TRANSCENDENTAL PREDICTION IN BOETHIUS’ SIGNIFICATION THEORY: *DE HEBDOMADIBUS* IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COMMENTARIES ON *PERI HERMENEIAS*

Paul J. LaChance

**Introduction**

In this essay I shall set out the basic terms and relations for an explanatory account of the central meaning of Boethius’ *De hebdomadibus*. The basic terms and relations include *bonum*, *esse* and *id quod est* as well as the principle that terms which refer to objects that share a particular meaning but that subsist differently are analogically predicated. I shall argue that Boethius distinguished between the meaning of predicates and the mode or manner in which their referents are said to subsist. Boethius offered only very brief and often tantalizing explanations of these concepts, leaving much room for interpretation as to their exact meaning. I will approach my interpretive task from two directions. First, I shall investigate Boethius’ logical commentaries and treatises, in which he discusses foundational questions of human knowing and the manner in which the content of one’s predications may be brought closer to the meaning that one intends to communicate. Second, I shall adopt a hypothesis that locates Boethius’ third tractate in the context of trinitarian theology. What I have to offer with respect to the meaning of *De hebdomadibus* will not verify the hypothesis, but I think that the hypothesis sheds light on the possible intention and meaning of the tractate. Thus, the linking of the hypothesis and the data of the text will yield an advance in ‘understanding’.\(^1\)

---

\(^1\) Boethius commented on the importance of the task of understanding prior to judgment, noting that Aristotle treated the two parts of logic, understanding and judgment, whereas the Stoics neglected understanding. Cf. *Commentaria In Topica Ciceronis*, Lib. I–IV, PL 64, col. 1039–1174; English trans. by E. Stump, Ithaca 1988. Despite the fact that in this context judgment appears to be a logical activity concerned with the forms of arguments, evidence from the *De divisione liber* (cf. infra, n. 18) suggests that Boethius recognized the importance of a range of activities in the articulation of a definition. If we consider that predication involves not simply the synthesis of meanings but also the positing of a particular mode of subsistence (substantial, accidental, relational) or manner of occurrence (necessary, contingent, or free), then the
understanding, moreover, gains credibility when the meaning of the text is explicitly connected with Boethius’ prior writings and constant concerns. I will not attempt to accomplish the explanatory task in this short essay. That task would not rest on any probing of the psychology of the author but on the authentic development of the interpreter and the thematization of the cognitive facts and patterns of self-appropriated consciousness. For that reason, the exercise in understanding offered here is preparatory both subjectively and objectively.

Boethius achieved remarkable clarity in terms both of the objects of thought and of the best way in which to take account of the limitations of reason in one’s statements about God and creatures. At the center of his account of the diversity that exists between the manner in which things exist and the manner in which the human mind conceives and knows them is a rudimentary notion of analogy. Boethius held that anything predicated of God must be predicated analogously, and he developed his notion of the transcendentals along the same lines. Unity, being and goodness are neither univocal nor accidentally equivocal. They are deliberately equivocal or intentionally related though not reducible to a single concept. For that reason, the nature of being, unity and goodness as objects of thought, and the analogical predication of transcendentals are the central topics of my essay.

Interpretive Procedure

In the process of interpretation one moves through various circles that relate texts to the world of the author, to the world of the interpreter and to the interpreter himself. Without raising complex hermeneutical questions here, let me state a few of the assumptions that guide my interpretation. Boethius’ world “seems to consist of God and of concrete wholes, each with an immanent Aristotelian-type essential ‘form’ that should not really be called a form but an image, an image of a true form that is itself an aspect of the divine mind”. Boethius consistently applied the principle that what is conceived by the mind abstractedly does not thereby subsist apart from bodies. He therefore did not follow other Neoplatonic commentators who posited as subsistent what the mind discovered to be distinguished as universals ante discussion of contingency in the commentaries on Peri hermeneias takes on a greater importance in the articulation of Boethius’ epistemology.