

BOOK IV

I

PHILOSOPHY delivered this sweet and gentle song with dignity of countenance and gravity of expression. But I had still not forgotten the grief within me and I cut her short just as she was preparing to say something.

'You,' I said, 'who are my leader towards the true light, all that you have poured forth in speech up to now has been clearly both divine to contemplate and invincibly supported by your arguments. You have spoken of things I had forgotten because of the pain of what I had suffered, but before this they were not entirely unknown to me.'

'But the greatest cause of my sadness is really this – the fact that in spite of a good helmsman to guide the world, evil can still exist and even pass unpunished. This fact alone you must surely think of considerable wonder. But there is something even more bewildering. When wickedness rules and flourishes, not only does virtue go unrewarded, it is even trodden underfoot by the wicked and punished in the place of crime. That this can happen in the realm of an omniscient and omnipotent God who wills only good, is beyond perplexity and complaint.'

Rep
"It would indeed be a matter of infinite wonder," she said, "it would be something more horrible than any outrage, if, as you reckon, in the well-ordered house of so great a father the worthless vessels were looked after at the expense of the precious ones, which grew filthy. But it is not so."

Rep
"If your recent conclusions may remain intact, you can learn from the Creator Himself since it is His realm we are speaking of, that the good are always strong and the wicked always humbled and weak. From Him, too, you can learn that sin never goes unpunished or virtue unrewarded, and that

BOOK IV

what happens to the good is always happy and that what happens to the bad always misfortune. There are many other considerations of this kind which, once your complaints have been stilled, will give you firm and solid strength.

'You have seen the shape of true happiness when I showed it to you just now, and you saw where it is to be found; and when we have run through all that I think we should clear out of the way beforehand, I will show you the path that will bring you back home. I will give your mind wings on which to lift itself; all disquiet shall be driven away and you will be able to return safely to your homeland. I will be your guide, your path and your conveyance.

- 'For I have swift and speedy wings
 With which to mount the lofty skies,
 And when thy mind has put them on
 The earth below it will despise:
- 5 It mounts the air sublunary
 And far behind the clouds it leaves;
 It passes through the sphere of fire
 Which from the ether heat receives,
 Until it rises to the stars,
- 10 With Phoebus there to join its ways,
 Or Saturn cold accompany
 As soldier of his shining rays.
 Wherever night is spangled bright
 The orbit of a star it takes,
- 15 And when the orbit's path is done
 The furthest heaven it forsakes.
 It treads beneath the ether swift
 Possessing now the holy light,
 For here the King of kings holds sway,
- 20 The reins of all things holding tight,
 Unmoving moves the chariot fast,
 The lord of all things shining bright.
 If there the pathway brings you back -
 The path you lost and seek anew -

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

25 Then, "I remember," you will say,
"My home, my source, my ending too."
And if you choose to seek again
The lightless earth which you have left,
Dictators whom the people fear,
30 Will outcasts seem of home bereft.¹

II

Then I cried out in wonder at the magnitude of her promises. 'Not that I don't think you can do it,' I said. 'Only do not keep me waiting, now that you have whetted my appetite.'

'First then,' she said, 'that the good are always strong and that the wicked always bereft of all power, these are facts you will be able to see, the one being proved by the other. For since good and evil are opposites, the weakness of evil is shown by establishing the strength of good, and vice versa. So to strengthen your confidence in my teaching, I will proceed along both ways and prove my assertions doubly.'

1. In this poem we have an account of the ascent of the soul to God, which must be understood in terms of the Boethian cosmos. The mind rises from the earth through the air to the sphere of the moon. At this point it leaves that part of the universe composed of the four elements, earth, air, water and fire; fire being the lightest of these has risen to just below the orbit of the moon where it forms its own sphere. Beyond the moon is the fifth element, the quintessence or ether. The soul continues to rise through the spheres of the stars (i.e. the wandering stars or planets as opposed to the fixed stars which are only reached in lines 13-14 after passing through the spheres of Mercury, Venus, Phoebus (= the sun), Mars, Jupiter and Saturn). Eventually the soul passes beyond the ether and reaches God, the source of the light emanating through the universe. The universe is turned inside out, as it were. God is seen as the centre of light. Earth as a place of darkness on the very edge of the universe. At birth the soul emanates or descends to the earth from God, and its ascent is an account of its return. See A. H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*, 3rd ed., London, 1957, Ch. 16, and F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. I, part ii, Ch. 45 for the Plotinian version of this; and C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge, 1964, Ch. 5 for the medieval version, and especially p. 116 for the 'inversion' of the universe from geocentric to theocentric. Cf. too the comparison of God to the still point in the middle of a series of concentric circles in IV, 6, a figure drawn from Plotinus. The metre was well-known in the middle ages and sprang to Chaucer's mind as he was carried aloft by the eagle in the *Hous of Fame*, ii. 972.

BOOK IV

'Now, there are two things on which all the performance of human activity depends, will and power. If either of them is lacking, there is no activity that can be performed. In the absence of the will, a man is unwilling to do something and therefore does not undertake it; and in the absence of the power to do it, the will is useless. So that if you see someone who wants to get something which he cannot get, you can be sure that what he has been lacking is the power to get what he wanted.'

'It is obvious,' I said, 'and cannot be denied.'

'And if you see a man who has done what he wanted, you will hardly doubt that he had the power to do it, will you?'

'No.'

'Therefore, men's power or ability is to be judged by what they can do, and their weakness by what they can't do.'

'I agree.'

'Do you, then, remember how earlier in the argument we reached the conclusion that the instinctive direction of the human will, manifested through a variety of pursuits, was entirely towards happiness?'

'I remember that this was proved as well.'

'And you recall that happiness is the good itself and similarly that since they seek happiness, all men desire the good?'

'Not so much recall it, as hold it fixed in my mind.'

'So that without any difference of instinct all men, good and bad alike, strive to reach the good.'

'Yes, that follows.'

'But surely men become good by acquiring goodness?'

'Yes.'

'So that good men obtain what they are looking for?'

'It seems so.'

'But if the wicked obtained what they want - that is goodness - they could not be wicked?'

'No.'

'Since, then, both groups want goodness, and one obtains it

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

and the other doesn't, surely there can be no doubt of the power of the good and the weakness of the bad?'

'Anyone who does doubt it is no judge either of reality or the logic of argument.'

'Again,' she said, 'suppose there were two men who are set the same natural task, and one of them performs and completes it by natural action, while the other cannot manage the natural action, but uses another method contrary to nature, and does not actually complete the task but approximates to someone completing it; which would you say had the more power?'

'I can guess what you mean,' I said, 'but I would like to have it more clearly put.'

'You will not deny that the action of walking is natural and human, will you?'

'No.'

'And presumably you have no doubt that it is the natural function of the feet?'

'No, indeed.'

'If, then, one man is able to proceed on foot and goes walking, and another lacks the natural function of the feet and tries to walk on his hands, which may properly be considered the more able or powerful?'

'Ask me another! No one could doubt that the man who can do the natural action is more able than the one who can't.'

'Well, the supreme good is the goal of good men and bad alike, and the good seek it by means of a natural activity – the exercise of their virtues – while the bad strive to acquire the very same thing by means of their various desires, which isn't a natural method of obtaining the good. Or don't you agree?'

'Yes, for what follows is also obvious; from what I have already admitted it follows that the good are powerful and the bad weak.'

'You anticipate correctly. As the doctors like to think, it is a sign of a constitution strong and fighting back. But seeing you are so quick of understanding, I will pile the arguments on. Just think how great the weakness is that we see in wicked men; they can't even reach the goal to which almost by compulsion their natural inclination leads them. What if they were deserted by this great and almost invincible help, and nature ceased to show them the way?

'Think of the extent of the weakness impeding the wicked. It is not as if the prizes they failed to win were mere sports trophies. The quest in which they fail is the quest for the highest and most important of all things, and success is denied these wretched men in the very pursuit they toil at night and day to the exclusion of all else, the same pursuit in which the strength of the good stands out.

'If a man by walking could reach a point beyond which there was nowhere for him to go, you would consider him the champion at walking. In the same way you must judge the man who achieves the goal of all endeavour, beyond which there is nothing, to be supreme in power. The opposite of this is also true; those who do not gain it² are obviously lacking in all power.

'For I ask you, what is the cause of this flight from virtue to vice? If you say it is because they do not know what is good, I shall ask what greater weakness is there than the blindness of ignorance. And if you say that they know what they ought to seek for, but pleasure sends them chasing off the wrong way, this way too, they are weak through lack of self control because they cannot resist vice. And if you say they abandon

2. It is difficult to see exactly how the MS reading at this point (*idem scelesti idem viribus omnibus videantur esse deserti*) fits the context, and I therefore follow Bieler's suggestion that the original reading was something like *qui minime apprehendunt*; this, he suggests, was glossed *idē* (= *id est*) *scelesti*, which was later misinterpreted as *idem scelesti* and incorporated in the text to the exclusion of the true reading.

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

2
goodness and turn to vice knowingly and willingly, this way they not only cease to be powerful, but cease to be at all. Men who give up the common goal of all things that exist, thereby cease to exist themselves. Some may perhaps think it strange that we say that wicked men, who form the majority of men, do not exist; but that is how it is. I am not trying to deny the wickedness of the wicked; what I do deny is that their existence is absolute and complete existence. Just as you might call a corpse a dead man, but couldn't simply call it a man, so I would agree that the wicked are wicked, but could not agree that they have unqualified existence. A thing exists when it keeps its proper place and preserves its own nature. Anything which departs from this ceases to exist, because its existence depends on the preservation of its nature.

'To the objection that evil men do have power, I would say that this power of theirs comes from weakness rather than strength. For they would not have the power to do the evil they can if they could have retained the power of doing good. This power only makes it more clear that they can do nothing, for if, as we concluded a short time ago, evil is nothing, it is clear that since they can only do evil, the wicked can do nothing.'

'Obviously.'

'But I want you to understand the exact nature of the power we are talking about. A moment ago we decided that there is nothing with greater power than the supreme good.'

'That is so.'

'But supreme goodness cannot do evil.'

'No.'

'Now, no one thinks of human beings as omnipotent, do they?'

'Not unless they are mad.'

'But men can do evil?'

'I only wish they couldn't.'

BOOK IV

'It is obvious, therefore, that since a power that can only do good is omnipotent, while human beings who can also do evil are not, these same human beings who can do evil are less powerful. In addition to this we have shown that all forms of power are to be included among those things worth pursuing, and that all these worthwhile objects of pursuit are related to the good as to a kind of aggregate of their nature. Now, the ability to commit a crime cannot be a form of goodness, and is therefore not worth pursuing. But all forms of power are worth seeking after, so that it is obvious that the ability to do evil is not a form of power.

'From all this the power of good men is obvious and, beyond all doubt, so is the weakness of bad men. And it is clear that what Plato said in the *Gorgias*³ is true, namely that only the wise can achieve their desire, while the wicked busy themselves with what gives pleasure without being able to achieve their real objective. Their actions depend on the belief that they are going to obtain the good they desire through the things that give them pleasure. But they do not obtain it, because evil things cannot reach happiness.

'High kings you see sit loftily on thrones,
In purple bright, by sober arms enhedged,
With savage threat in passion's breathless rage;
Once strip from pride their robes of empty show,
And see within the straitening fetters worn:
Here lust o'erthrows the heart with poisonous greed,
Here like a wave wrath whips and bears off sense,
Here captive sorrow sits or hope torments;
Here in one heart so many tyrants rule,
The king's own will's deposed, the enslaver slaved.'

III

'You can see, therefore, the filth in which crime wallows and the light in which goodness is resplendent. It is clear that good

3. 466b-481b.

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

deeds never lack reward, or crimes their appropriate punishment. The proper way of looking at it is to regard the goal of every action as its reward, just as the prize for running in the stadium is the wreath of laurels for which the race is run. Now, we have shown that happiness is the very same good which motivates all activity; so that goodness itself is set as a kind of common reward of human activity. But goodness cannot be removed from those who are good; therefore, goodness never fails to receive its appropriate reward. So despite all the raging of the wicked, the wise man's crown of laurels will never fall from him or wither away. The wickedness of others can never wrest their individual glory from the good. If it was a borrowed glory that we prided ourselves upon, other people including the very one who conferred it on us could take it away; but since the glory is conferred on each one by his own goodness he will only lose his reward when he stops being good.

'Finally since every reward is desired because it is believed to be good, no one will consider a man endowed with goodness to be without reward. But what kind of reward? The greatest and most beautiful of all. Think again of that corollary I emphasized to you a short time ago, and consider it this way. Goodness is happiness, and therefore it is obvious that all good men obtain happiness in virtue of their being good. But we agree that those who attain happiness are divine. The reward of the good, then, a reward that can never be decreased, that no one's power can diminish, and no one's wickedness darken, is to become gods. This being so, no wise man can be in any doubt of the inevitability of the punishment of the wicked. Like good and evil, reward and punishment are opposites. The reward we see due to the good must be balanced by a corresponding punishment of the wicked. Therefore, just as goodness is its own reward, so the punishment of the wicked is their very wickedness. Now, no one who suffers a punishment doubts that he suffers something

evil. So, if they are willing to examine themselves, I do not think men can consider themselves immune from punishment when they suffer the worst evil of all: evil is not so much an infliction as a deep set infection.

'Again, think of the punishment that dogs the wicked from the opposite point of view of the good. A short while ago you learned that all that exists is in a state of unity and that goodness itself is unity; from which it follows that we must see everything that exists as good. This means that anything which turns away from goodness ceases to exist, and thus that the wicked cease to be what they once were. That they used to be human is shown by the human appearance of their body which still remains. So it was by falling into wickedness that they also lost their human nature. Now, since only goodness can raise a man above the level of human kind, it follows that it is proper that wickedness thrusts down to a level below mankind those whom it has dethroned from the condition of being human.

'The result is that you cannot think of anyone as human whom you see transformed by wickedness. You could say that someone who robs with violence and burns with greed is like a wolf. A wild and restless man who is for ever exercising his tongue in lawsuits could be compared to a dog yapping. A man whose habit is to lie hidden in an ambush and steal by trapping people would be likened to a fox. A man of quick temper has only to roar to gain the reputation of a lion-heart. The timid coward who is terrified when there is nothing to fear is thought to be like the hind. The man who is lazy, dull and stupid, lives an ass's life. A man of whimsy and fickleness who is for ever changing his interests is just like a bird. And a man wallowing in foul and impure lusts is occupied by the filthy pleasures of a sow. So what happens is that when a man abandons goodness and ceases to be human, being unable to rise to a divine condition, he sinks to the level of being an animal.

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

'The sails of the lord of Ithaca⁴
And his wandering sea-borne ships
Were blown from the East to the island
Where a beautiful goddess lives,
Circe, daughter of the sun.
For her new-come guests she mixes
Cups she has touched with a spell;
In various shapes they are changed
By her hands in herb-lore skilled.
One takes the form of a boar,
And one an African lion
Grows in fang and claw.
Another becomes a wolf,
Can't weep, can only howl;
And here like an Indian tiger
One gently pads around.
Perils surround lord Odysseus,
But the winged Arcadian god
Takes pity on his plight,
Saves him from Circe's curse.
Odysseus' crew have drunk
The evil powered draughts,
And leave the bread men eat
To seek as pigs for husks:
Nothing is left intact,
Their voice and body changed;
Only the mind remains
To mourn their monstrous plight.
But Circe's hand was weak,
Her herbs were powerless;
They changed the body's limbs
But could not change the heart;
Safe in a secret fastness
The strength of man lies hid.

4. The lord of Ithaca is, of course, Odysseus, the story of whose long delayed homecoming from the siege of Troy forms the subject matter of Homer's *Odyssey*. His adventure on the island of Circe and his deliverance by Hermes – the winged Arcadian god – who gave him the scented white flower Moly as a charm against her magic are related in book 10.

BOOK IV

Those poisons, though, are stronger,
Which creeping deep within,
Dethrone a man's true self:
They do not harm the body,
But cruelly wound the mind.'

IV

Then I said, 'I agree, and I see the justice of saying that though they retain the outward appearance of the human body, wicked people change into animals with regard to their state of mind. But I could have wished that no freedom was allowed to the fury of cruel and wicked-minded men to bring destruction on the good.'

'It's not a question of freedom,' she said, 'as I will show at the appropriate point. But supposing the freedom they are believed to enjoy were removed, it would to a large extent mean relieving criminals of their punishment. It may seem incredible to some, but it must be the case that the wicked are less happy if they achieve their desires than if they are unable to do what they want. For, if desiring something wicked brings misery, greater misery is brought by having had the power to do it, without which the unhappy desire would go unfulfilled. So, since each stage has its own degree of misery, if you see people with the desire to do something wicked, the power to do it and the achievement, they must necessarily suffer a triple degree of misfortune.'

'Yes, I agree: but I hope very much that they will soon be released from this misfortune by losing the power to do evil.'

'They will be released sooner than perhaps you would wish or they themselves expect. For in the very short space of a human life, nothing can be so late in coming as to seem to the mind long to wait for, especially as it is immortal. Their great hope and their ambitious blue-print of crime is often destroyed by a sudden and unexpected end, which does at least impose a limit on their misery. For if wickedness is the cause

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

of their misery, it follows that their wickedness makes them the more wretched the longer it lasts. If death did not at last end their evil, I would count them the unhappiest of men. For obviously if our conclusions about the misfortune of wickedness are true, any misery which is agreed to be everlasting is infinite.'

'It is a strange thing to conclude and hard to accept, but I do see that it fits in with our previous admissions.'

'You are right,' she said, 'but if someone thinks a particular conclusion hard to accept, he ought to show either that some false assumption has preceded it or that the way the arguments have been marshalled does not necessarily produce the conclusion. Otherwise, provided he agrees to what has preceded, there is absolutely no ground for arguing about the conclusion. What I am going to say may also seem no less strange, but it is an equally necessary conclusion from our assumptions.'

'What is it?' I asked.

'That the wicked are happier if they suffer punishment than if they are unrestrained by any just retribution. And I do not have in mind what you may think, namely that wickedness is corrected by punishment and returned to the path of right by the fear of punishment, and is also an example to others to avoid punishable actions. No, I think there is another way in which the wicked are more unhappy if they go unpunished, apart from any consideration of the corrective effect of punishment or its value as a deterrent to others.'

'What other way is there?'

'Well, we have agreed, haven't we, that the good men are happy and the bad unhappy?'

'Yes.'

'Now, if someone's misery is offset by something good, he is happier than someone else whose misery is pure and undiluted by any admixture of good, isn't he?'

'So it seems.'

'What if that same unhappy person, who has no share of

BOOK IV

anything good, should receive some further evil in addition to those that have caused his unhappiness, he would have to be considered far more unhappy, wouldn't he, than the one whose misfortune is lessened by a share of good?'

'Of course.'

'Now, obviously the punishment of the wicked is just, and their escape from punishment unjust.'

'No one would deny that.'

'And no one will deny, too, that what is just is good, and on the other hand, what is unjust is bad.'

I agreed it was obvious.

'So when the wicked receive punishment they receive something good, the punishment itself, which is good, because of its justice; but when they go unpunished they acquire some extra evil in actually going scot free, which you have agreed is bad, because of its injustice.'

'I cannot deny it.'

'So the wicked are much more unhappy when they are unjustly allowed to go scot free, than when a just punishment is imposed upon them.'

'It is the logical outcome of our previous conclusion. But, I ask you, don't you leave any punishment of the soul until after the death of the body?'

'There is, indeed, great punishment then, sometimes exacted with penal severity, sometimes, I think, with purifying mercy; but it is not my intention to discuss it now.'

'We have followed the argument as far as we have for you to see that what you thought of as the entirely undeserved power of the wicked is no power at all. I wanted you to see that those whose freedom from punishment you were complaining of do not at all escape paying for their wickedness. That freedom of theirs for whose speedy end you were praying doesn't last long and will be the more miserable the longer it continues. It will be most miserable of all if it is endless. And lastly, the wicked are more wretched when

unjustly absolved from punishment than when they receive a just retribution. The logical conclusion of this is that they are burdened with heavier punishment precisely when they are believed to escape it.'

Then I said, 'When I consider your arguments, I think nothing more true could be spoken. But when I turn to the opinions of ordinary men, few would even grant you a hearing, let alone believe you.'

'It is true,' she said. 'Their eyes are used to the dark and they cannot raise them to the shining light of truth. They are like birds whose sight is sharpened by night and blinded by day. So long as they look only at their own desires and not the order of creation, they think of freedom to commit crimes and the absence of punishment as happy things. But let us see what is decreed by everlasting law: if you have turned your mind to higher things, there is no need of a judge to award a prize; it is you yourself who have brought yourself to a more excellent state: but if you have directed your zeal towards lower things, do not look for punishment from without; it is you yourself who have plunged yourself into the worse condition – just as if you look by turns at the sky and the dirt of the earth, and everything else disappears and you seem at one moment to be in the mud and at the next moment among the stars, just by the action of looking. But ordinary people do not see such things.'

'Well, are we to join these people whom we have shown to be like animals? What about the case of a man who completely lost his sight and even forgot he had ever had it and thought that he had everything that belonged to human perfection; would we who had sight think the same as the blind man?'

'And there is something else equally well founded on a firm base of argument which they will not agree with, namely that those who commit an injustice are more unhappy than those who suffer it.'

BOOK IV

'I would like to hear the argument.'

'Well, I presume you do not deny that every wicked man deserves punishment?'

'No.'

'And it is abundantly clear that the wicked are unhappy?'

'Yes.'

'Therefore you would not doubt the unhappiness of those who deserve punishment?'

'No.'

'Suppose, then, you were sitting in judgment in the law courts; on whom would you decide to pass sentence, the man who had committed the wrong, or the man who had suffered it?'

'I have no hesitation in saying I would satisfy the one who had suffered at the expense of the one who had done it.'

'So you would think the perpetrator of the injury more wretched than the victim?'

'It follows.'

'For this and other reasons based on the fact that by its own nature badness makes men wretched, it is clear that when someone is done an injury, the misery belongs not to the victim but to the perpetrator.⁵

'But the court orators of today take the opposite course; they try to excite the sympathy of the court for those who have suffered some grievous and painful injury, although a juster sympathy is more due to those who are guilty. They ought to be brought to justice not by a prosecution counsel with an air of outrage, but by a prosecution kind and sympathetic, like sick men being brought to the doctor, so that their guilt could be cut back by punishment like a malignant growth. In this way the work of the defence counsel would either completely come to a standstill, or, if they chose to benefit mankind, they would turn to the job of accusation.

5. Bieler suggests that at this point we have lost a reply from Boethius. The reply would be 'Yes, it is clear', or something like it.

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

And the wicked themselves, if through some crack they were allowed a glimpse of the virtue they had abandoned, if they could see themselves about to lay aside the filth of vice through the pains of punishment, they would no longer consider them to be pains because of the compensation of acquiring goodness, and they would refuse the services of defence counsels and give themselves up wholly to their accusers and judges.

‘This is why among wise men there is no place at all left for hatred. For no one except the greatest of fools would hate good men. And there is no reason at all for hating the bad. For just as weakness is a disease of the body, so wickedness is a disease of the mind. And if this is so, since we think of people who are sick in body as deserving sympathy rather than hatred, much more so do they deserve pity rather than blame who suffer an evil more severe than any physical illness.

‘What pleasure do men find in passions high
And tempting fate with suicidal hand?
If they seek death, unbid he’ll soon draw nigh,
Giving his steeds free rein to speed him forth.
Man is the prey of lion fangs and snake,
Of tiger, bear and boar; is man the prey
Of man as well? Why does he battles make
And long to perish by another’s blade?
Because his manners differ – just for this?
No just cause there for blood and savageness.
You want desert no due reward to miss?
Then love the good, show pity for the bad.’

V

Then I said, ‘Yes, I can see there is a kind of happiness and misery which are inseparable from the very actions of good and bad men. But I believe that there is both good and bad in the actual fortune of ordinary people. No wise man prefers being in exile, being poor and disgraced to being rich, respected, and powerful, and to remaining at home and

BOOK IV

flourishing in his own city. For this is the way that wisdom is more clearly and obviously seen to be operating, when somehow or other the happiness of their rulers is communicated to the people they come into contact with, especially if prison and death and all the other sufferings the law imposes by way of punishment are reserved for the wicked citizens for whom they were intended. Why this is all turned upside down, why good men are oppressed by punishments reserved for crime and bad men can snatch the rewards that belong to virtue surprises me very much, and I would like to know from you the reason for this very unjust confusion. I would be less surprised if I could believe that the confusion of things is due to the fortuitous operations of chance. But my wonder is only increased by the knowledge that the ruling power of the universe is God. Sometimes He is pleasant to the good and unpleasant to the bad, and other times He grants the bad their wishes and denies the good. But since He often varies between these two alternatives, what grounds are there for distinguishing between God and the haphazards of chance?’

‘It is not surprising,’ she said, ‘if ignorance of the principle of its order makes people think a thing is unplanned and chaotic. But even if you don’t know the reason behind the great plan of the universe, there is no need for you to doubt that a good power rules the world and that everything happens aright.’

‘If you knew not the stars of Arcturus
Sail near the highest pole of heaven, or why
The Waggoner is late to take his wain
And late to dip his flames into the sea
Although his rising comes again with haste,
The law observed in heaven would leave you dazed.
And let the full moon’s gleaming horns grow pale
As night extends his bounds across her disc;
Let Phoebe dimmed the confused stars reveal
Which just before her shining light had masked;

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

Whole nations by the common error moved
Rain frequent blows on pots and pans of brass.⁶
Yet no one wonders when the north west wind
Sweeps in the roaring waves to beat the shore,
Or when the frozen mass of hard-packed snow
Dissolves before the sun's aestival heat.
The causes in this case are clear to view,
But hidden cause confounds the human heart,
Perplexed by things that rarely come to pass,
For unexpected things the people dread.
Then let the clouds of ignorance give way
And these events will no more wondrous seem.'

VI

'It is so,' I said. 'But since it is part of your task to unravel the causes of matters that lie hidden and to unfold reasons veiled in darkness, and since I am very much disturbed by this strange phenomenon, I do beg you to tell me your teaching on this point.'

She paused and smiled a moment before answering.

'You are urging me to the greatest of all questions, a question that can never be exhausted. The subject is of such a kind that when one doubt has been removed, countless others spring up in its place, like the Hydra's heads. The only way to check them is with a really lively intellectual fire. The usual subjects of inquiry concern the oneness of providence, the course of fate, the haphazard nature of the random events of chance, divine knowledge and predestination, and the freedom of the will; you can see for yourself how difficult they are.

'However, as a knowledge of these things, too, is a part of

6. G. G. Ramsay comments on Satire VI lines 442-3 in the Loeb edition of Juvenal: 'Eclipses of the moon were supposed by the ignorant to be due to the incantations of witches. To prevent these from being heard, and so to ward off the evil events portended by the eclipse, it was the custom to create a din by the clashing of bells, horns, trumpets, etc.'