There are some who think, with Cleanthes, that the only duty of a comforter is to prove that the evil one is lamenting is not an evil at all. Others, as the Peripatetics, prefer urging that the evil is not great. Others again, with Epicurus, seek to divert your attention from the evil to good: some think it sufficient to show that nothing evil has happened that you had no reason to expect; this is the practice of the Cyrenaics. But Chrysippus thinks that the main thing in comforting is to remove from the person who is grieving the opinion that to grieve is the right thing to do and his duty. There are others who bring together all these various kinds of consolations, for people are differently affected, as I have done myself in my book on consolation; for as my own mind was much disordered, I have attempted in that book to discover every method of cure.¹

In this short but illuminating doxographic account, the Roman philosopher Cicero makes abundantly clear that in antiquity the art of consolation was part and parcel of philosophy.² As he says, Cicero himself wrote a Consolatio (which is now lost) but he was certainly not the first to do so for he had several Greek predecessors. “The consolatio as a genre of literature had a long history going back to the fifth century BCE, in the course of which it developed its own repertoire of standard arguments and topoi to soothe the sufferer.”³ In the classical and Hellenistic period, under the influence of both philosophy and rhetoric, “a specialized consolatory literature began to develop, initiating a tradition which persisted throughout Graeco-Roman antiquity and into the Middle

¹ Cicero, Tusc. Disp. 3.76.
Ages.”

What little has been preserved of this literature takes a variety of forms. Philosophers wrote treatises on death and the alleviation of grief. Letters of consolation were written to comfort those who had suffered bereavement or some other loss-experience such as exile or illness; these might be highly personal, or possess the more detached character of an essay. Funeral speeches frequently contained a substantial consolatory element as well. Poets sometimes wrote verse *consolationes* etc. As far as the contribution of philosophers is concerned, the first figure of importance is Crantor (ca. 335–275 BCE), the earliest Platonic commentator whose lost *On Grief* (*Peri penthous*) became very influential in antiquity; it opposed the Cynic ideal of eradicating this emotion and it was the model for Cicero’s lost *Consolatio*.

But instead of listing only lost works, let me also mention the most important works of consolation that have been preserved. These are Sulpicius Rufus’ letter to Cicero on the occasion of the death of the latter’s daughter, Tullia (*Ep. ad Fam.* 4.5); Seneca’s *Ad Marciam* and *Ad Helviam matrem* (*Dial.* 6 and 12) and also his *Epistles* 63, 93, and 99; Pseudo-Plutarch’s *Consolatio ad Apollonium*; and of course Boethius’ *Consolatio philosophiae*. These works range from the fourth/third cent. BCE to the sixth cent. CE (I leave out of account here the continuation of this type of literature in the Middle Ages).

The main topic in consolation literature is of a paraenetic nature: how to behave in a situation of bereavement, whether it be the death of a relative or friend, the loss of freedom by imprisonment or exile, the loss of health or wealth, etcetera. The one(s) addressed is (are) admonished to moderate or overcome his (their) grief and is (are) given advice on how to achieve that. This is generally done by stressing that what is lost (life, freedom, health, wealth) is by far not as valuable as it is generally deemed to be, with the implication that the great ‘loss’ is not really a great loss at all. For instance, in the case of exile or imprisonment it is often argued that a change of dwelling place is not a bad thing at all and that the ensuing loss of comfort, status, or fame is to be regarded as totally irrelevant to human life and happiness; the value of all earthly things is strongly relativized or denied. More often one finds the (Platonic) idea that death is not an evil to be feared, on the contrary, death liberates the immortal soul from the fetters of the body and the misery of an earthly existence so as to enable it to lead a better life. Quite often series of *exempla* illustrate and support the argument, esp. *exempla*.

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7 This is the Peripatetic concept of *metriopatheia*. 