

Reading Boethius in the Trumpocene

The classics are neither self-help books nor sources of conservative propaganda

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While quarantining during Covid, I noticed calls to read the late-classical thinker Boethius. I've returned to them as we take stock not only of Covid's impact but also of Trump's, with which it is inextricably intertwined.

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American public culture is now marked by a distrust of institutions. Members of “Zero Covid communities” still isolate, wear N95 masks, and socially distance. These communities compare themselves to gay men during the Aids epidemic, and claim that Covid is genocide. “If I die,” tweeted one, “put my body on the steps of the CDC.” QAnon adherents combine Evangelical Christianity and New Age themes into a new apocalyptic narrative. Trump brags about becoming a dictator if he’s elected again, but the institutional structures of the United States are not shutting him out. It seems like the problem is not only individual institutions, but the reliance on institutions themselves.

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius lived from around 475-477 to around 526 AD. His story is, in part, about a man who believed in the institutions that enmeshed him even though they had been twisted beyond repair. Boethius was a member of Rome’s old aristocracy by birth, adoption, and marriage; his birth coincided with the deposition of the last Western Roman Emperor. Boethius attained public positions in Rome: these were ceremonial honors, emptier than he knew, now the seat of power had moved to Ravenna. In 522 he accepted a position as Master of Offices in Ravenna under Theodoric. When a senator was accused of treason Boethius defended him, and was accused himself in return. Boethius had devoted his life to the institutions of western Rome but by now these institutions were powerless: Theodoric asked the Senate to judge his case and it condemned him. Boethius was exiled and imprisoned, and eventually executed. He wrote his most famous work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in prison before his death. Although this work was popular during the Middle Ages and early modern period, it is now almost entirely unknown.

“Why read Boethius today?” [asked John Marenbon in Aeon magazine](#). Marenbon argued that *The Consolation of Philosophy* poses questions that remain urgent today about human happiness, the relationship between reason and faith, and how to live in the face of death. As a [Stanford University blog](#) made plain, discussing Boethius in October 2020 was a direct engagement with contemporary events: “You think you have it bad, huh? All you are dealing with is a worldwide plague that won’t let up, financial catastrophes one after another, and cabin fever from enforced confinement. Try living at the nasty tail-end of the Roman Empire, when the barbarians were taking

over, and then being thrown into prison by the Ostrogoth Emperor Theodoric for doing nothing at all, really.”

For a liberal, there are obvious parallels between Theodoric’s tyranny and the barbarism of the Trump administration, as well as Trump’s stated goal of dictatorship should he be reelected. The end of the Roman Empire can be read more generally as a metaphor for a failure of liberal institutions: it seems as though, like Boethius, politically engaged liberals are also devoting their lives to institutions that will fail them, without realizing the full scope of the catastrophe until it is too late.

Having presented this issue, Boethius does not solve it. His discussion of how you should respond to catastrophe is apolitical. It is also difficult emotionally to internalize. The lack of ease in his work makes *The Consolation of Philosophy* both hard to encounter and intensely vital. Although the classics are essential for an informed life, the apolitical message of *The Consolation of Philosophy* demonstrates that on their own, they are not sufficient.

Boethius concludes that although he has been jailed on a false charge and is about to be executed, this is actually fine. Like the Platonic dialogues that inspired him, he argues that it is better to be just than corrupt, whether or not you suffer in this life. Since being good is its own reward, the suffering is only apparent. Boethius was also Christian, and *The Consolation of Philosophy* occupies an interesting position between his Christian intellectual heritage and late classical paganism, which Marenbon explores in his article. Strikingly, there is no explicit Christian message in the book. But in structure, it points beyond itself in an acknowledgement that the rational consolation it offers is not sufficient without faith. Does reason inform faith, or is the latter utterly transcendent? These are not easy solutions to happiness.

The classics are a foreign country

Classical texts like *The Consolation of Philosophy* are complex, even strange, but this weirdness is scrubbed away in pop culture searches for useful lessons. Carlos Fraenkel, James McGill Professor of Philosophy and Religion at McGill University, drew the public’s attention to attempts to turn classical works into modern self-help in an [article in the *Times Literary Supplement*](#). Fraenkel echoes the attention Marenbon

draws to Boethius's religious position when he argues that thinkers like Plato or the Stoics were not just teachers of how to live, but representatives of entire worldviews: because most of us do not share these religious positions, it would be highly problematic to simply pick up the philosophies they support. "Once we remove the metaphysics and cosmology," Fraenkel argues, "the conceptions of the wise life proposed by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics collapse, including the tools they offer for finding peace of mind and consolation." The self-helpification of ancient texts, in isolating supposedly clear and unthreatening teachings from the classical tradition, takes works from other cultures and alien times and sands off anything difficult to think about. You're reading to find isolated pieces of faux edification, not to encounter something a way of thinking that may be radically different than your own, and be changed by it.

But Fraenkel concluded that the classics could not inform modern engagement in the world at all: "The ancients can't help us now." Without sharing Boethius's religious beliefs and background in Platonism, arguing that it is better to be just than corrupt because an immoral individual is actually miserable, whether he feels himself to be or not, is not very useful. Fraenkel argues that "instead of seeking consolation in philosophy, let's minimize the need for it—by promoting science, technology, medicine and good social policies. We should champion robust free speech laws, for example, to prevent people like Socrates from getting sentenced to death in the first place. And we should invest in excellent brain surgeons and efficient vaccines...We should be working at removing the reasons for fear rather than honing the tools to cope with it."

Fraenkel's response is robustly political: leave the classics to the scholars and focus on making good laws and advancing science. His ideas, if implemented, would repair the institutions on which the liberal state is grounded. But they are also troublingly narrow. Developments since Frankel wrote his article demonstrate that instead of removing the reasons for fear, scientific developments have become new objects of fear. After the rise of QAnon, right-wing anti-vaccine thought, and zero-Covid agitation, arguing that people need to hone the tools to cope with catastrophe in order to live well no longer looks like an escape from the real world, but a powerful response to it.

The classics cannot be self-helpified, but we still need them. Though I've compared Trump's effects on American institutions to Boethius's imprisonment and death, most recent arguments in favor of the classics' enduring relevance have come from the political right. Florida governor and failed presidential primary candidate Ron DeSantis had both modeled himself on Trump and tried to carve out a space for himself as an alternative. In contrast to Trump's sublime illiteracy, one of DeSantis's strategies was to change Florida's education system to emphasize the classics. Florida is now the first state university system in the country to allow the [Classic Learning Test \(CLT\)](#), which is an alternative standardized test framed around classic texts. "Classical learning" in this context, or "classical Christian education," does not mean "the classics," or a focus on great texts, but supposedly a return to "core values" and the "centrality of the Western tradition." The CLT's framer went to a Reformed university. Yet the "Western tradition" gave rise to many political strands, many religions, as well as the rejection of religion: in order to use it to teach modern American far-right beliefs, you would have to drain it of all that makes it unusual, unpredictable, or uncomfortable.

You would also have to amputate the process of learning itself, the free inquiry into a text and the open intersubjective dialogue about it practiced at schools that authentically engage with classical texts, such as St. John's College, my alma mater; Colgate University, where I have just finished a position; and Stanford, where I will begin a fellowship this summer at the Hoover Institution. The far right recognizes this. Matthew Freeman in the *American Conservative* has [criticized](#) the modern reception of classic texts not from the left as is most common, but from the right. Freeman argues that the single aim of traditional education is to inculcate hero worship, even erotic love for the hero. It must therefore depend on hierarchy: "The existence of the hero presupposes the excellence of the few and the inferiority of the many. That is hierarchy. Without hierarchy, you cannot have hero-worship, and without hero-worship, you cannot have the classical tradition." But if all you get from three thousand years of written work is the idea that some people are superior to most people, why go to all the trouble?

In contrast, as scholars at institutions as disparate as [Columbia University](#) and the [Association of Classical Christian Schools](#) have argued, the act of reading the great

books is grounded on the idea that all human beings are equal. Freeman is right when he says that the *Iliad* doesn't display "the liberation of a people group," "accounts of individual rights," a manifesto on "freedom for all," or the "subversion of social hierarchies." Of course he is. So what? Grounding classical education on the equality of all human beings does not mean proposing that the *Iliad* argues for this equality; it means affirming that everyone has the right to read it.

As Du Bois wrote in his encomium to black colleges in [*The Souls of Black Folk*](#), "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not...Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest...we sight the Promised Land?" Freeman is afraid, and he's right to be: reading the great books implies equality not only between the reader of a text and its author, but also among all thinking minds. This fundamental human equality is essential to the process of intellectual inquiry itself.

When [*Colin Redemer at American Reformer*](#) writes that you should absolutely not teach young people Plato but instead make them memorize the Bible, and maybe do a little exercise and map reading, he recognizes the classics' freeing power. An authentic encounter with a great text shatters the way you had been living up to that moment and deranges your life. You will never think in the same way again, not ever; I speak from personal experience. The Classical Learning Extended Universe™ is a series of little rooms.

The personal and the political

Not only are the liberal arts grounded on "[the liberal assumption of equality](#)," informing life in the world through intelligent readings of classic texts is also of use to liberals as political agents. But Boethius's response to the grotesque injustice of his situation is not only not political, it's anti-political. It is a strong withdrawal, not an invitation to the *vita activa*. Obtaining comfort from this classic work risks making you not "woke," as Freeman claims, but politically passive.

I encountered 2020's discussions of this obscure late-classic philosopher while I was holing up in my mother's house, built on the poisoned ground of a nineteenth century silver smelter in Pueblo Colorado. It was a maze of dark boxes and trash and at night

she lurched away from me and growled like a dog. Those years were orthogonal to Covid for me. My mother is a survivor of multiple head injuries. In March 2019 I realized she believes things that aren't real. My father got sick during Covid, but not of Covid. Nobody talks about [long-any-other-disease](#) but he never recovered and I made the call to disconnect life support from my office as the sun was setting in November 2022.

τὸ σῶμα τὸ σῆμα.

The body is a grave.

A decade ago there was a week we thought my mother had cancer. I was gripped by hunger for big schlocky disaster movies and Plato's dialogues on the death of Socrates. I read the dialogues during the day and watched the movies at night. I consumed both dialogues and movies compulsively, repetitively, for a week straight so I could watch others face catastrophe and model my response on theirs. This trailer park [mirror for princes](#) was grubbier and more desperate than Freeman's emulation of heroes and I would not have lived through the week without it. The biopsy was negative; she was my mother then. She still is in the mornings. At night she barks and growls.

I know what "the ancients" would say: the same thing Epictetus told the magistrate who couldn't stand to stay in the same house with his sick daughter until he knew she'd recovered; avoiding relatives who are suffering is wrong (*Discourses*, I.11). It's not that the ancients can't help me. It's that I'm a coward.

The message I got from Epictetus when I realized my mother had gone insane was not that things were going to be OK, it was that they already were, I just didn't realize it. As Fraenkel elucidates their metaphysics, Stoics "deny the existence of bad things in the universe altogether. Everything is part of the Divine Mind's perfect plan and serves to make the world better." If we affirm that literally everything is for the best, including personal anguish, then no matter what is happening to us, "we are virtuous and happy under all circumstances: we become invulnerable to misfortune."

I was weaker. I blocked my mother's email once I heard she was stalking my sister. She switched to my father's email so I got rants in a dead man's voice and I blocked that too. Epictetus spoke to me in the voice of alien worlds.

Ancient writings offer the wisdom we need to think about our lives, but what Freeman seems unwilling to consider is that our lives encompass all of the human experience: not only heroism and strength, but also powerlessness, sickness, finitude, and death.

The ideas expressed in great texts are powerful. But to fully adopt them would require radically altering our worldview. Here Fraenkel and Freeman agree. I do not agree that not sharing the beliefs expressed in a classic text makes it worthless to inform your life. Instead, we should take the classics seriously on their own terms whether or not we agree with them.

For instance, can you think of a better illustration of Boethius's statement that good people are powerful but the evil are weak than Donald Trump? (*The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV.2). Beneath the facade a tyrant is miserable, and his life contains no pleasure (*The Republic*, IX: 577-588). Because the unjust are actually miserable, it's worse for you to do injustice than suffer it (*Gorgias*, 469-471).

At first glance, this is not at all clear: Trump was at one point the most powerful human being in the world and still has a death grip on the Republican party. Although his trials are ongoing, it is unclear whether he will ever face meaningful accountability. When Plato argues that a dictator is in fact unhappy, he means specifically that he is incapable of pursuing and understanding the good, and has harmed his own soul. But Trump and his followers and allies also appear miserable in a less narrow sense. Trump has swindled everyone who has aided him. He has fired them, betrayed them, and stiffed them of money. Every public figure on Trump's team has failed and been a target of public ridicule. Trump himself is a physical and mental wreck. He slurs, rambles, and trembles. Although it is impossible to truly know another person's mind, he appears to enjoy very little.

This kind of response is both potent and dangerous, because in posing the question of whether we as individuals are willing to change the way we feel about our

problems, it radically personalizes the political. The point is no longer the unjust system and unjust people who imprisoned Boethius and made Covid worse than it otherwise could have been, the point is his and our personal reactions. Stoicism functions as a survival manual for living under violent autocracy. Epictetus was a slave. Seneca was Nero's advisor but was eventually forced to commit suicide. Boethius was jailed and executed. This philosophy and its early-modern successor neo-Stoicism were enormously popular during the catastrophic warfare and political unrest of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, my academic specialization. And just as Boethius became popular during Covid, [people used Tacitus](#) as a model for thinking through authoritarianism under Trump. *The Consolation of Philosophy* is not sufficient on its own to inform political action, but it never claims to be. It is instead a view to what could happen if liberal political working fails.

To read and take seriously the proposition that your safety, the health of your family, and the success of your aims are unimportant compared to whether or not you know what is good and do it—that your emotions are a choice when your concrete lived situation may not be—is almost unbearably provocative. Whether it's also a consolation is up to you.

Thanks to John Marenbon and Carlos Fraenkel

Featured image is [Boethius teaching his students](#)

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