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An Explication of the *De Hebdomadibus* of Boethius in the Light of St Thomas’s Commentary

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**Introduction**

The writings of Ancius Manlius Severinus Boethius exercised a powerful influence on the nature and development of mediaeval philosophy. The extent of his influence was such that I think it fair to say that anyone seeking more than a superficial grasp of mediaeval philosophy must acquire some first-hand knowledge of his work. The trouble is, however, that while *The Consolation of Philosophy* is well-known and much commented upon, Boethius’s other works are relatively neglected.¹ Included in this latter group are the five theological tractates, one of which has this imposing title: *Quomodo Substantiae In Eo Quod Sint Bonae Sint Cum Non Sint Substantialia Bona*. This tractate also has the more manageable title *De Hebdomadibus* and it is as such that I shall refer to it throughout this article.² I have chosen to give an explication of the *De Hebdomadibus* for three reasons. First the problem with which it deals (the nature of the relation between goodness and substance) is intrinsically interesting and Boethius’s solution to the problem is a model of philosophical analysis. Second, in addition to the fact that the philosophical status of the nine axioms listed in the tractate is a matter of some scholarly controversy, the answer to the obvious question of how these axioms function in the tractate as a whole is not at all clear. And third, this tractate is philosophically significant to those philosophers who take St. Thomas as their inspiration since it appears that St. Thomas’s existence/essence distinction is adumbrated here. I shall begin my explication by giving a brief overview of the main lines of the tractate. Then I shall lay out the arguments contained in the statement and resolution of the dilemma which Boethius constructs, indicating (by means of Roman numerals in parentheses) where I think particular axioms are meant to apply. Finally, I shall display the axioms as perspicuously as possible and comment on them.

¹ I am obliged to Professor Ralph Mclnerny for awakening my interest in Boethius and for his suggestion that the *De Hebdomadibus* would repay careful study.

Overview

The groundplan of the *De Hebdomadibus* is as follows. It begins with a brief introduction which contains the nine axioms. Then the problem to be considered is outlined in the form of the following dilemma. Things which are are good. This is the basic assumption which will generate the dilemma. Things which are good are so either by virtue of their substance or by participation. If they are good by virtue of their substance then, since God is the only substantial good, we arrive at an impious conclusion: we identify creatures with their Creator. If they are good by participation then we generate a contradiction: things do and do not tend toward the good. Therefore, the conclusion must be that things which are are not good, which manifestly contradicts the basic assumption. Boethius’s solution to the dilemma makes use of a thought-experiment. Abstracting from the first good he distinguishes locutions such as ‘to be’ from locutions such as ‘to be good.’ On the basis of this distinction he is led to conclude that goodness is either a property of things or a principle of things. Re-introducing the notion of the first good, he notes that it is good by virtue of its very being. Secondary goods are also good by virtue of their being but only because that being derives from the will of the first good. Boethius cautions us against likening the being of particular things to the being of the first good and concludes the tractate by considering and refuting two objections to his solution.

The theme of the tractate is the problem of how substances can be good in virtue of their being without, at the same time, being substantial goods. Boethius is moved to deal with this particular problem by the appeal of a correspondent who urges him to elaborate on his hints towards a solution of this obscure question. Boethius warns his friends not to object to the obscurities resulting from brevity, remarking gnostically that such obscurity will be penetrated only by those worthy of penetrating it. To ensure the requisite obfuscation Boethius supplies us with a do-it-yourself argument kit in the form of nine axioms. “The intelligent interpreter,” Boethius tells us “will supply the arguments appropriate to each point.” At the outset then it seems clear that it will be one of the reader’s tasks to discern the use being made of the axioms in the subsequent discussion.

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3 Boethius, *De Hebdomadibus*, 53-55.
The Problem

I

1. Everything that is tends to the good
2. Everything tends to its like
3. Things which tend to the good are themselves good
4. Therefore, things which are are good

Step 1 in this argument derives from the common opinion of the learned. Step 2 has a similar ancestry. (Axiom IX) Step 8 is a particular application of Step 2, and Step 4, the conclusion, derives from Steps 1 and 3 together. Now that he has established the goodness of things which exist, Boethius goes on to consider how this is so. Things which are good are so either by participation or by virtue of their substance. These alternatives Boethius seems to consider to be both mutually exclusive and universally exhaustive. He proceeds to treat of each in turn.

Things which are good are so by participation

II

1. All things are good by participation
2. If all things are good by participation they are in no way good in themselves
3. All things are in no way good in themselves
4. All things do not tend to the good
5. All things do, and do not, tend to the good
6. Therefore, all things are not good by participation

Step 1 is the overall assumption of argument II. Step 2 is, presumably, a self-evident truth. Step 3 derives from Steps 1 and 2 by modus ponens. Step 4 is derived by modus tollens from Steps 3 and 1/3 (suitably recast in hypothetical form). Step 5 is merely the conjunction of Step 4 and Step 1/I, and the conclusion. Step 6, is derived from Steps 1 through 5 by reductio ad absurdum. With the elimination of the possibility of goodness by participation it seems as if all things must be good by virtue of their substance.

There is a difference between merely being something in a qualified way and being something in an essential way or in one’s very substance. In other words, there is a distinction between the substance of a thing and the qualities which it participates. This implies, for Boethius, that if a thing is good by participation, then goodness does not penetrate its inmost structure. The substantial reality of a thing—it’s essence and existence—differs from its accidental qualities. See Charles Fay, “Boethius’ Theory of Goodness and Being,” in James Collins, ed., Readings in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, (Westminster, Md: Newman Press, 1960), p. 171.
Things which are good are so by virtue of their substance

III

1. All things are good by virtue of their substance
2. If all things are good by virtue of their substance then the particular being of all things is good
3. The particular being of all things is good
4. If the particular being of all things is good then, if all things are good by virtue of their substance, they are like the first good
5. If all things are good by virtue of their substance they are like the first good
6. All things are like the first good
7. If anything is like the first good it is the first good
8. All things are the first good
9. Therefore, all things are not good by virtue of their substance

Step 1 is the overall assumption of this argument. Step 2 is a self-evident assumption. Step 3 derives from Steps 1 and 2 by modus ponens. Step 4 is another self-evident assumption. Step 5 derives from Steps 3 and 4 by modus ponens. Step 6 derives from Steps 1 and 5 by modus ponens. Step 7 is yet another self-evident assumption. Step 8 derives from Steps 6 and 7 by modus ponens and is, as Boethius puts it, “an impious assertion.” Step 9, the conclusion, derives from Steps 1 through 8 by reductio ad absurdum.

Our basic assumption was that all things that are are good. But, as we have just seen, they cannot be so either by participation or by virtue of their substance. And since these seem to be the only possible alternatives we are faced with a dilemma. How are we to overcome it?

The Solution

Mentally separating that which is not actually separable, we remove from our minds the presence of the first good. Now, supposing that all things that exist are good, we ask ourselves how this could be so if they did not derive from the first good. According to Boethius we notice immediately that it is one thing for existent things to be good and quite another thing for them to be. (Axiom V) To show us that this is indeed the case, he considers a substance which is white, round, heavy and good. If the substance were not different from its roundness, heaviness, whiteness and goodness, then the identification of the substance with its attributes would lead us to identify the attributes with one another and this, as Boethius says, is “contrary to nature.”

What about the suggestion

5 Boethius, De Hebdomadibus, 105-106.
that good things might be nothing else but good, i.e. possessing only the quality of goodness? If this were the case then, according to Boethius, we might more properly consider them (or rather it) to be the principle of things rather than things (or a thing). (Axiom IV) There is only one thing that is simply good and we have prescinded from that. We can conclude from this that while things separated from the first good may be good, their very being will not be good. Now comes the crucial passage:

But since they are not simple, they could not even exist at all unless that which is the one sole good had willed them to exist. They are called good simply because their existence has derived from the will of the good. For the first good, since it exists, is good in virtue of its existence; but the secondary good, since it has derived from that whose existence is itself good, is itself also good. 6 (Axioms IV, VH& VIII)

So, the existence of good things depends on the will of the first good. In the case of the first good, its being and goodness are identical. Just as the being of particular things is derived from the will of the first good, so too is the goodness attached to that being. We might erroneously conclude from this fact that particular things are like the first good because they too are good in virtue of their substance. There is, however, a difference. The goodness of the being of particular things is not good under all circumstances but is so simply because of its derivation from the will of the first good. The being of the first good is good under all circumstances since it is simply good. So, the particular being of things is good but it is not like the being of the first good since the one derives from the other. (Axioms IV & VI)

Therefore, the first good being removed from these things by a mental process, these things, though they might be good, yet could not be good in virtue of their existence, and since they could not actually have existed unless that which is truly good had produced them, therefore their existence is good and yet that which has derived from the substantial good is not like its source.7

If things did not derive their being from the will of the first good it is still possible that they could be good (perhaps, e.g. by participation) but their very being could, not be good. Since particular beings cannot be separated from the first good except by a mental process we may conclude that: 1. all things depend for their being on the will of the first good; 2. the being of all things is good; and 3. although the being of all things is derived

6 Boethius, De Hebdomadibus, 117-125.
7 Boethius, De Hebdomadibus, 140-146.
from the will of the first good all things are not thereby like it since there is nothing like it save itself.

Boethius wants to salvage the transcendental character of goodness without allowing it to usurp the unique position of the first good. The derivation of the being of all things from the will of the first good establishes the goodness of particular things and, at the same time, establishes an essential difference between the being of particular things and the being of the first good. Boethius concludes the tractate by considering and refuting some objections.

**Objection #1**
If things which are good are so by virtue of their being, why are they not, say, white by virtue of their being?

**Response**
Boethius points to the difference between accidental and substantial predication. To be is one thing, to be white is quite another. (Axiom V) That from which things derive their being is good by its very nature but it is not white. It accords with the will of the first good that things be good by virtue of their being but not white by virtue of their being. If something is white then it is so because it was willed to be so by someone who is not himself essentially white.

**Objection #2**
Why then is not everything just? (And here, unlike the response to the previous objection, we surely do not want to claim that God is not just!)

**Response**
In order to reply to his objection, Boethius distinguishes between essence and action. Goodness is a characteristic of what someone is: justice is a characteristic of what someone does. While being and action are one and the same thing in God they cannot be equated in his creatures. We are not simply beings. Our being is not identical with our actions so we are good by virtue of our being but we are not just by virtue of our being. (Axioms IV, VII & VIII)
The Axioms

How are we to understand the axioms that Boethius presents to us? Are they merely a set of random principles which he kept by him on his desk for use in the writing of theological tractates? Or are they something more than that? Is there, for example, some order or systematic connection between them such as to render them especially suitable for the task in hand? If we rely naively on Boethius’s statement that he is going to proceed in a mathematical manner we might be betrayed by our twentieth-century sophistication into treating the axioms as if they were constituents of a modern axiomatic system. As such we would expect them to be logically independent of one another and more or less equally fundamental to the system. On inspection, however, the axioms turn out to be concerned with a very few topics, namely, being, that which is, simplicity and complexity. Axioms II-VIII appear to contain three central theses plus some commentary on them, while the less centrally important axioms I and IX have ancillary functions.

Axiom I
A common conception of the mind is defined as “a. statement which anyone accepts as soon as he hears it.” Two types of these are distinguished: one which is obvious to all men; and the other which is obvious only to the learned.

Axioms II-VIII

Basic Thesis 1

Esse and id quod est are different (II)

Comment A (II)

Esse is not yet, whereas id quod est is as soon as it receives the form which gives it being.

Comment B (III)

Esse does not participate in anything in any way, whereas id quod est can participate in something.

Comment C (IV)

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Boethius, De Hebdomadibus, 18-19.
Esse cannot possess anything outside itself, whereas id quod est can.

Basic Thesis 2
Merely to be something and to be something in virtue of existence are different (V)

Comment A (V)
To be something signifies accident, whereas to be something in virtue of existence signifies substance.

Comment B (VI)
To be something requires accidentals participation, whereas to be something in virtue of existence requires substantial participation.

Comment C (VI)
Accidental participation presupposes substantial participation.

Basic Thesis 3
Simple things and composite things are different

Comment A (VII & VIII)
In simple things esse and id quod est are unified, whereas in composite things esse is one thing and id quod est another.

Axiom IX
The principle contained in this axiom simply states the identity of natures of any two things one of which seeks the other.

Comments on the Axioms
Axiom I
This first axiom is obviously procedural. It indicates that the remaining eight axioms are to be understood as common conceptions of the mind of the kind intelligible only to the learned. The presentation of such recondite theses is in keeping with the remarks Boethius makes in the introduction to the tractate to the effect that such obscure brevity

9 This thesis is not explicitly stated as such in the text. However, given the syntactical format of the two previous basic theses I do not think it too far-fetched to suppose that this is what Boethius had in mind.
has the immeasurable advantage of communicating one’s meaning only to those worthy of receiving it.

Axioms II-VIII

Basic Thesis 1.

Esse and id quod est are different

As James Collins remarks “Among the outstanding philosophical difficulties presented by the Opuscula Sacra is the determination of the exact meaning for Boethius of the binary of esse and id quod est.” For P. Duhem, quod est signifies the really existing concrete thing whereas esse signifies the specific nature or form common to all individuals in the same species. Roland-Gosselin, on the other hand, gives an essentially essentialistic account of the distinction. For him quod est signifies total essence whereas esse is a constitutive part of that essence. According to H. Brosch, quod est signifies the concrete essence while quo est (or esse) signifies the abstract or formal essence. Brosch also alerts us to the fact that Latin philosophical terminology of the period was neither firmly fixed nor unequivocal. He is not the only person to sound such a warning note. J. de Vries points out that if Boethius was not aware of the distinction between essence and existence then he could hardly have intended esse to signify either meaning of the term to the exclusion of the other. In agreement with de Vries, V. Schurr claims that for Boethius esse sometimes means essence, sometimes existence, with the essential connotation taking precedence on most occasions of use. He points to the later sections of the De Hebdomadibus as one place where the existential use is almost surely to be located. (It will be remembered that this is the section of the tractate in which Boethius remarks on the production of good things from the will of the first good.) To C. Fay, esse sometimes signifies form, sometimes essence, and sometimes actual existence. Fay agrees with Schurr in claiming that towards the end of the De Hebdomadibus esse takes on an existential connotation.

In view of all this it is difficult not to agree with F. Sassen’s suggestion that we adopt the neutral term ‘being’ as the translation for esse so as to avoid attributing

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10 James Collins, “Progress and Problem in the Reassessment of Boethius,” The Modern Schoolman Vol. XXIII, no. 1, (1945), 1-23. In this section I am following very closely Collins’ historical survey of the various interpretations which have been given to this crucial distinction. Precise references to the authors mentioned may be found in his article. See also Sr. H. V. Clare, “Whether Everything That is. Is Good: Marginal Notes on St. Thomas’s Exposition of Boethius’s De Hebdomadibus,” Laval Theologique et Philosophique Vol. III, no. 1, (1947), 66-76; Vol. III, no. 2, (1947), 177-194; Vol. V, no. 1, 1949), 119-140.
11 Cf. also Boethius, De Trinitate, 20ff.
12 According to Fay, this section of the Tractate contains Boethius’s central insight, which is that since “creatures are not simple, they could not in any way exist unless that which is solely good had willed them to be. Creatures are good in their existence inasmuch as their existence proceeds from the will of the first good, which is good in what it is.” (Fay, p. 170)
to Boethius a terminological precision not warranted by the fluid state of seventh century Latin philosophical terminology.

Comment A.

For *esse* is not yet but *quod est* is as soon as it has received the form which gives it being.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas all three comments on Basic Thesis 1 point to a difference in the mode of signification of the two terms, *esse* and *quod est*.

Nor is all this to be referred to existent things themselves, of which he has not yet spoken. He is here referring to a way of thinking or to intention. Moreover by *esse*, one meaning is signified; by *id quod est*, another is signified, just as ‘to run’ signifies something different from what ‘that which runs’ signifies; for ‘running’ and ‘being’ signify abstract concepts such as whiteness whereas ‘that which is’ (*quod est*), i.e. being (*ens*) and running (*currens*), signify concrete realities, as white describes a concrete reality.\(^{13}\)

*Esse* and *quod est* signify the same thing but they do so in different ways: *quod est* signifies concretely and *esse* signifies abstractly. *Esse* is that by which *quod est* exists: in itself, it cannot be said to exist.

Comment B.

*Quod est* can participate in something, but *ipsum esse* does not participate in any way in anything.

*Ipsum esse* cannot participate in anything for the simple reason that only what already is can participate and, as we know from Comment A, *ipsum esse* is not yet. It is apparent that the only sense of ‘participation’ entertained here is the participation by a previously existing substance in an accidental form. In his commentary, St. Thomas, having distinguished three types of participation, has this to say:

I shall pass however to the third way of participating, since it is impossible according to the first two ways for absolute *esse* to participate in anything; for it cannot participate in the way that matter participates in form or accident participates in a subject because, as was said, *esse* itself signifies something apart. Nor can it participate as particular participates in a universal, for those things spoken of as a part can participate in something as whiteness in colour, but being itself (*ipsum esse*) is present in all things: whence others participate in it

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\(^{13}\) St. Thomas Aquinas, “In Librum Boetii De Hebdomadibus Expositio,” which can be found as Opuscula LXII in Sanctii Thomae Aquinatis, *Opera Omnia*, Tomus XVIII, (New York: Musurgia Publishers, 1948). I have availed myself of a partial translation of St. Thomas’ commentary which is to be found in Mary T. Clark, *An Aquinas Reader* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 51-54.
but it does not participate in anything else. But that-which-is, a being (ens), although this is a most common expression, is nevertheless referring to something concrete and so it participates in being itself (ipsum esse) not as the more common is participated in by the less common, but it participates in ipsum esse as the concrete participates in the abstract.\textsuperscript{14}

Comment C.

\textit{Quod est} can possess something besides what it is itself. But \textit{ipsum esse} has no admixture of aught besides itself.

Since \textit{ipsum esse} is not yet, and since only what already is can participate, then it follows that ipsum esse cannot possess anything beside itself. In general, we cannot attribute to something abstractly signified anything other than that which is part of that thing so signified. For example: white, \textit{qua} white, is coloured but not soft or triangular; man, \textit{qua} man, is rational, but not tall or beautiful.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Basic Thesis 2.}

Merely to be something and to be something in virtue of existence are different.

This thesis distinguishes between being something in a qualified manner and being something essentially, between \textit{quod esse simpliciter} and \textit{id quod est aliquid}.\textsuperscript{16}

Comment A.

To be something signifies an accident, to be something in virtue of existence signifies substance.

The most obvious manifestation of the difference between being something and being something in virtue of existence is to be found in the modes of existence of substance and accident. A substance is a thing signified in an unqualified manner; an accident is what is signified by a qualification.

\textsuperscript{14} St. Thomas Aquinas, “In Librum Boetii De Hebdomadibus Expositio.”

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Boethius, \textit{De Trinitate}, II, 43-41: “. . . forms cannot be substrates. For if humanity, like other forms, is a substrate for accidents, it does not receive accidents through the fact that it exists, but through the fact that matter is subjected to it. For when the matter which is subject to humanity receives any accident, humanity itself seems to receive it. But form which is without matter will not be able to be a substrate, nor indeed to be in matter, else it would not be a form but an image.”

\textsuperscript{16} See note 4 above.
Comment B.

Everything that is participates in esse in order to exist but it participates in something else in order to be something.

This comment introduces a broader notion of participation than was previously entertained. (Axiom III)\(^{17}\)

Comment C.

*Quod est* participates in esse in order to be but it exists in order to participate in something else.

This comment points out that substantial participation is presupposed by accidental participation. This correlates with what was said about participation in Axiom III. There it was noted that *ipsum esse* could not participate in any way, for only what already is (i.e. only what already participates (broad sense) in substantial form) can participate (narrow sense) in accidental form.\(^{18}\)

Basic Thesis 3.

Simple things and composite things are different.\(^{19}\)

Comment A.

Every simple thing possesses as a unity its *esse* and its *id quod est*, while in every composite thing *esse* is one thing and *id quod est* another.

According to St. Thomas, it is at this point that Boethius moves from the intentional to the real order:

\(^{17}\) Fay has this to say: “Here, participation is used in the broad sense as equivalent to any reception, and not in the strict sense as the reception of a determination extraneous to the original form or essence of a thing.” (Fay, p.171)

\(^{18}\) Professor Ralph McInerny warns us against making the blunder of thinking that we are here dealing with three distinct participations: “It would of course be absurd to suppose that there are three participations being distinguished here: participation in ipsum esse, participation in esse substantiate, participation in esse aliquid. . . . Esse Commune is immediately divided into esse substantiate and esse accidential, per prius et posterius; these are not species of a generic esse. Rather, the one is esse simpliciter, the other esse secundum quid.” (McInerny, 237-238) Ralph McInerny, “Boethius and St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Revista di Filosofia neo-scolastica*, (Anno LXVI 1974), Fasc. II-IV, 219-245.

\(^{19}\) See note 9 above.
We should reflect that what was previously said about the difference between *esse* and *id quod est* was according to the mode of knowing; here, however, he indicates how it is applied to things. First, he shows this in regard to composite things; second, in regard to simple things such as; in every simple thing its *esse* and its *id quod est* are one. Therefore, we must consider that just as *esse* and *id quod est* differ in simple things as mental intentions, so in composite things they really differ.20

In simple being the *esse* and the *quod est* are unified, i.e., that by which the simple being is and that which the simple being is one and the same. There is obviously only one such Being despite the inference which might be drawn from the manner in which Boethius expresses himself in axiom VII. (Angels, though simpler than we, in that they are not composed of matter and form, are nevertheless not entirely simple since their essence and existence are not identical.) Composite beings do not have that by which they are identical with that which they are: that by which they are is something other than they possess in themselves.

The philosophical significance of the tractate is three-fold. First, in its treatment of the relationship between being and goodness, it adumbrates the high mediaeval notion of the transcendental. Second, it provides a clear example of a particular philosophical methodology in action. Boethius has a firm grip on a small set of basic metaphysical principles. A specific problem is analysed with an eye to the eventual application of these principles. The principles are indeed applied and the problem is solved. It is clear from the tractate that Boethius is conscious of his *modus operandi*. Neither the particular set of axioms employed, nor the use made of them, is in any way accidental. The procedure is not limited in use to the particular problem under discussion. Finally, even if the tractate were no more than a source of St. Thomas’s real distinction, it would deserve our attention. But it is more than that. It provides us with a clear example of early Latin philosophical method (as we have seen) and, equally importantly, an example of an attempt to forge philosophically sensitive terminology from recalcitrant linguistic material. As such it reminds us of the fluid and nuanced character of all philosophical terminology and it should send us back to a study of St. Thomas’s own works with a renewed interest in discovering what St. Thomas himself has to say when the layers of exposition and interpretation are stripped away.

20 St. Thomas Aquinas, “In Libro Boetii De Hebdomadibus Expositio.”