

Some remarks on Boethius' "Consolation of Philosophy"

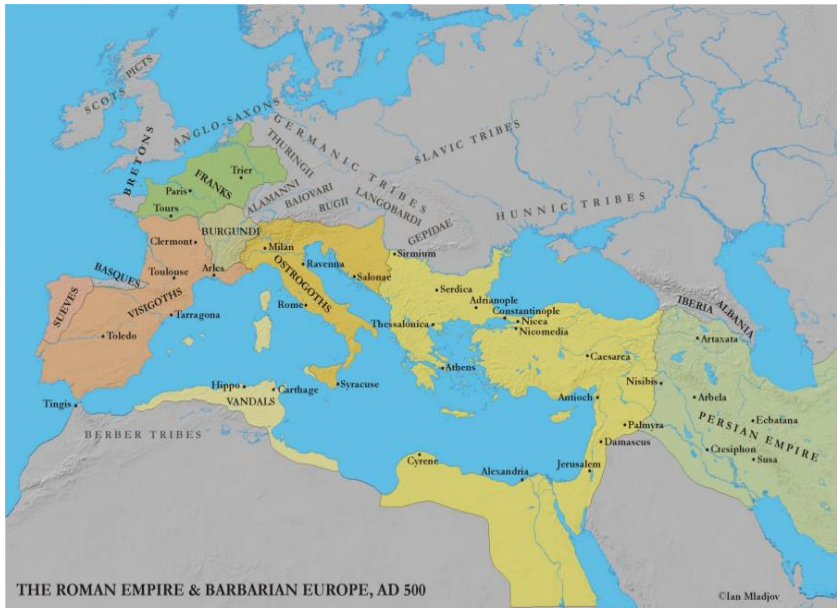
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The Roman Empire under Diocletian (305)



The Roman Empire in 480-500



The kingdom of the Ostrogoths

- ▶ In 476, Odoacer, a germanic warrior (probably a goth or a hun) who had been serving in the roman army as head of the italian *foederati*, deposes the last western roman emperor Romulus Augustus (emperor *de facto* since 475, but not recognized by the eastern emperor) and receives from the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire (Zeno) the title of *patricius*, swearing fealty (on paper) to Julius Nepos (*de jure*, the legitimate emperor, who had been deposed by Romulus' father Orestes).
- ▶ In 480, Julius Nepos is assassinated (who did it is still unclear)
- ▶ Zeno receives the imperial *insignia* from the senate of Rome and abolishes the co-emperorship. Odoacer, whose rule has meanwhile extended to the large part of Italy, is nominally subjected to Zeno as king of Italy.
- ▶ Odoacer become more powerful; Zeno gets worried, and offers the kingdom of Italy to Theodericus the Great (king of the ostrogoths, *foederati* of the Eastern Roman Emperor) in exchange for him defeating Odoacer
- ▶ Theodericus eliminates Odoacer, massacres his army (493) and takes over the kingdom, ruling formally as Zeno's viceroy

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

- ▶ Boethius was born around 480 in an old and aristocratic family, the *anicia* family, which had had among its members an emperor and many consuls (Boethius' father himself had been consul under Odoacer's rule).
- ▶ Boethius' father died when he was still an infant, and he was raised by Quintus Symmachus, a Roman aristocrat who was fluent in Greek and who introduced him to literature and philosophy. Boethius will later marry Symmachus' daughter Rusticana.
- ▶ Brilliant *Cursus honorum* within Theodericus' administration: senator at 25, then consul (510), then *magister officiorum*. In 522, both of his two sons became consuls, one for the east and one for the west.

Boethius as a scholar

- ▶ Boethius was a learned and respected scholar. He translated works from Plato and Aristotle, in particular Aristotle's works on logic (*Topics*, *De interpretatione*, *Categories*).
- ▶ He composed numerous treatises, some on logic and rhetoric (*In Ciceronis topica* and *De Topicis Differentiis*), others on arithmetic (*De Arithmetica*) and music (*De Institutione Musica*). Important are his works on theology, where he supported the orthodox (i.e., trinitarian) view of the nature of God in contrast to the Arian and Nestorian heresies.
- ▶ His plans of translating and commenting the whole body of works by Plato and Aristotle, along with a final commentary in which these two philosophies would be brought to unification, were however never accomplished.

Boethius in the *Margarita Philosophica*



The “Consolation of Philosophy”

- ▶ Ciprianus, a magistrate at the court of Theodericus, accuses Boethius of conspiring with the senate to overthrow Theodericus’ rule in order to hand the kingdom over to the eastern roman emperor.
- ▶ Boethius is imprisoned in Pavia (northern Italy) and sentenced to death (524/525). According to some sources, the sentence was executed by tying a rope around Boethius’ head and tightening it until his eyes exploded and his skull was crushed.
- ▶ While in prison, Boethius wrote the “Consolation of Philosophy”, a philosophical work which will have an enormous influence on medieval thought and Christian theology, and which can be considered at the same time as a “spiritual testament” of classical antiquity, and as the birth of medieval scholasticism.
- ▶ Boethius can thus be seen as the last of the ancients, and the first of the medievals.

Structure of the consolation

- ▶ The consolation are a book of meditations in form of dialogue. Boethius, imprisoned in Pavia, is mourning the fall which threw him into such a miserable condition, from a former situation of "happiness". Lady philosophy then appears to console him.
- ▶ Philosophy as medicine
- ▶ The work is divided into five books.
- ▶ The first three books examine common conceptions of happiness. They draw heavily from Aristotelean and Platonic doctrines, and are conceived as a "light medicine", which Boethius has to take before delving into the more complex investigations of the last two books.
- ▶ The last two books are more technical, and tackle problems such as that of evil and that of free will.
- ▶ The work is interspersed with poetry, which elucidates the philosophical arguments and serves to relieve the reader from the weight of speculation.

The appearance of philosophy

While I was thus mutely pondering within myself, and recording my sorrowful complainings with my pen, it seemed to me that there appeared above my head a woman of a countenance exceeding venerable. Her eyes were bright as fire, and of a more than human keenness; her complexion was lively, her vigour showed no trace of enfeeblement; and yet her years were right full, and she plainly seemed not of our age and time.

Her stature was difficult to judge. At one moment it exceeded not the common height, at another her forehead seemed to strike the sky; and whenever she raised her head higher, she began to pierce within the very heavens, and to baffle the eyes of them that looked upon her. Her garments were of an imperishable fabric, wrought with the finest threads and of the most delicate workmanship; and these, as her own lips afterwards assured me, she had herself woven with her own hands.

The appearance of philosophy-2

The beauty of this vesture had been somewhat tarnished by age and neglect, and wore that dingy look which marble contracts from exposure. On the lower-most edge was inwoven the Greek letter π , on the topmost the letter θ , and between the two were to be seen steps, like a staircase, from the lower to the upper letter. This robe, moreover, had been torn by the hands of violent persons, who had each snatched away what he could clutch. Her right hand held a note-book; in her left she bore a staff.



Boethius' lament

[...] Is there still need of telling? Is not the cruelty of fortune against me plain enough? Doth not the very aspect of this place move thee? Is this the library, the room which thou hadst chosen as thy constant resort in my home, the place where we so often sat together and held discourse of all things in heaven and earth? Was my garb and mien like this when I explored with thee nature's hid secrets, and thou didst trace for me with thy wand the courses of the stars, moulding the while my character and the whole conduct of my life after the pattern of the celestial order? Is this the recompense of my obedience? [...]

*[...] Verily this is the very crown of my misfortunes, that **men's opinions for the most part look not to real merit, but to the event; and only recognise foresight where Fortune has crowned the issue with her approval.** Whereby it comes to pass that reputation is the first of all things to abandon the unfortunate. [...] This only will I say, that the most crushing of misfortune's burdens is, that as soon as a charge is fastened upon the unhappy, they are believed to have deserved their sufferings. [...]*

I, for my part, who have been banished from all life's blessings, stripped of my honours, stained in repute, am punished for well-doing. And now methinks I see the villainous dens of the wicked surging with joy and gladness, all the most recklessly unscrupulous threatening a new crop of lying informations, the good prostrate with terror at my danger, every ruffian incited by impunity to new daring and to success by the profits of audacity, the guiltless not only robbed of their peace of mind, but even of all means of defence.

- ▶ Problem: fortune seems to reward the evil, giving them happiness, at least as much as the good. Hence why be good?

Philosophy's response

- ▶ Boethius has lost his happiness of his own hand, since **true happiness** *cannot* be taken by any external agent
- ▶ Boethius has forgotten what man is, that is, he has forsaken knowledge of his own nature; and by consequence knowledge of what true happiness is.
- ▶ Boethius wrongly believes that changes in fortune are purely random, and are not subjected to any design.

*[...] It is because forgetfulness of thyself hath bewildered thy mind that thou hast bewailed thee as an exile, as one stripped of the blessings that were his; **it is because thou knowest not the end of existence that thou deemest abominable and wicked men to be happy and powerful** [...]*

The inconstancy of Fortune

*[...] What is it, then, poor mortal, that hath cast thee into lamentation and mourning? Some strange, unwonted sight, methinks, have thine eyes seen. Thou deemest Fortune to have changed towards thee; thou mistakest. **Such ever were her ways, ever such her nature. Rather in her very mutability hath she preserved towards thee her true constancy [...]***

- ▶ Fortune does not really change; its own very nature is mutability. One who makes of fortune his mistress is destined to be subjected to her ever changing will.

"Why, then, dost bemoan thyself? I have done thee no violence. Wealth, honour, and all such things are placed under my control. My handmaidens know their mistress; with me they come, and at my going they depart. I might boldly affirm that if those things the loss of which thou lamentest had been thine, thou couldst never have lost them."

The inconstancy of Fortune - 2

- ▶ The happiness that fortune can give is never full nor complete; one can be lucky in some respect, but unlucky in others
- ▶ Furthermore, him who is blessed by fortune becomes sensitive to even the smallest and most trifling misfortunes, because he has not been "schooled in adversity"

Why, then, ye children of mortality, seek ye from without that happiness whose seat is only within us? Error and ignorance bewilder you. I will show thee, in brief, the hinge on which perfect happiness turns. Is there anything more precious to thee than thyself? Nothing, thou wilt say. If, then, thou art master of thyself, thou wilt possess that which thou wilt never be willing to lose, and which Fortune cannot take from thee. And that thou mayst see that happiness cannot possibly consist in these things which are the sport of chance, reflect that, if happiness is the highest good of a creature living in accordance with reason, and if a thing which can in any wise be reft away is not the highest good, since that which cannot be taken away is better than it, it is plain that Fortune cannot aspire to bestow happiness by reason of its instability.

Do worldly goods give real happiness?

*All mortal creatures in those anxious aims which find employment in so many varied pursuits, though they take many paths, yet strive to reach one goal—the goal of happiness. **Now, the good is that which, when a man hath got, he can lack nothing further.** This it is which is the supreme good of all, containing within itself all particular good; so that if anything is still wanting thereto, this cannot be the supreme good, since something would be left outside which might be desired. 'Tis clear, then, that happiness is a state perfected by the assembling together of all good things.*

- ▶ Men strive for happiness, i.e., for the good, but they identify it in different things, such as: (i) wealth, (ii) rank, (iii) sovereignty, (iv) glory, (v) pleasure
- ▶ By these means they strive to reach (a) contentment, (b) reverence, (c) power, (d) renown, (e) joy of heart
- ▶ Clearly, according to the above, the highest good would be one which would give all of (a-e) at the same time.

Do worldly goods give real happiness?

- ▶ Wealth and riches: they are useful only insofar they are transferred to others. One man cannot become richer without impoverishing another; wealth cannot be possessed as an unbroken whole by every man.
- ▶ Nature requires very little material goods to support the body; and accumulation of wealth often leads to greed and wickedness, and then to the loss of tranquillity, since one has to procure the means to preserve his wealth.
- ▶ Consequently, pursuit of wealth paradoxically leads a man astray from self-sufficiency.
- ▶ Rank: even the worst, most despicable men can achieve high rank; and then, the more important they are, the more their wickedness is exposed. Thus we do not really deem a man worthy because of his rank, but we deem him worthy of his rank because of his goodness. Thus dignities do not naturally effect reverence.
- ▶ Sovereignty: power brings with it greed for more power, necessity for more protection, fear of losing this power, hostility of the people.

Do worldly goods give real happiness?

- ▶ Pleasure: pursuit of bodily pleasures weakens the soul and reduces man to the condition of a slave to the most contemptible things. Pleasure is most properly of the beast. Pursuit of bodily pleasures brings man to the necessity of finding rarer and rarer pleasures.
- ▶ glory and fame: they are bounded in space and in time. Compared to the vastity of time and space, fame among a certain subpopulation of mankind, within a limited extent of time, is insignificant. If time (or space) are infinite, then fame is utterly nothing.

Verily, if a single moment's space be compared with ten thousand years, it has a certain relative duration, however little, since each period is definite. But this same number of years—ay, and a number many times as great—cannot even be compared with endless duration; for, indeed, finite periods may in a sort be compared one with another, but a finite and an infinite never. So it comes to pass that fame, though it extend to ever so wide a space of years, if it be compared to never-lessening eternity, seems not short-lived merely, but altogether nothing.

*[...] Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.
The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.
Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,
If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.
Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?
Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre [...]*

True happiness is to be looked for within

Then, what seek ye by all this noisy outcry about fortune? To chase away poverty, I ween, by means of abundance. And yet ye find the result just contrary. Why, this varied array of precious furniture needs more accessories for its protection; it is a true saying that they want most who possess most, and, conversely, they want very little who measure their abundance by nature's requirements, not by the superfluity of vain display. Have ye no good of your own implanted within you, that ye seek your good in things external and separate? Is the nature of things so reversed that a creature divine by right of reason can in no other way be splendid in his own eyes save by the possession of lifeless chattels? [...] Indeed, man is so constituted that he then only excels other things when he knows himself; but he is brought lower than the beasts if he lose this self-knowledge. For that other creatures should be ignorant of themselves is natural; in man it shows as a defect.

What is the good?

- ▶ Men are mistaken in that they separate that which is simple and indivisible - the good -, and believe they can achieve (a-e) by pursuing separately (i-v); however, (a-e) are the same thing, are inseparable, and must be achieved at the same time.
- ▶ That which is really independent also has power, renown, reverence, and joy of heart all together.

This, then, which is one, and simple by nature, human perversity separates, and, in trying to win a part of that which has no parts, fails to attain not only that portion (since there are no portions), but also the whole, to which it does not dream of aspiring.

Happiness is God: God \Leftrightarrow Happiness

\Rightarrow :

*[...] since nothing can be imagined better than God, how can we doubt Him to be good than whom there is nothing better? Now, reason shows God to be good in such wise as to prove that in Him is perfect good. For were it not so, He would not be supreme of all things; for there would be something else more excellent, possessed of perfect good, which would seem to have the advantage in priority and dignity, since it has clearly appeared that **all perfect things are prior to those less complete**. Wherefore, lest we fall into an infinite regression, we must acknowledge the supreme God to be full of supreme and perfect good. But we have determined that true happiness is the perfect good; therefore true happiness must dwell in the supreme Deity.*

Happiness is God: God \Leftrightarrow Happiness

⇐:

[...] For if thou deemest it [the Good] received from without, thou mayst esteem that which gives more excellent than that which has received. But Him we most worthily acknowledge to be the most supremely excellent of all things. If, however, it is in Him by nature, yet is logically distinct, the thought is inconceivable, since we are speaking of God, who is supreme of all things. Who was there to join these distinct essences? Finally, when one thing is different from another, the things so conceived as distinct cannot be identical. Therefore that which of its own nature is distinct from the highest good is not itself the highest good—an impious thought of Him than whom, 'tis plain, nothing can be more excellent.

Everyone can be a God

*'Then, further,' said she, 'just as geometricians are wont to draw inferences from their demonstrations to which they give the name "deductions," so will I add here a sort of corollary. For since men become happy by the acquisition of happiness, while **happiness is very Godship**, it is manifest that they become happy by the acquisition of Godship. But as by the acquisition of justice men become just, and wise by the acquisition of wisdom, so by parity of reasoning by acquiring Godship they must of necessity become gods. So every man who is happy is a god; and though in nature God is One only, yet there is nothing to hinder that very many should be gods by participation in that nature.'*

- ▶ True happiness, which gives (a-e), is identical with God, is one, and is the end to which every being tends.

The impotence of evil

- ▶ Since Good=Happiness=God, men who are evil are not only far from God, but far from happiness, and they utterly lack any of (a-e).
- ▶ Evil pursuit of (i-v) not only renders men weak and powerless, but it also means that men have renounced their dignity, as they have forgotten their true nature, which consists in pursuing the Good. Evil men are worse than beasts.
- ▶ Evil is totally powerless against good men, since the sources of happiness lies within, and is therefore untouchable by them.
- ▶ Good men are rewarded by their own goodness; evil men are punished by their own wickedness. Evil men are happier when are punished; more unhappy when they are not punished.
- ▶ It then follows that hatred against evil men is unreasonable: they are instead to be pitied, since they lie in a state of despair and impotence.
- ▶ Moreover, every fortune is good fortune, since it is either reward or trial for the good, or punishment for the evil.

*For why do they forsake virtue and follow vice? Is it from ignorance of what is good? Well, what is more weak and feeble than the blindness of ignorance? Do they know what they ought to follow, but lust drives them aside out of the way? If it be so, they are still frail by reason of their incontinence, for they cannot fight against vice. Or do they knowingly and wilfully forsake the good and turn aside to vice? Why, at this rate, they not only cease to have power, but **cease to be at all**. For they who forsake the common end of all things that are, they likewise also cease to be at all. Now, to some it may seem strange that we should assert that the bad, who form the greater part of mankind, do not exist. But the fact is so. I do not, indeed, deny that they who are bad are bad, but that they **are** in an unqualified and absolute sense I deny. Just as we call a corpse a dead man, but cannot call it simply "man", so I would allow the vicious to be bad, but that they **are** in an absolute sense I cannot allow. That only **is** which maintains its place and keeps its nature; whatever falls away from this forsakes the existence which is essential to its nature.*

Punishment of the evil and reward of the good

*Verily, other men's unrighteousness cannot pluck from righteous souls their proper glory. Were the reward in which the soul of the righteous delighteth received from without, then might it be taken away by him who gave it, or some other; but since it is conferred by his own righteousness, then only will he lose his prize when he has ceased to be righteous. Lastly, since every prize is desired because it is believed to be good, who can account him who possesses good to be without reward? And what a prize, the fairest and grandest of all! For remember the corollary which I chiefly insisted on a little while back, and reason thus: Since absolute good is happiness, 'tis clear that all the good must be happy for the very reason that they are good. But it was agreed that those who are happy are gods. **So, then, the prize of the good is one which no time may impair, no man's power lessen, no man's unrighteousness tarnish; 'tis very Godship.***

Determinism and free will

- ▶ Boethius follows Aristotle in conceiving the world as a system of events interconnected by the relation of cause and effect: every event has a cause, and can itself be a cause of other events. Under this conception, chance is just a human illusion, which follows from ignorance of causes (determinism).
- ▶ Moreover, God, in its perfection, knows everything and foresees everything.
- ▶ This poses the problem: if God foresees everything, then everything is already determined with certainty (necessity) in its relation of cause and effect with respect to everything else (otherwise God's knowledge would be imperfect). Consequently, there is no free will (the faculty for men to choose freely their actions), as men's actions and motives have already been determined since the beginning of time.
- ▶ Thus, it seems that if events can be foreseen, then they are necessary; and if there is no necessity, then they cannot by any means be foreseen.
- ▶ This problem is crucial: without free will, it would seem that evil men have no moral responsibility whatsoever for their deeds, and therefore that their punishment is not only unjust, but itself evil..

*Now, the cause of the mistake is this—that men think that all knowledge is cognized purely by the nature and efficacy of the thing known. Whereas the case is the very reverse: **all that is known is grasped not conformably to its own efficacy, but rather conformably to the faculty of the knower.** An example will make this clear: the roundness of a body is recognised in one way by sight, in another by touch. Sight looks upon it from a distance as a whole by a simultaneous reflection of rays; touch grasps the roundness piecemeal, by contact and attachment to the surface, and by actual movement round the periphery itself. Man himself, likewise, is viewed in one way by Sense, in another by Imagination, in another way, again, by Thought, in another by pure Intelligence.*

- ▶ Various modes of cognition belong to different beings. Sense alone belongs to the most basic entities (shell-fish and such), imagination is present in all animals capable of movement, thought pertains to men alone, and intuition to the Deity. Each subsequent mode of cognition surpasses the former and comprehends them at a higher level.
- ▶ The solution to the problem of free will resides in achieving an understanding of how the divine mode of knowledge works

What is eternity?

[...] **Now, eternity is the possession of endless life whole and perfect at a single moment.** *What this is becomes more clear and manifest from a comparison with things temporal. For whatever lives in time is a present proceeding from the past to the future, and there is nothing set in time which can embrace the whole space of its life together. To-morrow's state it grasps not yet, while it has already lost yesterday's; nay, even in the life of to-day ye live no longer than one brief transitory moment. Whatever, therefore, is subject to the condition of time, although, as Aristotle deemed of the world, it never have either beginning or end, and its life be stretched to the whole extent of time's infinity, it yet is not such as rightly to be thought eternal. For it does not include and embrace the whole space of infinite life at once, but has no present hold on things to come, not yet accomplished. Accordingly, that which includes and possesses the whole fulness of unending life at once, from which nothing future is absent, from which nothing past has escaped, this is rightly called eternal[...]*

What is eternity?

- ▶ "Aeternitas est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio".
- ▶ The meaning of "simul" here is to be intended in the original meaning of a timeless, or logical, togetherness.
- ▶ *simultaneous* > *simul* > *sema*, togetherness, *hama* in greek.
- ▶ Plotinus of Lycopolis, neo-platonic (teacher of Porphyry): eternity is "the life, which belongs to that which exists and is in being, all together and full, completely without extension or interval".
- ▶ "all together": "homou pasa". Parmenides: "It never was, nor will be, because It is now, a whole all together (homou pan), one, continuous".
- ▶ See also *Timaeus*, 37 D, Petrarch's *Trionfo dell'Eternità*.

Two notions of necessity

- ▶ Whatever exists in time, even if it exists at all times, is incomplete
- ▶ God's cognition embraces all things in the past and the future as happening now, since only the present moment exists for him; thus his knowledge is best characterized not as foreknowledge, but of knowledge of a moment that never passes.
- ▶ Distinction between two types of necessity: simple necessity (e.g., "all men are mortal"), and conditioned necessity ("If you know that someone is walking, then he must necessarily be walking"). This second type of necessity is involved in God's foreknowledge, in that God just *intuits* everything that will happen, in the same way as we see what happens when someone is walking.
- ▶ Only the second type of necessity is thereby predicated of events

*[...] this Divine anticipation changes not the natures and properties of things, and it beholds things present before it, just as they will hereafter come to pass in time. Nor does it confound things in its judgment, but in the one mental view distinguishes alike what will come necessarily and what without necessity. **For even as ye, when at one and the same time ye see a man walking on the earth and the sun rising in the sky, distinguish between the two, though one glance embraces both, and judge the former voluntary, the latter necessary action: so also the Divine vision in its universal range of view does in no wise confuse the characters of the things which are present to its regard, though future in respect of time.***

- ▶ When we see the sun rising and a man walking, both events are necessary at the moment in which they happen, for the simple fact that they are happening *now*; but we easily distinguish between the former and the latter event.
- ▶ Analogously, God intuits every event which will come to be, but does not necessitate it, although it is necessary, in the second sense of necessity mentioned before.

"But," thou wilt say, "if it is in my power to change my purpose, I shall make void providence, since I shall perchance change something which comes within its foreknowledge." My answer is: Thou canst indeed turn aside thy purpose; but since the truth of providence is ever at hand to see that thou canst, and whether thou dost, and whither thou turnest thyself, thou canst not avoid the Divine foreknowledge, even as thou canst not escape the sight of a present spectator [...] for the Divine vision anticipates all that is coming, and transforms and reduces it to the form of its own present knowledge, and varies not, as thou deemest, in its foreknowledge, alternating to this or that, but in a single flash it forestalls and includes thy mutations without altering.

Conclusion - Divina Commedia, canto X, 121 - 129.

*[...] Or se tu l'occhio de la mente trani
di luce in luce dietro a le mie lode,
gi de l'ottava con sete rimani.
Per vedere ogni ben dentro vi gode
lanima santa che 'l mondo fallace
fa manifesto a chi di lei ben ode.
Lo corpo ond'ella fu cacciata giace
giuso in Cieldauro; ed essa da martiro
e da essilio venne a questa pace.*

*[...] Now if thy mental eye conducted be
from light to light as I resound their frame,
the eighth well worth attention thou wilt see.
The soul who pointed out the world's dark ways,
to all who listen, its deceits unfolding.
Beneath in Cieldauro lies the frame
whence it was driven; from woe and exile to
this fair abode of peace and bliss it came.*