

## The Good in Boethius' *De hebdomadibus*

Abstract:

The *De hebdomadibus* (DH) of Boethius presents a problem with the idea that ordinary finite substances are good and then proposes a solution to the problem. Careful reconstruction of Boethius' arguments reveals that his solution relies on an account of finite goodness that he does not make explicit. Moreover, accounts of finite goodness that commentators have supplied to the DH should be rejected. Instead, the account of finite goodness given in book III of the *Consolatio* successfully resolves the problem raised in the DH.

Keywords: Boethius, ethics, metaethics, value theory, God

### 1. Introduction

The De hebdomadibus (DH) of Boethius is an important and understudied text. Written about 520 CE, the DH ranks high in the works of early medieval philosophy that would be influential well through the high medieval period. Unfortunately, contemporary histories written in English ignore the work entirely with one or two exceptions (Bourke 1968, 65-66). The current unpopularity of the DH is perhaps explained by its obscurity. It addresses a potential problem that results from a set of propositions or “axioms” that Boethius was known for teaching. The problem is that since there is only one substantial good, ordinary finite substances cannot be good at all. Thus, the task of the DH is to explain “in what way can substances be good in that they are but are not substantial goods.”<sup>1</sup>

As a solution, Boethius presents a thought experiment to show that, under conceivable circumstances, finite things are good only accidentally. He infers from this that they are not good essentially, which sets them apart from the first substantial good. But he does not tell us what this non-essential goodness is such that this difference obtains. His argument therefore has a remarkable lacuna, which some commentators have tried to fill. Thomas Aquinas thinks that this kind of goodness is the same as virtue or the perfection of a thing's telos (2001, L4.A156). Scott MacDonald argues the “good” is to be analyzed as “depending for existence on the first good” (1988). In contrast to these interpretations, Boethius thinks that the goodness of finite things is an imperfect intimation of the supremely perfect first good.

The paper starts with an interpretation of the alleged problem of creaturely goodness (section 2). Then it presents an interpretation of Boethius' explicit solution to the problem (section 3). This discussion reveals that while Boethius' solution technically implies the negation of a central premise in the argument of section 2, he does not motivate it. Instead, he seems to rely on the reader taking for granted a specific understanding of creaturely value and its relationship to the First Good. This paper then turns to consider interpretations that have been proposed to fill out Boethius' solution—Aquinas' and MacDonald's above—and show that they fail as interpretations (section 4). This paper ends by offering an interpretation from the two rejected.

## 2. The Dilemma for Belief in Finite Goodness

Boethius begins the dilemma with the claim that nothing that exists fails to be good.<sup>2</sup> This claim not only faces the apparent counter examples of dull knives and deadly diseases—things that are bad and so not good—but also by the existence of things like atoms and quarks—things

that are neutral and so not good. Fortunately, Boethius does not assert the claim without argument.

That which are are good. For the common opinion of the learned holds that all that is tends to the good. And everything tends to what it is like. So then what tends to the good are themselves good. (OSIII.56-60)

The argument can be summarized with the following.

(G1) All things tend toward what they are like. (Axiom IX)

(G2) TF, all things that tend toward the good are good. (from G1)

(G3) All things tend toward the good. (premise)

(G4) TF, all things are good. (from G2 and G3)

The goodness of all things follows from Axiom IX together with premise (G3). As a “common opinion of the wise,” Boethius does not defend (G3). Yet he may feel entitled to it, since the claim runs deep in ancient ethical thought. For instance, it is the first thesis of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics that “the good is what all things seek” (1094a4).

The problem, however, is that Boethius’ Axioms present an apparent dilemma for the claim that “all things are good.” Here is the main argument.

(MA1) If some finite x is good, then x is good per se or by participation. (Axioms

III-V)

(MA2) X is not good by participation.

(MA3) X is not good per se.

(MA4) Therefore, x is not good.

According to the Axioms, there are two ways a thing can possess a feature. First, it might have the feature accidentally. In this case, a thing attains the feature by “participation.” For Boethius,

to participate in something is to “take a part” of something that is not itself (Aquinas 2001, L2.A70). Simple categorical propositions can predicate something of the subject that adds to it or not. For instance, “red” adds something to “ball.” Nothing about being a ball makes it red. If the predication does add something to the subject, it does so by involving another category. The subject participates in another category, and so only possesses it accidentally. Thus, a thing only participates in what is accidental to it, and accidental predicates are only possessed by a thing through participation. Secondly, however, the ball might have a feature in virtue of its own essence or nature. Something about the ball itself makes it corporeal. The ball’s corporeality is part of what it is to be the ball. In the case that the predicate adds nothing to the subject, it is contained in the substance.

So on the assumption of the Axioms, there are only two ways things can be good: good either adds to the thing of which it is predicated or it doesn’t. The claim “x is good” must be disambiguated between “x is good by participation” or “x is good per se” which respectively signify having a property by participation (and therefore accidentally) or having a property in virtue of being what it is. So the axioms themselves directly support (MA1).

The argument for (MA2) also heavily relies on the Axioms.

If things are good by participation, then they are in no way good per se. For what is white by participation is not white in that it is, and the same for other qualities. If, therefore, they are good by participation, then they are in no way good per se, and so do not tend to the good. But it is conceded that they do. (OSIII.62-68)

This argument is a reductio of the claim that things are good by participation. It can be summarized as follows.

(P1) If some finite x is good by participation then x is not good by itself. (Axiom III-V)

(P2) If x is not good by itself, then it does not tend toward the good. (Axiom IX)

(P3) But for all x, x tends toward the good. (G3)

(P4) Therefore, it is not the case that some x is good by participation.

The first and third premises have already been established. Again, if something has a feature by participation, then it does not have it in virtue of itself. Moreover, (P3) is substantially the same as (G3), which has already been admitted to be a “common conception of the wise.” Premise (P2) is supported by Axiom IX which reads as follows.

All diversity is discordant, but likeness is to be sought. That which seeks another is demonstrated to be naturally the same kind as the very thing which it seeks. (OSIII.49-52)

The second sentence elaborates the first by specifying the kind of similarity that obtains between seeker and sought. This similarity consists of being “naturally the same.” Boethius seems to have in mind that concrete substances seek what they are like in the per se sense. On this reading, then, underwriting Axiom IX is the following kind of similarity.

Things x and y are **naturally similar** = x is F per se if and only if y is F per se.

Two things are naturally alike when they have the same nature, and they share a nature when everything that can be said per se of one can be said per se of the other. From this reading of Axiom IX, it follows that if something x tends toward what is good per se, then x is good per se. And premise (P2) follows by contraposition.

So much for the arguments for (MA1) and (MA2). The argument for (MA3), that things are not good per se, is more complicated (OSIII.68-83). It is more difficult to parse out the

premises than the previous arguments, and it does not rely as straightforwardly on the Axioms.

Here is the text.

But if their being is good, then those which exist are good in that they exist, and for them to be is the same as to be good. They are therefore good substantially since they do not participate in goodness. But if the existence in them is the same as their good then there is no doubt that since they would be good substantially, they would be similar to the first good and so they would be the first good itself. For nothing is like it except itself. From which the result is that things that exist would be God, which is an impious statement. They are therefore not substantially good, and so, for them, being good is not in them. Thus, they are not good in that they exist. (OSIII.71-83)

The central argument in this passage appears to be the following.

(S1) If some finite  $x$  is good per se, then its being is the same as its goodness.

(S2) If the being of  $x$  is the same as its goodness, then  $x$  is naturally like the first good.

(S3) If  $x$  is naturally like the first good, then  $x$  is God.

(S4) But  $x$  is not God.

(S5) Therefore, it is not the case that some  $x$  is good per se.

The fourth premise, (S4), is obviously entailed by Boethius' religious commitments. Like the negation of the common conception above (G3), anything that entails it is false. Moreover, as a finite thing,  $x$  is composite. Its being (esse) and "that which is" are distinct (Axiom VIII). God, however, is simple, and simple things have their esse and "that which is" as one (Axiom VII). Thus, for no second good  $x$  is it the case that  $x$  is God.

Premise (S3) follows from natural similarity together with Boethius' theological commitments. Again, to be "naturally like" something is to have all the same per se predicates. And so, x and y are naturally alike if and only if, for any F, if F is predicated per se of x then F is predicated per se of y. For anything to be similar to God in this way would mean for it to have all the same properties as God. But then it would just be God. Axiom VII says that the esse and id quod est are one in a simple thing. Presumably there can be only one simple thing, God. Thus, showing something to be simple amounts to showing it to be God. At one point in his argument, Boethius says, "But if their being is good, then what are good in that they are, and their being is the same as the being of the first good" (OSIII.72-74). The being of the first good, moreover, is one and the same as that it is. Thus, if the being were shared with second goods, they too would have being and that they are as one and the same. Per Axiom VII, they would be simple things, and so they too would be God.

It might be thought that theists could maintain the goodness of finite things by simply rejecting the doctrine of divine simplicity, which provides the motivation for thinking that whatever is naturally like God must be God. This move would be a mistake, however, since theism in general faces a parallel problem to the one Boethius identifies. On any theistic view, God may not be simple, but surely God is in some way axiologically privileged. God has a kind of value that nothing else has. But given Axiom IX, if things seek the first good, then by nature they must also be first goods. But there cannot be two first goods. In Consolatio III, Lady Philosophy argues this exact point.

There cannot be two highest goods that are different from one another. When two goods differ, one is shown not to be the other. And so neither could be perfect, since one lacks

the other. But what is not perfect is plainly not highest. Therefore, in no way are there highest goods that can be different from one another. (10.69-75)

In other words, God loses any axiological privilege if we grant that other things have the same kind of good as Him. And this axiological flattening seems to follow from the attribution of *per se* goodness to finite things. It makes creatures god-like in a way that is unacceptable even to theists that reject simplicity.

In any case, it appears that things cannot be good *per se* without implying an unacceptable consequence. By undermining the possibility of a distinction between first and second substantial goods, a commitment to the claim that all things are substantially good amounts to a claim that all things have the same kind of value as God, which is of course unacceptable. Since things could be good neither substantially nor by participation, it follows that they are not good at all.

Moving on from premise (S3), premise (S2) says that if the being of *x* is the same as its goodness, then *x* is naturally like the first good. For the first good, its being is the same as its goodness in the strongest possible sense. For it, what it is to be just is to be good. It and its goodness are therefore conceptually inseparable. For anything that has goodness *per se*, then, it follows that it is naturally similar to God.

The argument only works, however, if some antecedent condition is established sufficient to entail that some finite good thing *x* just is its goodness. This is what (S1) is intended to do, which says that being and goodness are the same in whatever is good *per se*. The idea here seems to be that *x* is *F* *per se* if and only if *x* and *F* are conceptually inseparable. They are just the same thing such that it would be a self-contradiction to assert that *x* is not *F*. In the next section, it will be seen that (S1), so understood, is the premise Boethius rejects.



We can summarize the central problem of the DH with the following inconsistent triad.

Every second good tends toward the first good. (G3)

Things only tend toward that which they are naturally like. (Axiom IX)

No second good is naturally like the first good. (Theistic/Platonic commitments)

Second goods have to be both like and unlike the first good. Boethius' denial of (S1) will allow him to establish this partial similarity. It is not the case that  $x$  is  $F$  per se if and only if  $F$  cannot be denied of  $x$  without contradiction. In other words, he will argue that while finite beings are good in virtue of their existence, the two are not conceptually inseparable. There are two ways to predicate a feature of a thing "in that it is." The first involves conceptual inseparability while the second does not. Consequently, the notion of natural similarity, and so Axiom IX, must be disambiguated to accommodate the difference between the stronger, conceptual kind of predication and the weaker kind. The result will be that Axiom IX only states that things tend toward what they are like in one respect but not necessarily in another.

### 3. Resolving the Dilemma

#### 3a. The Thought Experiment

Boethius' proposed solution does not involve an attempt at a third way between the horns of the dilemma. For there is none. A thing is either good through itself or not. Rather Boethius argues that if a substance is something through itself it does not follow that it has this feature substantially or as a part of its essence, which cannot be negated on pain of self-contradiction. The task for Boethius, then, is to motivate this distinction, to show that it tracks reality, and ultimately, to show what it consists of.

The argument relies on a thought experiment with two main components. First, Boethius asks us to “remove from the soul for a brief while the presence of the first good” so that we can “consider how things could be good if they did not descend from the first good” (OSIII.92-93). Many things that can’t be separated in reality are separated by the mind. A triangle, for instance, is never actually separate from the underlying material in which it is exemplified, but we usually think of a triangle without thinking of wood, or plastic, or whatever. Although he does not explicitly say that this involves conceiving the non-existence of God, this appears to be his meaning.<sup>3</sup> Second, Boethius asks us to add to the first thought the additional proposition that “all things that are are good” (OSIII.96). So Boethius asks us to consider the following conjunction.

(TE1) Things are good and there is no first good.

We already know that for Boethius, a thing is good either per se or by participation. But Boethius goes a step further and assumes that if things do not come from God, then they are per se good if and only if they are substantial goods. A thing is substantially F if F cannot be denied of it without contradiction. Again, this link between per se predication and conceptual inseparability is the very supposition he will reject. But for now, he wants to show how denying the first good gets us into trouble. Showing that goodness is conceptually separable from things is, given the counterpossible hypothesis, sufficient to show that they are merely good by participation. “For then perhaps things participate in the good, but they could not have their very being as good since they would not have from the good” (OSIII.138-140). If things do not come from the good, then they are only good by participation.

To show this, Boethius presents another dilemma, but this time to show that if there is no first good, then things could only be good by participation. The first horn is stated in the following passage.

Suppose that one and the same substance is good, white, heavy, and round. Then that substance would be one thing, roundness another, color another, and goodness another. For if these were the same as that substance, then weight would be the same as color, color the same as good, and good the same as weight, which nature does not allow to happen. (OSIII.100-106)

And then, a few lines down, he gives the second horn.

But if they were nothing other than good, and they were neither heavy nor colored nor extended in a dimension of space, nor were there any other quality in them except only that they are good, then they would seem to be not things but the principle of things; rather, not they would seem but it would seem. For there is one of this only, which would be its goodness, and nothing else. (OSIII.111-117)

If this interpretation is correct, then the second premise in the thought experiment is an implied disjunction that states two logically exhaustive ways things might be substantially good.

(TE2) A thing is substantially good and substantially other things (e.g. white, round, heavy, etc.) or it is substantially good alone.

Assuming that x is F, then x is just F or x is F and something else too (G, H, etc.). The latter option leads to the unacceptable result that good, white, round, and heavy are the same property.

(TE3) If a thing is substantially good, white, round, and heavy, then these things are the same as its “particular substance.”

(TE4) If good, white, round, and heavy are the same particular substance, then they are the same property.

(TE5) But good, white, round, and heavy are not the same property.

It follows from (TE3)-(TE5) that the first disjunct of (TE2) is false, and that substantial goods do not have other substantial properties.<sup>4</sup> Given the presupposition of Boethius' thought experiment, however, the second disjunct is also false. That claim was that a thing is substantially good and substantially nothing else. If a thing is substantially good and nothing else, however, then it is the first good. According to the thought experiment, however, there is no first good.

(TE6) If a thing is substantially good (and nothing else), then it is the first good.

(TE7) But nothing is the first good. (From TE1)

It follows that the second disjunct of (TE2) is also false. Since these were the only two options for substantial goodness in the thought experiment, it follows that nothing is good through itself but only accidentally.

(TE8) Nothing is good substantially, but only accidentally.

It looks like rejecting the existence of the first good will not help preserve the goodness of ordinary things. Indeed, Boethius thinks such a path leads precisely where his opponents accuse his view of ending up.

The first good, quite apart from getting in the way of second goods, is a condition for second goods. The solution rests in the fact that all things receive their particular being from the first good.

The being itself of all things emanates from that which is the first good and whose good is such that it may rightly be said that it is good in that it is. Therefore, their being itself is good, since it is in the first good. (OSIII.124-127)

All things "descend" or "emanate" (defluxit) from the being of the one whose being itself is good substantially. This forms the beginning of Boethius' main reply (MR) to (MA).

(MR1) The being of all things emanates from what is good in virtue of its existence.

(MR2) Whatever emanates from what is good in virtue of its existence is itself good in its very being.

(MR3) Therefore, all things are good in their very being.

The argument negates (MA3) above, which says that no creaturely thing is good in itself. Note, however, that argument (S1)-(S5)—the argument for the view that there are no second goods in the per se sense—remains unattacked. Boethius still has to show why holding to the per se goodness of finite things does not lead to the unacceptable (from his theistic perspective) conflation of divine and creaturely goodness.

### 3b. Rebutting and Refuting the Dilemma

The thought experiment presupposed that second goods are conceivably not good in themselves, which distinguishes them from the first good. If something is conceivably not good in itself, then its being or esse, its definition as it were, is not its goodness. It is not a self-contradiction to say for any second good x that “x is not good in itself,” whereas it is a contradiction to say, “God is not good in itself.” But this is precisely what was shown in the thought experiment above, at least to Boethius’ mind.

For though they [finite things] can be good in that they are, yet they are not like the first good, since their being itself is not good in whatever ways that things can be, but because their being itself is not able to be unless it descends from the first being, which is the good. Therefore, their being itself is good, but it is not like what it is from. (OSIII.128-134)

John Marenbon argues that Boethius is here relying on a distinction between what is possible and what is conceivable that is unpopular on modern accounts of modal statements (2003, 93-94).<sup>5</sup> The thought experiment supposes that our ability to conceive of something somehow outstrips the bounds of possibility. On this reading, it is inconceivable that God is not good while creatures are conceivably (though not possibly) not good.

There are at least two reasons for interpreting Boethius as relying on the conceivable/possible distinction in the DH. First, Boethius nowhere indicates that creatures can possibly fail to be good in the per se sense. But he would have to commit to this view in order to establish the weaker kind of non-similarity. It would not be enough to presuppose what he does in the thought experiment, which is that creatures are only conceivably not good in the per se sense since this is compatible with weak similarity. Second, if something can possibly fail to be F, then it is not F per se but by participation. But the whole point of the DH is to show that second goods are good per se, not by participation, without conflating their goodness with God's.

The conceivable/possible distinction requires us to disambiguate the natural similarity relation between two versions.

Things x and y have **strong natural similarity** = x is F per se if and only if y is F per se, and it is inconceivable that x, but not y, be F, and vice versa.

By contrast, a weaker version of natural similarity says the following.

Things x and y have **weak natural similarity** = x is F per se if and only if y is F per se, and it is not possible for x, but not y, to be F, and vice versa.

If God and creatures are merely weakly similar, then we cannot conclude that the latter are God. So weak similarity between God and creatures does not lead to the impious propositions Boethius is worried about. Boethius need only show that they are not similar in the strong sense.

To this end, if one shows that God is inconceivably not good per se whereas creatures are only impossibly not good per se, then one has shown that they are not naturally similar in the sense that matters.

Indeed, Boethius has shown this. Recall that (MR3) said that second goods are in fact good per se, even though they would not be good per se under the counterpossible hypothesis.

(MR4) Second goods are conceivably not good in themselves.

(MR5) If something is good in its being, and if it is conceivably not good in itself, then it is both good by itself and its being is not the same as its goodness.

(MR6) Therefore, for any second good, it is both good by itself and its being is not the same as its goodness.

The conclusion (MR6) rejects the premise (S1) that features are had per se only if they are had essentially. It rejects that x can be good per se only if x cannot be conceived apart from its goodness. The same cannot be said for God's goodness, however, which is conceptually inseparable from His substance. Thus, God and creatures are not similar in the strong sense.

(MR7) It is not conceivable that the first good is not good in the per se sense.

(MR8) If second goods, but not the first good, are conceivably not good in the per se sense, then second goods are not naturally similar to the first good.

(MR9) Therefore, second goods are not naturally similar to the first good.

Given the strong version of natural similarity, (MR8) is true. (MR7) is true by definition. It follows from the thought experiment that first and second goods are not naturally similar.

The upshot here is that not everything that is predicated per se of something is denied on pain of contradiction. Boethius carves a third category of propositions between substantial and accidental predication. The former, recall, occurs when some predicate is attributed to the subject

by definition. Some  $x$  can be  $F$  in itself without being inconceivably not  $F$ . It turns out that substantial predication is not the same as *per se* predication.

**Accidental Predication:**  $x$  is  $F$  by participation.

***Per se* Predication:**  $x$  is  $F$  in that it is.

**Substantial Predication:**  $x$  is  $F$  by definition in that  $F$  is conceptually inseparable from  $F$ . “ $X$  is  $F$ ” cannot be denied without contradiction.

This distinction allows Boethius to say that finite thing  $x$  is good *per se* but not substantially. In short, Boethius resolves the puzzle raised in the DH by pointing out that just because “ $x$  is not  $F$ ” is not a contradiction, it doesn’t follow that  $x$  is  $F$  only by participation. It could be true that “ $x$  is  $F$ ” is necessarily true but not true by definition. Created things are good in that they are, but they are not substantial goods.

Unfortunately, this logical point does not fully resolve the central puzzle of the DH. Boethius’ solution is that creatures are good in virtue of their being but not (unlike God) by definition. And so creatures are conceivably not good, but God isn’t. But this is to assert that God and creatures are good in different ways. This may well be true, but only if something makes it true. It is not a brute fact. Without an explanation, Boethius opens himself to the objection that he merely helps himself to the distinction that saves his Axioms. We are owed some account of finite goodness that allows him to say that they are weakly, but not strongly, similar to the first good. Such an account will reveal the reason creatures are conceivably not good. The logical distinction between conceivability and possibility only pushes the problem to this level of explanation.



#### 4. A Positive Account of Second Goodness

We can rule out from the start any attempt at a solution solely in terms of the referent, but not the sense, of “good.” Since reference does not determine sense, the specifications of the objects referred to in evaluative propositions could not explain why it is inconceivable (viz. non-sense) that creaturely things could be good in their being but not from the First Good. But if we can conceive of things that are good per se that are not from the first good, then it is not the case that things are only good by participation on the counterpossible hypothesis. The explanation we are looking for, then, requires an account of the meaning of “good.”

One who looks in the text of the DH for a definition of “second goodness” will end up, in the words of Ralph McInerny, with his “hands empty” (1990, 232). The text does give us two hints to start with, however. First, when stating the problem, Boethius takes on the Aristotelian formula. The good is what all things desire. There is no textual evidence that Boethius revises this commitment with respect to second goods. Understood this way, Boethius’ distinction implies that second goods are conceivably not desirable per se.

Second, premise (MR2) says that whatever emanates (fluxit) from what is good in virtue of its existence is itself good in its very being (esse). Boethius clearly thinks of this as an explanatory relation (MacDonald 1988, 261). Creatures are good in their being because they flow from the good. The emanation of a thing from God explains the goodness it has in virtue of its being. We can therefore begin to look for a positive account of second goods by interpreting (MR2) with this explanatory constraint and in light of the Aristotelian formula.

##### 4a. Relational Accounts of Second Goodness

Scott MacDonald argues that we should interpret (MR2) as analytically true. For Boethius, MacDonald says, “Depending for existence on the first good just is what being good consists in”

(1988, 264). The sense of “consists in” here is semantic. MacDonald claims that depending for existence on the first good “appears to be a sort of analysis of goodness” (1988, 265). If this is what Boethius has in mind, then it would be true, by definition, that whatever emanates from the first good is good in its very being.

Despite lacking warrant from the text of the DH, MacDonald’s claims that his reading has several advantages (1988, 265-267). First, it solves the mystery by telling us what goodness consists in. Second, this reading explains the unique metaphysical picture on offer in Boethius’ solution. It supposes that the goodness of creatures is not substantial because it is a relational property. It is not accidental because the dependence-for-existence relation is non-accidental since one cannot exist without it. Third, this reading would provide a defense of the view that all things are good in virtue of their being. To derive this from the relational analysis of goodness, we only need to say that the existence of all things depends on the first good.

These strengths notwithstanding, MacDonald’s reading fails as an interpretation. It implies distinct meanings of the word “good” inside and outside the thought experiment (Marenbon 2003, 93). One purported discovery of that experiment is that second goods are conceivably not good in themselves. On MacDonald’s reading, however, this amounts to the claim that second goods conceivably do not stand in the depending-for-existence relation to God. But then it is left unexplained in what sense things are good on the counterpossible hypothesis that they do not come from God. In fact, on MacDonald’s interpretation, there could be no sense in which creatures are good on that hypothesis. But Boethius clearly thinks that they can. If MacDonald’s relational analysis makes one premise of the argument analytically true, it makes another premise analytically false.

The same problem is faced by any view that ties the meaning of “good” in relation to the first good. It immediately falsifies as a conceptual matter any attribution of goodness to something without mention of God. The only way to avoid it is to allow for a different sense of “good” that applies in the hypothesis, is non-relational, and is absolute. This latter sense is the reason we can call things “good” without mentioning the first good. The relational account by itself may be shored up by dividing goodness into these two senses.

Thomas Aquinas makes precisely this move in his Exposition of the De Hebdomads of Boethius and in his later writings on the nature of goodness. Like MacDonald, Aquinas interprets Boethius as holding that things are good in their being “inasmuch as they are termed ‘good’ through a relation to the First Good” (2001, L4.A149). The relation is not depending-for-existence, however, but the relation of analogy that obtains between the final cause and the thing ordered to the final cause. Just as we call food ordered to health “healthy,” so we call a thing ordered to the first good “good” (Clare 1949, 132). Moreover, everything is ordered in this way in their very being but not in their essence, since we can think of them apart from this ordering. Thus, the teleological ordering of a thing to the first good allows us to say that it is good per se but not substantially. We can conceive of each thing apart from the first good as one abstracts an effect from its cause. Considered this way, a thing can be thought of without its goodness. Aquinas thinks Boethius introduces another sense of “good,” however, that does not conceptually involve the teleological ordering to the first good. Even considered apart from God, a thing may be thought to attain the perfections of its nature or its virtue. But since things are capable of failing to achieve this perfection, it cannot be predicated of them per se but only accidentally. Conceived in abstraction from the first good, therefore, we cannot call a thing “good” per se but only accidentally.

Thomas' view provides an explanation for the modal difference between first and second goods. Creaturely things, conceived apart from their ordering to the first good, are good accidentally. They can fail to be virtuous. God, however, has by nature all the perfections that constitute his virtue. God cannot be conceived to lack in some perfection. Creatures (but not God) are therefore conceivably not good per se.

Understood this way, however, Aquinas' view also fails as an interpretation. Since Aristotle had advanced the arguments against Plato in Nicomachean Ethics 1.6, it had been accepted by Aristotelians that virtue is not possessed by participation in a distinct category. There is no category "virtue" that all things participate in and which makes them virtuous. Virtue is instead a contingent state of each of the categories. "In quality, as the virtues; in quantity, as the measured amount; in relative, as the useful; in time, as the opportune moment; in place, as the <right> situation; and so on" (1096a25-28). Aristotle goes on, "Hence it is clear that the good cannot be some common and single universal; for if it were, it would be spoken of in only one of the predications, not in them all" (1096a28-30). But when Boethius considers how a thing might be under his counterpossible hypothesis, participation in the non-Aristotelian sense is the only option left. He says, ex hypothesi, "it could perhaps be good... For then it could participate in the good" (OSIII.137-39).

This point matters because the sense of the typical property term does not change between predicating it of a thing substantially or by participation. "Red" means the same in "x is red by participation" as it does in "x is red substantially." Otherwise, we could not intelligibly ask, as Boethius does in the analogous case of goodness, "Is x red substantially or by participation?" The difference between these two claims concerns the way they have a certain property, not a difference in the particular property they have. Similarly, Boethius nowhere

suggests that commitment to goodness by participation in the counterpossible world would depart from the Aristotelian formulation. In the thought experiment, he is saying that things may not be desirable in virtue of their being, but, contra Aristotle, they might still be desirable by participation with the good.

There are two aspects of goodness employed in every attribution of it in the actual world. One is operational. Good things do well insofar as they aim at the good. The other is aesthetic, for lack of a better term. Good things have a certain magnetic attractiveness that makes them the proper aim of other things. The two aspects are related insofar as things that pursue the good also have the very property that makes the things they pursue desirable. This much is implied by Axiom IX. The DH raises the puzzle of how there can be a distinction cross cutting these two aspects between a first and privileged kind of goodness and a second dependent kind of goodness. On Aquinas' solution, however, creatures cannot have the aesthetic aspect in their very being. On his account, things are good per se insofar as they are teleologically ordered to God. But, famously, things valued for an external end are not "attractive" in themselves but only with reference to their ends. So while a thing could satisfy the operational aspect of goodness in virtue of its very being, it could not satisfy the aesthetic aspect by itself.

Although the relational accounts of value examined here fail to explain the modal difference between first and second goods, they reveal more requirements of a successful explanation. MacDonald's account taught us that "good" has to have a sense both inside and outside the thought experiment. Aquinas' account teaches us that they have to have the same sense. That sense, finally, must include both the operational and the aesthetic aspects normally attributed to a thing of value. Our explanation for the dual facts that creatures are conceivably not good while God isn't must respect these constraints.

#### 4b. An Absolutist Account of Second Goodness

I propose the following principle to explain the modal difference between first and second goods.

- (A) Whatever emanates (fluxit) from what is good in virtue of its existence is, in virtue of its very being, an aspect of the first good.

“Aspect” is the term often used to compensate for the fact that God is traditionally thought to be without parts. Boethius concurs with this doctrine, saying “since they [creatures] aren’t simple, they are altogether unable to be unless they had been willed to be by the one who is alone good” (OSIII.117-119). The implication is that God is simple. Yet, he thinks, we can recognize that attributing knowledge to God is not the same in meaning as attributing a will to God. God’s “aspects” are somehow grounded in his being that allow us to refer to him in some finite respect.<sup>6</sup>

Principle (A) is independently warranted as an interpretation for the solution in the DH. Boethius’ solution in the DH resembles the relationship between divine and creaturely goodness discussed in book III of the Consolation of Philosophy (Stewart 1974, 138). The picture that we get there is that the Good itself is unique and perfect. There is nothing else like it, and it constitutes happiness insofar as it is the complete satisfaction of all desire.

In Consolatio III.9 the discussion concerns the distinction between true and false ideas about happiness. One way common opinion about happiness goes wrong is that it is often confused for one aspect of it. People desire power, self-sufficiency, fame, respect, or pleasure as if these are individually sufficient for happiness, when in fact none of them are. But it would be just as false to deny that they are not necessary for happiness. Boethius, in the voice of Lady Philosophy, argues that these are one and the same.

And so it is necessary through the same arguments that self-sufficiency, power, fame, honor, and pleasure are different names but their substance differs in no way. (III.9.41-44)

Take the example of power. Power, it turns out, is also self-sufficient, famous, honored, and pleasurable (10-25). So one cannot truly attain it without attaining the others. However, power can't mean the same as these things, since then one could not pursue it to the neglect of the others. It can therefore be aimed at apart from aiming at the others. But since happiness is the complete good, it lacks nothing to be desired. What results from aiming at, say, power without self-sufficiency does leave much to be desired. Lady Philosophy concludes from this,

Happiness is not to be sought in any mode of things which are believed to satisfy by themselves the ones desiring. (III.9.71-73)

The point here is that there is a normative relationship between the true and perfect happiness, and the aspects under which it is grasped and pursued by finite and error-prone humans. Power is not bad, or neutral. It is rather an intimation of complete happiness. It is a limited, unsatisfying good.

These things appear to give mortals either images of the true good or certain imperfect goods, but they cannot compare to the true and perfect good. (III.9.91-94)

Consolatio III concerns how things return to the first good, whereas the DH concerns how things flow from (defluxit) the first good. Presumably, though Boethius is not as clear about this in the DH as he could have been, the “very being” of things is not the “same substance” as God in any way that could be construed as blurring the substantial difference between creature and Creator. Thus, unlike the relationship between happiness and its aspects in the Consolatio, creaturely

goods are not themselves different “names” of a single substance that is God that would make them numerically identical to Him. Rather, principle (A) proposes that God somehow took aspects of himself and made numerically distinct creaturely things. Boethius does not tell us how this works out metaphysically. The main issue of the DH is the normative question whether anything other than God can be good.

This absolutist explanation of Boethius’ modal distinction satisfies the requirements of a successful interpretation laid out above. First, principle (A) not only maintains, but explains, the privileged status of the First Good over second goods. Something is a “First Good” because it has the following feature.

**Unqualified Absolute Goodness (UAG):** x has UAG if and only if (1) x is absolutely good and (2) there is no possible y that is absolutely good in some way that x isn’t.

Similarly, something is a “second good” because it has the following feature.

**Aspectual Absolute Goodness (AAG):** x has AAG if and only if (1) x is absolutely good and (2) there is at least one possible y that is absolutely good in some way that x isn’t.

The First Good has UAG while second goods only have AAG. The former is desirable in every possible way something can be desirable. It is itself the proper aim of action and attaining is ultimately satisfying. Alternatively, the latter is finite and therefore fails to satisfy all desire for the valuable. Attaining it, however, is not ultimately satisfying.

Second, (A) explains how creatures are good per se, that is, in virtue of their being: Their very being is an aspect of the First Good. The First Good has UAG, and so lacks nothing to be desired. Further, everything about it is good. But certain aspects of it may be describable apart



from the others. Thus, if something is an aspect of it, then it is itself good but in a partial and incomplete way. Under that description, it lacks the other aspects of the Good, and so it can only attain a finite intimation of it. But far from making it bad or neutral, that aspect is still itself the proper object of desire. Thus, (A) explains one of the central premises in Boethius' solution, (MR2), which states that whatever emanates from God is good in virtue of its being.

Third, principle (A) explains the modal distinction. Creatures are, in their very being, aspects of the First Good. On the counterpossible hypothesis that there is no first good, however, we have no way to credit them with value in virtue of their very being. They would still be good, however, but not in virtue of their being or essence. They would thus be good by participation in the Good. (A) therefore explains another premise in Boethius' solution, (MR4), which says that second goods are conceivably not good in themselves.

Finally, principle (A) also works within the interpretive constraints identified above, giving it an advantage over the relational accounts of second goodness. It maintains the meaningfulness of propositions like "things are good" considered under the counterpossible hypothesis. It also preserves both inside and outside the thought experiment both the operational and the aesthetic elements to value attributions. It retains the same sense of "good" between "x is good per se" and "x is good by participation." In both propositions, what is being communicated is that x does well and is in some way attractive.

## 5. Conclusion

The distinction between "ways" things can be good pulls most of the weight for Boethius' solution to the puzzle of the DH. Unfortunately, Boethius does not tell us what it means for something to be good "in a way" in the DH or in the Consolatio. He instead asserts that there are

different ways things can be absolutely good, and then points out that this fact preserves God's privileged kind of goodness. There is no possible "way" to be good that God doesn't have.

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the title of the De hebdomadibus, or otherwise known as Boethius' third theological tractate, or Opuscula sacra III (OSIII). All translations of OSIII and the Philosophiae consolatiois (Consolatio) are original and are taken from the 1973 re-issue of the Loeb Classical Library edition of Boethius' Theological Tractates and Consolation of Philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> The following account the dilemma is indebted to MacDonald (1988) and Casey (1987). This paper departs from their interpretations in important respects.

<sup>3</sup> This departs from Aquinas' interpretation of the thought experiment (2001, L4.A35-51). He thinks that we are asked to consider second goods apart from the first good, as one would consider an effect without its cause, rather than entertain the falsehood that there is no first good. On this reading, the reason why no creature is the first good is not that there *is* no first good, but that such beliefs are anathema (Clare 1949, 125). However, this reading makes (TE3)-(TE7) superfluous. If it is impious to attribute substantial goodness to a finite thing, then it is equally impious to attribute substantial goodness, roundness, and heaviness to it. Moreover, Boethius accepts the validity of non-trivial reasoning from impossible hypotheses (Martin 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Boethius has been accused of making a mistake here by Marenbon (2003, 92) and MacDonald (1988, 257). On their reading, Boethius argues that because the distinct attributes of x are not the

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same it follows that none of them can be predicated substantially of *x*. But this inference is fallacious since *x* could be substantially good but have all the other properties by participation. Hence MacDonald argues, “From the denial that all these properties are the same as *x*’s substance it does not follow that no *one* of them is the same as *x*’s substance” (1988, 257). The context shows, however, that Boethius gives at least two arguments, one of which draws no such inference. His assertion of the non-identity of various properties is rather meant to show that whatever properties are substantially predicated of a thing are identical to each other. Thus, multiple non-identical properties cannot be substantially predicated of the same thing. As argued in the main text, Boethius has a separate argument for why a thing’s substantial properties could not be restricted to good alone.

<sup>5</sup> See also Martin (1999).

<sup>6</sup> See Ward (2021) for discussion of the question whether, let alone how, a simple being can be mentally divided into “aspects.”

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