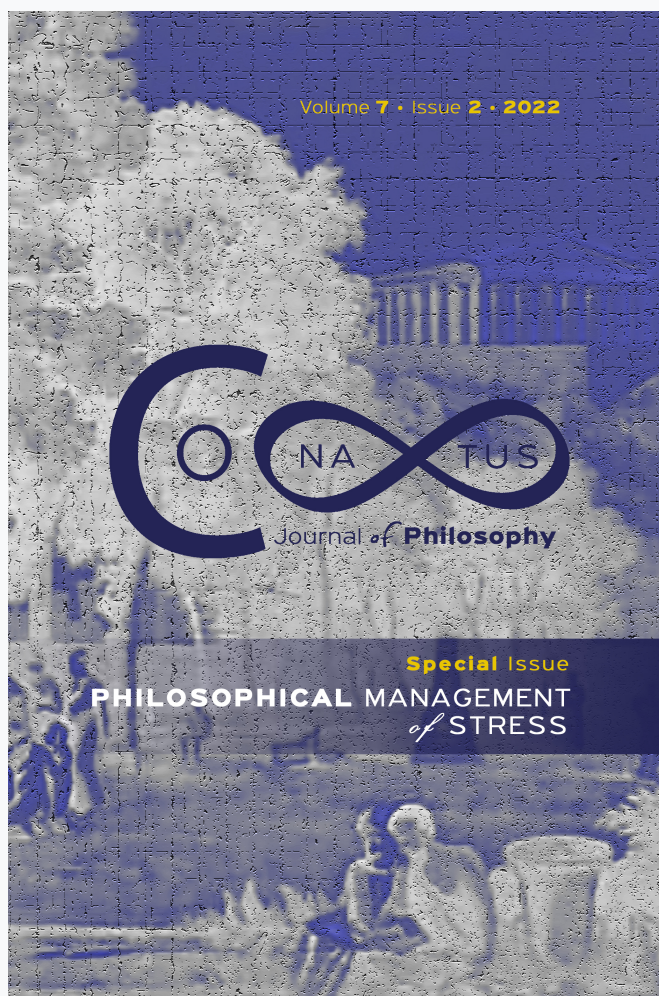


Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 7, No 2 (2022)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: Philosophical Management of Stress



Management of Stress through Philosophical Reflections: Teachings by Boethius (d. 524) for Our Modern Life

Albrecht Classen

doi: [10.12681/cjp.25648](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.25648)

Copyright © 2022, Albrecht Classen



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Classen, A. (2022). Management of Stress through Philosophical Reflections: Teachings by Boethius (d. 524) for Our Modern Life. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 7(2), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.25648>

Management of Stress through Philosophical Reflections: Teachings by Boethius (d. 524) for Our Modern Life

Albrecht Classen

University of Arizona, United States

E-mail address: aclassen@email.arizona.edu

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-319X>

Abstract

*While many scholars in the medical and psychological profession offer specific suggestions about how to handle stress and to overcome its negative impact, very few have ever considered philosophical reflections as a critical tool for this problem. One of the greatest moments of stress would certainly be when an individual has to face his/her death penalty and subsequent execution, especially if s/he feels innocent. Already ca. 1.500 years ago, the late antique philosopher Boethius (d. ca. 524) had to answer for himself how to cope with this situation, being imprisoned and waiting for his last terrible moment. When he composed his treatise, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, he created one of the most influential philosophical reflections on life's burning issues. This treatise continues to offer fundamental insights into how to come to terms with the conflicts and stresses of human existence, and it is discussed here as a profoundly philosophical answer to stress in universal terms.*

Keywords: stress management; philosophical approaches; Boethius; quest for happiness; meaning of life

I. Introduction: What is stress?

Modern society seems to be deeply influenced by the unfortunate experience of stress, that is, being subject to personal conflicts, dilemmas, paradoxes, excessive amounts of work, pressure, and the like. Consequently, there are countless advice books on how to combat stress, urging us to manage our time better, to stay focused in our daily activities, to separate clearly the private from the public part of our lives, to pursue the famous "Serenity Prayer" originally formulated by the German-American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), to meditate on a regular basis on

the meaning of all existence, to explore our emotions and to come to terms with them peacefully, to organize all our actions in a calm way so as to avoid stress resulting from time and other conflicts, or to reduce our dependency on material conditions, to move away from urban centers and to enjoy an existence in the calm countryside. Since the current challenge consists of probing how we might manage our stress today through philosophical endeavors, it seems best to quote the critical and relevant verses by Niebuhr's prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the
difference.¹

Indeed, serenity, courage, and wisdom can be clearly identified as fundamental virtues in all of human existence to cope effectively with the challenges that present themselves all the time for everyone in the world. Interestingly, however, some people, some cultures, and some social groups appear to operate more stress-free than others, which cannot be the case by accident, maybe because they already live by the ideal concepts developed by Niebuhr. But how would we acquire those virtues, if the prayer itself might not help directly? Stress cannot be overcome through blind faith; stress is human-made and self-imposed, so it is up to us as humans to come to terms with it and to develop effective strategies to handle this unnecessary psychological problem effectively.

To draw from one of many different definitions of stress available online, we could claim that

Stress is a normal biological reaction to a potentially dangerous situation. When you encounter sudden stress, your brain floods your body with chemicals and hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.

When you sense danger, the hypothalamus at the base of your brain reacts. It sends nerve and hormone signals to your adrenal glands, which release an abundance of hormones.

These hormones are nature's way of preparing you to face danger and increase your chances of survival.

¹ See the study by Niebuhr's own daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: Norton, 2003).

One of these hormones is adrenaline. You might also know it as epinephrine, or the fight-or-flight hormone.²

We could approach stress by means of what psychologists, trauma doctors, physiotherapists, and others have suggested. Life is, after all, stress, especially if it is out of balance and threatens to overpower the individual who cannot cope with a specific situation because s/he is overburdened in terms of work, does not receive sufficient support from family members, friends, or colleagues, or is threatened by external forces.³

II. Stress from an interdisciplinary approach

Today, many of our issues and problems are best handled through an interdisciplinary approach, and this would also be the case with stress. The present investigation offers a rather unusual critical approach to the syndrome of stress, not relying on medicine or psychology, but on philosophy. I suggest turning our attention to a philosopher from late Antiquity, Boethius, who went through some of the greatest stress any human being can suffer from, after he had been apprehended, placed in a prison in Pavia, Italy, and then faced the certain death penalty. Indeed, he was executed either in 524 or 525, without having ever seen a judge, his accuser/s, or a legal court. He was charged with state treason and eventually killed by way of stoning in 525. The trumped-up charges pertained to Boethius's effort to build and maintain diplomatic ties between the Eastern Roman capital of Constantinople, still ruled by a Greek-speaking emperor, and the remnant of the formerly Western Roman empire governed from Rome, the Senate. At that time, however, the Ostrogoths, a Germanic tribe, ruled over Italy under the leadership of King Theodoric the Great (454-526), whereas Boethius tried his best to develop open channels with the Byzantine empire and to preserve the traditional cultural ties between both parts of the old Roman empire.

The historical details do not matter to us in the present context, whereas his highly stressful situation under which he then composed his famous philosophical treatise, *De consolatione philosophiae* (On the Consolation of

² Timothy J. Legg, "Everything you Need to Know about Stress," *Healthline*, last modified February 25, 2020, <https://www.healthline.com/health/stress#hormones>.

³ "Stress and your Health," *Medline Plus*, last accessed December 20, 2020, <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003211.htm#:~:text=Stress%20is%20a%20feeling%20of,danger%20or%20meet%20a%20deadline>. See also Shirley Fisher, ed., *Handbook of Life Stress, Cognition and Health* (Chichester: Wiley, 1988); E. Ronald de Kloet, Melly Oitzl, and Eric Vermetten, eds., *Hormones and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: Basic Studies and Clinical Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008). There is, of course, much more current medical research on stress than can be cited here.

Philosophy), will serve us here as a critically important approach to stress and stress management. After all, Boethius faced the death penalty; he knew that he had no defense because the opponents did not care about any legitimacy of his imprisonment and his charges, and because even the king did not bother to protect his former servant. As far as we can tell, this poor man was innocent, but he was in the way of certain political groups opposed to his diplomatic endeavors reaching out to Constantinople, hence to the Greek world in the eastern Mediterranean. So, in short, Boethius had to realize that his life was coming to an end through a brutal and unjustified execution.

III. Boethius's responses

In this precarious situation, with stress rising to the highest possible level, this famous philosopher, teacher, translator, musical theoretician, and poet resorted to his ultimate abilities in order to come to terms with his stress and embarked on composing this treatise while still in prison.⁴ While he did not yet know the term 'stress' as such, he successfully developed a major philosophical strategy to overcome his personal suffering and thereby to leave behind a grand document of human intellect, self-composure, and deep insights into the foundation of all existence both within its material and its immaterial dimensions. By analyzing the meaning of true happiness, Boethius succeeded in developing an amazingly effective, relevant, and logical argument how to liberate oneself from the confines of the physical constraints where all our stress rests, and aim for a higher noetic perspective taking the individual to a deep understanding of what brings about happiness.

Boethius was subsequently killed, but not without leaving behind this most influential narrative which deeply influenced centuries of his readers who consistently regarded him as one of the greatest schoolteachers of the West. In fact, we can trace the impact of *De consolatione philosophiae* throughout the entire Middle Ages and the early modern age, and it would actually be impossible to determine any moment in time when his treatise would no longer have been regarded as one of the most important philosophical treatises of all time.⁵

⁴ I have engaged with the history of imprisonment and freedom, as also reflected on by Boethius, in a recent new monograph, *Freedom, Imprisonment, and Slavery in the Pre-Modern World: Cultural-Historical, Social-Literary, and Theoretical Reflections* (Berlin, and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021). See also my introduction and contribution to the volume *Incarceration and Slavery in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: A Cultural-Historical Investigation of the Dark Side in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Albrecht Classen, 1-58 (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books, 2021).

⁵ For convenience's sake, I draw here from the English translation, Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans., with intro. and notes Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2001), with text citations embedded. For background and critical analyses,

IV. Boethius today: Philosophy and psychology combined

While Boethius's famous work has mostly been studied by medievalists and historians of philosophy, we can certainly draw from it as well regarding the management of stress. Whereas we are commonly bothered by everyday types of stress, and hence seek out everyday types of remedies or coping mechanisms, we ignore the fundamental approach to stress per se and are hence helpless when individual situations emerge which would have to be handled with a variety of approaches. In short, we tend to sweep the real reasons for our stress under the carpet and continue with our daily lives as if nothing had happened, and ignore, out of convenience, the underlying conflicts and problems. To put it differently, there is a wide-spread tendency to rely on placebos in cases of human conflicts and tensions, whereas the real *raison d'être* is left aside, maybe because most people have lost the ability to work through issues that affect them all the time by means of philosophical reflections.

Put differently, without a philosophical grounding, most common strategies employed to allow us to operate in ordinary life without facing

see, for instance, Margaret Gibson, ed., *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981); Ralph McInerney, "Boethius," in *Medieval Philosophers*, ed. Jermiah Hackett, 110-117 (Detroit, and London: Gale Research, 1992); Joachim Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae* (Berlin, and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978); John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For the most recent perspectives, see the contributions to Maarten J. F. M. Hoenen, and Lodi W. Nauta, eds., *Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the Consolatio philosophiae* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr., and Philip Edward Phillips, eds., *Vernacular Traditions of Boethius's De consolatione philosophiae* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2016); Brian Donaghey, et al., eds., *Remaking Boethius: The English Language Translation Tradition of The Consolation of Philosophy* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 2019). I myself have engaged with Boethius on numerous occasions; see, for instance, "Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae*. Eine 'explication du texte,'" *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 32, no. 2 (2000): 44-61; "What Do They Mean for Us Today? Medieval Literature and Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century. Boethius, John of Salisbury, Abelard, and Christine de Pizan," *Mediaevistik* 12 (2001): 185-208; "Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the *Consolatio philosophiae*" *Carmina Philosophiae* 15 (2006): 63-88; "Boethius and No End in Sight: The Impact of *De consolatione philosophiae* on Early Modern German Literature from the Fifteenth through the Seventeenth Century: Andreas Gryphius and Johann Scheffler (Angelus Silesius)," *Daphnis* 46, no. 3 (2018): 448-466; "Literature as a Tool of Epistemology: Medieval Perspectives for Post-Modernity. Or, the Post-Modern World Long Anticipated by the Pre-Modern: Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, Apollonius of Tyre, Marie de France, and Ulrich Bonerius," *New Literaria – An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2020): 1-19. Imprisonment has often served as a catalyst for the creation of major treatises, letters, journals, travelogues, and essays; see Jamie S. Scott, *Christians and Tyrants: The Prison Testimonies of Boethius, Thomas More, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, Washington, DC., Baltimore, MD, et al.: Peter Lang, 1995).

the real challenges prove to be fragmentary or piecemeal. Normally, in cases of stress, or other problems, people look for simple and direct solutions, and would certainly prefer taking pills to fix things than to think thoroughly about the causes and conditions of their stress. Once, however, we have turned our attention fully to Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and have mastered his basic teaching, a much more universal explanation of most issues in life might become available.

Following, I do not suggest that Boethius's treatise would be a panacea for all problems in our existence, especially because he was stuck in a particularly terrifying situation. But since he was faced with the most fundamental question regarding the tragic unhappiness he had to suffer from, we can take his treatise as a model for the philosophical working through of human suffering at large and as a gateway toward the solution of how to acquire true and lasting happiness. Boethius's readers throughout the centuries have acknowledged his deep insights and have hence embraced the philosophical teachings contained in his treatise. There is thus no reason why we would want to ignore those today, particularly because they have withstood the test of time, at least in academic terms. Here I want to suggest that they can and ought to be instrumentalized once again because they shed such important light on the roots of most of our problems today. As is often the case, a more holistic approach to conflicts or issues in the twenty-first century, drawing from historical resources, promises to open innovative perspectives and long-term solutions.⁶

V. Life's stresses: Historical-philosophical perspectives

As we have observed above, human life is commonly influenced negatively by stress, whether of a trivial or an existential kind. A philosophical reflection on suffering, hence on stress, promises to yield significant insights from the past that have proven to be of timeless value, except that his *Consolation of Philosophy* has mostly disappeared from public view over the last two hundred years. Without his treatise being part of the critical reading list in

⁶ See now the contributions to Chris Jones, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema, eds., *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to Improving Our Understanding of the Present* (Berlin, and Boston: Walther de Gruyter, 2020). For a critical evaluation, however, see my review to appear in *Mediaevistik* 34 (2021). Cf. also Bettina Bildhauer, and Chris Jones, eds., *The Middle Ages in the Modern World: Twenty First Century Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For new efforts, from a very broad interdisciplinary approach, see now the contributions to Albrecht Classen, ed., *The Relevance of The Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Past and Present, Humanities, Special Issue* (2020), https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/pas_pre. Here, medievalists and modernists likewise address the same question.

higher education, Boethius was bound to be ignored.⁷ Ironically, however, neither his personal experience nor his theoretical reflections have lost any value for us today, especially when we face the issue of stress. Stress comes in many manifestations, and in its extreme form as suffering, such as when Boethius suffered deeply from his realization that he was unjustly held in prison and that he was certainly facing his death penalty without having any resort to defense.

Examining the arguments as developed in *De consolazione philosophiae*, we quickly realize that Boethius explores the profound question of what constitutes human life and what parameters we need to operate effectively and happily during our existence in order to achieve at least a modicum of happiness. Being a neo-Platonist, the philosopher heavily works with the concept of anagnorisis, the phenomenon of remembering of what the individual had known already for a long time but then forgot. What Boethius had forgotten, as we are told at the beginning, was nothing less but the meaning of and the path toward true happiness. As we would say today, we as individuals are stressed and suffer because we have lost the sense of what our life might mean and the understanding of how to pursue an existence aimed at achieving profound and full happiness.

VI. Not stress, but lack of comprehension

The real issue would hence not even be stress, but the lack of comprehension of what constitutes happiness or the path toward that goal. However, by way of analyzing the meaning of happiness, fundamental strategies and concepts easily open up which make it possible to come to terms with stress as well. In other words, stress is ultimately an external manifestation of internal conflicts, or the absence of the true understanding of who and what we are as human beings.

Moreover, as *De consolazione philosophiae* also indicates, the critical issue would not even be the mundane conflicts or tensions in our daily lives which can easily lead to stress. Instead, from a philosophical point of view, without a clear understanding of the purpose and goal of human existence, any wrinkle or ripple on the surface of our lives can threaten to trip us up and make us fall. Unfortunately, most people, maybe especially today, mistake

⁷ Online, we find more information on Boethius than we might have expected: The School of Life, "Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy," March 29, 2018, YouTube video, 9:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMUP48stXDC>; <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/boethius-and-the-consolation-of-philosophy/>; Carl R. Trueman, "Boethius: The Philosopher Theologian," *Ligonier*, last revised August 1, 2006, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/boethius-philosopher-theologian/>; Classical Academic Press, "Teaching Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy," last accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.classicalu.com/course/teaching-boethius-the-consolation-of-philosophy/>.

those little ripples – stress – as the essential issues, whereas stress would have to be identified simply as a manifestation of the core troubles in our existence. This is the very point where philosophy comes in and challenges us to remember what the true teachings would be, based on logic, rationality, principles, values, and ideals.

VII. Philosophy as our teacher

This very realization proves to be the essential strategy pursued by Boethius, who has the allegorical figure of Philosophy appear in his prison cell and teach him the old lessons once again which he had forgotten. The treatise, as it stands, continues to appeal to us today to listen to Philosophy and to follow her arguments which she develops in a stunningly logical fashion, ripping away all false pretenses about the common assumptions concerning the usual notions of happiness in our lives. Stress has much to do with the individual's inability to cope with the demands of life, to handle various tasks, or to carry out jobs in a timely and effective manner. This stress, however, is not just the outcome of our daily affairs, but the result of conflicts and contradictions in our entire human make-up, worldview, self-concept, and perception. We could thus claim that stress emerges because we suffer from misconceptions about what constitutes the ultimate values and ideals of human existence.

Examining how Boethius handled his stress, i.e., his personal suffering while on death-row, and comprehending how he translated his superficial stress-experience into an opportunity to recover his true senses and concept of happiness in a philosophical interpretation of the word, we stand to gain new insights into coping mechanisms, or rather profound insights into the workings of this world. On that basis, most forms of stress would then be compartmentalized and exposed as trivial issues, whereas the finite challenge really rests in the quest for happiness in philosophical terms.

The prisoner is at first surrounded by the Muses and thus given in to emotional responses. All he knows to do in this situation is to cry and to grieve, being helpless and despondent, being a complete victim of his stress. Only once Philosophy has entered his cell, does the situation change because she immediately goes into action and begins her teaching, which lays the foundation for a fundamental change of his mind, his attitude, and his perception of life in the larger context. All of his stress proves to be the result of his shortsightedness and blindness regarding the inner realities of this life. There are several profound lessons which Philosophy slowly but surely conveys to the prisoner, which at the end take him out of his misery, his slump, his desperation, and hence his mental stress.

She does not address the question at all whether Boethius's imprisonment would be justified or not, especially because she herself has already suffered

from various attacks by enemies who refuse to listen to reason and logic and only aim for power, influence, status, and wealth – her dress is damaged to some extent, a clear reference to the death of Socrates. For Philosophy, by contrast, the central task focuses primarily on the issue of what constitutes happiness, and who grants this happiness to the individual. The meaning of life is thus identified as the foundation upon which happiness can be achieved. Without grasping this critical condition, Boethius would never free himself from his stress, i.e., his anger over the injustice imposed on him, the frustration about his situation in the prison, and his fear of the execution.

Philosophy at first helps him to understand that practically all forms of happiness traditionally identified in life would be only superficial and unreliable. Whether power, money, honor, goods, or family life, all of that proves to be nothing but a loan from Fortune, and ultimately would have to be returned. All material forms of happiness would be illusions and could not be trusted. In fact, Fortune herself turns out to be defined by constant and perpetual change, i.e., by the wheel, and the only truth that would exist could be discovered in the very mutability of all life. When individuals suffer from stress, both in the past and in the present, they moan about the impact of Fortune and the perpetual changing of its wheel, although this turning constitutes the very property of all material existence – contingency.⁸

VIII. Stress as lack of happiness

Philosophy does not argue that Boethius should reject all physical pleasures, but she suggests that he recognize that they are defined by temporality and never represent true happiness. She reminds him that he can look back to his own family life, which was a very happy one, together with his wife, his two currently highly decorated sons (appointed jointly as Consuls), and his father-in-law. However, true happiness would not rest in them either. Anyone of high power would be constantly afraid of losing it again, or would have to fear being attacked, robbed, or even killed. Public honor would come and go and could never be relied on. Material wealth would grant just temporary happiness and could never be relied on for good. Even family would not be a guarantee for happiness because contingency would certainly undermine this

⁸ Howard Rollin Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927); Emanuele Narducci, Sergio Audano, and Luca Fezzi, eds., *Aspetti della fortuna dell'antico nella cultura Europea: atti della quarta giornata di studi, Sestri Levante, 16 marzo 2007* (Pisa: ETS, 2008). For an excellent overview, see "Fortuna," *Wikipedia*, last modified October 14, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortuna>, which, despite much criticism of this online encyclopedia (often with good reasons), serves our purposes well.

social structure as well. In fact, Philosophy ultimately emphasizes that truth could be found only when misfortune strikes because only then would the person suffering from it learn who the true friends are and who not.

Again, Philosophy does not dismiss any of the traditional sources of happiness per se, but deconstructs them as contingent and hence as unreliable, if not even unworthy of further attention by the one looking for true happiness. Only a rational approach to one's life's framework would facilitate a constructive handling of stress because it can be identified as the result of disorientation, confusion, lack of self-control, lack of independence, and a weak will, all of which subjugate the individual under external pressures.

Once this concept has been fully developed and explained, Philosophy turns to the second strategy to liberate the protagonist from his illusion, and hence his stress. While Fortune would be defined by its regular lack of constancy, i.e., ordinary human life in all of its trivial dimensions and conditions, the real goal for the individual, when philosophically properly trained, would be to transcend those material conditions and to recognize them as what they all really are, loaned by ever-changing Fortune.

Philosophy clearly deconstructs all common assumptions about those worldly aspects seemingly offering a sense of happiness; worldly honor depends on all others; money proves to be highly volatile, and political or economic power is nothing but contingent on the current conditions. She also dismisses family and friendship as any valid sources of friendship, but she does not dismiss any of those criteria as completely meaningless. They could and should be enjoyed while one has them, but they cannot be the source of actual happiness. Contingency thus proves to be the key term in this context. As long as the individual operates within the framework of contingency, no real freedom, i.e. happiness, can ever be achieved.

Maybe true happiness might not even exist, and since all humans kind of stumble through life, constantly bumping into hindrances, hurdles, and problems, the entire hope for a stress-free life might be illusory. Boethius might have also reached that conclusion, especially since he faced certain death despite being completely innocent, as he claimed. However, Philosophy then moves one step further and reminds the miserable man that he has forgotten about the true essence of happiness, which cannot be based on ephemeral objects (material) or offices (fame, authority). Freedom of contingency would be the only avenue to move away from this constant dependency and make it possible for the individual to be him/herself. The key term used here is "self-sufficiency," meaning that a person would be self-content and without any need of outside resources.

IX. Freedom as a remedy against stress

Only if that freedom would be achievable, the individual could rely on itself and distance itself from all other people, institutions, locations, events, or

activities because those would not be needed. This would also entail, at least in our context, that this being would be completely stress-free, free from all frictions, conflicts, tensions, and arguments, because it would be responsible only to itself and draw everything from itself. Stress, to be sure, tends to be the result of two or more contrasting, if not conflicting demands on oneself, or of the clash between the own self and others, often because we simply are unaware of the natural path toward ourselves, or to the absolute good.

The most difficult task would be, according to Boethius, to realize the nature of this self-sufficiency or whether it could ever be achieved by a human being. Philosophy solves this issue by resorting to a Neoplatonic concept, arguing that all life descends from a perfect being and evolves throughout time, increasingly moving away from that original ideal. People, however, tend to forget about their own origin, which can be traced back to the status of being complete, unified, self-assured, and free from contingency. Stress results, hence, because the individual has forgotten what s/he is and where it originated from.

One more time, life is determined by stress because there are too many conflicts, demands, pressures, and the absence of one or the other thing that we might desire or need to have. Since people, if not all life, is far away from complete independence, contingency continues to dominate material existence, which thus allows stress to reappear over and over again. Life is never ideal or perfect since it is moving away from the state of perfection and goodness. Only the original being from which all life stems was independent and completely self-sufficient, hence happy. Philosophy therefore identifies our existence as the natural and perpetual endeavor to join with this supreme good – *summum bonum*, sometimes translated as God. Since self-sufficiency proves to be unachievable and ever-evanescent, stress enters our lives. However, we are also told that the individual life is actually determined by the constant quest for the good in order to overcome the dependency from the workings of Fortune. We might identify Fortune itself as the ultimate source of stress because of its very nature of being inconstant.

If true happiness cannot be achieved by those means provided by Fortune, it can only rest beyond it, in the very goodness or independence identified above as the source of all being. But would it ever be possible to leave this material existence behind and to reach the absolute good, or to merge with it? Most likely not, as Philosophy would also suggest. However, the primary goal would not be this achievement, but the constant effort to get outside of the domain of Fortune and to aim for the real good, i.e., self-sufficiency, or freedom of contingency. Philosophy emphasizes that this sense of ultimate goodness, fullness, completion, or freedom rests in all beings, and in order to gain happiness, which also means in our context to become liberated from

stress, the only strategy would be to follow the own call of the inner nature to return to this *summum bonum*.

X. Stress and non-existing evil

This then leads to the rather surprising claim by Philosophy that there is no real evil. If all beings naturally aim for the one and only goal, to be whole, good, self-sufficient, or independent again, then those who commit something evil – at least within the sphere of Fortune, hence in the material dimension – really operate against their own self-interest and thus ultimately eliminate themselves. Philosophy compares those evil creatures with plants or animals that deliberately turn their back toward this ultimate good, the dream of all living endeavors and seek out the worst possible place of all existence, where they thus transform into non-beings. Every plant, every worm, every creature would naturally strive to be one, a self within itself, fulfilled, complete, or self-sufficient. By contrast, those who commit something evil move in the very opposite direction and thus eliminate themselves, at least in philosophical or spiritual terms.

As much as Boethius wished that this self-elimination would happen faster and liberate him from his prison and expected death penalty, Philosophy must remind him that those evil beings would only deserve pity because of their utmost inner weakness. They would be so weak because they could not even pursue the most natural, virtually instinctual drive of all life, to live out its full potential and reaching the stage of self-sufficiency as part of the *summum bonum*. However, since we all exist in the material dimension, we are all subject to Fortune and thus have to realize regularly the degree to which we are constantly subject to the vagaries of life. But that is exactly where all our stress rests, coming both from the external and the internal dimensions, forces, issues, or conditions.

In the final two books of *De consolazione philosophiae*, Boethius, or Philosophy, turns increasingly to larger and more esoteric issues, probing the difference between Fortune and Providence, the nature of time, and the very quality of this absolute goodness, the *summum bonum*. This also sheds light on the physical character of time and the fact that this goodness is beyond time. Providence means that it exists both in the past and in the present and has also complete knowledge of the future – certainly issues that go beyond our own investigation and our understanding as human beings.

XI. The philosophical mind

Undoubtedly, Boethius's treatise requires a philosophical mind to comprehend the specific arguments. But the narrator himself intervenes regularly and

questions Philosophy about the very same issues that would concern the modern reader. The poet proves to be a great didactic author who easily anticipates where and why the audience would face serious problem of comprehension. Through the dialogue with Philosophy we can follow the argument rather easily and can thereby realize in gradual progression where the external issues rest and how the rational thinker can overcome them.

Fundamentally, as Philosophy teaches Boethius and us today once again, most of the problems in our lives rest in our misunderstanding of the workings of Fortune and mistake the worldly forces such as power, wealth, or honor with the real source of happiness, the absolute goodness, self-sufficiency, and thus the freedom from contingency. We only need to tweak the entire argument slightly in order to recognize the direct response to the question of how the human being can overcome stress and withdraw into its own self where the origins of goodness and self-sufficiency rest. Boethius did not argue for asceticism, eremitism, monasticism, or any other form of self-deprivation for religious reasons. He did not reject the material world, with all of its goods but also its stresses and conflicts. However, in face of his own stress, being imprisoned and facing certain death through execution, he developed a profound philosophical answer regarding life's ultimate question where true happiness rests. By means of transcending worldly concepts of happiness, he succeeded in projecting philosophical happiness predicated on self-sufficiency and freedom from contingency.

This thus would be the critical answer to the question we have raised here. Stress is a human problem, mostly self-created, but often insurmountable, unless, as I have suggested here, the individual resorts to philosophical reflections about the nature of true happiness, the meaning of life, and the purpose of all existence, as outlined by Boethius in his *De consolatioe philosophiae*. Stress arises because the individual does not understand the larger picture of life, determined by the fundamental drive toward happiness as defined by Philosophy. Apparently, Boethius succeeded in overcoming his own anger, fear of death, and the stress of his imprisonment and anxiety about being on the death-row by way of his philosophical ruminations. The astoundingly extensive reception history of his treatise confirms that he had indeed discovered one of the secrets how to overcome stress and how to orient one's life toward the ultimate good.

XII. Conclusion: Past ideas for our future

There is truly much to learn from our past in order to cope with the issues of today. Boethius was certainly not a psychologist or a psychotherapist, and he did not have in mind any medical suggestions of how to come to terms with stress. Nevertheless, his treatise proves to be a most critical tool providing

also modern readers with theoretical reflections about human life and the necessary direction to be pursued in order to liberate oneself from all the dilemmas, conflicts, contradictions, and aggressions that vex people all over life.

References

Bildhauer, Bettina, and Chris Jones, eds. *The Middle Ages in the Modern World: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Boethius. *Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated with introduction and notes by Joel C. Relihan. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2001.

Classen, Albrecht, ed. *Incarceration and Slavery in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: A Cultural-Historical Investigation of the Dark Side in the Pre-Modern World*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books, 2021.

Classen, Albrecht, ed. *The Relevance of The Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Past and Present*. *Humanities* (2020), Special Issue. https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/pas_pre.

Classen, Albrecht. "Boethius and No End in Sight: The Impact of *De consolatione philosophiae* on Early Modern German Literature From the Fifteenth through the Seventeenth Century: Andreas Gryphius and Johann Scheffler (Angelus Silesius)." *Daphnis* 46, no. 3 (2018): 448-466.

Classen, Albrecht. "Boethius as a Source for Late-Medieval German Didactic Poetry? The Example of the Gnostic Poet Heinrich der Teichner." *Carmina Philosophiae* 15 (2006): 63-88.

Classen, Albrecht. "Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae*. Eine 'explication du texte.'" *Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik* 32, no. 2 (2000): 44-61.

Classen, Albrecht. "Literature as a Tool of Epistemology: Medieval Perspectives for Post-Modernity. Or, the Post-Modern World Long Anticipated by the Pre-Modern: Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, Apollonius of Tyre, Marie de France, and Ulrich Bonerius." *New Literaria – An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2020): 1-19.

Classen, Albrecht. "What Do They Mean for Us Today? Medieval Literature and Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century. Boethius, John of Salisbury, Abelard, and Christine de Pizan." *Mediaevistik* 12 (2001): 185-208.

Classen, Albrecht. *Freedom, Imprisonment, and Slavery in the Pre-Modern World: Cultural-Historical, Social-Literary, and Theoretical Reflections*. Berlin, and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021.

Classical Academic Press. "Teaching Boethius: *The Consolation of Philosophy*." Last Accessed December 20, 2020. <https://www.classicalu.com/course/teaching-boethius-the-consolation-of-philosophy/>.

de Kloet, Ronald E., Melly Oitzl, and Eric Vermetten, eds. *Stress Hormones and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: Basic Studies and Clinical Perspectives*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008.

Donaghey, Brian, Noel Harold Kaylorm, Philip Edward Phillips, and Paul E. Szarmach, eds. *Remaking Boethius: The English Language Translation Tradition of The Consolation of Philosophy*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 2019.

Fisher, Shirley, and James Reason, eds. *Handbook of Life Stress, Cognition and Health*. Chichester: Wiley, 1988.

Gibson, Margaret, ed. *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981.

Gruber, Joachim. *Kommentar zu Boethius De consolatione philosophiae*. Berlin, and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978.

Hoenen, Maarten J. F. M, and Lodi Nauta, eds. *Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the Consolatio philosophiae*. Leiden: Brill, 1997.

Jones, Chris, Conor Kostick, and Klaus Oschema, eds. *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to Improving Our Understanding of the Present*. Berlin, and Boston: Walther de Gruyter, 2020.

Kaylor, Noel Harold Jr., and Philip Edward Phillips, eds. *Vernacular Traditions of Boethius's De consolatione philosophiae*. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2016.

Legg, Timothy J. "Everything you Need to Know about Stress." *Healthline*. Last modified February 25, 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/health/stress#hormones>.

Marenbon, John. *Boethius*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

McInerney, Ralph. "Boethius." In *Medieval Philosophers*, edited by Jermiah Hackett, 110-117. Detroit, and London: Gale Research, 1992.

Medline Plus. "Stress and your Health." Last accessed December 20, 2020. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003211.htm#:~:text=Stress%20is%20a%20feeling%20of,danger%20or%20meet%20a%20deadline>.

Narducci, Emanuele, Sergio Audano, and Luca Fezzi eds. *Aspetti della fortuna dell'antico nella cultura Europea: atti della quarta giornata di studi, Sestri Levante, 16 marzo 2007*. Pisa: ETS, 2008.

Patch, Howard Rollin. *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927.

Scott, Jamie S. *Christians and Tyrants: The Prison Testimonies of Boethius, Thomas More, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York, Washington, DC., Baltimore, MD, et al.: Peter Lang, 1995.

Sifton, Elisabeth. *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*. New York: Norton, 2003.

The School of Life. "Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy." March 29, 2018. *YouTube Video*. 9:27. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMUP48stXDc>. <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/boethius-and-the-consolation-of-philosophy/>.

Trueman, Carl R. "Boethius: The Philosopher Theologian." *Ligonier*. Last Revised August 1, 2006. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/boethius-philosopher-theologian/>.

Wikipedia. "Fortuna." Last Modified October 14, 2022. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortuna>.