, but soon he himself held out his hands to the chains of his conquerors. Do you think, then, that a man has any power if he cannot prevent another from doing to him what he can do to another? Besides, if offices and powers had in them any natural good of their own, they would never come to the worst of men. For opposites do not usually keep company; nature refuses to join contraries. So since there is no doubt that the worst men very often hold high office, it is also clear that things which allow themselves to cling to the worst men are not good by their own nature. This can be judged even more fittingly of all Fortune's gifts, which come most abundantly to the most wicked. On this point I think we should also consider the following: no one doubts that a man is brave if he has seen bravery in him, and whoever has swiftness is plainly swift.[9] In the same way music makes musicians, medicine physicians, rhetoric orators. For the nature of each thing does what is proper to it; it is not mixed with the effects of contrary things, and it actively drives away what is opposed to it. Yet riches cannot quench insatiable greed, nor could power make a man master of himself if vicious desires hold him bound in unbreakable chains; and dignity conferred on the wicked not only fails to make them worthy, but rather betrays them and puts their unworthiness on display. Why does this happen? Because you like to call things by false names when they are really otherwise, and those names are easily refuted by the effects of the things themselves. So those riches cannot rightly

8 The tongue story is told of the philosophers Zeno of Elea and Anaxarchus. Busiris was a mythical king of Egypt who sacrificed strangers.

9 Marcus Atilius Regulus, Roman consul, was captured by the Carthaginians in 255 BC during the First Punic War.

be called riches, nor that power power, nor this dignity dignity. Finally, the same conclusion may be drawn about Fortune as a whole: it is clear that there is nothing in her worth seeking, nothing of native goodness, since she does not always attach herself to the good, and does not make good those she is attached to.

POEM 6: NERO

Nero's vast power could not cure his cruelty.

2.M6 We know what ruin he wrought
when he burned the city and slaughtered the senators,
he who once, in his savagery, killed his brother
and grew wet with his mother's spilt blood,
and, running his eyes over her cold body,
did not wet his face with tears, but could
sit as critic of her dead beauty.
Yet this man ruled with his scepter the peoples
whom Phoebus sees when he hides his rays beneath the waves
and when he rises from the farthest east,
those who lie beneath the seven cold stars of the north,
those whom the south wind, violent with its dry heat,
scorches as it bakes the burning sands.
Could lofty power in the end
change the madness of depraved Nero?
Alas for the grievous lot, whenever the unjust
sword is added to cruel poison![10]

PROSE 7: THE SMALLNESS OF FAME

On a tiny earth, and set against eternity, glory is next to nothing.

2.P7 Then I said: "You know yourself that ambition for mortal things has had very little mastery over me. But I did want the

opportunity to take part in public affairs, so that virtue would not grow old in silence." And she said: Yet this is the one thing that can lure minds that are excellent by nature but not yet brought to the finishing touch by the perfection of the virtues: namely the desire for glory, and a reputation for the greatest services to the state. Consider how slight it is, how empty of all weight. You have learned from the demonstrations of astronomy that the whole circuit of the earth has, compared with the expanse of the heavens, the proportion of a point; that is, if it is compared with the size of the celestial sphere, it must be judged to have no extent at all. Of this region, so tiny within the universe, about one quarter, as you learned from Ptolemy's proofs, is inhabited by living creatures known to us. If from this quarter you subtract in thought all that is covered by seas and marshes and all the vast expanse stretched out in drought, hardly the narrowest space will be left for human beings to live in. Hedged in and shut up in this tiniest point of a point, do you think about spreading your fame and extending your name? What greatness or splendor can glory have, squeezed within such narrow and meager limits? Besides, this very enclosure of a small dwelling-place is inhabited by many nations differing in language, customs and their whole way of life. Because of the difficulty of travel, the diversity of speech and the rarity of trade, not only the fame of individual men but not even the fame of cities can reach them.[11] In the age of Marcus Tullius, indeed, as he himself indicates somewhere, the fame of the Roman republic had not yet crossed the Caucasus mountains, though it was then at its height and feared even by the Parthians and the other peoples of that region. Do you see, then, how narrow, how cramped is the glory you labor to widen and extend? Where the fame of the Roman name cannot pass, will the glory of a Roman man advance? And what of the fact that the customs and institutions

10 Nero, emperor AD 54–68, was blamed for the fire of Rome in AD 64, and had his half-brother Britannicus and his mother Agrippina killed. The "seven stars" are the Plough, marking the north.

11 Ptolemy (2nd century AD), the Alexandrian astronomer and geographer.

of different peoples disagree with one another, so that what is judged worthy of praise among some is judged worthy of punishment among others? So if anyone delights in being talked about, it does him no good at all to carry his name to many peoples. Each man, then, will be content with glory spread among his own people, and that glorious immortality of fame will be confined within the borders of a single nation. But how many men who were most famous in their own day have been wiped out by oblivion for lack of writers![12] And yet what good are writings themselves, when a long and dark antiquity buries them along with their authors? You seem to yourselves to be extending your immortality when you think of fame in time to come. But if you consider the infinite expanses of eternity, what reason do you have to rejoice in the long life of your name? The length of a single moment, compared with ten thousand years, has some share in it, however small, since both spans are finite. But this number of years, and any multiple of it you like, cannot even be compared with unending duration. Between finite things there can be some comparison, but between the infinite and the finite there can never be any. So it comes about that fame, however long it lasts, if it is thought of alongside inexhaustible eternity, seems not small but plainly nothing. But you do not know how to act rightly except for the breeze of popular favor and empty rumors; abandoning the excellence of conscience and virtue, you demand your rewards from other people's idle talk. Hear how wittily someone mocked the shallowness of this kind of arrogance. A certain man had assumed the false name of philosopher, not to practice true virtue but for proud glory. Someone attacked him with insults, adding that he would soon know whether he was a philosopher, if he bore the injuries done him gently and patiently. The man put on patience for a little while, and having taken the insult, said as if in triumph: "Now at last do you see that I am a philosopher?" Then the other replied, very bitingly: "I would have, if you had kept

12 Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC); the passage is in the "Dream of Scipio" at the end of his *Republic*.

quiet." But what has fame to do with outstanding men—for it is of them we are speaking—who seek glory through virtue? What, I say, has fame to do with them, once the body has been dissolved in death at the last? For if human beings die entirely—which our reasoning forbids us to believe—there is no glory at all, since the one whose glory it is said to be does not exist at all. But if the mind, conscious of having done well, is released from its earthly prison and freely seeks heaven, will it not despise all earthly business, since, enjoying heaven, it rejoices to be free of earthly things?

POEM 7: DEATH SCORNS GLORY

Death levels high and low, and famous names soon fade.

2.M7 Whoever with headlong mind seeks glory alone
and believes it the highest good,
let him look at the wide-open spaces of the sky
and the cramped position of the earth.
A name that cannot fill so small a circuit,
however it has grown, will make him ashamed.
Why, you proud, do your necks strain in vain
to rise from the mortal yoke?
Though fame travels through distant peoples
and spreads abroad, setting tongues talking,
and a great house shines with famous titles,
death scorns lofty glory,
wraps up the humble and the lofty head alike,
and makes the lowest equal to the highest.
Where now do the bones of faithful Fabricius lie?
What of Brutus, or stern Cato?
A thin surviving fame marks, in a few letters,
an empty name.
But because we know their splendid names,
are we given to know the dead themselves?
You lie there, then, utterly unknown,
and fame does not make you known.[13]

/ But if you think life is prolonged
by the breath of a mortal name,
when a late day snatches even this from you,
then a second death awaits you.

13 Gaius Fabricius (3rd century BC) was a byword for incorruptibility; Brutus is probably Lucius Junius Brutus, who expelled the kings, and Cato either the Elder or the Younger, both models of stern virtue.

PROSE 8: THE USES OF BAD FORTUNE

Adverse fortune teaches the truth and reveals who one's real friends are.

2.P8 But so that you do not think I am waging an implacable war against Fortune: there is a time when she, that deceiver, deceives in nothing and deserves well of human beings—namely when she reveals herself, uncovers her face and declares her ways. Perhaps you do not yet understand what I am saying. What I am eager to say is strange, and so I can hardly put my thought into words. I think that adverse fortune does people more good than prosperous fortune. For prosperous fortune, when she seems to smile, always lies with the look of happiness; adverse fortune is always truthful, when she shows by changing that she is unstable. The one deceives, the other instructs; the one binds the minds of those who enjoy her with the false appearance of good things, the other frees them with the knowledge that happiness is fragile. And so you may see the one windy, flowing, always ignorant of herself, and the other sober, girded for action, and made wise by the very practice of adversity. Finally, happy fortune draws people away from the true good with her flatteries; adverse fortune usually hauls them back to true goods with a hook. Or do you think it should be counted among the least of things that this harsh, this terrible fortune has revealed to you the minds of your faithful friends? She has sorted out for you the sure faces of your companions from the doubtful ones; in leaving, she took away her own and left you yours. What would you have paid for this when you were unharmed and, as you thought, fortunate! Go on, complain now of lost riches: you have found friends, the most precious kind of riches there is.

POEM 8: LOVE BINDS THE WORLD

The love that orders the cosmos should also rule human hearts.

2.M8 That the world with steady faith
varies its harmonious changes,
that warring seeds
keep a lasting treaty,
that Phoebus brings forth the rosy day
in his golden chariot,
that the nights which Hesperus has ushered in
are ruled by Phoebe,
that the greedy sea holds its waves
within fixed bounds,
so that the restless land may not
push its borders wide:
all this chain of things is bound together
by love, ruling land and sea
and holding command in heaven.
If love should slacken the reins,
all that now loves each other
would at once make war,
and the world-machine that now, in allied faith,
they drive with lovely motions,
they would strive to break apart.
Love also holds peoples
joined in a sacred treaty;
love binds the sacred bond of marriage
with chaste affection;
love also dictates its laws
to faithful friends.[14]

/ O happy human race,
if your minds were ruled
by the love that rules the heavens.

14 Phoebe is the moon.

Book III

The true good
Wealth, office, power, fame and pleasure fail; true happiness is God himself.

PROSE 1: THE PROMISE OF TRUE HAPPINESS

Eager for stronger remedies, Boethius asks where she will lead him: to true happiness.

3.P1 She had already finished her song, but its sweetness held me spellbound, eager to hear more, astonished, my ears still pricked up. So after a little while I said: "O highest comfort of weary minds, how you have revived me, both by the weight of your thoughts and by the delight of your singing! So much so that I no longer think myself unequal to the blows of Fortune. And so the remedies you said were rather sharp, far from dreading them, I now urgently demand, eager to hear." Then she said: "I sensed it when you were drinking in my words, silent and attentive, and I either waited for that state of your mind or, more truly, produced it myself. What remains is of such a kind that it stings when tasted, but grows sweet once taken inside. But as for your saying that you are eager to hear, how you would burn with longing if you knew where I am setting out to lead you!" "Where?" I said. "To true happiness," she said, "which your mind also dreams of; but because its sight is taken up with images, it cannot look upon happiness itself." Then I said: "Please do so, and show me without delay what true happiness is." "Gladly," she said, "for your sake. But first I will try to sketch in words and give shape to what is better known to you, so that once you have

seen it clearly and then turned your eyes the other way, you may recognize the form of true happiness."

POEM 1: CLEARING THE FIELD

As a field is cleared before sowing, false goods must be seen for what they are.

3.M1 Whoever wants to sow a fertile field
first clears the land of brushwood,
cuts back brambles and fern with a sickle,
so that Ceres may come heavy with new grain.
The labor of bees tastes sweeter
if a bitter flavor has first stung the mouth.
The stars shine more pleasingly when the south wind
stops sounding its rainy blasts.
When the morning star has driven off the darkness,
lovely day drives her rosy horses.
You too, looking first at false goods,
begin to draw your neck back from the yoke.
Then true goods will enter your mind.

PROSE 2: THE HIGHEST GOOD

All people seek happiness, the state that contains all goods, but by different routes.

3.P2 Then, fixing her gaze for a little while and withdrawing, as it were, into the noble seat of her mind, she began: All the concern of mortals, busied with the labor of many different pursuits, advances by different paths, yet strives to arrive at one goal, happiness. And that is the good which, once someone has gained it, leaves him nothing further to desire. It is the highest of all goods and contains all goods within itself; if anything were missing from it, it could not be the highest, since something would be left outside it that could still be wished for. It is clear, then, that happiness is a state made perfect by the gathering together of all goods. This, as we said, all mortals try to reach by different routes. For the desire for the true good is naturally

planted in human minds, but error leads them astray toward false goods. Some of them, believing that the highest good is to need nothing, labor to abound in riches. Others, judging the good to be what is most worthy of veneration, strive to gain offices and so be revered by their fellow citizens. There are those who place the highest good in the highest power; these either want to rule themselves or try to attach themselves to those who rule. Those to whom renown seems something supremely good hurry to spread a glorious name through the arts of war or of peace. Very many measure the fruit of the good by joy and gladness; these think it the happiest thing to melt away in pleasure. There are also those who exchange the ends and causes of these things, one for another: for example, those who want riches for the sake of power and pleasures, or those who seek power either for money's sake or to spread their name. It is around these, then, and others like them that the aim of human actions and prayers turns: nobility, for example, and popular favor, which seem to procure a kind of renown; wife and children, which are sought for the delight they give. Friends, the most sacred kind of good, are counted not under fortune but under virtue; the rest are taken up either for the sake of power or of pleasure. As for the goods of the body, it is easy to see that they are to be referred to those above. Strength and size seem to bestow ability; beauty and speed, renown; health, pleasure. In all of these it is clear that happiness alone is desired. For what each person seeks above everything else, he judges to be the highest good. But we have defined the highest good as happiness; therefore each person judges the state he desires above all else to be happiness. So you have before your eyes, roughly, the pattern of human happiness: wealth, honors, power, glory, pleasures. Epicurus, considering these alone, concluded consistently enough that the highest good was pleasure, since all the others seem to bring delight to the mind. But I return to human pursuits. The human mind, though its memory is clouded, still seeks its own good; but like a drunk man it does not know by which path to get home. Do those who strive to

need nothing seem to be mistaken? But nothing can complete happiness so well as a state rich in all goods, needing nothing from outside, sufficient to itself. Are those mistaken who think that what is best is also most worthy of reverent honor? Not at all. For it is nothing cheap or contemptible that the effort of nearly all mortals labors to obtain. Or is power not to be counted among goods? What then? Is that to be thought weak and without strength which is plainly superior to all things?[1] Or is renown to be counted as nothing? But it cannot be set apart: whatever is most excellent must also seem most renowned. As for happiness not being anxious and gloomy, nor subject to pains and troubles, what need is there to say it, when even in the smallest things people seek what it delights them to have and enjoy? These, then, are what people want to obtain; they desire riches, offices, kingdoms, glory and pleasures because they believe that through them they will gain sufficiency, reverence, power, renown and joy. It is the good, then, that people seek by such different pursuits. And in this it is easily shown how great the power of nature is, since, though their opinions vary and disagree, they agree in loving the good as their end.

1 Epicurus (341–270 BC), Greek philosopher who made pleasure the highest good.

POEM 2: THE PULL OF NATURE

Lions, birds and saplings return to their nature; all things seek their origin.

3.M2 How many reins of things
mighty Nature turns, by what laws
in her foresight she keeps the vast world,
binding each single thing tight
in an unbreakable knot—I wish
to tell in clear song on the pliant strings.
Though African lions wear
handsome chains, and take food
given them by hand, and fear the harsh master
whose blows they are used to bearing,
if blood has stained their fearsome mouths,
their spirits, long dormant, return,
and with a deep roar they remember themselves;
they slip the knots and free their necks,
and the tamer, first to be torn by the bloody tooth,
gives their raging fury its first taste.

/ The bird that chatters in the high branches
is shut in the hollow of a cage;
though cups smeared with honey
and lavish meals, with fond attention,
are served to it by playful human care,
yet if, hopping in its cramped wickerwork,
it sees the pleasant shade of the woods,
it tramples the scattered food with its feet,
longs sadly for the forests alone,
murmurs of the forests in its sweet voice.
A sapling, once bent by powerful force,
bows its top down toward the ground;
if the hand that bent it lets it go,
it looks at the sky with its top upright.
Phoebus sets in the western waves,
but by a hidden path again
turns his chariot to its usual rising.
All things seek again their own return
and each rejoices in its homecoming;
nor does any thing keep the order it is given
unless it has joined its rising to its end
and made its own circle steady.

PROSE 3: WEALTH DOES NOT SATISFY

Riches promise sufficiency but create new needs.

3.P3 "You too, creatures of earth, dream of your origin, though in a faint image; and though with no very keen sight, still with some kind of thought you look toward that true goal of happiness. And so natural inclination leads you toward the true good, and manifold error leads you away from it. Consider whether people can reach their appointed goal through the things by which they think they will gain happiness. If money or honors or the rest really bring something to which no good seems lacking, then let us too admit that some people become happy by gaining them. But if they cannot deliver what they promise, and

lack many goods, is not a false appearance of happiness clearly caught out in them? First, then, I ask you yourself, who were so recently overflowing with riches: amid that abundant wealth, did anxiety, born of some wrong or other, never trouble your mind?" "Yet," I said, "I cannot remember ever having been so free in mind that I was not always troubled by something." "Was it not because either something was absent that you did not want absent, or something was present that you did not want present?" "That is so," I said. "So you desired the presence of the one and the absence of the other?" "I admit it," I said. "But does a person lack what he desires?" she said. "He does," I said. "And one who lacks something is not wholly sufficient to himself?" "No," I said. "So you, full of riches," she said, "had to put up with this insufficiency?" "Of course," I said. "Then riches cannot make a person need nothing and be sufficient to himself; and that is what they seemed to promise. And I think this is especially worth considering: money has nothing in its own nature to prevent its being taken from those who possess it against their will." "I admit it," I said. "Of course you admit it, when every day someone stronger snatches it from someone unwilling. "For where do lawsuits come from, except that money taken by force or fraud from unwilling owners is being reclaimed?" "That is so," I said. "So everyone will need protection sought from outside to guard his money?" "Who would deny it?" I said. "But he would not need it unless he possessed money that he could lose?" "That cannot be doubted," I said. "Then the matter has turned into its opposite: the riches that were thought to make people sufficient to themselves in fact make them need the protection of others. And in what way is need driven out by riches? Can the rich not be hungry? Can they not be thirsty? Do the limbs of the moneyed not feel the winter cold? But the wealthy, you will say, have the means to satisfy their hunger and drive off thirst and cold. In this way need can indeed be soothed by riches; it cannot be removed altogether. "For if need, always gaping and demanding something, is filled by riches, there must always remain a need to be filled. I say nothing of the fact that

very little is enough for nature, and nothing is enough for greed. So if riches cannot remove need, and even create need of their own, why do you believe they provide sufficiency?"

POEM 3: THE RICH MAN'S CARE

However much the greedy man gains, care stays with him and his wealth leaves him at death.

3.M3 Though the rich man, from a flowing flood of gold,
greedily amasses wealth that will never satisfy him,
and loads his neck with pearls from the shores of the Red Sea,
and ploughs his rich fields with a hundred oxen,
gnawing care will not leave him while he lives,
and when he dies his fickle wealth does not go with him.

PROSE 4: OFFICE DOES NOT CONFER HONOR

High office exposes the wicked and has no dignity of its own.

3.P4 But offices, you say, make the person they come to honored and revered. Do magistracies have such power that they plant virtues in the minds of those who hold them and drive out vices? Yet they usually do not banish wickedness but rather put it in the spotlight; and so we are often indignant that they have fallen to the most wicked men. That is why Catullus calls Nonius "a tumor," though he sat in the curule chair. Do you see how much disgrace offices add to bad men? Their unworthiness would be less exposed if no honors made them conspicuous. And you yourself—could you ever be brought, even under the threat of so many dangers, to consider holding office alongside Decoratus, when you saw in him the mind of a worthless buffoon and informer? For we cannot judge people worthy of reverence because of their honors when we judge them unworthy of those very honors. But if you saw someone endowed with wisdom, could you think him unworthy of reverence, or of the wisdom

with which he is endowed? Surely not.[2] For virtue has a dignity of its own, which it at once passes on to those it is joined with. Since popular honors cannot do this, it is clear that they do not have the beauty proper to dignity.

Here something further should be noticed. If a person is more contemptible the more people despise him, then office, since it cannot make revered those it puts on show to many, rather makes the wicked more despised. But not without payback: for the wicked repay offices in kind, staining them with their contagion. And so that you may recognize that true reverence cannot come through these shadowy offices, consider this. If someone who had been consul many times happened to go among foreign peoples, would his office make him venerable to the foreigners? Yet if this were a natural gift of offices, they would never fail in their function anywhere in the world, just as fire never stops being hot anywhere on earth. But since it is not their own power but people's deceptive opinion that attaches this to them, they vanish at once when they come among those who do not consider them offices.

But that is among foreign nations. Among those where they arose, do they at least last forever? The praetorship was once a great power; now it is an empty name and a heavy burden on a senator's fortune. If someone had once taken charge of the people's grain supply, he was considered great; now what is more lowly than that prefecture? For, as we said a little earlier, what has no splendor of its own receives splendor at one time and loses it at another, according to the opinion of those who deal with it. If, then, offices cannot make people revered, if they are soiled besides by contact with the wicked, if they cease to shine as times change, if they grow cheap in the estimation of nations, what beauty worth seeking do they have in themselves, let alone give to others?[3]

2 Catullus, poem 52, on Nonius; the curule chair was the seat of Rome's senior magistrates. Decoratus held office at the Gothic court around AD 508; little else is known of him.

3 By Boethius's day the praetorship was largely ceremonial, and its holder was expected to pay for public games.

POEM 4: NERO'S HONORS

Honors handed out by a wretch like Nero cannot make anyone happy.

3.M4 Though he decked himself out, proud, in Tyrian purple
and snow-white gems,
yet he flourished, hated by all,
Nero of the raging luxury.
Yet this wicked man once handed out to the revered
senators curule chairs that brought disgrace.
Who then would think those happy
whose honors come from wretches?

PROSE 5: THE WEAKNESS OF KINGS

Kings and their favorites live in fear, and their power cannot protect them.

3.P5 Or can kingdoms, and friendship with kings, make a person powerful? Why not, when their happiness lasts forever? Yet antiquity is full of examples, and so is the present age, of kings who have exchanged happiness for disaster. What splendid power, which is found too weak even to preserve itself! And if this royal power is the author of happiness, does it not, wherever it falls short, lessen happiness and bring in misery? But however far human empires extend, there must remain many peoples over whom any given king does not rule. And where the power that makes men happy stops, there powerlessness creeps in, which makes them wretched; in this way, then, kings must have the larger share of misery. A tyrant who had experienced the dangers of his lot represented the fears of kingship by the terror of a sword hanging over a man's head. What sort of power is this, then, which cannot drive away the bite of anxieties or avoid the stings of fear?[4] They would like to have lived free from care, but they cannot; and then they boast of

4 Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, who seated the flatterer Damocles beneath a sword hung by a single hair (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.61–62).

their power! Do you think a man powerful when you see him wanting what he cannot achieve? Do you think a man powerful who goes about with a bodyguard at his side, who fears more than those he terrifies, who, to seem powerful, is in the hands of his servants? And why should I speak of the friends of kings, when I show that kingdoms themselves are full of such weakness? Royal power often lays them low, sometimes while it stands, sometimes when it has fallen. Nero forced Seneca, his friend and teacher, to choose the manner of his own death. Antoninus threw Papinian, long powerful among the courtiers, to the soldiers' swords. Yet both wanted to renounce their power; Seneca even tried to hand his wealth over to Nero and retire into leisure. But while their very bulk dragged them down to their fall, neither achieved what he wanted.[5] What sort of power is this, then, which its possessors dread, which you are not safe in having when you want to have it, and which you cannot escape when you want to lay it down? Or are friends a protection, when fortune, not virtue, has won them? But the one whom good fortune made a friend, misfortune will make an enemy. And what plague is more effective at doing harm than an enemy who is an intimate?

5 The jurist Papinian was executed in AD 212 by the emperor Caracalla, officially named Antoninus.

POEM 5: TRUE POWER

Only one who masters his own passions is truly powerful.

3.M5 Whoever wants to be powerful
must tame his fierce passions,
and not, conquered by lust, bow his neck
to its foul reins.
For though the land of India far away
may tremble at your laws,
and farthest Thule be your slave,
still, if you cannot drive off black cares
and put your wretched complaints to flight,
that is not power.[6]

PROSE 6: GLORY AND NOBLE BIRTH

Fame is often undeserved and always narrow, and noble birth is someone else's merit.

3.P6 And glory—how deceptive it often is, how shameful! So the tragic poet rightly exclaims: ὦ δόξα δόξα μυρίοισι δὴ βροτῶν οὐδὲν γεγῶσι βίοτον ὤγκωσας μέγαν ["O glory, glory, for countless mortals who were nothing you have puffed their lives up great!"]. For many people have often won a great name through the false opinions of the crowd; and what can be imagined more shameful than that? Those who are falsely praised must themselves blush at their praises. And even if glory is won by merit, what will it add to the conscience of the wise man, who measures his good not by popular rumor but by the truth of his conscience? And if it seems a fine thing to have spread one's name, it follows that not to have spread it must be judged shameful. But since, as I argued a little earlier, there must be many nations that the fame of one man cannot reach, it happens that the man you think glorious seems without glory over the greater part of

6 Thule was the name given to the most northerly land known to the ancients.

the earth.[7] Among these things I think popular favor not even worth mentioning, since it neither arises from judgment nor ever lasts firmly. And who does not see how empty, how worthless the name of nobility is? If it is referred to renown, the renown belongs to someone else. For nobility seems to be a kind of praise that comes from the merits of one's parents. But if praise creates renown, then those who are praised must be the renowned. So if you have no renown of your own, another's renown does not make you illustrious. If there is anything good in nobility, I think it is this alone: that the nobly born seem to be under an obligation not to fall short of their ancestors' virtue.

POEM 6: ONE ORIGIN

All human beings come from one father, so none is ignoble except by vice.

3.M6 The whole human race on earth springs from a like origin.
For there is one father of things; one provides for all.
He gave Phoebus his rays and gave the moon her horns,
he gave human beings to the earth as he gave stars to the sky,
he shut up in limbs souls drawn from a lofty seat.
So all mortals spring from a noble seed.
Why do you clamor about your family and ancestors? If you look at your beginnings
and at God your maker, no one is ignoble,
unless, fostering what is worse through vice, he abandons his own origin.

PROSE 7: BODILY PLEASURE

Pleasures of the body bring anxiety, disease and regret.

3.P7 What should I say of the pleasures of the body? The craving for them is full of anxiety, and having one's fill of them full of remorse. What diseases, what unbearable pains they tend to

7 Euripides, *Andromache* 319–20.

bring to the bodies of those who enjoy them, as a kind of fruit of wickedness! What delight there is in their motions I do not know. But that the endings of pleasures are sad, anyone who is willing to remember his own lusts will understand. If they can make people happy, there is no reason why cattle too should not be called happy, whose whole effort hastens to fill the bodily void. The delight of wife and children would indeed be most honorable; but it was said all too truly that someone found his sons to be his torturers. How galling their condition is, whatever it may be, there is no need to remind you, who have experienced it before and are anxious now. In this I approve the saying of my Euripides, who said that a man without children is happy in his misfortune.[8]

POEM 7: THE BEE'S STING

Every pleasure stings once its sweetness is gone.

3.M7 Every pleasure has this about it:
it drives those who enjoy it with stings,
and, like the winged bees,
once it has poured out its pleasant honey,
it flies off, and with a bite that clings too long
strikes the hearts it has hit.

PROSE 8: FALSE PATHS

Each of these goods brings harm, and the goods of the body are slight and fleeting.

3.P8 There is no doubt, then, that these roads to happiness are byways, and cannot lead anyone to the place they promise to lead him. And how great are the evils in which they are entangled, I will show very briefly. What then? Will you try to amass money? But you will have to snatch it from someone who has it. Would you shine with high offices? You will have to beg

8 Euripides, *Andromache* 418–20. The saying about sons as torturers has not been traced.

from the one who grants them, and you who long to outdo others in honor will be cheapened by the humility of asking. Do you desire power? Exposed to the plots of your subjects, you will lie open to dangers. Do you seek glory? But pulled this way and that by every kind of hardship, you cease to be free of care. Would you lead a life of pleasure? But who would not despise and reject the slave of the body, that most worthless and fragile thing? And those who make a show of bodily goods—how slight, how fragile a possession they rely on! Will you be able to surpass elephants in size, or bulls in strength? Will you outrun tigers? Look at the expanse of the sky, its firmness, its swiftness, and stop at last admiring worthless things. And yet the sky is to be admired less for these things than for the reason by which it is governed. As for the gleam of beauty, how quick, how swift it is, more fleeting than the changing flowers of spring! If, as Aristotle says, human beings had the eyes of Lynceus, so that their sight could pierce through obstacles, would not the body of Alcibiades, so beautiful on the surface, seem utterly foul once its insides were seen? So it is not your own nature that makes you seem beautiful, but the weakness of the eyes that look at you. Value the goods of the body as highly as you like, so long as you know that whatever you admire can be dissolved by the little flame of a three-day fever! From all this we can sum up: these things, which cannot give the goods they promise and are not made perfect by the gathering of all goods, neither lead to happiness as paths nor make anyone happy by themselves.[9]

9 Lynceus, one of the Argonauts, could see through solid earth. Alcibiades (c. 450–404 BC), Athenian statesman famed for his beauty. The Aristotle passage is from a lost work, probably the *Protrepticus*.

POEM 8: IGNORANCE OF THE GOOD

People know where to find gold and fish, but not the good they seek.

3.M8 Alas, what ignorance leads the wretched
away from the path, astray!
You do not look for gold on a green tree,
nor pick gems from the vine;
you do not hide your nets on high mountains
to enrich your feasts with fish,
nor, if you want to hunt roe deer,
do you search the Tyrrhenian shallows.
Indeed, people know the hidden places beneath the waves,
the very recesses of the sea:
which waters are richest in snow-white pearls
or in red purple,
and which shores excel in tender fish
or prickly sea urchins.
But where the good they desire lies hidden,
they are content, in their blindness, not to know;
and what lies beyond the starry pole
they seek, sunk in the earth.
What fitting curse shall I call down on foolish minds?
Let them chase wealth and honors;
and when they have piled up false goods in a heavy mass,
then let them recognize the true ones.

PROSE 9: TRUE HAPPINESS

Sufficiency, power, reverence, renown and joy are one; true happiness gives them all at once.

3.P9 "It will be enough to have shown the form of false happiness this far. If you have seen it clearly, the next step is to show what true happiness is." "But I do see," I said, "that sufficiency cannot come from riches, nor power from kingdoms, nor reverence from offices, nor renown from glory, nor joy from pleasures." "And have you also grasped the reasons why this is so?" "I seem

to glimpse them as if through a narrow crack, but I would rather learn them more clearly from you."

"The reason is very easy to see. What is simple and undivided by nature, human error splits apart, and carries it away from the true and perfect to the false and imperfect. Do you think that what needs nothing lacks power?" "Not at all," I said. "You are right. For if something is of weaker strength in any respect, in that respect it must need help from someone else." "That is so," I said. "So sufficiency and power have one and the same nature." "So it seems." "And do you think that such a thing should be despised, or on the contrary that it is the most worthy of veneration of all things?" "That," I said, "cannot even be doubted." "Let us add reverence, then, to sufficiency and power, so that we judge these three to be one." "Let us add it, if we want to admit the truth." "Well then," she said, "do you think this is obscure and undistinguished, or most illustrious with every kind of renown? "Consider whether what has been granted to need nothing, to be most powerful and most worthy of honor, might lack renown, which it could not supply for itself, and so seem in some respect more lowly." "I cannot help admitting," I said, "that, being all this, it is also most renowned." "It follows, then, that we must admit that renown does not differ from the other three." "It follows," I said. "So what needs nothing from anything else, what can do all things by its own strength, what is renowned and revered—is it not clear that this is also most joyful?" "But how any sorrow could steal upon such a thing," I said, "I cannot even imagine; so, if what we said before holds, I must admit that it is full of joy." "And by the same reasoning it also necessarily follows that the names of sufficiency, power, renown, reverence and delight are indeed different, but that their substance in no way differs." "It necessarily follows," I said. "This, then, which is one and simple by nature, human perversity divides; and while it tries to gain part of a thing that has no parts, it obtains neither the part, which does not exist, nor the whole, which it hardly aims at." "How so?" I said. "The man who seeks riches," she said, "to escape poverty, cares nothing for power; he prefers to be

lowly and obscure, and even denies himself many natural pleasures so as not to lose the money he has gathered. But in this way not even sufficiency comes to one whom strength abandons, whom trouble pricks, whom lowliness casts down, whom obscurity hides away. And the man who desires only power squanders wealth, scorns pleasures, and thinks honor and glory without power worth nothing. But you see how many things this man lacks too. It happens that at times he needs necessities, that he is gnawed by anxieties; and since he cannot drive these off, he ceases to be even what he most sought—powerful. "One can reason in the same way about honors, glory and pleasures. For since each of these is the same as the others, whoever seeks one of them without the rest does not get even the one he desires." "What then?" I said. "If someone wanted to obtain them all together, he would indeed want the sum of happiness. But will he find it in these things, which we have shown cannot give what they promise?" "No," I said. "So happiness is by no means to be tracked down in the things that are believed to supply one or another of the things worth seeking." "I admit it," I said, "and nothing truer could be said." "So you have," she said, "both the form of false happiness and its causes. Now turn your mind's gaze the other way; for there you will at once see the true happiness I promised." "But that is plain even to a blind man," I said, "and you showed it a little earlier, when you were trying to lay bare the causes of the false. "For unless I am mistaken, true and perfect happiness is that which makes a person sufficient, powerful, revered, renowned and joyful. And so that you may know I have understood more deeply: since these are all the same, I recognize without any doubt that whatever can truly provide one of them is full happiness." "O my pupil, how happy you are in this opinion," she said, "if you add this ..." "What?" I said. "Do you think there is anything among these mortal and perishable things that can bring such a state?" "I do not," I said, "and you have shown it so clearly that nothing more is needed." "These things, then, seem to give mortals either images of the true good or certain imperfect goods, but they cannot confer the

true and perfect good." "I agree," I said. "Since, then, you have recognized what true happiness is, and what things only counterfeit it, it now remains for you to learn where you can seek this true happiness." "That," I said, "is what I have long been eagerly waiting for." "But since, as our Plato holds in the *Timaeus*," she said, "we ought to call for divine help even in the smallest matters, what do you think we should do now, to be worthy of finding the seat of that highest good?" "We must call upon the Father of all things," I said, "for without him no beginning is rightly founded." "Rightly said," she replied, and at once she sang these words.[10]

10 Plato, *Timaeus* 27c.

POEM 9: O YOU WHO GOVERN THE WORLD

Philosophy prays to the maker who orders the universe, asking to see the source of the good.

3.M9 O you who govern the world by everlasting reason,
maker of earth and heaven, who command time to go forth
from eternity, and, abiding unmoved, give all things motion:
no causes from outside drove you to fashion
this work of shifting matter, but the form of the highest good,
innate in you and free of envy. You draw all things
from the heavenly pattern; most beautiful yourself,
you bear the beautiful world in your mind, and shape it in a like image,
and command its perfect parts to complete a perfect whole.
You bind the elements by numbers, so that cold agrees with flame
and dry with wet, so that the purer fire
may not fly off, nor weight drag the earth down to sink.
You link the soul that moves all things, the middle of threefold nature,
and release it through harmonious members.
Once divided, it gathers its motion into two circles,
and goes forth, to return into itself, and circles the deep mind,
and turns the heavens in a like image.[11]

11 The poem condenses Plato's account of the making of the world in the *Timaeus*, including the world-soul and its two circles.

/ With like causes you bring forth souls and lesser lives,
and fitting them, raised on high, to light chariots,
you sow them in heaven and earth; and by a kindly law
you make them turn back to you and return by the fire that
leads them home.
Grant, Father, that my mind may climb to your august seat,
grant it to behold the source of the good; grant that, the
light found,
it may fix the clear sight of the soul on you.
Scatter the clouds and the weight of earthly mass,
and shine out in your splendor! For you are the clear sky,
you are calm rest for the devout; to see you is the end:
you are beginning, carrier, guide, path and goal, all at once.

PROSE 10: GOD IS THE HIGHEST GOOD

The perfect good exists and is God, so happiness is God himself.

3.P10 "Since, then, you have seen the form of the imperfect good and also of the perfect good, I think we must now show where this perfection of happiness is located. And here I think we must first ask whether any such good as you defined a little earlier can exist in the nature of things, so that no empty image of thought may deceive us, apart from the truth of the matter before us. But that it exists, and is as it were the source of all goods, cannot be denied. For everything that is called imperfect is said to be imperfect by some lessening of the perfect. So if in any kind of thing something appears imperfect, there must also be something perfect in that kind. For if perfection is taken away, one cannot even imagine where what is called imperfect could have come from. The nature of things did not take its beginning from what is diminished and incomplete, but, proceeding from what is whole and complete, it declines into these last and exhausted things. "So if, as we showed a little earlier, there is a certain imperfect happiness in fragile good, there can be no doubt that there is some solid and perfect happiness." "That is concluded most firmly," I said, "and most truly." "And

where it dwells," she said, "consider in this way. That God, the first principle of all things, is good is proved by the common conception of human minds. For since nothing better than God can be thought of, who could doubt that that than which nothing is better is good? Reason shows God to be good in such a way that it also proves that perfect good is in him. For if he were not such, he could not be the first principle of all things. There would be something more excellent than he, possessing perfect good, which would seem to be prior to him and more ancient; for it has become clear that all perfect things come before those less complete. So, lest our reasoning go on to infinity, we must admit that the highest God is utterly full of the highest and perfect good. "But we have established that the perfect good is true happiness; therefore true happiness must be located in the highest God." "I accept that," I said, "and there is no way it can be contradicted." "But I ask you," she said, "see how reverently and inviolably you approve what we have said, that the highest God is utterly full of the highest good." "How do you mean?" I said. "Do not presume that this Father of all things received from outside that highest good of which he is said to be full, or that he has it by nature in such a way that you would think the substance of God who has it and of the happiness he has are different. For if you think it was received from outside, you might judge the giver more excellent than the receiver. But we most rightly acknowledge that he is the most excellent of all things. And if it is in him by nature, but is distinct from him in concept, then—since we are speaking of God, the first principle of all things—let anyone imagine it who can: who joined these different things together? "Finally, what is different from any thing is not the thing from which it is understood to be different. So what is by its nature different from the highest good is not the highest good—and it is wrong to think this of him than whom nothing is known to be more excellent. For absolutely nothing can be better by nature than its own source; so I would conclude by the truest reasoning that what is the source of all things is also, in its very substance, the highest good." "Most rightly," I

said. "But it has been granted that the highest good is happiness." "That is so," I said. "Then," she said, "we must admit that God is happiness itself." "I cannot resist the premises laid down before," I said, "and I see that this follows from them." "See," she said, "whether the same thing is proved still more firmly from this: that there cannot be two highest goods that are different from each other. "For of goods that differ, it is clear that the one is not what the other is; so neither could be perfect, since each lacks the other. But what is not perfect is clearly not highest; so the goods that are highest can in no way be different. Yet we have concluded that both happiness and God are the highest good; therefore the highest happiness must be the same as the highest divinity." "Nothing," I said, "could be concluded that is truer in fact, firmer in reasoning or more worthy of God." "On top of this, then," she said, "just as geometers, once they have demonstrated their propositions, like to infer something further which they call *porismata* ['deductions'], so I too will give you a sort of corollary.[12] "Since people become happy by gaining happiness, and happiness is divinity itself, it is clear that they become happy by gaining divinity. And just as people become just by gaining justice, and wise by gaining wisdom, so by the same reasoning those who have gained divinity must become gods. Everyone who is happy, then, is a god. By nature, indeed, there is only one God; but nothing prevents there being as many as you like by participation." "This is beautiful and precious," I said, "whether you prefer to call it a porism or a corollary." "Yet nothing is more beautiful than this, which reason persuades us to attach to it." "What?" I said. "Since happiness seems to contain many things," she said, "do all these join together into one body of happiness, as it were, through a variety of parts, or is there one of them that completes the substance of happiness, to which the rest are referred?" "I wish," I said, "you would make this clear by going through the things themselves." "Do we not think," she said, "that happiness is a good?" "Yes, indeed, the highest," I said. "You may add that to all of them," she said. "For

12 *Corollarium* in Latin first meant a small garland given as a bonus or gratuity.

happiness is judged to be the same as the highest sufficiency, the highest power, and reverence, renown and pleasure too. What then? Are all these goods—sufficiency, power and the rest—limbs, as it were, of happiness, or are they all referred to the good as to their summit?" "I understand," I said, "what you propose to investigate, but I want to hear what you conclude." "Take the answer to this question as follows. If all these were limbs of happiness, they would also differ from one another. For this is the nature of parts: being different, they make up one body. But all these have been shown to be the same; so they are not limbs at all. Otherwise happiness will seem to be made up of one limb —which is impossible." "That is not in doubt," I said, "but I am waiting for what remains." It is obvious that the others are referred to the good. Sufficiency is sought because it is judged to be good, and power because it too is believed to be good; and the same can be inferred about reverence, renown and delight. The good, then, is the sum and cause of all things sought. For what holds no good in itself, either in reality or in appearance, cannot be sought in any way. And conversely, things that are not good by nature are still sought as though they were truly good, if they seem to be good. So it comes about that goodness is rightly believed to be the sum, the hinge and the cause of all things sought. And that for the sake of which something is sought seems to be what is most desired: if someone wanted to ride for the sake of his health, for example, he does not so much desire the motion of riding as the effect of health. Since, then, all things are sought for the sake of the good, it is not they but the good itself that is desired by all. But we have granted that happiness is that for the sake of which the other things are wished for; so in this way too happiness alone is sought. From this it plainly appears that the good itself and happiness have one and the same substance. "I see no reason why anyone could disagree." "But we have shown that God and true happiness are one and the same." "Yes," I said. "Then we may safely conclude that the substance of God also lies in the good itself and nowhere else."

POEM 10: THE ONE REFUGE

All who are captive to desire are invited to the harbor of the true good.

3.M10 Come here together, all you captives
whom deceitful desire binds in wicked chains—
desire that dwells in earthbound minds.
Here will be your rest from toil,
here a harbor abiding in calm quiet,
this the one refuge open to the wretched.
Not all that the Tagus gives with its golden sands,
or the Hermus with its glowing red banks,
or the Indus, near the torrid zone,
mingling green stones with white,
could make the eyes see clearly; rather, they bury
blinded minds deeper in their own darkness.
All this that pleases and excites the mind
the earth has nourished in its lowest caverns;
the splendor by which heaven is ruled and flourishes
shuns the dark ruins of the soul.
Whoever can discern this light
will deny that the rays of Phoebus are bright.[13]

PROSE 11: THE GOOD IS THE ONE

All things seek unity and their own survival, and so all things seek the good.

3.P11 "I agree," I said, "for it all holds together, bound by the firmest arguments." Then she said, "How highly will you value it if you come to know what the good itself is?" "Infinitely," I said, "if I may at the same time come to know God too, who is the good." "And yet I will make it plain by the truest reasoning," she said, "provided only that what we concluded a little while ago stands." "It will stand." "Have we not shown," she said, "that the

13 The Tagus (in Spain) and the Hermus (in Asia Minor) were famous for gold-bearing sands.

things most people seek are not true and perfect goods, because they differ from one another, and since one lacks what the other has, they cannot bring a full and absolute good? And that they become the true good when they are gathered, as it were, into a single form and operation, so that what is sufficiency is also power, reverence, renown and delight; but that unless they are all one and the same, they have nothing to earn them a place among things worth seeking?" "That has been demonstrated," I said, "and cannot be doubted in any way." "Then these things, which are not goods at all when they differ, but become goods when they begin to be one—is it not by acquiring unity that they come to be goods?" "So it seems," I said. "But do you grant that everything good is good by participation in the good, or not?" "It is so." "Then by the same reasoning you must grant that the one and the good are the same; for things whose effect is by nature not different have the same substance." "I cannot deny it," I said. "Do you know, then," she said, "that everything that exists continues and subsists just as long as it is one, but perishes and dissolves as soon as it ceases to be one?" "How so?" "As with animals," she said. "When soul and body come together into one and remain so, it is called an animal; but when this unity is dissolved by the separation of the two, it plainly perishes and is no longer an animal. "The body itself, too, while it remains in one form through the joining of its limbs, is seen as a human shape; but if the parts of the body are separated and set apart and so break up its unity, it ceases to be what it was. Anyone who runs through other cases in the same way will see beyond doubt that each thing subsists while it is one, and perishes when it ceases to be one." "When I consider more cases," I said, "it seems to me no different." "Is there, then," she said, "anything which, insofar as it acts by nature, abandons the desire to subsist and wishes to come to destruction and decay?" "If I consider animals," I said, "which have some nature capable of willing and not willing, I find none that, without compulsion from outside, throws away the will to endure and hurries of its own accord to its death. For every animal works to protect its life, and avoids death and

destruction. But what I should think about plants and trees, and about inanimate things altogether, I am quite unsure." And yet there is no reason for you to be in doubt about this either, when you see, first, that plants and trees spring up in places suited to them, where, so far as their nature allows, they cannot quickly wither and die. Some grow on plains, others on mountains; marshes bear some, others cling to rocks, and barren sands are fertile for still others; and if anyone tried to move them to other places, they would wither. But nature gives each what suits it, and labors that they should not perish while they can still endure. What of the fact that all of them draw their nourishment through their roots, as though with mouths plunged into the earth, and spread strength through their pith and bark? What of the fact that the softest part, such as the pith, is always hidden in the innermost place, while outside there is a certain firmness of wood, and last of all the bark is set against the harshness of the weather, like a defender able to endure hardship? And then how great is nature's care, that all things are propagated by multiplying their seed! Who does not know that all these are like mechanisms, not only for enduring for a time, but for enduring, generation after generation, as if forever? And the things believed to be inanimate—does not each of them, by similar reasoning, desire what is its own? Why else does lightness carry flames upward, while weight presses earth downward, except that these places and motions suit each of them? Moreover, what is in keeping with each thing preserves it, just as what is hostile to it destroys it. Hard things such as stones cling most tightly to their parts and resist being easily broken up. Fluid things such as air and water yield easily to what divides them, but quickly flow back into the parts from which they were cut; and fire refuses all division. We are not now dealing with the voluntary motions of the knowing soul, but with natural inclination—as when we digest the food we have taken without thinking about it, or breathe in our sleep without knowing it. For even in animals the love of survival comes not from the will of the soul but from the principles of nature. Often, under compelling causes,

the will embraces death, which nature dreads; and conversely the will sometimes restrains the work of procreation, by which alone mortal things endure, and which nature always seeks. So true is it that this love of self proceeds not from a movement of the soul but from natural inclination. For providence gave the things it created this, as the greatest cause of their endurance: that they naturally desire to endure as long as they can. So there is no way you can doubt that all things that exist naturally seek to persist, and avoid destruction. "I confess," I said, "that I now see beyond doubt what long seemed uncertain." "Now whatever seeks to subsist and endure," she said, "desires to be one; for take this away, and nothing will even continue to exist." "That is true," I said. "All things, then," she said, "desire the one." I agreed. "But we have shown that the one is the very same as the good." "Yes, indeed." "All things, then, seek the good; which you may in fact define like this: the good is that which is desired by all." "Nothing truer can be thought of," I said. "For either all things are referred to nothing single and, left without one summit as it were, will drift with no one to guide them; or, if there is something toward which all things hurry, it will be the highest of all goods." And she said, "I am very glad, my pupil; for you have fixed in your mind the very mark of the central truth. But in this it has become clear to you what you said a little while ago you did not know." "What?" I said. "What the end of all things is," she said. "For it is surely that which is desired by all; and since we have concluded that this is the good, we must admit that the end of all things is the good."

POEM 11: TRUTH WITHIN

Truth is found by turning inward; learning is remembering.

3.M11 Whoever searches for the truth with a deep mind
and wishes not to be misled by any false paths,
let him turn back upon himself the light of his inner sight,
bend his long wanderings round into a circle,
and teach his soul that whatever it strives for outside
it possesses, hidden away, among its own treasures.
What the black cloud of error long concealed
will shine more clearly than Phoebus himself.
For the body has not driven all light from the mind,
though it brings with it a heavy mass of forgetfulness.
Surely the seed of truth clings deep within,
and is roused when teaching fans it into flame.
For why, when questioned, do you judge rightly of your own accord,
unless a spark still lived, buried deep in the heart?
And if Plato's Muse proclaims the truth,
what each one learns, he is remembering, having forgotten.[14]

PROSE 12: GOD GOVERNS BY GOODNESS

God rules all things through the good, and they obey willingly; evil is nothing.

3.P12 Then I said, "I agree strongly with Plato; for you are now reminding me of these things a second time. I lost the memory of them first through contact with the body, and then again when I was weighed down by the burden of grief." Then she said, "If you look back at what has already been granted, you will not be far from remembering what you confessed a little while ago that you did not know." "What?" I said. "By what rud-

14 Plato taught that learning is recollection of what the soul knew before birth (*Meno*, *Phaedo*).

ders the world is steered," she said. "I remember," I said, "that I confessed my ignorance; but though I already foresee what you are going to offer, I want to hear it from you more plainly." "A little while ago," she said, "you thought there was no doubt at all that this world is ruled by God." "Nor do I think so now," I said, "nor will I ever think it open to doubt, and I will briefly set out the reasons that lead me to this. This world would never have come together into one form out of parts so diverse and contrary, unless there were one who joined such diverse things. "And once they were joined, the very diversity of their natures, at odds with itself, would pull them apart and tear them asunder, unless there were one who held together what he had bound. Nor would the order of nature proceed so surely, nor would things unfold such well-ordered motions in place, time, operation, extent and quality, unless there were one who, himself remaining unchanged, ordered these varieties of change. Whatever this is by which created things endure and are moved, I call it by the word everyone uses: God." Then she said, "Since this is what you think, I believe little work remains for me before you can see your homeland again, safe and in possession of happiness. But let us look at what we set out. Did we not count sufficiency as part of happiness, and agree that God is happiness itself?" "Yes, indeed." "Then to rule the world," she said, "he will need no help from outside; otherwise, if he needed anything, he would not have full sufficiency." "That," I said, "necessarily follows." "Then he orders all things through himself alone." "That cannot be denied," I said. "And yet God has been shown to be the good itself." "I remember," I said. "Then he orders all things through the good, since he rules all things through himself, whom we have agreed to be the good; and this is, as it were, the helm and rudder by which the machine of the world is kept stable and unimpaired." "I agree strongly," I said, "and a little while ago I foresaw, if only with a faint suspicion, that you were going to say this." "I believe it," she said; "for now, I think, you are turning your eyes more alertly to see what is true. But what I am going to say is no less plain to see." "What?" I said. "Since

God is rightly believed to steer all things with the helm of goodness," she said, "and all these same things, as I have taught, hurry toward the good by natural inclination, can there be any doubt that they are ruled willingly, and turn of their own accord at the nod of the one who orders them, as things in tune and in harmony with their ruler?" "It must be so," I said; "nor would it seem a happy rule if it were a yoke on the unwilling rather than the well-being of the obedient." "Then there is nothing that, keeping its nature, tries to oppose God." "Nothing," I said. "And if it tried," she said, "would it achieve anything at all against him whom we agreed is most powerful by right of his happiness?" "It would have no power at all," I said. "Then there is nothing that either wishes or is able to resist this highest good." "I think not," I said. "Then it is the highest good," she said, "that rules all things mightily and disposes them sweetly." Then I said, "How I am delighted, not only by the conclusion your arguments have reached, but much more by these very words you use—so that at last the folly that tears at great things may be ashamed of itself!" "You have heard in the stories," she said, "of the Giants attacking heaven; but a kindly strength disposed of them too, as they deserved. But would you like us to set the arguments themselves against one another? Perhaps from such a clash some beautiful spark of truth may fly out." "As you please," I said.[15] "No one would doubt," she said, "that God is all-powerful." "No one at all who is in his right mind," I said, "would hesitate." "But for one who is all-powerful," she said, "there is nothing he cannot do." "Nothing," I said. "Can God, then, do evil?" "Not at all," I said. "Then evil is nothing," she said, "since he cannot do it, who can do everything." "Are you playing with me," I said, "weaving with your arguments a labyrinth from which there is no way out—now going in by the way you should come out, now coming out by the way you went in—or are you folding together some wonderful circle of the divine simplicity? For a little earlier, beginning from happiness, you said it was the highest good, and you

15 "Rules all things mightily and disposes them sweetly" echoes Wisdom 8:1. The Giants, in Greek myth, made war on the gods and were overthrown.

described it as located in the highest God. You also argued that God himself is the highest good and full happiness; and from this you handed me, as a little bonus, that no one would be happy unless he were likewise a god. "Again, you said that the very form of the good is the substance of God and of happiness, and you taught that the one itself is the very good that is sought by the whole of nature. You argued, too, that God rules the universe by the rudders of goodness, that all things obey willingly, and that evil has no nature. And you unfolded all this with no proofs brought in from outside, but with proofs internal and at home, each drawing its credibility from the other."

Then she said, "We are not playing at all. By the gift of God, whom we prayed to a while ago, we have accomplished the greatest thing of all. For such is the form of the divine substance that it neither slips away into what is outside it nor takes anything outside into itself; but, as Parmenides says of it, πάντοθεν εὐκύκλου σφαίρης ἐναλίγκιον ὄγκῳ [in bulk like a well-rounded sphere on every side], it turns the moving orb of things while keeping itself unmoved. And if we have also used arguments not sought from outside but placed within the bounds of the subject we were treating, there is nothing for you to wonder at, since you have learned, on Plato's authority, that words must be akin to the things they speak of."[16]

16 Parmenides, Greek philosopher (5th century BC), fragment 8; the Plato reference is *Timaeus* 29b. The prayer is the hymn of 3.M9.

POEM 12: ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

Orpheus wins Eurydice back from the underworld but loses her by looking back.

3.M12 Happy is he who has been able to see
the shining fountain of the good;
happy is he who has been able to loose
the chains of the heavy earth.
Once, mourning his wife's death,
the Thracian bard,
after he had, with his tearful measures,
made the woods run and move,
and forced the rivers to stand still,
and the hind had laid her fearless flank
beside savage lions,
and the hare no longer feared the sight
of the hound, now calmed by song—
when a burning passion, fiercer still,
scorched the inmost depths of his breast,
and the strains that had subdued all things
could not soothe their master,
complaining that the gods above were pitiless,
he went to the dwellings below.
There, tuning gentle songs
to the sounding strings,
all that he had drawn from the chief springs
of the goddess his mother,
all that unbridled grief could give,
and love that doubled grief,
he pours out in weeping, moving Taenarus,
and with sweet prayer asks pardon
of the lords of the shades.[17]

17 Orpheus, the legendary singer of Thrace, son of the Muse Calliope; Taenarus, a cape in southern Greece thought to be an entrance to the underworld.

/ The three-headed doorkeeper stands stunned,
captured by the new song;
the goddesses who avenge crimes,
who drive the guilty with fear,
now are wet with sorrowful tears.
Ixion's head is not whirled
headlong by the swift wheel,
and Tantalus, ruined by long thirst,
disdains the rivers.
The vulture, sated with the music,
did not tear at Tityus's liver.
At last the judge of the shades, in pity,
says, "We are beaten.
We give the man his wife as companion,
bought by his song.
But let a law restrain the gift:
until he has left Tartarus,
he may not turn his eyes back."
Who can give lovers a law?
Love is a greater law to itself.
Alas, near the very bounds of night
Orpheus saw his Eurydice,
lost her, killed her.
This tale concerns you,
all who seek to lead your mind
up into the day above.[18]

/ For whoever, overcome, turns his eyes
back toward the pit of Tartarus
loses whatever excellent thing he draws with him,
while he looks upon the dead below.

18 Cerberus, the three-headed dog, guards the underworld; the Furies avenge crimes; Ixion (bound to a wheel), Tantalus (tormented by thirst) and Tityus (his liver eaten by a vulture) suffer punishment there.

Book IV

Providence and fate
Why the wicked seem to prosper, and how providence orders all things.

PROSE 1: WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

Boethius asks how evil can flourish under a good God; Philosophy promises an answer.

4.P1 When Philosophy had sung these things gently and sweetly, preserving the dignity of her face and the gravity of her expression, I, who had not yet wholly forgotten the grief planted deep in me, broke in on her as she was preparing to say something more. "O guide toward the true light," I said, "the things your speech has poured out up to now have shown themselves unanswerable, both as divine in their own contemplation and by your arguments; and what you said, though I had recently forgotten it through the pain of the injustice done to me, I was not altogether ignorant of before. But this is perhaps the greatest cause of my grief: that although there is a good ruler of things, evils can exist at all, or pass by unpunished. How much wonder this alone deserves you surely consider. But to this another, greater thing is added. For while wickedness rules and flourishes, virtue not only lacks rewards but is even thrown under the feet of criminals and trampled, and pays the penalties in place of the crimes. "That these things should happen in the kingdom of a God who knows all things, can do all things, but wills only good things—no one can wonder at it or lament it enough."

Then she said, “It would indeed be a thing of boundless astonishment, and more horrible than any monster, if, as you suppose, in the perfectly ordered house of so great a master of the household, as it were, the cheap vessels were cared for while the precious ones were left to grow filthy. But it is not so. For if the conclusions we reached a little while ago are kept intact, you will learn, on the authority of the very one whose kingdom we are now speaking of, that the good are always powerful, while the wicked are always abject and weak; that vices are never without punishment, nor virtues without reward; that good fortune always befalls the good, and misfortune the wicked; and many things of that kind, which will put your complaints to rest and strengthen you with firm solidity. And since you have seen the form of true happiness, which I showed you a while ago, and have recognized where it is located, then, after running through everything I think it necessary to set out first, I will show you the way that will carry you back home. “I will also fasten wings to your mind, by which it may raise itself on high, so that, with your turmoil driven away, you may return safe to your homeland under my guidance, by my path, and even in my vehicles.”

POEM 1: THE WINGS OF THE MIND

The mind can fly beyond the stars to its true homeland.

4.M1 For I have swift wings
that climb the heights of the sky.
When the quick mind puts them on,
it looks down in disgust on the earth,
rises above the globe of the boundless air,
and sees the clouds behind it;
and the fire that grows hot from the ether's swift motion—
it climbs beyond its highest point,
until it rises into the star-bearing houses
and joins its paths with Phoebus,
or follows the journey of the cold old man,
a soldier of the flashing star;
or wherever the night is painted with sparkling lights,
it runs again the circle of the stars;
and when it has had enough of this,
it leaves the outermost sphere
and treads upon the back of the swift ether,
possessed of the awesome light.
Here the lord of kings holds the scepter
and guides the reins of the world,
and, steadfast, steers the swift chariot,
the shining judge of things.[1]

/ If the road should bring you back here,
the road you now seek, having forgotten it,
"This," you will say, "I remember—this is my homeland;
here I was born, here I will plant my feet."
And if you should wish to look back
at the night of earth you have left behind,
you will see the grim tyrants whom wretched peoples fear
living as exiles.

1 The "cold old man" is Saturn, the slowest and outermost of the known planets.

PROSE 2: THE GOOD ARE POWERFUL, THE WICKED WEAK

All seek the good but only the good attain it, so the wicked have no real power.

4.P2 Then I said, "My word, what great things you promise! And I do not doubt that you can accomplish them; only do not keep me waiting, now that you have stirred me up." "First, then," she said, "you may recognize that power is always present to the good, while the wicked are deserted by all strength; and each of these is proved by the other. For since good and evil are contraries, if it is established that the good is powerful, the weakness of evil is plain; and if the frailty of evil becomes clear, the firmness of the good is known. But so that our view may be the more abundantly credible, I will proceed along both paths, confirming my propositions now from one side, now from the other. There are two things on which the accomplishment of all human actions depends, namely will and power; if either is lacking, nothing can be carried out. For if the will is lacking, no one even undertakes what he does not want; but if power is absent, the will is in vain. "So if you see someone wanting to obtain what he does not obtain at all, you cannot doubt that he lacked the strength to get what he wanted." "That is clear," I said, "and cannot be denied in any way." "And if you see someone who has accomplished what he wanted, will you doubt that he was also able to?" "Not at all." "And in what each person can do he must be judged strong, and in what he cannot do, weak." "I admit it," I said. "Do you remember, then," she said, "that it was concluded in our earlier arguments that the whole aim of the human will, though it is driven along by various pursuits, hurries toward happiness?" "I remember," I said, "that this too was demonstrated." "Do you recall that happiness is the good itself, and so, when happiness is sought, the good is desired by all?" "I do not so much recall it," I said, "as keep it fixed in my memory." "All people, then, good and bad alike, strive with the same undivided aim to reach the good?" "Yes," I said, "that follows." "But it

is certain that people become good by acquiring the good." "Certain." "Then the good obtain what they seek?" "So it seems." "But if the wicked obtained the good they seek, they could not be wicked." "That is so." "Since, then, both seek the good, but the one group obtains it and the other does not, can there be any doubt that the good are powerful, while those who are wicked are weak?" "Whoever doubts it," I said, "can consider neither the nature of things nor the logical sequence of arguments."

"Again," she said, "suppose there are two people who have the same goal set before them by nature, and one pursues and achieves it by a natural function, while the other cannot perform that natural function, but in some other way than suits nature does not really fulfill his goal, but only imitates the one who fulfils it: which of these do you judge to be stronger?" "Although I can guess what you mean," I said, "I want to hear it more plainly." "You will not deny," she said, "that the motion of walking is natural to human beings?" "Not at all," I said. "And you do not doubt that this is the natural function of the feet?" "Not that either," I said. "If, then, one person who is able to go on foot walks, while another, who lacks this natural function of the feet, tries to walk by leaning on his hands, which of them can rightly be thought stronger?" "Go on with the rest," I said, "for no one would doubt that one who has power over a natural function is stronger than one who cannot do the same." "But the highest good, which is set before bad and good alike, the good seek by the natural function of the virtues, while the wicked try to obtain the very same thing through various desires, which is not a natural function for obtaining the good. Or do you think otherwise?" "Not at all," I said, "for what follows is also clear. From what I have granted, it must be that the good are powerful and the wicked weak." She said: You run ahead rightly, and that, as doctors like to hope, is a sign of a nature now rallying and fighting back. But since I see that you are very quick to understand, I will pile up arguments one after another. For see how great is the weakness of vicious people, who cannot even arrive at that toward which their natural inclination leads and almost

compels them. And what if they were deprived of this great and almost invincible help of nature going before them? Consider, too, how great a powerlessness grips wicked people. For the prizes they seek, and cannot gain and keep, are not light or trivial ones; they fail in the very sum and summit of things, and the wretches do not succeed in the one thing they labor at day and night. And in this the strength of the good stands out. For just as you would judge that person most capable of walking who, going on foot, could reach the place beyond which there was nothing further open to travel, so you must judge that person most powerful who grasps the end of things worth seeking, beyond which there is nothing more. From this follows the opposite: that the same people who are wicked are seen to be deserted by all their strength. For why do they abandon virtue and pursue vices? From ignorance of what is good? But what is more feeble than the blindness of ignorance? Or do they know what they should pursue? But desire drives them headlong off course. So they are weak through lack of self-control too, since they cannot struggle against vice. Or do they abandon the good knowingly and willingly, and turn aside to vices? But in this way they cease not only to be powerful but to be at all. For those who abandon the common end of all things that are cease, equally, to exist. This may perhaps seem strange to someone—that we should say the wicked, who are the majority of people, do not exist; but that is how things stand. I do not deny that those who are wicked are wicked; but I deny that they exist purely and simply. For just as you might call a corpse a dead man but could not simply call it a man, so I would grant that the vicious are wicked, but I cannot admit that they exist in an absolute sense. For that exists which keeps its order and preserves its nature; but what falls away from this also abandons the existence that lies in its nature. "But the wicked can do things," you will say. I would not deny it either; but this power of theirs comes not from strength but from weakness. For they can do evil, which they would have no power to do if they had been able to remain in the efficacy of the good. And this ability shows all the more

clearly that they can do nothing. For if, as we concluded a little earlier, evil is nothing, then since they can do only evil, it is plain that the wicked can do nothing. "That is clear." "And so that you may understand what the force of this power is, we established a little while ago that nothing is more powerful than the highest good." "That is so," I said. "But the same cannot do evil," she said. "Not at all." "Is there anyone, then," she said, "who thinks that human beings can do everything?" "No one, unless he is mad." "And yet they can do evil." "I only wish," I said, "that they could not." "Since, then, one who is capable only of good can do everything, while those who are capable of evil too cannot do everything, it is clear that those who can do evil have less power. "Add to this that we have shown that all power is to be counted among the things worth seeking, and that all things worth seeking are referred to the good, as to a kind of summit of their nature. But the ability to commit crime cannot be referred to the good; therefore it is not worth seeking. Yet all power is worth seeking; so it is plain that the ability of the wicked is not power. From all this the power of the good, and the weakness of the wicked, appear beyond doubt; and it is plain that Plato's view is true, that only the wise can do what they desire, while the wicked can indeed practice whatever they please, but cannot fulfill what they desire. For they do whatever they like, thinking that through the things that delight them they will obtain the good they desire; but they do not obtain it, since disgraceful deeds never arrive at happiness."[2]

2 Plato, *Gorgias* 466–468.

POEM 2: TYRANTS IN CHAINS

Proud kings are slaves to lust, anger, grief and hope.

4.M2 The kings you see sitting high on the summit of the throne,
bright in shining purple, fenced in by grim weapons,
threatening with fierce looks, panting with the rage of their hearts—
if someone stripped the proud of the coverings of their empty finery,
he would see at once that inside, these lords wear tight chains.
For here lust twists their hearts with greedy poisons,
here anger whips the mind, stirring up turbulent waves;
grief wears out its captives, or slippery hope torments them.
So when you see one head bearing so many tyrants,
he does not do what he wishes, oppressed by unjust masters.

PROSE 3: REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

Goodness is its own reward, and wickedness turns human beings into beasts.

4.P3 Do you see, then, in what mud disgraceful deeds wallow, and with what light goodness shines? From this it is clear that the good never lack rewards, nor crimes their own punishments. For of things that are done, that for the sake of which each thing is done may with good reason be seen as its reward, just as the crown for which one runs lies waiting as the prize for running on the racecourse. But we have shown that happiness is the very good for the sake of which all things are done. So the good itself is set before human actions as a kind of common reward. And yet this cannot be separated from good people—for no one who lacks the good will any longer rightly be called good—so upright conduct is never left without its rewards. However much, then, the wicked may rage, the crown of the wise will not fall, will not

wither. For the wickedness of others does not pluck from good souls the honor that is their own. If a good person rejoiced in something received from outside, then someone else, or even the very person who had given it, could take it away; but since each person's goodness confers it on him, he will lack his reward only when he has ceased to be good. Finally, since every reward is sought because it is believed to be good, who would judge one who possesses the good to be without reward? And what reward? The most beautiful and greatest of all. For remember that corollary which I gave you a little while ago as a special gift, and reason thus: since the good itself is happiness, it is plain that all good people, by the very fact that they are good, become happy. But it is agreed that those who are happy are gods. So the reward of the good is one that no day can wear away, no one's power diminish, no one's wickedness darken: to become gods. Since this is so, no wise person could doubt that punishment, too, is inseparable from the wicked.[3] For since good and evil, and likewise punishment and reward, stand opposed face to face, what we see accruing to the reward of the good must correspond, on the opposite side, in the punishment of the wicked. Just as goodness itself becomes the reward of the good, so wickedness itself is the punishment of the wicked. Now whoever is afflicted with punishment does not doubt that he is afflicted with an evil. If, then, they were willing to assess themselves, could they think themselves free of punishment, when wickedness, the worst of all evils, has not only affected them but thoroughly infected them? But see, from the side opposite to the good, what punishment accompanies the wicked. You learned a little earlier that everything that is, is one, and that the one itself is good; from which it follows that everything that is also appears to be good. In this way, whatever falls away from the good ceases to be; so the wicked cease to be what they were—though that they were human beings is still shown by the shape of the human body that remains. So, having turned to wicked-

3 The corollary of 3.P10: since happiness is divinity, those who become happy become gods by participation.

ness, they have lost their human nature too. But since goodness alone can raise anyone above the human, it must be that wickedness thrusts down below the dignity of a human being those whom it has cast down from the human condition. The result is that you cannot regard as human someone you see transformed by vices. Does a violent robber of others' wealth burn with greed? You might call him like a wolf. Is someone fierce and restless, always exercising his tongue in quarrels? You will compare him to a dog. Does a secret plotter delight in having stolen by fraud? Let him be ranked with foxes. Does someone roar with unrestrained anger? Let him be thought to carry the spirit of a lion. Is someone fearful and quick to flee, dreading what need not be feared? Let him be held to be like a deer. Is someone lazy and dull, sunk in torpor? He lives the life of an ass. Is someone fickle and inconstant, always changing his pursuits? He is no different from the birds. Is someone sunk in foul and unclean lusts? He is held fast by the pleasures of a filthy sow. So it happens that one who has abandoned goodness and ceased to be human, since he cannot pass over into the divine condition, is turned into a beast.

POEM 3: CIRCE

Circe turns Ulysses' men into animals, but vice changes the mind itself.

4.M3 The sails of the Neritian captain
and his ships wandering on the sea
the east wind drove to the island
where the beautiful goddess dwells,
born of the seed of the Sun,
who mixes for her new guests
cups touched by a spell.
When into various forms
her herb-mighty hand had turned them,
the face of a boar covers one;
another, a Libyan lion,
grows teeth and claws;
this one, newly added to the wolves,
howls when he means to weep;
that one, like an Indian tiger,
paces tamely about the house.
But though, beset as he was by various ills,
the power of the winged Arcadian god,
pitying the captain,
freed him from his hostess's plague,
the rowers had already drunk
the evil cups with their mouths;
already, as swine, they had exchanged
the grain of Ceres for acorns,
and nothing remains whole
of those who have lost voice and body.
Only the mind, steady above
the monstrous shapes it suffers, groans.[4]

4 Ulysses (from Neritos, near Ithaca) and the enchantress Circe, daughter of the Sun; the winged Arcadian god is Mercury, who protected Ulysses (*Odyssey* 10). Marmarica, the original's word for Libya.

/ O hand too weak,
herbs without true power!
Though they can change the limbs,
they cannot change the heart.
The strength of human beings is within,
hidden in a secret citadel.
Those poisons are more powerful
that drag a person away from himself,
dread poisons that sink deep within,
and, though they do no harm to the body,
rage by wounding the mind.

PROSE 4: THE MISERY OF THE WICKED

The wicked are unhappier when they succeed, and when they go unpunished.

4.P4 Then I said, "I admit it, and I see that it is not wrong to say that the vicious, although they keep the shape of the human body, are changed into beasts in the quality of their souls. But I would have wished that those whose savage and criminal minds rage to destroy the good were not allowed to do so." "Nor are they allowed," she said, "as will be shown in the proper place. But even so, if what they are believed to be allowed were taken away, the punishment of criminals would be in large part relieved. For—and this may perhaps seem incredible to some—the wicked must be more unhappy when they have accomplished what they desire than if they cannot fulfill what they desire. For if it is wretched to have wanted what is wicked, it is more wretched to have been able to do it, since without that ability the wretched will would languish without effect. So, since each of these has its own wretchedness, those whom you see wanting, being able and carrying out a crime must be weighed down by a triple misfortune." "I agree," I said, "but I earnestly wish that they may soon be free of this misfortune, by being deprived of the ability to commit crime." "They will be free of it," she said, "sooner than you perhaps wish, or than they

themselves think they will. For in the short span of life there is nothing so late in coming that an immortal soul, above all, should think it a long wait; their great hopes and their lofty machinery of crime are often destroyed by a sudden and unexpected end, and that indeed sets a limit to their misery. For if wickedness makes people wretched, the longer one is wicked, the more wretched he must be; and I would judge them the unhappiest of all, if at least death did not finally put an end to their malice. For if our conclusions about the misfortune of depravity are true, it is plain that misery known to be eternal is infinite." Then I said, "That is indeed a remarkable inference, and hard to grant; but I recognize that it agrees only too well with what was granted before." "You judge rightly," she said. "But whoever thinks it hard to accept a conclusion should, in fairness, either show that something false came before it, or show that the arrangement of the premises does not produce a necessary conclusion; otherwise, once the premises are granted, there is no ground at all to object to the inference. For what I am about to say may seem no less astonishing, yet it follows just as necessarily from what has been assumed." "What is that?" I said. "That the wicked are happier when they pay penalties than if no punishment of justice restrains them. I am not now working toward what might occur to anyone—that depraved characters are corrected by punishment and led to what is right by fear of penalties, and that they serve as an example to others to avoid what deserves blame. I think that the wicked who go unpunished are more unhappy in another way, even if no account is taken of correction and no regard is had to example." "And what other way will there be," I said, "besides these?" And she said, "Did we not grant that the good are happy and the wicked wretched?" "Yes," I said. "If, then," she said, "something good is added to someone's misery, is he not happier than one whose misery is pure and solitary, with no admixture of any good?" "So it seems," I said. "And what if, to that same wretched man who lacks all goods, some further evil is attached besides those that make him wretched—must he not be judged much

unhappier than one whose misfortune is relieved by sharing in some good?" "Of course," I said. "But it is plain that it is just for the wicked to be punished, and unjust for them to escape unpunished." "Who would deny it?" "But no one will deny this either," she said, "that everything just is good, and conversely whatever is unjust is evil." "That is clear," I replied. "So when the wicked are punished, they have something good attached to them—namely the punishment itself, which is good by reason of justice—and when they escape punishment, they have in them a further evil, impunity itself, which you have admitted is an evil because it is unjust." "I cannot deny it." "Then the wicked are much more unhappy when granted an unjust impunity than when punished by a just penalty." Then I said, "That does follow from what was concluded a little while ago. But I ask you," I said, "do you leave no punishments for souls after the body has died?" "Great ones indeed," she said; "some of them, I think, are exacted with penal severity, others with purifying mercy. "But it is not my plan to discuss these now. What we have done so far is this: that you should recognize that the power of the wicked, which seemed to you most unworthy, is nothing; that you should see that those whom you complained went unpunished are never without the punishment of their wickedness; that you should learn that the license which you prayed might soon end is not long, and would be unhappier if it lasted longer, and unhappiest of all if it were eternal; and after this, that the wicked are more wretched when let off with an unjust impunity than when punished with a just penalty. And it follows from this conclusion that they are weighed down by heavier punishments precisely when they are believed to go unpunished."

Then I said, "When I consider your arguments, I think nothing truer can be said. But if I turn back to human judgments, who is there who would think these things worth even hearing, let alone believing?" "That is so," she said. "For they cannot lift eyes accustomed to darkness to the light of clear truth, and they are like birds whose sight is lit by night and blinded by day. For while they look not at the order of things but at their own feel-

ings, they think that license and impunity for crimes bring happiness. But see what the eternal law ordains. Shape your mind to better things, and you have no need of a judge to confer the reward: you have yourself added yourself to the more excellent. Turn your efforts to worse things, and do not look for an avenger outside: you have yourself thrust yourself down among the baser—just as, if you looked in turn at the filthy ground and at the sky, then, with everything outside you at rest, by the mere act of seeing you would seem to be now in the mud, now among the stars. "But the common crowd does not consider these things. What then? Should we side with those whom we have shown to be like beasts? What if someone who had wholly lost his sight even forgot that he had ever had vision, and thought he lacked nothing of human perfection—would we who can see therefore think as the blind do? For they will not accept this either, which rests on equally strong supports of argument: that those who do wrong are more unhappy than those who suffer it." "I would like to hear these very arguments," I said. "Do you deny," she said, "that every wicked person deserves punishment?" "Not at all." "And it is plain in many ways that those who are wicked are unhappy." "Yes," I said. "Then you do not doubt that those who deserve punishment are wretched?" "Agreed," I said. "If, then, you sat as judge," she said, "on whom would you think punishment should be inflicted—the one who had done the wrong, or the one who had suffered it?" "I have no hesitation," I said, "that I would make amends to the one who suffered by the pain of the one who did it." "Then the one who inflicts a wrong would seem to you more wretched than the one who receives it." "That follows," I said. "From this, then, and for other reasons resting on the same root—that wickedness by its own nature makes people wretched—it is clear that a wrong done to anyone is the misery not of the one who receives it but of the one who does it." "And yet," she said, "orators nowadays do the opposite. For they try to rouse the judges' pity for those who have suffered something grave and bitter, when a juster pity is owed rather to those who commit it. They ought to be brought to

trial, like the sick to a doctor, not by angry accusers but rather by kind and compassionate ones, so that the diseases of guilt might be cut away by punishment. In that way the work of defense counsel would either go entirely cold, or, if it preferred to benefit people, would turn into the role of prosecution. "The wicked themselves, too, if they were allowed to glimpse through some little crack the virtue they have abandoned, and saw that through the torments of punishment they would lay aside the filth of their vices in exchange for gaining goodness, would not consider these torments at all; they would refuse the help of their defenders and hand themselves over wholly to their accusers and judges. So it is that among the wise no place at all is left for hatred. For who but the greatest fool would hate the good? And to hate the wicked is without reason. For if, just as sickness is of the body, so vice is a kind of disease of the soul, then since we judge those sick in body to deserve not hatred but pity, much more are they to be pitied, not persecuted, whose minds are oppressed by wickedness, which is fiercer than any sickness."

POEM 4: LOVE THE GOOD, PITY THE WICKED

Why hasten death with war? Love the good and pity the wicked.

4.M4 What joy is there in stirring up such great commotion
and provoking fate with your own hand?
If you seek death, it draws near of itself,
of its own will, and does not slow its winged horses.
Those whom serpent, lion, tiger, bear and boar
attack with their teeth still attack one another with the sword.
Is it because their ways differ and are at odds
that they stir up unjust battle lines and savage wars
and wish to perish by each other's weapons?
That is not reason enough to justify cruelty.
Do you wish to give a fitting return to merit?
Love the good, as is right, and pity the wicked.

PROSE 5: REWARDS REVERSED

Boethius asks why rewards and punishments so often seem reversed.

4.P5 Here I said, "I see what happiness or misery is established in the very deserts of the good and the wicked. But I judge that there is something good or bad in this popular fortune too. For no wise man would rather be an exile, poor and disgraced, than flourish, remaining in his own city, powerful in wealth, respected for his office, strong in power. For the task of wisdom is carried out more brilliantly and more conspicuously when the happiness of those who rule is in some way passed on to the peoples in their care—especially since prison, execution and the other tortures of legal punishment are owed rather to harmful citizens, for whom indeed they were established. Why, then, these things should be reversed—why the punishments of crimes should weigh on the good, while the wicked seize the rewards of virtue—I wonder greatly, and I want to learn from you what reason there seems to be for such unjust confusion. For I would wonder less if I believed that all things were thrown together by chance events. "As it is, God as ruler heightens my bewilderment. Since he often gives pleasant things to the good and harsh things to the wicked, and conversely gives hard things to the good and grants the wicked what they wish for, unless the cause is discovered, what is there that seems to differ from chance events?" "It is no wonder," she said, "if something is believed to be random and confused when the principle of its order is unknown. But though you do not know the cause of so great an arrangement, still, since a good ruler governs the world, do not doubt that all things are done rightly."

POEM 5: HIDDEN CAUSES

People marvel at eclipses only because they do not know the causes.

4.M5 If someone does not know that the stars of Arcturus
glide near the highest pole,
why slow Bootes follows his Wagon
and plunges his late flames into the sea,
though he unfolds his rising all too quickly,
he will be amazed at the law of the high heavens.
Let the horns of the full moon grow pale,
stained by the boundaries of dark night,
and let Phoebe, confused, reveal the stars
she had covered with her shining face:
a public error stirs up the nations,
and they weary the bronze with frequent blows.
No one wonders that the blasts of the northwest wind
pound the shore with roaring waves,
or that the mass of snow, hard with frost,
melts in the burning heat of Phoebus.
For here the causes are easy to see;
there, hidden ones trouble the heart.
All things that time brings forth but rarely,
and that stun the fickle crowd by their suddenness—
let the cloudy error of ignorance give way,
and they will surely cease to seem wonders.[5]

PROSE 6: PROVIDENCE AND FATE

Philosophy distinguishes providence from fate and explains why the good suffer and the wicked prosper.

4.P6 "That is so," I said; "but since it is your office to unfold the causes of hidden things and to explain reasons veiled in darkness, I beg you to tell me what you decide on this matter, since

5 Bootes, the Herdsman, rises quickly and sets slowly near the Wagon (the Great Bear). During eclipses of the moon people beat bronze to help her.

this marvel troubles me most of all." Then, smiling a little, she said, "You are calling me to the greatest of all questions to investigate, one which can scarcely be exhausted by anything. For its subject matter is such that when one doubt is cut away, countless others grow in its place like the heads of the Hydra, and there would be no end unless one held them in check with the most vigorous fire of the mind. For in this question people usually ask about the simplicity of providence, the chain of fate, sudden chance events, divine knowledge and predestination, and free will; and you yourself can weigh how heavy these are. But since knowing these things too is part of your cure, although we are hemmed in by a narrow limit of time, we will still try to touch on something of it.[6] "But if the delights of musical song please you, you must put off that pleasure a little, while I weave together arguments linked to one another in order." "As you like," I said. Then, as if starting from another beginning, she argued as follows: The coming-to-be of all things, the whole progress of changeable natures, and whatever is moved in any way, receive their causes, order and forms from the stability of the divine mind. This mind, set in the citadel of its own simplicity, has established a manifold way of ruling things. When this way is seen in the very purity of the divine intelligence, it is called providence; but when it is referred to the things it moves and orders, it was called fate by the ancients. That these are different will easily become clear if one considers the force of each in the mind. For providence is that divine reason itself, established in the supreme ruler of all, which orders all things; fate, on the other hand, is the ordering inherent in movable things, through which providence binds each thing in its own order. For providence embraces all things alike, however different, however infinite; but fate sets individual things in motion, distributed in places, forms and times. So this unfolding of temporal order, united in the foresight of the divine mind, is providence; and the same union, distributed and unfolded in time, is called fate.

6 The Hydra, a many-headed serpent killed by Hercules; when one head was cut off, others grew, until the stumps were seared with fire.

Though they are different, one depends on the other. For the order of fate proceeds from the simplicity of providence. Just as a craftsman, grasping beforehand in his mind the form of the thing to be made, sets the work in motion, and leads through temporal stages what he had foreseen simply and all at once, so God by providence orders what is to be done singly and stably, but by fate administers these same things he has ordered in manifold ways and in time. Whether, then, fate is carried out by certain divine spirits serving providence, or whether the chain of fate is woven by a soul, or by the whole of nature serving it, or by the heavenly motions of the stars, or by angelic power, or by the varied cunning of daemons, or by some or all of these, this at least is clear: providence is the unmoving and simple form of things to be done, while fate is the movable interweaving and temporal order of those things which the divine simplicity has arranged to be done. So it is that everything subject to fate is also subject to providence, to which fate itself is subject; but certain things placed under providence rise above the chain of fate. These are the things which, stably fixed near the first divinity, exceed the order of fate's mobility.[7] For consider spheres turning about the same pivot: the innermost comes close to the simplicity of the center and becomes a kind of pivot for the others placed outside it, around which they turn; the outermost, turning in a wider circuit, is spread over larger spaces the further it departs from the indivisible middle point; and if anything connects and joins itself to that middle, it is drawn together into simplicity and ceases to spread out and flow apart. In the same way, whatever departs further from the first mind is entangled in tighter bonds of fate, and a thing is freer from fate the nearer it approaches that pivot of things. And if it clings to the firmness of the supreme mind, it is free of motion and rises above the necessity of fate as well. So as reasoning is to understanding, as what comes to be is to what is, as time is to eternity, as the circle is to its center, so is the moving chain of fate to the

7 Daemons: in late ancient thought, spirits intermediate between gods and humans, not necessarily evil.

stable simplicity of providence. This chain moves the heaven and the stars, blends the elements with one another and transforms them by alternating exchange; it likewise renews all things that are born and die through the like progression of offspring and seeds. It also binds the actions and fortunes of human beings by an indissoluble connection of causes; and since these causes set out from the beginnings of unmoving providence, they too must be unchangeable. For things are best ruled in this way: if the simplicity abiding in the divine mind imposes an unswerving order of causes, and this order by its own unchangeableness restrains things that are changeable and would otherwise drift at random. So it happens that although to you, who are not at all able to contemplate this order, all things seem confused and disordered, nonetheless their own proper measure orders all things, directing them toward the good. For there is nothing that is done for the sake of evil, even by the wicked themselves, whom, as has been most fully shown, a depraved error turns aside while they seek the good—still less could an order that proceeds from the pivot of the highest good turn aside anywhere from its beginning. "But what confusion," you will say, "could be more unjust than that sometimes adversity and sometimes prosperity should befall the good, and to the wicked too sometimes what they want and sometimes what they hate?" Do human beings, then, live with such soundness of mind that those whom they judge good or wicked must necessarily be as they think? Yet human judgments clash on this very point, and some think those deserving of reward whom others think deserving of punishment. But let us grant that someone could distinguish the good from the wicked; will he then be able to see that inmost temperament of souls, as people usually speak of it in bodies? For it is no less a wonder, to one who does not know the reason, why among healthy bodies sweet things suit some and bitter things others, and why some sick people are helped by mild remedies and others by sharp ones. But the doctor, who knows the measure and balance of health itself and of sickness, does not wonder at this at all. And what

else does the health of souls seem to be but goodness? What else their sickness but vices? And who else is either the preserver of the good or the banisher of evils but God, the ruler and healer of minds? When he looks out from the high watchtower of providence, he recognizes what suits each person, and assigns what he knows to be suitable. Here, then, is that remarkable wonder of the order of fate: something is done by one who knows, at which those who do not know are astonished. For, to touch briefly on the few things human reason can grasp of the divine depth: the man whom you think most just and most observant of fairness seems otherwise to providence, which knows all things. And our friend Lucan reminded us that the victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated cause pleased Cato. So whatever you see done here contrary to your expectation is right order in the things themselves, but perverse confusion in your opinion. But suppose there is someone so good in character that divine and human judgment agree about him, yet he is weak in strength of mind; if anything adverse happened to him, he might perhaps stop practicing the innocence by which he could not keep his fortune. So a wise dispensation spares one whom adversity could make worse, so as not to let one suffer for whom hardship is not suitable.[8] There is another, perfect in all virtues, holy and close to God; providence judges it wrong that he should be touched by any adversity at all, so much so that it does not allow him to be troubled even by bodily illness. For as someone more excellent than I has said, ἀνδρὸς δὴ ἱεροῦ δέμας αἰθέρες ᾠκοδόμησαν [the heavens have built the body of a holy man]. Often, too, it happens that the supreme direction of affairs is given to the good, so that overflowing wickedness may be beaten back. To others providence distributes a certain mixture, according to the quality of their souls: some it stings, so that they may not grow wanton through long prosperity; others it lets be tossed by hardships, so that they may strengthen the virtues of the soul by the use and exercise of patience. Some fear

8 Lucan, *Pharsalia* 1.128: Cato the Younger stood with the losing republican side against Caesar in the civil war.

more than they should what they can bear; others despise more than they should what they cannot bear; these it leads into sorrows, to test themselves. Some have bought a name revered by the ages at the price of a glorious death; some, unconquerable under torture, have shown others by their example that virtue cannot be defeated by evils.[9] There is no doubt how rightly and in what good order these things are done, and for the good of those to whom they seem to happen. For that other fact, too—that the wicked meet now with sorrows, now with what they desire—derives from the same causes. As for their sorrows, no one wonders, since everyone thinks they deserve ill. Their punishments both deter others from crimes and correct the very people on whom they are inflicted. Their joys, on the other hand, speak a great lesson to the good about what they should think of this kind of prosperity, which they often see serving the wicked. In this I believe something else is also being arranged: perhaps someone's nature is so headlong and unruly that poverty at home might rather provoke him into crime; providence cures this man's disease with the remedy of money bestowed on him. This man, looking at his conscience stained with disgrace and comparing himself with his fortune, perhaps grows afraid that the loss of what he enjoys using may be painful. So he will change his ways and, while he fears to lose his fortune, he abandons his wickedness. Others have been thrown headlong into a deserved disaster by prosperity they did not deserve. To some the right of punishing has been granted, so that it might be a cause of exercise for the good and of punishment for the wicked. For just as there is no treaty between the good and the wicked, so the wicked cannot agree even among themselves. How could they, when each is at odds with himself, as his vices tear his conscience apart, and they often do things which, once done, they decide should not have been done? From this that highest providence has often produced a remarkable wonder: that the wicked have made wicked men good. For some, when they think they are suffering injustice at the hands

9 The source of this Greek verse is unidentified.

of the worst people, burn with hatred of the guilty and return to the fruit of virtue, striving to be unlike those they hated. For it is only divine power for which even evils are good, since by using them fittingly it draws out the effect of some good. For a certain order embraces all things, so that whatever departs from the principle of order assigned to it slips back into order—another order, perhaps, but order—so that nothing in the kingdom of providence may be left to chance. ἀργαλέον δέ με ταῦτα θεὸν ὥς πάντ' ἀγορεύειν [but it is hard for me to tell all this as if I were a god]. For it is not right for a human being either to grasp with his intellect or to set out in words all the machinery of the divine work. Let it be enough to have seen only this: that God, the maker of all natures, also orders all things, directing them to the good; and while he hastens to keep the things he has brought forth in his own likeness, he banishes all evil from the boundaries of his commonwealth through the chain of fated necessity. So it is that, although evils are believed to abound on earth, if you look at the providence that orders them, you will judge that there is no evil anywhere.[10] But I see that you have long been weighed down by the weight of the question and wearied by the length of the argument, and are waiting for some sweetness of song. Take, then, a draught, so that, refreshed by it, you may press on more firmly to what lies further.

10 Homer, *Iliad* 12.176.

POEM 6: THE CONCORD OF THE UNIVERSE

Love holds the stars, seasons and elements in order under their maker.

4.M6 If you would discern the laws of the Thunderer on high
with a pure and skillful mind,
look up at the summits of highest heaven.
There, by a just covenant of things,
the stars keep their ancient peace.
The sun, driven by its ruddy fire,
does not hinder Phoebe's cold axle;
nor does the Bear, which at the topmost height of the world
turns its swift courses,
never bathed in the western deep,
though it sees the other stars sink,
long to dip its flames in Ocean.
Always, at equal turns of time,
the Evening Star announces the late shadows
and the Morning Star brings back the kindly day.
So mutual love renews
their eternal courses; so from the starry
regions warring discord is banished.
This concord tempers the elements
in equal measures, so that, though they fight,
wet things yield in turn to dry,
cold keeps faith with flame,
hovering fire rises on high,
and heavy earth sinks down by its weight.[11]

11 The Thunderer is a classical title of Jupiter, here used of God. The Bear (Ursa Major) never sets below the horizon in Mediterranean latitudes.

/ By the same causes, in warm spring
the flower-bearing year breathes out its scents,
burning summer parches Ceres' grain,
autumn returns heavy with fruit,
and falling rain waters the winter.
This tempering feeds and brings forth
whatever breathes life in the world;
the same, seizing, hides and takes away,
drowning in final death all that has risen.
Meanwhile the Maker sits on high,
and, ruling all things, steers them by the reins:
king and lord, fountain and origin,
law and wise judge of what is right.
What he stirs to go in motion
he halts, drawing it back, and steadies what wanders.
For unless he called back their straight paths
and forced them again into curving orbits,
the things a stable order now holds together
would fall apart, cut off from their source.

/ This is the love shared by all things:
they seek to be held by the goal of the good,
since they could not otherwise endure
unless, turning back in love,
they flowed again to the cause that gave them being.

PROSE 7: ALL FORTUNE IS GOOD

Every fortune rewards, trains, corrects or punishes, so all fortune is good.

4.P7 "Do you see, then, what follows from all that we have said?" "What?" I asked. "That all fortune," she said, "is entirely good." "And how," I said, "can that be?" "Pay attention," she said. "Since all fortune, whether pleasant or harsh, is bestowed either to reward or to exercise the good, or to punish or correct the wicked, all fortune is good, since it is plainly either just or useful." "Your reasoning is very true indeed," I said, "and if I con-

sider the providence and fate you taught me a little while ago, it is a view that rests on firm strength. But, if you please, let us count it among those you set down a little earlier as contrary to opinion." "Why?" she asked. "Because ordinary human speech says, and says often, that some people have bad fortune." "Would you like us, then," she said, "to draw near to the language of the crowd for a little, so that we do not seem to have withdrawn too far from human usage?" "As you please," I said. "Do you not judge that what is beneficial is good?"[12] "That is so," I said. "And what exercises or corrects is beneficial?" "I admit it," I said. "Good, then?" "Of course." "But this is the fortune of those who, either established in virtue, are waging war against hardship, or, turning away from vices, are setting out on the road of virtue." "I cannot deny it," I said. "And what of pleasant fortune, which is given as a reward to the good—surely the crowd does not judge it bad?" "Not at all; rather, it thinks it the best, as indeed it is." "And the rest—the fortune which, being harsh, restrains the wicked with just punishment—surely the people do not think that good?" "On the contrary," I said, "it judges it the most miserable of all that can be imagined." "Take care, then, that by following the opinion of the people we have not arrived at something very contrary to opinion." "What?" I asked. "From what has been granted," she said, "it follows that for those who are in possession of virtue, or advancing in it, or attaining it, all fortune, whatever it may be, is good; while for those who remain in wickedness, all fortune is the very worst." "That is true," I said, "though no one would dare to admit it." "Therefore," she said, "the wise man should not be aggrieved whenever he is brought into a contest with fortune, just as it does not befit a brave man to be indignant whenever the din of war resounds. For both of them, difficulty itself is the material: for the brave man, of spreading his glory; for the wise man, of shaping his wisdom. That is also why virtue is so called: because, relying on its own strength, it is not overcome by adversity. For you who

12 Latin *inopinabilis*, Cicero's word for the Greek *paradoxa*: the surprising conclusions of 4.P4.

are set on the path of progress in virtue have not come here to dissolve in luxuries and wither away in pleasure. You join a very fierce battle with every kind of fortune, so that harsh fortune does not crush you nor pleasant fortune corrupt you. Hold the middle ground with firm strength![13] "Whatever falls short of it or goes beyond it shows contempt for happiness but gains no reward for its toil. For it lies in your own hands what kind of fortune you prefer to shape for yourselves; for all fortune that seems harsh, unless it exercises or corrects, punishes."

13 The pun links Latin virtus (virtue, originally manly courage) with vires, "strength".

POEM 7: THE LABORS OF HEROES

Agamemnon, Ulysses and Hercules won glory through hardship.

4.M7 Waging wars for twice five years,
the avenger, Atreus' son, by the ruin of Phrygia
atoned for his brother's lost marriage bed.
When he wished to give sails to the Greek fleet
and bought the winds with blood,
he put off the father, and, a grim priest,
made a pact with his poor daughter's throat.
The Ithacan wept for his lost comrades,
whom savage Polyphemus, lying in his vast cave,
buried in his monstrous belly;
but, raging with his blinded face,
the Cyclops paid for that joy with mournful tears.
Hercules is famed for his hard labors.
He tamed the proud Centaurs,
took the spoil from the savage lion,
and pierced the birds with unerring arrows.
He snatched the apples from the watching dragon,
his left hand heavier with the golden metal;
he dragged Cerberus on a triple chain.
Victorious, he is said to have set their cruel master
as fodder before the fierce team of horses.[14]

14 Agamemnon, son of Atreus, led the Trojan War to recover Helen, wife of his brother Menelaus, and sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia for a fair wind; the Ithacan is Ulysses. Hercules fed the Thracian king Diomedes to his own man-eating mares.

/ The Hydra perished, its poison burned away;
the river Achelous, his brow disfigured,
sank his shamed face into his banks.
He laid Antaeus low on the Libyan sands;
Cacus sated the wrath of Evander;
and the bristling boar flecked with foam the shoulders
on which the high heavens were to press.
His last labor: on his unbending neck
he held up the sky, and in return
won the sky as the prize of that last labor.
Go now, you brave, where the lofty road
of a great example leads! Why, idle,
do you turn and bare your backs? The earth, once
overcome,
gives you the stars.[15]

15 Episodes from the labors of Hercules: the river-god Achelous lost a horn to him, the giant Antaeus was crushed, the thief Cacus killed at the site of Evander's Rome, and the Erymanthian boar carried off; he held up the sky for Atlas and was finally deified.

Book V

Foreknowledge and freedom
Chance, free will, and how God knows the future without compelling it.

PROSE 1: CHANCE

Philosophy defines chance as the unexpected meeting of causes set in motion for other ends.

5.P1 She had finished, and was turning the course of her speech to treat and settle certain other matters. Then I said: "Your exhortation is right, and wholly worthy of your authority. But what you said a while ago—that the question of providence is entangled with many others—I am finding true in practice. For I ask whether you think chance is anything at all, and if so, what it is." Then she said: "I am hurrying to pay the debt of my promise and to open for you the road by which you may be carried back to your homeland. These matters, though very useful to know, turn aside a little from the path of our purpose, and it is to be feared that, worn out by detours, you may not have the strength to travel the straight road to its end." "Do not be afraid of that at all," I said. "For it will be a rest for me to come to know the things in which I most delight; and at the same time, once every side of your argument stands firm with undoubted certainty, nothing that follows will be in doubt." Then she replied. "I will do as you wish," she said, and at once began thus: "If someone defines chance as an event produced by random motion and by no chain of causes, I affirm that chance is nothing at all, and I judge it to be an utterly empty word, signifying no real thing beneath it. For what place can be left for random-

ness when God constrains all things into order? That nothing comes from nothing is a true saying, which none of the ancients ever contradicted—although they laid it down, as a kind of foundation for all their reasoning about nature, with reference not to the active principle but to the material substrate. But if something arises from no causes, it will seem to have arisen from nothing. And if this cannot happen, then chance of the kind we defined a moment ago cannot exist either." "What then," I said, "is there nothing that can rightly be called chance or accident? Or is there something, though hidden from the crowd, to which these words apply?" "My Aristotle," she said, "defined it in his *Physics*, with an account both brief and close to the truth." "In what way?" I asked. "Whenever," she said, "something is done for the sake of some end, and, for certain reasons, something other than what was intended occurs, it is called chance: as if someone, digging the ground in order to till a field, were to find a buried mass of gold. This is believed to have happened by chance, yet it does not come from nothing; for it has its own causes, whose unforeseen and unexpected coming-together seems to have produced the chance. For if the farmer had not dug the ground, and if the one who hid his money had not buried it in that spot, the gold would not have been found. These, then, are the causes of the chance gain, which comes from causes meeting and flowing together, not from the intention of the one acting.[1] "For neither the man who buried the gold nor the man who worked the field intended that the money should be found; but, as I said, it happened that where one had buried it, the other dug—the two coincided. We may therefore define chance as an unexpected event arising from causes that flow together, among things done for some purpose. And what makes causes meet and flow together is that order which proceeds by an inescapable chain of connection and, descending from the fountain of providence, arranges all things in their places and times."

1 Aristotle discusses chance in *Physics*, Book 2, chapters 4–6.

POEM 1: THE TIGRIS AND EUPHRATES

Even chance follows a hidden law, like rivers flowing together.

5.M1 Among the crags of the Achaemenian rock, where the fleeing fighter
turns and fixes his arrows in the breasts of his pursuers,
the Tigris and Euphrates spring from a single source
and soon part, their waters divided.
If they were to meet and be called back again into one course,
all that the waters of each stream carry would flow together;
ships would meet, and trunks torn up by the flood,
and the mingled waters would tangle in chance patterns;
yet these wandering chances are governed by the very slope of the land
and the downward order of the flowing stream.
So chance, which seems to run with slackened reins,
submits to the bridle and itself moves by law.[2]

PROSE 2: FREE WILL

Every rational being has free will, freest when it contemplates the divine mind.

5.P2 "I see," I said, "and I agree that it is as you say. But in this series of causes bound to one another, do we have any free will, or does the chain of fate bind even the very motions of human minds?" "There is," she said, "for there could be no rational nature without free will being present to it. For whatever can naturally use reason has judgment, by which it discerns each thing; of itself, therefore, it distinguishes what is to be avoided and what desired. What someone judges to be desirable he seeks; what he considers should be avoided he flees. So in those

2 Achaemenian means Persian; the fighter who shoots while fleeing is the Parthian horse-archer.

who have reason within them there is also freedom to will and not to will. But I do not hold that this freedom is equal in all. For the higher, divine substances have clear-sighted judgment, uncorrupted will, and power ready at hand to bring about what they desire. "Human souls, however, must be freer when they keep themselves in the contemplation of the divine mind, less free when they slip down into bodies, and less still when they are bound in earthly limbs. Their ultimate slavery comes when, given over to vices, they have fallen from possession of their own reason. For once they have cast their eyes down from the light of highest truth to what is lower and dark, they are soon clouded by the fog of ignorance and troubled by destructive passions; by yielding and consenting to these, they add to the slavery they have brought upon themselves, and are, in a certain way, captives of their own freedom. Yet the gaze of providence, which looks forth on all things from eternity, sees these things, and disposes each, predestined according to its merits."

POEM 2: THE TRUE SUN

God sees all things, past, present and future, in one glance.

5.M2 πάντ' ἐφορᾶν καὶ πάντ' ἐπακούειν ["he sees all things and hears all things"]:
so, of Phoebus, bright with pure light,
sings Homer of the honeyed voice.
Yet he cannot break through
to the inmost depths of the earth or the sea
with the weak light of his rays.
Not so the maker of the great world.
As he looks upon all things from on high,
no mass of earth resists him,
no night with its black clouds stands in his way.
What is, what has been, and what is to come
he sees in one glance of the mind.
Since he alone looks upon all things,
you could call him the true sun.[3]

PROSE 3: FOREKNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM

Boethius argues that divine foreknowledge seems to rule out free will, justice and prayer.

5.P3 Then I said: "Look—I am thrown again into confusion by a still harder perplexity." "What is it?" she said. "For I already guess what troubles you." And I said: It seems far too contradictory and conflicting that God foreknows all things and that there is any free will. For if God foresees all things and cannot in any way be deceived, then what providence has foreseen will be must necessarily happen. So if from eternity he foreknows not only the deeds of human beings but also their plans and wishes, there will be no free will; for no deed and no wish of any kind can exist except what divine providence, which cannot be

3 Homer uses the Greek phrase of the sun (*Iliad* 3.277, *Odyssey* 11.109). The Latin plays on solus, "alone", and sol, "sun".

deceived, has perceived beforehand. For if things can be twisted in a direction other than the one foreseen, there will no longer be firm foreknowledge of the future, but rather uncertain opinion—and to believe that of God I judge impious. Nor do I approve the argument by which some believe they can untie this knot of the question. For they say that it is not because providence has foreseen that something will be that it is going to happen, but rather the contrary: because something is going to be, it cannot be hidden from divine providence; and in this way the necessity slips back to the other side. For, they say, it is not necessary that what is foreseen should happen, but it is necessary that what will be should be foreseen—as if the difficulty were which is the cause of which, whether foreknowledge of the future is the cause of its necessity, or the necessity of the future the cause of providence; and as if we were not striving to show that, however the order of causes stands, the outcome of things foreknown is necessary, even if foreknowledge does not seem to impose on future things the necessity of happening. For if someone is sitting, the opinion that supposes he is sitting must be true; and conversely, if the opinion about someone that he is sitting is true, he must be sitting. In both cases, then, there is necessity: in the one, the necessity of sitting; in the other, of truth. But no one sits because the opinion is true; rather, the opinion is true because someone's sitting came first. So, although the cause of the truth comes from one side, there is nevertheless a necessity common to both. Plainly we can reason in the same way about providence and future things. For even if they are foreseen because they are going to be, and do not happen because they are foreseen, it is nonetheless necessary either that things to come be foreseen by God or that things foreseen happen—and this alone is enough to destroy free will. And how preposterous it is to say that the outcome of temporal things is the cause of eternal foreknowledge! Yet what else is it to think that God foresees future things because they are going to happen, than to suppose that things which happen at some point in time are the cause of that highest providence? Besides,

just as when I know that something is, it must necessarily be, so when I know that something will be, it must necessarily be going to be. So it follows that the outcome of a thing foreknown cannot be avoided. Finally, if anyone thinks a thing is otherwise than it is, that is not only not knowledge, but false opinion, far removed from the truth of knowledge. So if something is going to be in such a way that its outcome is not certain and necessary, how could anyone know beforehand that it will happen? For just as knowledge itself is unmixed with falsehood, so what is grasped by it cannot be otherwise than as it is grasped. That is why knowledge is free of falsehood: because each thing must be just as knowledge grasps it to be. What then? How does God foreknow these uncertain future things? For if he judges that things will inevitably happen which it is possible may not happen, he is deceived—which it is impious not only to think but even to say aloud. But if he decides that they will be just as they are, so that he knows they can equally happen or not happen, what is this foreknowledge, which grasps nothing certain, nothing stable? Or how is it different from that ridiculous prophecy of Tiresias: "Whatever I say will either be or not be"? And how would divine providence surpass human opinion if, like human beings, it judged uncertain those things whose outcome is uncertain? But if there can be nothing uncertain in him, that most certain source of all things, then the outcome of those things which he has firmly foreknown is certain.[4] Therefore there is no freedom in human plans and actions, since the divine mind, foreseeing all things without the error of falsehood, binds and constrains them to a single outcome. Once this is accepted, it is plain how great a collapse of human affairs follows. For in vain are rewards and punishments set before the good and the wicked, since no free and voluntary movement of their minds has earned them. And what is now judged most just—that the wicked are punished or the good rewarded—will seem the most unjust of all, since it is not their own will that sends

4 The mock-prophecy is put in the mouth of the blind seer Tiresias by Horace (*Satires* 2.5.59).

them to either, but the fixed necessity of what is to come that compels them. So neither vices nor virtues will be anything at all; rather, there will be a mixed and undistinguished confusion of all deserts. And—nothing more wicked than this can be imagined—since the whole order of things is derived from providence, and nothing is left to human plans, it follows that even our vices are referred to the author of all good things. So there is no reason either to hope for anything or to pray against anything. For what could anyone hope for, or even pray against, when an unbending chain links together everything that can be wished for? So that one and only exchange between human beings and God will be taken away: hoping, that is, and praying. For it is by the price of rightful humility that we earn the priceless return of divine grace; this is the only way in which human beings seem able to converse with God, and to be joined, by the very act of supplication, to that unapproachable light even before they obtain what they ask. But if, once the necessity of future things is accepted, hopes and prayers are believed to have no force, what will there be by which we could be connected to that highest principle of all things and cling to it? Therefore the human race must, as you were singing a little while ago, be cut off and separated from its source and fall apart.[5]

5 Boethius echoes the closing lines of 4.M6.

POEM 3: THE MIND'S SEARCH FOR TRUTH

How can two truths conflict, and how can the mind seek what it does not know?

5.M3 What discordant cause has loosed
the covenants of things? What god has set
such great wars between two truths,
so that things that stand firm one by one
refuse to be yoked together when combined?
Or is there no discord between truths,
and do they always hold together, sure of each other?
But the mind, buried in blind limbs,
cannot, by the fire of its smothered light,
know the fine connections of things.
But why does it burn with such love
to find the hidden marks of truth?
Does it know what it anxiously longs to know?
But who labors to know what is known?
And if it does not know, what does it blindly seek?
For who would desire anything he does not know,
or who could pursue things unknown?
Or where would he find them? And who,
in ignorance, could recognize the form he found?
Or, when it beheld the lofty mind,
did it know the whole and the parts alike?

/ Now, hidden in the cloud of the limbs,
it has not wholly forgotten itself;
it keeps the whole, though it loses the parts.
So whoever searches for the truth
is in neither condition: for he neither knows,
nor yet is wholly ignorant of everything;
but, keeping hold of the whole which he remembers,
he consults it, going back over what he saw on high,
so that to what he has kept he may add
the parts he has forgotten.

PROSE 4: WAYS OF KNOWING

Things are known according to the power of the knower, not the nature of the thing known.

5.P4 Then she said: "This is an old complaint about providence. It was vigorously pursued by Marcus Tullius when he classified the kinds of divination, and you yourself have long and thoroughly investigated it; but so far it has by no means been resolved carefully and firmly enough by any of you. The cause of this obscurity is that the movement of human reasoning cannot be brought close to the simplicity of divine foreknowledge; if that could in any way be conceived, no doubt at all would remain. I shall try to make this plain and resolve it, but only after I have first weighed the things that trouble you. I ask, then, why you think that solution less effective which holds that foreknowledge is not the cause of necessity for future things, and so thinks that free will is in no way hindered by foreknowledge. For do you draw your argument for the necessity of future things from anywhere else than from this: that things foreknown cannot fail to happen?[6] "If, then, foreknowledge adds no necessity to future things—as you yourself admitted a little while ago—why should the voluntary outcomes of things be forced to a fixed result? For the sake of argument, so that you may see what follows, let us suppose there is no foreknowledge. Would the things that come about by free will, as far as this goes, be forced into necessity?" "Not at all." "Let us suppose, again, that foreknowledge exists, but imposes no necessity on things; the same free will, I think, will remain whole and unconditioned. 'But,' you will say, 'foreknowledge, even if it is not a necessity of happening for future things, is nonetheless a sign that they will necessarily come about.' In that case, then, even if there had been no foreknowledge, it would be established that the outcomes of future things are necessary. For every sign only shows what is; it does not bring about what it signifies. So it

6 Cicero treated these questions in *On Divination* and *On Fate*.

must first be shown that nothing happens except by necessity, so that foreknowledge may appear to be a sign of this necessity. "Otherwise, if there is no such necessity, foreknowledge cannot be a sign of a thing that does not exist. Moreover, it is agreed that a proof resting on firm reasoning must be drawn not from signs, nor from arguments fetched from outside, but from fitting and necessary causes. 'But how can it be that things foreseen as future do not come about?' As if we believed that the things providence foreknows to be future will not happen, and did not rather judge that, although they do happen, they had nothing in their own nature that made it necessary for them to happen. You may easily weigh this from the following. We see many things before our eyes while they are being done, such as what charioteers are seen to do in guiding and turning their four-horse chariots, and other things of that kind. Does any necessity compel any of these to be done as they are?" "Not at all. For the effect of skill would be in vain if everything moved under compulsion." Then things which, when they happen, lack the necessity of existing, were, before they happened, going to be without necessity. So there are some things going to happen whose outcome is free from all necessity. For I do not think anyone will say that things now happening were not going to happen before they happened. These things, then, even though foreknown, have free outcomes. For just as knowledge of present things imposes no necessity on what is happening, so foreknowledge of the future imposes none on what is to come. "But this," you say, "is the very question—whether there can be any foreknowledge of things that do not have necessary outcomes." For these ideas seem out of tune with each other: you think that if things are foreseen, necessity follows; that if necessity is lacking, they are not foreknown at all; and that nothing can be grasped by knowledge unless it is certain; and that if things of uncertain outcome are foreseen as though certain, this is the fog of opinion, not the truth of knowledge. For you believe that to judge a thing otherwise than as it is falls short of the integrity of knowledge. The cause of this error is that everyone supposes that all the things

he knows are known solely by the power and nature of the things known. But the very opposite is true. For everything that is known is grasped not according to its own power but rather according to the capacity of those who know it. To make this clear with a brief example: sight recognizes the same roundness of a body in one way, touch in another. Sight, remaining at a distance, takes in the whole at once by the rays it casts; touch, clinging and joined to the sphere, moving around its very circumference, grasps the roundness part by part. Man himself, too, is viewed in one way by the senses, in another by imagination, in another by reason, in another by intelligence. The senses judge the shape as constituted in its underlying matter; imagination judges the shape alone, without matter. Reason goes beyond this too, and examines, by a universal consideration, the species itself that is present in individual things.[7] But the eye of intelligence stands higher still; for, passing beyond the compass of the universal, it beholds with the pure gaze of the mind that simple form itself. Here the chief point to consider is this: the higher power of comprehension embraces the lower, but the lower in no way rises to the higher. For the senses have no power beyond matter, nor does imagination behold universal species, nor does reason grasp the simple form; but intelligence, looking as it were from above, having conceived the form, discerns also all the things that lie beneath it—but in the same way in which it grasps that form itself, which could be known to no other power. For it knows the universal of reason, the shape of imagination, and the material object of sense, without using reason or imagination or the senses, but seeing all things beforehand, so to speak, formally, in that single glance of the mind. Reason too, when it looks at something universal, grasps what is imaginable and sensible without using imagination or the senses. For it is reason that has defined the universal of its conception thus: man is a two-footed rational animal. Although this is a universal notion, no one is unaware that the

7 Intelligence (intellegentia) is the highest mode of knowing, the mind's direct intuition, above step-by-step reasoning (ratio).

thing is imaginable and sensible; yet reason considers it not by imagination or sense, but in a rational conception. Imagination, too, although it took its start from the senses in seeing and forming shapes, nevertheless surveys all sensible things when the senses are absent, by a way of judging that is not sensory but imaginative. Do you see, then, how in knowing, all things use their own capacity rather than that of the things known? And rightly so; for since every judgment is the act of the one who judges, each must accomplish its work by its own power, not another's.

POEM 4: THE ACTIVE MIND

Against the Stoics: the mind is not a blank page but actively judges.

5.M4 The Porch once brought forth
old men, obscure beyond measure,
who believed that sensations and images
from bodies outside
are stamped upon minds,
just as it is the custom, with a quick stylus,
on the smooth surface of a page
that as yet bears no marks,
to press and fix letters.
But if the mind, strong in its own
motions, unfolds nothing,
but only lies passive,
subject to the marks of bodies,
and like a mirror gives back
the empty images of things,
where does this notion come from that thrives in minds
and sees all things?
What power perceives particulars,
or divides what it has come to know?
What gathers again what was divided,
and, choosing now one path, now the other,
now lifts its head among the highest things,
now descends to the lowest,
then, returning to itself,
refutes falsehood with truth?[8]

8 The Porch (Greek Stoa) is the Stoic school, named after the painted colonnade in Athens where it met.

/ This is a cause more active,
far more powerful
than one that, like matter,
passively receives impressed marks.
And yet there comes first, arousing
and stirring the powers of the mind,
a sensation in the living body,
when light strikes the eyes
or a voice sounds in the ears.
Then the mind's vigor, aroused,
calling the forms it holds within
to similar motions,
applies them to the marks from outside
and mingles the images
with the forms hidden within.

PROSE 5: REASON AND INTELLIGENCE

Human reason should yield to divine intelligence, as sense and imagination yield to reason.

5.P5 But if, in perceiving bodies—although qualities presented from outside affect the organs of sense, and the body's being affected comes before the vigor of the active mind, calling forth the mind's act upon itself and arousing the forms that until then lay quiet within—if, I say, in perceiving bodies the mind is not stamped by that affection but judges by its own power the affection undergone by the body, how much more do those beings that are free from all bodily affections, in their discerning, not follow what is presented from outside, but set free the act of their own mind? For this reason, then, many kinds of knowledge have fallen to diverse and differing substances. Sense alone, without any other kind of knowledge, has fallen to living things that cannot move, such as the shellfish of the sea and other creatures that cling to rocks and are nourished there; imagination to beasts that move, in which some impulse to flee or to seek already seems present; reason belongs to the human race

alone, as intelligence to the divine alone. So it is that the kind of knowledge which, by its own nature, knows not only its proper object but also the objects of the other kinds, surpasses the rest. What, then, if sense and imagination were to oppose reasoning, saying that the universal which reason thinks it beholds is nothing? For, they would say, what is sensible or imaginable cannot be universal; so either the judgment of reason is true and nothing is sensible, or, since reason knows that many things are subject to the senses and imagination, the conception of reason, which considers what is sensible and particular as if it were something universal, is empty. If, in reply, reason were to answer that it does indeed view both the sensible and the imaginable under the aspect of the universal, whereas they cannot aspire to knowledge of the universal, since their knowledge cannot go beyond bodily shapes; and that, in the knowledge of things, one should rather trust the firmer and more perfect judgment—in a dispute of this kind, should not we, who possess the power of reasoning as well as of imagining and perceiving, rather take reason's side? It is just the same when human reason does not think that divine intelligence beholds future things except as reason itself knows them. For this is how you argue: if some things do not seem to have certain and necessary outcomes, they cannot be known beforehand as certainly going to happen. So there is no foreknowledge of these things; and if we believe there is foreknowledge even of them, there will be nothing that does not come about of necessity. If, then, just as we share in reason, we could also have the judgment of the divine mind, then, just as we have judged that imagination and sense ought to yield to reason, so we would think it most just that human reason should submit itself to the divine mind. Therefore let us be raised up, if we can, to the summit of that highest intelligence; for there reason will see what it cannot behold in itself: that is, how even things that have no certain outcomes are nonetheless seen by a certain and definite foreknowledge, and how this is not opinion but rather the simplicity of highest knowledge, enclosed by no limits.

POEM 5: UPRIGHT HUMANITY

Human beings stand upright so that they may lift their minds to heaven.

5.M5 In how many varied shapes living creatures move across the lands!
For some have long-stretched bodies and sweep the dust,
and, driven by the strength of their breast, drag an unbroken furrow;
some have wings whose roaming lightness beats the winds,
and they swim through the spaces of the long sky in liquid flight;
others delight to press their footprints on the ground as they walk,
to cross green fields or pass beneath the woods.
Though you may see that all of them differ in varied forms,
yet their downturned faces can weigh down their dull senses.
The human race alone lifts its lofty head higher,
and stands light, with upright body, and looks down on the earth.
This shape admonishes you, unless, earthbound, you have foolishly lost your wits:
you who seek the sky with upright face and lift your brow,
carry your mind aloft as well, lest, weighed down,
the mind sink lower while the body is raised higher.

PROSE 6: ETERNITY

God is eternal and sees all things as present, so his foreknowledge imposes no necessity.

5.P6 Since, then, as was shown a little while ago, everything that is known is known not from its own nature but from that of those who comprehend it, let us now consider, as far as is permitted, what the state of the divine substance is, so that we may also recognize what its knowledge is. That God is eternal is the

common judgment of all who live by reason. Let us consider, then, what eternity is; for this will make plain to us both the divine nature and divine knowledge. Eternity, then, is the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of unending life. This becomes clearer by comparison with temporal things. For whatever lives in time proceeds, in the present, from the past into the future, and nothing placed in time can embrace the whole extent of its life at once. It has not yet grasped tomorrow, and it has already lost yesterday; and even in today's life you live no more than in that moving, passing moment. So whatever undergoes the condition of time, even if—as Aristotle held of the world—it never began to be and never ceases, and its life extends with the infinity of time, is still not such that it may rightly be thought eternal. For it does not comprehend and embrace the whole extent of its life, infinite though it be, all at once; it does not yet have the future, and no longer has what is past. What, therefore, comprehends and possesses at once the whole fullness of unending life, to which nothing of the future is lacking and nothing of the past has flowed away, is rightly held to be eternal; and it must both be present to itself, always in possession of itself, and have the infinity of moving time present to it. Hence some are wrong who, when they hear that Plato thought this world had no beginning in time and will have no end, suppose that in this way the created world is made co-eternal with its creator.[9] For it is one thing to be led through unending life, which Plato attributed to the world; it is another to have embraced the whole presence of unending life all at once, which is clearly proper to the divine mind. Nor should God seem older than created things by a quantity of time, but rather by the property of his simple nature. For the infinite motion of temporal things imitates this present state of unmoving life; and since it cannot reproduce or equal it, it falls from immobility into motion and dwindles from the simplicity of presence into the infinite quantity of future and past. And since

9 Aristotle argued that the world has no beginning or end (*On the Heavens*); the reading of Plato's *Timaeus* referred to here was debated in antiquity.

it cannot possess the whole fullness of its life at once, by the very fact that in a certain way it never ceases to be, it seems to some extent to rival what it cannot fulfill and express, binding itself to whatever presence belongs to this tiny, fleeting moment —a presence which, because it bears a certain image of that abiding presence, grants to whatever it touches that they seem to be. But since it could not stay still, it seized on the infinite journey of time, and so it came about that by going it continued the life whose fullness it could not embrace by staying. So if we wish to give things fitting names, let us follow Plato and say that God is eternal, but the world perpetual. Since, then, every judgment comprehends what is subject to it according to its own nature, and the state of God is always eternal and present, his knowledge too, surpassing all the motion of time, abides in the simplicity of its presence, and, embracing the infinite spaces of past and future, considers all things in its simple act of knowing as though they were happening now. So, if you wish to weigh the presence by which he discerns all things, you will more rightly judge it to be not foreknowledge, as of something future, but knowledge of a never-failing present. Hence it is called not foresight but providence, because, set far above the lowest things, it looks forth on all things as if from the lofty summit of the world. Why, then, do you demand that things lit by the divine light become necessary, when not even human beings make necessary the things they see? For does your gaze add any necessity to the things you see present? "Not at all," I said. And yet, if a comparison of the divine present and the human is fitting, just as you see certain things in this temporal present of yours, so he sees all things in his eternal present. So this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and property of things; it sees them present before it just as they will turn out in time at some future point.[10] Nor does it confuse its judgments of things; with one glance of its mind it discerns both what will come about necessarily and what will not. Just as when you see

10 The Latin contrasts praevidentia, "seeing beforehand", with providentia, read as "seeing forth" from a height.

at the same time a man walking on the earth and the sun rising in the sky—though you see both at once, you nevertheless distinguish them, and judge the one voluntary and the other necessary—so the divine gaze, looking down on all things, in no way disturbs the quality of things that are present to it but, with respect to the condition of time, are future. So it comes about that this is not opinion but knowledge resting on truth, since it knows that something will come to be which, as it is well aware, lacks the necessity of existing. At this point, if you say that what God sees will happen cannot fail to happen, and that what cannot fail to happen happens of necessity, and so tie me to this word "necessity," I will admit that this is a matter of the most solid truth, but one which scarcely anyone but a contemplator of the divine has reached. For I will reply that the same future thing, when referred to divine knowledge, is necessary, but when considered in its own nature, seems entirely free and unconditioned. For there are two necessities: one simple, as that it is necessary that all human beings are mortal; the other conditional, as, if you know that someone is walking, it is necessary that he is walking. For what anyone knows cannot be otherwise than as it is known; but this conditional necessity by no means carries the simple one along with it. For this necessity is produced not by a thing's own nature but by the addition of a condition; no necessity compels a man who is walking of his own will to go forward, although, at the time he is walking, it is necessary that he goes forward. In the same way, then, if providence sees something as present, it must be, though it has no necessity of nature. But God beholds as present those future things that come about from free will. These things, then, referred to the divine gaze, become necessary through the condition of divine knowledge; but considered in themselves, they do not lose the absolute freedom of their nature. All things, then, that God foreknows will be will undoubtedly come to pass; but some of them proceed from free will, and these, though they come to pass, do not by coming into existence lose their own nature, by which, before they happened, they could also have not happened. What

does it matter, then, that they are not necessary, since, because of the condition of divine knowledge, they will in every way come about as if by necessity? It matters in just the way that the examples I set out a little while ago differ: the rising sun and the walking man. While these are happening, they cannot fail to happen; yet one of them, even before it happened, had to come to be, while the other did not. So too the things God has present will undoubtedly come to be; but one kind comes down from the necessity of things, the other from the power of those who act. Not wrongly, then, did we say that these things, if referred to divine knowledge, are necessary, and if considered in themselves, are free from the bonds of necessity; just as everything that lies open to the senses is universal if you refer it to reason, and particular if you look at it in itself. "But," you will say, "if it lies in my power to change my purpose, I shall make providence void, if I happen to change what it foreknows." I will reply: you can indeed turn your purpose aside, but since the present truth of providence sees both that you can, and whether you will, and in which direction you will turn, you cannot escape divine foreknowledge, just as you could not escape the gaze of an eye that is present, however you might turn to various actions by your free will. What then will you say? "Will divine knowledge be changed by my arrangements, so that when I will now this, now that, it too seems to alternate its turns of knowing?" Not at all. For the divine gaze runs ahead of every future thing, and bends it back and recalls it to the presence of its own knowledge; nor does it alternate, as you suppose, foreknowing now this, now that; but, remaining still, it anticipates and embraces your changes in a single glance. This presence, in which he comprehends and sees all things, God has obtained not from the outcome of future things, but from his own simplicity. This also resolves the point you set down a little while ago as unfitting: that our future actions should be said to provide the cause of God's knowledge. For this power of knowledge, embracing all things in its present awareness, itself sets the measure for all things and owes nothing to what comes after. Since this is so,

free will remains inviolate for mortals, and the laws are not unjust that set rewards and punishments before wills released from all necessity. There also remains God, the onlooker from above who foreknows all things, and the ever-present eternity of his vision runs together with the future quality of our actions, dispensing rewards to the good and punishments to the wicked. Nor are hopes and prayers placed in God in vain; when they are right, they cannot be ineffective. Turn away, then, from vices; cultivate virtues; lift up your minds to right hopes; offer humble prayers on high. A great necessity of goodness is laid upon you, if you will not pretend otherwise, since you act before the eyes of a judge who sees all things.