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# Boethius on Being and Goodness

### [Prologue]

You ask that I should set out and explain a little more clearly the obscurity of that question from our hebdomads which concerns the way in which substances are good in virtue of the fact that they have being when they are not substantial goods. And you say that this should be done because the method of writings of this sort is not known to all. Now I myself am your witness how eagerly you have embraced these things before. But I contemplate the hebdomads on my own for myself and keep my thoughts in my memory rather than share them with any of those who, out of perversity and impudence, permit nothing to be composed without jest and laughter. Therefore, do not object to the obscurities associated with brevity which, since they are a faithful guardian of a secret, have the advantage of speaking only with those who are worthy. For that reason I have put forward first terms and rules on the basis of which I will work out all the things that follow, as is usually done in mathematics (and other disciplines also).

### [The Axioms]

[I.] A conception belonging to the common understanding is a statement that anyone approves once it has been heard. There are two types of these. One type is common in the sense that it belongs to all men – e.g., if you propose: “If you take away equals from two equals, what remain are equals,” no one who understands it denies it. The other type belongs only to the learned, even though it comes from such conceptions as belong to the common understanding – e.g., “Things which are incorporeal are not in a place,” and others that the learned but not the uneducated acknowledge.

[II.] Being and that which is are different. For being itself does not exist yet, but that which is exists and is established when it has taken on the form of being.

[III.] That which is can participate in something, but being itself participates in no way in anything. For participation comes about when something already exists; but something exists when it has assumed being.

[IV.] That which is can have something besides what it itself is; but being itself has nothing besides itself mixed into it.

[IV.] Being something *merely* and being something *in virtue of the fact that it has being* are different. For an accident is signified in the former case, a substance in the latter.

[VI.] Everything that participates in being so that it exists participates in something else so that it is something. Hence, that which is participates in being so that it exists; but it exists so that it might participate in anything else whatever,

[VII.] Every simple has its being and that which is as one.

[VIII.] For every composite, being and it itself are different.

[IX.] Every difference is discord, but likeness is to be sought. And what seeks another is itself shown to be naturally the same sort as that very thing which it seeks.

These things that we have set down to begin with, therefore, are enough. A careful interpreter of the reasoning will fit each one to its arguments.

### [The Question]

Now the question is of this sort. Things which exist are good. For the common view of the learned holds that everything which exists tends toward good. But everything tends toward its like. Therefore, the things which tend toward good are themselves good. But we have to ask how they are good, by participation or by substance?

If by participation, they are in no way good in themselves. For what is white by participation is not white in itself in virtue of the fact that it itself has being. And the same applies to other qualities. Therefore, if they are good by participation, they are in no way good in themselves. Therefore, they do not tend toward good. But that was granted. Therefore, they are not good by participation but by substance.

Now for those things the substance of which is good, what they are are good.<sup>1</sup> But that which they are they have from [their] being. Therefore, their being is good; and therefore, the being itself of all things is good. But if [their] being is good, those things which exist are good in virtue of the fact that they have being, and, for them, being is the same as being good. Therefore, they are substantial goods because they do not participate in goodness.

But if being itself is good in their case, there is no doubt that since they are substantial goods, they are like the first good. And hence, they will be this good itself, for nothing is like it besides it itself. It follows from this that all things which exist are God, which is an impious claim. Therefore, they are not substantial goods, and hence being is not good in their case. Therefore, they are not good in virtue of the fact that they have being. But neither do they participate in goodness, for then they would in no way tend toward good. Therefore, they are in no way good.

1 The awkward English in this sentence reflects what seems to me to be Boethius's use of painstakingly precise Latin terminology. The Latin text of the short argument in which this claim occurs is: "*Quorum vero substantia bona est, id quod sunt bona sunt; id quod sunt autem habent ex eo quod est esse. Esse igitur ipsorum bonum est.*" The emphasized clause is the cause of the awkward English. Boethius's understanding of the expression *id quod sunt* in this passage seems to me to be the following. He takes *id quod est* to signify the essence of a thing ('that which it is' or 'what it is' – notice that this use of *id quod est* is different from its use in the Axioms). Since many things share one essence, Boethius uses *id quod sunt* ('that which they are,' 'what they are'). But there are many such essences, and Boethius wants to claim that all of these are good; hence the last plural verb: *bona sunt*.

## [The Solution]

A solution of the following sort can be offered to this question. There are many things that, although they cannot be separated in actuality, nevertheless are separated in the mind and in thought. For example, although no one separates a triangle (or other [geometric figures]) from the underlying matter in actuality, nevertheless, distinguishing it in the mind, one examines the triangle itself and its essential character apart from matter. Therefore, let us remove from our mind for a little while the presence of the first good. (That it does exist is, of course, certain on the basis of the view of the learned and the unlearned and can be known from the religions of barbarian races.) Therefore, having removed this for a little while, let us suppose that all things which are good exist. And let us consider how those things could be good if they had not flowed down from the first good.

From this point of view I observe that, in their case, that they are good and what they are are different. For let one and the same good substance be supposed to be white, heavy, and round. Then that substance itself, its roundness, its color, and its goodness would all be different, for if these items were the same as the substance itself, heaviness would be the same as color, [color] as good, and good as heaviness. But nature does not allow this. Therefore, in their case, being and being something would be different; and then they would indeed be good but they would not have [their] being itself as good. Therefore, if they did exist in any way, then they would not be from the good and they would be good and they would not be the same as good; but, for them, being and being good would be different.

But if they were nothing else at all except good, neither heavy nor colored nor extended in spatial dimension nor were there any quality in them excepting only that they were good, then it would seem that they are not [merely] things but the source of things. Nor would “they” seem [so], but rather “it” would seem [so], for there is one and only one thing of this sort that is only good and nothing else.

But because they are not simple they cannot exist at all unless that thing which is only good willed that they exist. Therefore, they are said to be good because their being flowed from the will of the good. For the first good, because it is, is good in virtue of the fact that it is.<sup>2</sup> But a second good, because it flowed from that whose being itself is good, is itself also good. But the being itself of all things flowed from that which is the first good and which is such that it is properly said to be good in virtue of the fact that it is. Therefore, their being itself is good, for it is then in it [– that is to say, the first good].

In this the question has been resolved. For although they are good in virtue of the fact that they have being, nevertheless they are not like the first good. For it is not just in any way whatever in which things have being that their being itself is good, but because the being itself of things cannot exist unless it has flowed down from the first being, i.e., the good. Therefore, [their] being itself is good and it is not like that from which it has being. For [the first good] is good in virtue of the fact that it is in whatever way it is, for it is not anything other than good. But [a second good] could perhaps be good but it could not be good in virtue of the fact that it has being unless it were from [the first good]. For then it would perhaps participate in good; but they could not have being itself, which they would not have from the good, as good. Therefore, when the first good is removed from them in the mind

2 In this sentence I translate the phrase *in eo quod est* with ‘in virtue of the fact that it is’ rather than the usual ‘in virtue of the fact that it has being’ because Boethius is talking here about the first good, which is simple and therefore cannot be said to *have* properties.

and in thought, these things could not be good in virtue of the fact that they have being, even though they could be good. And since they could not exist in actuality unless that which truly is good had produced them, their being is good, and that which flowed from the substantial good is not like it. And if they had not flowed from it, they could not be good in virtue of the fact that they have being, even though they could be good – this is because they would be both other than the good and not from the good, while that thing is itself the first good and is being itself and the good itself and being good itself.

### [Objections and Replies]

And will it not also be necessary that white things are white in virtue of the fact that they have being, since those things that are white have flowed from the will of God so that they are white? Not at all. For being and being white are different in their case because of the fact that he who produced them so that they exist is indeed good but not white. Therefore, it followed from the will of the good that they are good in virtue of the fact that they have being. But it did not follow from the will of what is not white that the essential character such that a thing is white in virtue of the fact that it has being belongs to it; for they have not flowed down from the will of the white. And so, because he who willed those things to be white was not white, they are white *merely*. But because he who willed those things to be good was good, they are good *in virtue of the fact that they have being*.

Therefore, according to this reasoning, must not all things be just since he is just who willed them to exist? No indeed. For being good has to do with essence, but being just with an act. In him, however, being is the same as acting, and therefore being good is the same as being just. But, for us, being is not the same as acting, for we are not simple. For us, therefore, being good is not the same as being just; but, for us, all [and only] the things in virtue of which we have being are the same.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, all things are good [but] not also just.

Further, good is of course general, but just is specific, and a species does not descend into all [the members of its genus]. Therefore, some things are just, some another [species of good], [but] all things are good.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase I have translated 'in virtue of which we have being' is *in eo quod sumus*. Except for the fact that the verb is in the first person plural, it is the same phrase as the phrase that I have translated consistently throughout as 'in virtue of the fact that it has being (they have being)' [*in eo quod est (sunt)*]. Maintaining consistency in the present passage would lose the sense.