BOOK III

I

SHE had stopped singing, but the enchantment of her song left me spellbound. I was absorbed and wanted to go on listening. After a moment I spoke to her.

'You are the greatest comfort for exhausted spirits. By the weight of your tenets and the delightfulness of your singing you have so refreshed me that I now think myself capable of facing the blows of Fortune. You were talking of cures that were rather sharp. The thought of them no longer makes me shudder; in fact I'm so eager to hear more, I fervently beg you for them.'

'I knew it,' she replied. 'Once you began to hang on my words in silent attention, I was expecting you to adopt this attitude – or rather, to be more exact, I myself created it in you. The remedies still to come are, in fact, of such a kind that they taste bitter to the tongue, but grow sweet once they are absorbed.

'But you say you are eager to hear more. You would be more than eager if you knew the destination I am trying to bring you to.'

I asked what it was and she told me that it was true happiness.

'Your mind dreams of it,' she said, 'but your sight is clouded by shadows of happiness and cannot see reality.'

I begged her to lead on and show me the nature of true happiness without delay.

'For you,' she said, 'I will do so gladly.

'But first I will try to describe and sketch an idea of the cause of happiness. Then, with a proper vision of that, you will be able to turn your gaze in a different direction and recognize the pattern of true happiness.

'Whoever wants to sow in virgin soil
First frees the fields of undergrowth and bush,
Cuts back thick ferns and brambles with the scythe
And clears the way for crops of swelling wheat.
The tongue that first has tasted bitter food
Finds honey that the bees have won more sweet;
And stars shine out more pleasing to the eye
When from the south the rain winged wind has dropped.
The darkness first the morning star dispels,
Then beauteous day drives in his rosy steeds.
You, too, have seen the face of spurious good
From whose ill yoke you start to raise your neck,
And true good now shall penetrate your mind.'

II

She stood gazing at the ground for a while, as if she had retreated into the recesses of thought, and then began to speak again.

'In all the care with which they toil at countless enterprises, mortal men travel by different paths, though all are striving to reach one and the same goal, namely, happiness, which is a good which once obtained leaves nothing more to be desired. It is the perfection of all good things and contains in itself all that is good; and if anything were missing from it, it couldn't be perfect, because something would remain outside it, which could still be wished for. It is clear, therefore, that happiness is a state made perfect by the presence of everything that is good, a state, which, as we said, all mortal men are striving to reach though by different paths. For the desire for true good is planted by nature in the minds of men, only error leads them astray towards false good.

'Some men believe that perfect good consists in having no wants, and so they toil in order to end up rolling in wealth. Some think that the true good is that which is most worthy of respect, and so struggle for position in order to be held in respect by their fellow citizens. Some decide that it lies in the

highest power, and either want to be rulers themselves, or try to attach themselves to those in power. Others think that the best thing is fame and busy themselves to make a name in the arts of war or peace. But most people measure the possession of the good by the amount of enjoyment and delight it brings, convinced that being abandoned to pleasure is the highest form of happiness. Others again confuse ends and means with regard to these things, such as people who desire riches for the sake of power and pleasure, or those who want power for the sake of money or fame. So it is in these and other such objectives that the aim of human activity and desire is to be found, in fame and popularity which appear to confer a kind of renown, or in a wife and children which men desire for the sake of the pleasure they give. And as for friendship, the purest kind is counted as a mark not of good fortune, but of moral worth, but all other friendship is cultivated for the sake of power or pleasure.

'Now, it is clear that physical endowments are aspects of higher blessings: for clearly bodily strength and size give a man might; beauty and speed give him renown; and health gives him pleasure. And through all of this it is clear that the only thing men desire is happiness. Each man considers whatever he desires above all else to be the supreme good. We have already defined the supreme good as happiness; so that the state which each man desires above all others is judged by him to be one of happiness. So you have before you the general pattern of human happiness – wealth, position, power, fame, pleasure. Taking only these into consideration, Epicurus with perfect consistency stated that pleasure was the highest good, because all the others bring the mind enjoyment.

'But to return to the pursuits of men. In spite of a clouded memory, the mind seeks its own good, though like a drunkard it cannot find the path home. No one would say that people who strive to have all they want are wrong. In fact there is no

other thing which could so successfully create happiness as a condition provided with all that is good, a condition of self-sufficiency and with no wants. No one again would say those people are wrong who think that that which is most worthy of respect and veneration is the best. It is no cheap and contemptible thing the possession of which is the object of the exertions of almost all mankind. Power, too, must be counted among the things that are good. For something which is agreed to be superior to all things can scarcely be considered weak and impotent. And, again, fame can't be considered valueless. It can't be ignored because anything that is of great excellence is also of great renown. It is irrelevant to say that happiness is a state free from anxiety, sadness, and the domination of grief and suffering, when even in small matters, what men look for is something which gives delight by its possession and enjoyment.

'These, then, are the things which people long to obtain. And they want riches, position, estates, glory and pleasures, because it is their conviction that through them they will achieve self-sufficiency, respect, power, celebrity and happiness. This is the good that men are looking for in such a variety of pursuits. And it is not difficult to show the hand of nature in this, since in spite of the variety and difference of their opinions, men are agreed in their choice of the good as their goal.

'My pleasure is to sing with pliant strings
How mighty Nature holds the reins of things,
And how she frames her laws in providence
With which to stabilize the world immense;
How all things singly she doth bind and curb
With such a bond that nothing can disturb.
Although the Punic lion fetters wears
With ornaments, and often lashes bears,
Although he fears the tamer and will take
Such food as outstretched hands an offering make,

If blood should just once touch his bristling jaws,
His latent spirit will return and cause
Him with a roar his old self to recall
And break the chains that from his neck will fall.
First limb from limb the tamer then is torn
Whose new spilt blood augments the rage reborn.
A bird which chattered noisily when free
Into a cage is taken from the tree;
Though cups are set all sweet with honey there
And food in plenty with the sweetest care
Is ministered by men in their delight,
It flutters in the cage and catches sight
Of where the pleasant woodland shade is cast:
The food beneath its feet is scattered fast;
Now for the wood alone she sadly longs,
For the woods alone she sings her whispered songs.
Forced by strong hands the pliant switch obeys,
Its bended head down to the ground it lays;
But when those hands the withy cease to ply,
Its head springs up again to face the sky.
The sun into the western waves descends,
Where underground a hidden way he wends;
Then to his rising in the east he comes:
All things seek the place that best becomes.
Each thing rejoices when this is retrieved:
For nothing keeps the order it received
Except its rising to its fall it bend
And make itself a circle without end.'

III

'You earthly creatures, you also dream of your origin, however faint the vision. You do have some sort of notion, unclear as it is, of the true goal of happiness, and so an instinctive sense of direction actually guides you towards the true good, only various errors lead you astray. Consider, therefore, whether men really can reach their appointed goal by the means with which they think they are going to win happiness. If money

or position or the rest do bring some sort of condition which doesn't seem to lack any of the good things, I will join you in admitting that some people do become happy through the possession of them. But if money and the rest can't achieve what they promise and are actually lacking in the greater number of good things, it will be quite obvious that in them men are snatching at a false appearance of happiness.

'So first I will ask you a few questions, since you yourself were a wealthy man not long ago. In the midst of all that great store of wealth, was your mind never troubled by worry arising from a feeling of injury?'

'Yes it was,' I replied; 'in fact I can't remember when my mind was ever free from some sort of worry.'

'And that was either because something was missing which you didn't want to be missing, or because something was present which you would have preferred not to have been present.'

'Yes.'

'You wanted the presence of one thing and the absence of another?'

'Yes.'

'Now a man must be lacking something if he misses it, mustn't he?'

'Yes.'

'And if a man lacks something he is not in every way self-sufficient?'

'No.'

'And so you felt this insufficiency even though you were supplied with wealth?'

'Yes, I did.'

'So that wealth cannot make a man free of want and self-sufficient, though this was the very promise we saw it offering. And this, too, I think, is a point of great importance, namely the fact that money has no inherent property such as to stop it being taken away from those who possess it, against their will.'

I had to agree.

'You can hardly do otherwise,' she continued, 'when it can happen that someone takes it from another against his will because he is stronger. What else are the lawsuits for except to recover moneys that have been stolen by fraud or violence?'

'That is true.'

'So that a man will need outside help to protect his money.'

'Yes.'

'But he won't need it if he doesn't possess any money which may be lost?'

'No.'

'So the situation has been reversed. Wealth which was thought to make a man self-sufficient in fact makes him dependent on outside help. In which case, what is the way in which riches remove want? If you say that rich people do have the means of satisfying hunger and driving away thirst and cold, I will reply that although want can be checked in this way by riches, it can't be entirely removed. Every hungry and clamorous want may be satisfied with the help of riches, but the want which admits of being satisfied necessarily still remains. There is no need for me to mention that nature is satisfied with little, whereas nothing satisfies greed. So that, if so far from being able to remove want, riches create a want of their own, there is no reason for you to believe that they confer self-sufficiency.

'Though wanton gold-lust urge the rich man on
To reap in wealth that cannot sate his greed,
Though ponderous Persian[1] pearls bow down his head
And oxen by the score his acres tread,
Each day he lives with gnawing care he'll ache,
And dead, his fickle fortunes him forsake.'

1. To the Romans the Persian Gulf and not the Red Sea was known as the *Mare Rubrum*. 'It was commonly believed that in that part of the world the beach was strewn with jewels and pearls cast up by the sea.' (K. F. Smith, *The Elegies of Albus Tibullus*, Darmstadt, 1964, p. 413, note on 2.2., 16.)

IV

'But it is said, when a man comes to high office, that makes him worthy of honour and respect. Surely such offices don't have the power of planting virtue in the minds of those who hold them, do they? Or of removing vices? No: the opposite is true. More often than removing wickedness, high office brings it to light, and this is the reason why we are angry at seeing how often high office has devolved upon the most wicked of men – why Catullus calls Nonius a kind of malignant growth, in spite of the office he held.[2]

'Surely you can see how much disgrace high office heaps upon the evil? If they don't become famous because of appointments to high office, their unworthiness will be less conspicuous. And was it possible that so much danger could lead you, too, at long last to think of taking office along with Decoratus?[3] Surely you could see he had a thoroughly evil mind, the mind of a parasite and informer? We can scarcely consider men worthy of respect on account of the offices they hold, if we judge them unworthy of those offices! But if you saw a man endowed with wisdom, you would hardly think him unworthy of respect or of the wisdom he was endowed with, would you?'

2. Catullus 52: Quid est, Catulle? quid moraris emori?
sella in curuli struma Nonius sedet,
per consulatum peierat Vatinius
quid est, Catulle? quid moraris emori?
(Drop dead, Catullus, lie right down where you are and die.
That blister Nonius occupies a magistrate's chair;
Vatinius commits perjury – and collects a consulate.
Drop dead, Catullus, just drop right down and die.
– Peter Whigham's translation, Penguin Classics ed. p. 111)
The details of the poem are a little puzzling since the identity of the Nonius in question is unknown and it is uncertain whether the word *struma* (meaning 'a scrofulous tumour') is a pun on Nonius' name or a reference to his illness; to add to the uncertainty, Cicero taunts Vatinius with the same deformity. See C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus, A Commentary*, Oxford, 1961.

3. Decoratus was quæstor in A.D. 508.

'No.'

'Because virtue has her own individual worth, which she immediately transfers to whoever possesses her. But as public offices cannot do this, it is clear that they have no beauty or worth of their own.

'There is another point we should especially note: if a man is the more worthless the more widely he is despised, then, since high office displays men to the public gaze, but cannot make them worthy of respect, it makes them instead more despised. But not with impunity; for wicked men confer a like return on the offices they hold: they discredit them through contact with themselves.

'But I want you to see how true respect cannot be obtained through the insubstantial honours of high office; take the example of a man who has been consul many times and comes by chance among foreign peoples: would his offices make him respected by them? If it were a natural property of high offices, they would never fail to have this effect anywhere in the world, just as anywhere on earth fire is always hot. But as it is the false opinion of men that connects them with this function and not some inherent property, immediately they reach people who don't consider them honours, they come to nothing.

'This is what happens among foreigners. But do they last for ever in the country of their origin? There was a time when the praetorship was an office of great power, but now it is no more than an empty name and a heavy burden on the pockets of the senatorial class. And once upon a time if a man had charge of the corn supplies, he was considered a great man, but now no office is lower. For as we said just now, if a thing has no beauty of its own, its dignity varies at different times according to the opinion of the people who use it.

'If, therefore, high offices cannot make people worthy of respect and if, furthermore, they become tarnished by contact

with evil men; if their splendour can disappear with the change of time and they grow cheap in the estimation of foreign peoples, without asking what beauty they can confer, what beauty worth desiring do they even possess?

'Although the proud lord clothed himself
In purple robes and gem-stones white,
Yet Nero grew to all men's hate
A wild and cruel sybarite.
At times the evil man would give
To reverend elders office low;
But who could think those honours good
Which wretched men on them bestow?'

V

'Can being a king or being the friend of a king give a man power? If the answer is "Yes, because their happiness endures uninterrupted," I shall reply that history, and our own times too, is full of examples of kings who exchanged happiness for ruin. What a splendid thing power is, when we find it insufficient even for its own preservation!

'Now, if kingly power is a source of happiness, any deficiency in it means a diminution of happiness and the introduction of unhappiness, doesn't it? Whatever the size of human empires, it is inevitable that many people are left unruled by any king. And wherever the power that makes men happy comes to an end, lack of power enters and makes them wretched. So that there necessarily exists among kings a larger share of misery. Dionysius the Tyrant of Syracuse knew well enough the dangers of his position, when he illustrated the fears of kingship to Damocles by making a sword dangle over his head by a single hair.

'What is this power, then, which cannot banish the nagging of worry or avoid the pin-prick of fear? Kings would like to live free from worry, but they can't. And then they boast of their power! Do you think of a man as powerful when you

see him lacking something which he cannot achieve? A man who goes about with a bodyguard because he is more afraid than the subjects he terrorizes, and whose claim to power depends on the will of those who serve him?

'And what should I say of the friends of kings, when I can show that kingship itself is full of such weakness? They are often brought down while the royal power remains unimpaired, but often too when it collapses. The decision to commit suicide was forced upon Seneca by the very Nero whose friend and mentor he had been. And Papinian who had long been a power in the court was thrown to the soldiers' swords by Caracalla.[4] Each of them was willing to give up his power. Seneca even tried to give his money to Nero and go into retirement. But like men who lose their footing and are pulled down by their own weight, neither was able to achieve what he wanted.

'What sort of power is it, then, that strikes fear into those who possess it, confers no safety on you if you want it, and which cannot be avoided when you want to renounce it? There is no support, either, in friends you acquire because of your good fortune rather than your personal qualities. The friend that success brings you becomes your foe in time of misfortune. And there is no evil more able to do you injury than a friend turned foe.

'Whoever wants to wield high power
Must tame his passions fierce;
His heart to evil must not cower
Or bow to lust's fell yoke.

4. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the Roman philosopher, playwright and *littérateur*, was the boyhood tutor of the emperor Nero, and later on his adviser. He amassed an immense fortune which he offered to the emperor when he asked to be allowed to retire, but Nero refused and later ordered him to commit suicide. He died in A.D. 65. See Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 54, Penguin Classics edition (*Annals of Imperial Rome*) pp. 327 ff. Aemilius Papinianus, one of the greatest of the Roman jurists, was executed by the emperor Caracalla in A.D. 212. *Vita Caracallae* 8, 1 ff. in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* II translated by David Magie, Loeb Classical Library, 1924.

For distant India tremble may
  Beneath your mighty rule,
And Thulé[5] bow beneath your sway
  Far in the Northern sea,
But if to care and want you're prey,
  No king are you, but slave.'

VI

'Fame, in fact, is a shameful thing, and so often deceptive. Euripides was right to make Andromache cry out

> O Fame, o Fame! – many a man ere this
> Of no account hast thou set up on high.[6]

Many, indeed, are the men who have wrongly acquired fame through the false opinions of the people. There is nothing more conceivably shameful than that. Men who are unjustifiably commended cannot but blush at the praise they receive. And even if the praise is deserved, it cannot add anything to the philosopher's feelings: he measures happiness not by popularity, but by the true voice of his own conscience.

'If it is thought a fine achievement to have spread this fame far and wide, it follows that it must be judged shameful not to have spread one's fame. But, as I said just now, there must of necessity be many peoples to whom the reputation of one single man can never extend, so that you may consider a man famous, whom the next quarter of the globe will never even have heard of. This is why I don't consider popularity worth mentioning in this list; its acquisition is fortuitous and its retention continuously uncertain.

'As for the claim to nobility, no one is blind to the vanity and worthlessness of that. If it derives from fame, it is

5. To the Romans Thulé, variously identified as Iceland or Mainland in the Shetland Isles, marked the extreme northern limit of the known world, just as India here stands for the farthest east.

6. *Andromache*, 319.

borrowed nobility, for it is clearly a kind of praise derived from the deeds of one's parents. Fame is the product of praise, and it is logical that it is those who are praised that become famous. Therefore the praise of someone else cannot ennoble you unless you are famous in your own right. If there is anything good in nobility, I think it is only this: that there is a necessary condition imposed upon the noble not to fall short of the virtue of their ancestors.

'From one beginning rises all mankind;
For one Lord rules and fathers all things born.
He gave the sun his light, the moon her horns,
And men to earth and stars to grace the sky;
He closed in bodies minds brought down from high,
A noble origin for mortal men.
Why then proclaim your kin and ancestry?
Look whence you came and see who made you, God.
No man degenerate is unless through sin
He leaves his proper source for meaner things.'

VII

'Of bodily pleasure I can think of little to say. Its pursuit is full of anxiety and its fulfilment full of remorse. Frequently, like a kind of reward for wickedness, it causes great illness and unbearable pain for those who make it their source of enjoyment. I do not know what happiness lies in its passions, but that the end of pleasure is sorrow is known to everyone who cares to recall his own excesses. But if bodily pleasure can produce happiness, there is no need to deny that animals are happy, since their whole aim in life is directed towards the fulfilment of bodily needs. The pleasures derived from a wife and children are indeed most honest; but there is a story all too natural that a certain man found his children tormentors. How painful the condition of every such man is, there is no need to remind you, since you have experienced such

conditions yourself, and are still not free from anxiety. So I agree with my Euripides when he said that the childless man was fortunate in his misfortune.[7]

'One quality alike all pleasures have:
They drive their devotees with goads.
And like a swarm of bees upon the wing,
They first pour out their honey loads,
Then turn and strike their victim's heart
And leave behind their deep set sting.'

VIII

'There is no doubt, then, that these roads to happiness are side-tracks and cannot bring us to the destination they promise. The evils with which they are beset are great, as I will briefly show you. If you try to hoard money, you will have to take it by force. If you want to be resplendent in the dignities of high office, you will have to grovel before the man who bestows it: in your desire to outdo others in high honour you will have to cheapen and humiliate yourself by begging. If you want power, you will have to expose yourself to the plots of your subjects and run dangerous risks. If fame is what you seek, you will find yourself on a hard road, drawn this way and that until you are worn with care. Decide to lead a life of pleasure, and there will be no one who will not reject you with scorn as the slave of that most worthless and brittle master, the human body.

'For think how puny and fragile a thing men strive to possess when they set the good of the body before them as their aim. As if you could surpass the elephant in size, the bull in strength, or the tiger in speed! Look up at the vault of heaven: see the strength of its foundation and the speed of its movement, and stop admiring things that are worthless. Yet

7. The source of the quotation is Euripides' *Andromache* (the play already quoted from by Boethius in ch. VI), line 420.

the heavens are less wonderful for their foundation and speed than for the order that rules them.[8]

'The sleek looks of beauty are fleeting and transitory, more ephemeral than the blossom in spring. If, as Aristotle said, we had the piercing eyesight of the mythical Lynceus[9] and could see right through things, even the body of an Alcibiades,[10] so fair on the surface, would look thoroughly ugly once we had seen the bowels inside. Your own nature doesn't make you look beautiful. It is due to the weak eyesight of the people who see you. Think how excessive this desire for the good of the body is, when, as you know, all that you admire can be reduced to nothing by three days of burning fever.

8. This passage must be understood in terms of the Ptolemaic explanation of the universe which was generally accepted from the second century A.D. until the time of Copernicus. According to this theory the universe was geocentric. The earth was surrounded by a series of concentric transparent spheres in each of which was fixed one of the 'seven planets', viz. the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. (Uranus, Neptune and Pluto were not discovered until the eighteenth century and later.) Beyond the sphere of Saturn lay the sphere of the fixed stars, and beyond that the *Primum Mobile*, which is caused by God to rotate on its own axis once in every twenty-four hours, the speed of the rotation being very high on account of the vast size of the sphere. As it rotates the *Primum Mobile* communicates its motion to the sphere lying contiguous to it, which is thus moved in the same direction, but at a slower speed; the motion of the sphere of the fixed stars is communicated in turn to the sphere of Saturn, and so it progresses through the other six spheres. In this way the observable motions of the heavenly bodies were accounted for, though the Aristotelian account, with which Boethius was acquainted, and the full details of the Ptolemaic account are much more complex, than this brief outline. (See for the Ptolemaic system A. C. Crombie, *Augustine to Galileo*, Mercury Books no. 3, pp. 82 ff. and for Aristotle, W. D. Ross, *Aristotle*, London, 1923 etc., pp. 96–7.) It is the abstract mathematical complexity of the system which regulates the movements of the planets which Boethius finds really wonderful, not just the physical construction of the universe or the immense speed of its rotation.

9. Lynceus was one of the Argonauts, who was supposed to have such sharp eyes that he could see in the dark and discover the whereabouts of hidden treasure. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, ii, p. 246.

10. Alcibiades, an Athenian military leader of the late fifth century B.C. was famous for his wealth and beauty and notorious for the use he made of them. A good picture of this brilliant but dissolute man is given in Plato's *Symposium* (translated by W. Hamilton in the Penguin Classics).

'The sum of all this is that because they can neither produce the good they promise nor come to perfection by the combination of all good, these things are not the way to happiness and cannot by themselves make people happy.

'Alas, how men by blindness led
Go from the path astray.
Who looks on spreading boughs for gold,
On vines for jewels gay?
Who hides his nets on mountain tops
For a board with fish high piled?
Who sails his boat upon the sea
To hunt the she-goat wild?
The very ocean's depths men know
Beneath the waves on high;
They know which strand is rich with pearls,
Which shores with purple dye;
They know the bays for tender fish,
For shellfish where to try.
But in their blindness men know not
Where lies the good they seek:
That which is higher than the sky
On earth below they seek.
What can I wish you foolish men?
Wealth and fame pursue,
And when your toil false good has won,
Then may you see the true!'

IX

'I have said enough to give a picture of false happiness, and if you can see that clearly, the next thing is to show what true happiness is like.'

'I do indeed see that sufficiency has nothing to do with riches, or power with kingship, respect with honours, glory with fame, or happiness with pleasures.'

'But have you grasped the reasons for this?'

'I think I can see a glimmer of them, but I would like to learn of them more clearly from you.'

'The reason is very clear. That which is one and undivided is mistakenly subdivided and removed by men from the state of truth and perfection to a state of falseness and imperfection. Do you consider self-sufficiency as a state deficient in power?'

'Not at all.'

'Of course not; for if a being had some weakness in some respect, it would necessarily need the help of something else.'

I agreed.

'So that self-sufficiency and power are of one and the same nature.'

'So it seems.'

'Would you then consider a being of this kind beneath contempt, or on the contrary supremely worthy of veneration?'

'The latter, there is no doubt about it.'

'Then let us add the state of being revered to sufficiency and power, that we may judge all three to be one.'

'We must, if we care to admit the truth.'

'What do you think, then, would such a combination be unrecognized and unknown, or famous and renowned? Granted that it lacks nothing, possesses all power, and is supremely worthy of honour, ask yourself whether it would lack a glory which it cannot provide for itself and therefore whether it seems of qualified merit.'

'I can only say that in view of its nature it would be unsurpassed in glory.'

'And consequently we may say that glory is no different from the three we already have.'

'Yes.'

'If there were, then, a being self-sufficient, able to accomplish everything from its own resources, glorious and worthy of reverence, surely it would also be supremely happy?'

'How any sorrow could approach such a being is inconceivable: it must be admitted that provided the other qualities are permanent, it will be full of happiness.'

'And for the same reason this conclusion, too, is inescapable; sufficiency, power, glory, reverence and happiness differ in name but not in substance.'

'Yes.'

'Human perversity, then, makes divisions of that which by nature is one and simple, and in attempting to obtain part of something which has no parts, succeeds in getting neither the part – which is nothing – nor the whole, which they are not interested in.'

'How does that happen?'

'If a man pursues wealth by trying to avoid poverty, he is not working to get power; he prefers being unknown and unrecognized, and even denies himself many natural pleasures to avoid losing the money he has got. But certainly no sufficiency is achieved this way, since he is lacking in power and vexed by trouble; he is of no account because of his low esteem, and is buried in obscurity. And if a man pursues only power, he expends wealth, despises pleasures and honour without power, and holds glory of no account. But you can see how much this man also lacks; at any one time he lacks the necessaries of life and is consumed by worry, from which he cannot free himself, so he ceases to be what he most of all wants to be, that is, powerful. A similar argument can be applied to honour, glory, and pleasures, for, since any one of them is the same as the others, a man who pursues one of them to the exclusion of the others, cannot even acquire the one he wants.'

'But suppose someone should want to obtain them all at one and the same time.'

'Then he would be seeking the sum of happiness. But do you think he would find it among these things which we have shown to be unable to confer what they promise?'

'No, I don't.'

'So that it is impossible to find happiness among these things which are thought to confer each of the desired states individually?'

'I agree, and no truer word could be spoken.'

'Then there you have both the nature and the cause of false happiness. Now turn your mind's eye in the opposite direction and you will immediately see the true happiness that I promised.'

'Even a blind man could see it,' I said, 'and you revealed it just now when you were trying to show the causes of false happiness. For unless I'm mistaken, true and perfect happiness is that which makes a man self-sufficient, strong, worthy of respect, glorious and joyful. And to show you that I have more than a superficial understanding, without a shadow of doubt I can see that happiness to be true happiness which, since they are all the same thing, can truly bestow any one of them.'

'You are blessed in this belief, my child, provided you add one thing.'

'What is that?'

'Do you think there is anything among these mortal and degenerate things which could confer such a state?'

'No, I don't, and you have proved it as well as anyone could wish.'

'Clearly, therefore, these things offer man only shadows of the true good, or imperfect blessings, and cannot confer true and perfect good.'

'Yes.'

'Since then you have realized the nature of true happiness and seen its false imitations, what remains now is that you should see where to find this true happiness.'

'Which is the very thing I have long and eagerly been waiting for.'

'But since in the *Timaeus* my servant Plato was pleased to

ask for divine help even over small matters,[11] what do you think we ought to do now in order to be worthy of discovering the source of that supreme good?'

'We ought to pray to the Father of all things. To omit to do so would not be laying a proper foundation.'

'Right,' she said, and immediately began the following hymn.

'O Thou who dost by everlasting reason rule,
Creator of the planets and the sky, who time
From timelessness didst bring, unchanging Mover,
No cause drove Thee to mould unstable matter, but
The form benign of highest good within Thee set.
All things Thou bringest forth from Thy high archetype:
Thou, height of beauty, in Thy mind the beauteous world
Dost bear, and in that ideal likeness shaping it,
Dost order perfect parts a perfect whole to frame.
The elements by harmony Thou dost constrain,
That hot to cold and wet to dry are equal made,
That fire grow not too light, or earth too fraught with weight.
The bridge of threefold nature madest Thou soul, which spreads
Through nature's limbs harmonious and all things moves.
The soul once cut, in circles two its motion joins,
Goes round and to itself returns encircling mind,
And turns in pattern similar the firmament.
From causes like Thou bringst forth souls and lesser lives,
Which from above in chariots swift Thou dost disperse
Through sky and earth, and by Thy law benign they turn
And back to Thee they come through fire that brings them home.
Grant, Father, that our minds Thy august seat may scan,
Grant us the sight of true good's source, and grant us light
That we may fix on Thee our mind's unblinded eye.
Disperse the clouds of earthly matter's cloying weight;
Shine out in all Thy glory; for Thou art rest and peace

11. Before embarking on his account of how the universe began Timaeus says they must pray to all the gods and goddesses, for 'everyone with the least sense always calls on god at the beginning of any undertaking, small or great'. (Plato, *Timaeus* 27C, tr. H. D. P. Lee, Penguin Classics, p. 40.)

To those who worship Thee; to see Thee is our end,
Who art our source and maker, lord and path and goal.'[12]

12. This poem, remarkable for the masterly succinctness of its majestic poetry, has long been regarded as a kind of epitome of the first part of Plato's *Timaeus*, and was especially dear to commentators of the early Middle Ages whose direct knowledge of Plato was otherwise confined to a translation of the *Timaeus* by Chalcidius. There are a number of points, however, in which the Boethian version differs from the *Timaeus* which cannot, therefore, be regarded as its only source. The epitome begins at line 4, and the following parallels with H. D. P. Lee's translation of the *Timaeus* are noteworthy: line 6, Lee, p. 42; 9, Lee, p. 44; 10–12, Lee, pp. 43–4; 13–14, Lee, pp. 49 and 46; 15–16, Lee, pp. 48, 45 and 49; 18, Lee, p. 57; 19, Lee, ibid; 20 and 21, Lee, pp. 57–8. For most of the passages for which there is no parallel in the *Timaeus* sources can be found in the writings of the Neoplatonists and especially Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus*. The poem, in fact, is composed in the form of a Platonic hymn to God, and is full of phrases which echo the vocabulary of the Platonic hymns. There is also some influence from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, particularly in the movement of the final lines of the poem: the introduction of the particle *for* in line 26 parallels the construction of the *Gloria* in the liturgy of the Western church and the Lord's Prayer rather than the Platonic hymns. And no one can be deaf to the echo in the final line of St John's gospel.

The following phrases need a word of comment:

ll. 7–8. Nowhere does Plato say that God carries the model of the universe in his mind; this is part of the teaching of Neo-platonism.

l. 16. 'encircling mind'. Plato does not say that the soul encircles mind. Plotinus, however, uses the figure of the dance of the imperfect around the perfect, i.e. of created soul around the uncreated mind of God.

l. 17. 'in pattern similar'. Proclus speaks of Soul as set between Mind and Body; soul is moved by Mind, i.e. God, which in a similar way itself moves Body, i.e. corporeal and concrete nature – here the firmament.

l. 18. 'lesser lives'. Proclus commenting on *Timaeus* 41d holds that there are three different kinds of souls; the 'lesser lives' of this passage are either souls enclosed in earthly bodies, or, lesser souls compared with the world soul described in lines 15–17.

ll. 19–21 contain a summary of Neo-platonic religion, the descent of the souls (figuratively spoken of as fixed in chariots in a formula taken over by the Neo-Platonists from Plato himself) from God and their ultimate ascent and return through the purifying action of fire which returns them to God.

Even, therefore, in the part of Boethius' hymn which has been seen as an epitome of the *Timaeus*, Boethius is heavily influenced by the doctrine and sacred hymns of Neo-platonism. For details see Friedrich Klingner, *De Boethii Consolatione Philosophiae*, 2te Unveranderte Auflage, Weidmann, Zurich/Dublin, 1966, pp. 38–67. And for Boethius' use of Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus*, H. R. Patch in *Speculum* VIII, 1933, pp. 41–51.

X

'Since, then, you have seen the form both of imperfect and of perfect good, I think we now have to show where this perfect happiness is to be found.

'The first question to ask is, I think, whether any good of the kind I defined a moment ago can exist in the natural world. This will prevent our being led astray from the truth of the matter before us by false and ill-founded reasoning. But the existence of this good and its function as a kind of fountain-head of all good things cannot be denied; for everything that is said to be imperfect is held to be so by the absence of perfection. So that if a certain imperfection is visible in any class of things, it follows that there is also a proportion of perfection in it. For if you do away with perfection, it is impossible to imagine how that which is held to be imperfect could exist. The natural world did not take its origin from that which was impaired and incomplete, but issues from that which is unimpaired and perfect and then degenerates into this fallen and worn out condition. But we showed just now that there is a certain imperfect happiness in perishable good, so that there can be no doubt that a true and perfect happiness exists.'

'Which is a very sound and true conclusion,' I said.

'As to where it is to be found, then, you should think as follows. It is the universal understanding of the human mind that God, the author of all things, is good. Since nothing can be conceived better than God, everyone agrees that that which has no superior is good. Reason shows that God is so good that we are convinced that His goodness is perfect. Otherwise He couldn't be the author of creation. There would have to be something else possessing perfect goodness over and above God, which would seem to be superior to Him and of greater antiquity. For all perfect things are obviously superior to those that are imperfect. Therefore, to avoid an

unending argument, it must be admitted that the supreme God is to the highest degree filled with supreme and perfect goodness. But we have agreed that perfect good is true happiness; so that it follows that true happiness is to be found in the supreme God.'

'I accept that. There is nothing in any way open to contradiction.'

'But,' she said, 'I must ask you to make sure that your approval of our statement that the supreme God is to the highest degree filled with supreme good is unqualified and final.'

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'By avoiding the assumption that this Father of creation has received this supreme good with which He is said to be filled from outside Himself, or that He possesses it by nature but in such a way as would lead you to suppose that the substance[13] of God the possessor was a separate thing from the

13. The application of the word 'substance' in this passage may seem strange. It is, in fact, a technical term of Aristotelian metaphysics, denoting the individual thing about which assertions can be made. For Aristotle, a substance is simply a real thing which actually exists, but since in his view matter is something negative without proper characteristics of its own, that which makes things definite and distinguishable is their form. 'The sensible individuals cannot be defined owing to the material element in them, which renders them perishable and makes them obscure to our knowledge. On the other hand, substance is primarily the definable essence or form of a thing, the principle in virtue of which the material element is some definite concrete object. It follows from this that substance is primarily form which is, in itself, immaterial, so that if Aristotle begins by asserting that individual sensible objects are substances, the course of his thought carries him on towards the view that pure form alone is truly and primarily substance. But the only forms that are really independent of matter are God, the Intelligences of the spheres and the active intellect in man, so that it is these forms which are primarily substance.' (Copleston, *op. cit.*, I, ii, p. 48.) This teaching is alluded to by Boethius in his tractate *On the Trinity*, where he adds, 'When we say God, we seem to denote a substance; but it is a substance that is supersubstantial.' (Loeb Classical Library ed., p. 17.) The same sort of language is, of course, met with in the Nicene Creed where the Son is said to be of one substance with the Father.

substance of the happiness He possesses. If you thought that He received it from outside Himself, you would be able to count the giver superior to the receiver. But we are in agreement that it is right to consider God the most excellent of things.

'On the other hand, if goodness is a natural property of God, but something logically distinct from Him, whenever we speak of God as the author of creation, an able mind might be able to imagine the existence of a power responsible for bringing together the two that were separate.

'Finally, if one thing is distinct from another, it cannot be the thing from which it is perceived to be distinct. So that which by its own nature is something distinct from supreme good, cannot be supreme good; but this is something we may not hold about Him to whom we agree there is nothing superior. It is impossible for anything to be by nature better than that from which it is derived. I would therefore conclude with perfect logic that that which is the origin of all things is in its own substance supreme good.'

'Perfectly right.'

'But we have agreed that supreme good is the same as happiness.'

'Yes.'

'So that we have to agree that God is the essence of happiness.'

'Your premises are incontestable and I see that this inference follows upon them.'

'Then consider whether this, too, can be firmly accepted: that it is impossible for two supreme goods to exist separate from one another. For it is clear that if the two goods are separate, the one cannot be the other, so that neither could be perfect when each is lacking to the other. But that which is not perfect is obviously not supreme. It is therefore impossible for there to be two separate supreme goods. However, we deduced that both happiness and God are supreme goodness,

so that it follows that supreme happiness is identical with supreme divinity.'

'There could scarcely be a conclusion more true to reality, or more sure in its reasoning, or more worthy of God.'

'I will add something to it. Just as in geometry some additional inference may be drawn from a theorem that has been proved, called in technical language, in Greek a *porisma* and in Latin a corollary, I too will give you a kind of corollary. Since it is through the possession of happiness that people become happy, and since happiness is in fact divinity, it is clear that it is through the possession of divinity that they become happy. But by the same logic as men become just through the possession of justice, or wise through the possession of wisdom, so those who possess divinity necessarily become divine. Each happy individual is therefore divine. While only God is so by nature, as many as you like may become so by participation.'

'What you say is beautiful and valuable, whether you give it the Greek or the Latin name.'

'But the most beautiful thing is what logic leads us to add to all this.'

'What is that?'

'Are all the many things we see included under the word happiness like parts combining to form a single body, yet separate in their variety, or is there any one of them which can fully supply the essence of happiness and under which the others may be classed?'

'Could you clarify the question by being more specific?'

'Well, we consider happiness something good, don't we?'

'Yes, the supreme good.'

'You could say the same of all of them. Absolute sufficiency is judged to be the same as happiness, and so too are power, reverence, glory and pleasure. Well, the question is this, all these things – sufficiency, power and the others – are they

good as if happiness were a body of which they were members, or is goodness a kind of heading to which they belong?'

'I understand the question which you are proposing we should ask, but I should like to hear what your answer would be.'

'This is how I would resolve it. If all these were related to happiness like limbs to a body, they would differ from one another, because it is the nature of parts that the body is one, but the parts that make it up are diverse. But all these things have been proved to be identical. So that they are not like limbs. Moreover it would appear that happiness was a body made up of a single limb, which is impossible.'

'There is no doubt of that; but I am eager for what is to come.'

'It is clear that the other properties are classed under good. It is just because sufficiency is judged a good that people want it, and it is just because it too is believed to be a good that power is sought after. And exactly the same conclusion may be reached about reverence, glory and pleasure.

'The chief point and reason, therefore, for seeking all things is goodness. For it is quite impossible for that which contains no good in itself whether real or apparent, to be an object of desire. On the other hand, things which are not good by nature are sought after if they nevertheless seem as if they were truly good.

'The result is, therefore, that there is justice in the belief that goodness is the chief point upon which the pursuit of everything hinges and by which it is motivated. What seems most to be desired is the thing that motivates the pursuit of something, as, for example, if a man wants to go riding for the sake of health; it is not so much the motion of horse-riding he desires as the resultant good health. Since, therefore, all things are desired for the sake of the good in them, no one desires them as much as the good itself. But we are agreed that the reason for desiring things is happiness. So that it

is patently obvious that the good itself and happiness are identical.'

'I can see no reason for anyone to disagree.'

'But we have shown that God and happiness are one and the same thing.'

'Yes.'

'We may safely conclude, then, that God is to be found in goodness itself and nowhere else.

'Come hither now all you who captive are,
Whom false desire enchains in wicked bonds,
Desire that makes her home in earthly minds;
Here will you find release from grievous toil,
Here find a haven blessed with peaceful calm,
An ever open refuge from distress.
Not all the gold that Tagus' sands bestow,
That Hermus from his glittering banks casts up,
Or Indus, on whose torrid shores are strewn
Green emeralds intermixed with dazzling pearls,
May sharpen and make bright the intellect,
But wealth in its own darkness clouds the thoughts.
For all that thus excites and charms the mind
Dim earth has fostered in her caverns deep;
While that bright light which rules and animates
The sky, will shun such dark and ruined souls:
Whoever once shall see this shining light
Will say the sun's own rays are not so bright.'

XI

'I agree, for all that you have said is established and connected by the soundest of reasoning.'

Then she asked, 'How valuable would you think it if you could come to know the good itself?'

'Infinitely valuable,' I said, 'if I should also be able to see God, who is the good.'