How does God's Knowledge Differ from Tiresias' Oracles? Revisiting Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V

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1.

As formulated by Boethius himself, the well-known question raised in Book V of *The Consolation of Philosophy* appears to share certain features with some of the puzzles discussed today under the heading of the paradox of predictability.[1] On the one hand, we encounter an oracular intelligence ("Laplacean Intelligence") capable of predicting all events that will occur; on the other, an agent who, while not strictly counter-predictive, nonetheless claims the possibility – *qua* a being endowed with free will – of escaping any form of epistemic determination. If the Oracular Intelligence is genuinely capable, on the basis of its own knowledge or science, of predicting everything that will happen – even the intention of certain agents to act counter-predictively – then the universe in question can only be strictly deterministic, and the very possibility of acting counter-predictively becomes meaningless. If, by contrast, we admit the possibility that those subject to the knowledge of the Oracular Intelligence can in fact act in a counter-predictive manner,

[1] The paradox was famously formulated by Michael Scriven; see M. Scriven, "An Essential Unpredictability in Human Behavior", in *Scientific Psychology: Principles and Approaches*, ed. B.B. Wolman, E. Nagel, New York 1965, 411-425. See also D.K. Lewis, J.S. Richardson, "Scriven on human unpredictability", in *Philosophical Studies*, 17 (1966), 69-74; L.D. Roberts, "Scriven and MacKay on Unpredictability and Free Choice", in *Mind*, 84 (1975), 284-288. I refer here primarily to the way in which Jennan Ismael revisited the paradox in terms of the contrast between (natural) oracles and counterpredictive devices. See J. Ismael, "The Paradox of Predictability", in Ead., *How Physics Makes Us Free*, New York-Oxford 2016, 169-182; Ead., "Determinism, Counterpredictive Devices, and the Impossibility of Laplacean Intelligences", in *The Monist*, 102 (2019), 478-498.

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the Oracular Intelligence thereby ceases to be such, and its predictions prove to be merely probabilistic or doxastic.

What, then, would happen if we were to posit the existence of a rational agent or epistemic subject who, like the Laplacean Intelligence, is able to know the universe both in its general laws and in its individual details, and therefore to predict everything, but who is external to the universe itself and does not belong to it? In such a case, no interfering effect would arise – as occurs when the intelligence in question is itself part of the universe whose events it anticipates – and the predictions of this rational subject would, by definition, be infallible. In short, what would happen if we replaced Laplace's 'demon' with the God of the late antique and medieval Christian tradition, for instance with Boethius' God? This is precisely the issue I wish to address: namely, the problem of the compatibility between an omniscient and infallible rational subject – who knows everything with absolute certainty – and the possibility of preserving a margin of unpredictability, and thus of free will, within such a determinate (or indeed so deterministic) system.

There are, of course, many elements that distinguish the scenario of Book V of the *Consolation* from contemporary debates on predictability. I shall confine myself to mentioning two. First, the Laplacean Intelligence may be conceived as an 'extrinsic predictor', but may also, in a certain sense, belong to the very system whose behaviour it predicts; Boethius' God, by contrast, as already anticipated, is entirely external to the system itself and shares none of its characteristics. Secondly, Boethius explicitly speaks of human free will, not of counter-predictive behaviour. And yet what most clearly characterises Boethius' approach to the problem of free will – distinguishing it from that of his predecessors, and in part also from that of later authors who engage with it – is precisely the issue of unpredictability, or rather the relationship between human action and an epistemic subject (an Oracular Intelligence) that is omniscient and, above all, by definition infallible. The "epistemic objection" that Boethius raises against Philosophy in the third prose of Book V is far less naïve than it is sometimes taken to be, and in fact constitutes the very core of Boethius' argument. If God knows in a determined and necessary way events that are in themselves contingent and unpredictable (first case), then He is mistaken in every act of knowledge concerning events of this kind, and therefore cannot be infallible or omniscient at all; if God knows in a contingent

way events that are genuinely unpredictable and contingent (second case), then His knowledge is of a doxastic nature, and His predictions are reduced to mere conjectures of human soothsayers – depowered natural oracles – such as Tiresias; if, finally, God is able to predict all human behaviour in an absolutely infallible manner (third case), then such behaviour is not unpredictable at all, but rather subject to absolute predictability. In this last case, the problem becomes that of determining whether such predictability – precisely what Lady Philosophy and Boethius uphold – is compatible or incompatible with effective freedom on the part of human beings.

I believe that insufficient attention has been paid to the way in which the epistemic objection raised by Boethius in the third prose gives rise, from that point until the conclusion of Book V, to two distinct problems:

[P1] how God can know in a determinate and infallible way events that are contingent in themselves, without deceiving Himself as to their nature and without resorting to merely opinion-based or doxastic knowledge;

[P2] how human free will can remain indeterminate even if we admit God's infallible knowledge of all events, including those brought about by human agents.

The failure to distinguish clearly – or the tendency to conflate – these two problems lies, in my view, at the root of several of the interpretative difficulties that have characterised the reception of Boethius' solution.

It is from this perspective, then, that I intend to reread the fifth book of the *Consolation*. More specifically, I propose to show four things:

(a) that at least two of the three pillars traditionally regarded as fundamental components of Boethius' solution (or even as its very core) – namely, the principle according to which everything that is known depends essentially on the faculty that knows it, and not vice versa, and the doctrine of the absolute timelessness of divine knowledge – must be interpreted as specific arguments devised to circumvent the epistemic objection raised by Boethius [P1], rather than as arguments directly intended to support the freedom of human agency [P2];

(b) that Boethius' true solution in fact rests on the distinction between absolute necessity and hypothetical necessity, and, at a deeper level, on the distinction between the absolute modal status intrinsic to events and their relative and extrinsic modal status;

(c) that Boethius' solution only makes sense if we abandon any "libertarian" interpretation of it and instead adopt a strictly compatibilist (or even super-compatibilist) perspective;

(d) that the freedom of choice Boethius seeks to safeguard is essentially 'potestative', that is, grounded in the fact of making one's own choices and being the source of one's own agency, rather than freedom understood in a synchronic and counterfactual sense (as the possibility of acting otherwise at that very moment).

2.

In Book I of the *Monarchia*, Dante laments the fact that everyone has the Boethian definition of free will on their lips, while very few truly understand it – just as the logicians of his time do with the definition of the triangle:

> […] principium primum nostre libertatis est libertas arbitrii, quam multi habent in ore, in intellectu vero pauci. Veniunt nanque usque ad hoc: ut dicant liberum arbitrium esse liberum de voluntate iudicium; et verum dicunt, sed importatum per verba longe est ab eis, quemadmodum tota die logici nostri faciunt de quibusdam propositionibus, que ad exemplum logicalibus interseruntur (puta de hac: "triangulus habet tres duobus rectis equales").[2]

Dante is clearly referring here to the formula used by Boethius in his second commentary on the *De interpretatione*, in which free will is in effect defined as *liberum nobis de voluntate iudicium* ("free judge-

[2] Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, I xii 2, ed. P. Chiesa, A. Tabarroni, with the cooperation of D. Ellero (Nuova Edizione Commentata delle Opere di Dante [NECOD] 4), Roma 2013, 48; tr. P. Shaw, Cambridge 1995 (https://danteonline.it/opere/index.php?opera=Monarchia%20-%20ed.%20Shaw): "[…] the first principle of our freedom is free will, which many people talk about but few understand. For they go so far as to say that free will is free judgment in matters of volition. And what they say is true, but they are very far from understanding what the words mean, just like our logicians who daily enunciate certain propositions by way of example in their discussions on logic, such as 'a triangle has three angles equal to two right angles".

ment in matters of volition").[3] Yet what Dante writes could, without difficulty, be applied to Boethius' more extensive and celebrated treatment of human free will in the fifth book of the *Consolation of Philosophy*. In this sense, Dante's words may be taken not merely as a bitter observation, but almost as a kind of curse: for it seems to have been impossible, so far, to arrive at a shared interpretation of the solution Boethius proposes concerning the relationship between divine science and human free will.

I do not pretend to resolve this issue definitively in the present paper – such a claim would be an intolerable presumption. What I would like to attempt, however, is a clarification, or rather a disambiguation, of certain elements of Boethius' solution, and especially an examination of the way in which they fit together. Since, as mentioned above, one of my aims is to show that Boethius does not hold a 'libertarian' conception of free will, as we would describe it today, but rather a strictly 'compatibilist' one – and since this conviction diverges from what is explicitly or implicitly assumed by some of the most authoritative interpreters of the fifth book of the *Consolatio*[4] – it seems appro-

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[3] A. M. S. Boethius, *In librum Aristotelis De interpretatione, editio secunda,* III, c. 9, ed. K. Meiser, Leipzig 1880, 196.14.

[4] My main interlocutor in this case will be perhaps the most refined interpreter of Boethius' philosophy, i.e. John Marenbon. I will refer primarily to J. Marenbon, "Divine Prescience and Contingency in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*", in *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, 68 (2013), 9-21 and even more to *Le temps, l'eternité et la prescience de Boèce a Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris 2005, ch. 2, 21-54. To summarise the points of convergence and divergence between my interpretation and Marenbon's: I agree with Marenbon in believing that the interpretation of eternity as timelessness alone does not constitute the true fulcrum of Boethius' solution. However, I do not agree with Marenbon's choice to identify this core in the peculiar nature of divine knowledge (an "epistemic" solution), his inclination, in my view, to describe Boethius as a "libertarian", and his decision to separate the question of foreknowledge from that of providence or causality. By contrast, I would argue that: (i) Boethius adopts a "compatibilist" rather than a "libertarian" perspective; (ii) in Boethius, divine science is inseparable from providence, and from the causal order of the world; (iii) that the core of Boethius' solution lies in the distinction between absolute necessity and hypothetical necessity, which in turn refers to the idea that *in se* – that is, considered independently of the constraint or epistemic clause of divine knowledge – human events and actions retain an intrinsically contingent nature (the same events are, however, necessary when related *ad aliud*, that is, extrinsically, to divine science and providence). An indeterministic interpretation of Boethius is also defended, as far as I can see, in S. Knuuttila, *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy,* London-New York 1993, 45-62, esp.

priate to clarify in advance what I mean, in this specific context, by these positions ('compatibilism', 'incompatibilism'). This is not done in order to explain what is already well known, but rather to avoid any possible misunderstanding or *fallacia aequivocationis*, since in matters of this kind it is the nuances, even the smallest ones, that make the difference.

By 'libertarians' I mean the proponents of that form of incompatibilism which denies precisely the compatibility of freedom with one or more forms of determinism (for instance, natural causal determinism), and therefore maintains that freedom is possible only if a certain degree of indeterminacy is postulated. Not all incompatibilists, of course, are 'libertarians': an incompatibilist might also be a 'hard determinist', that is, someone who believes that the world has a deterministic structure and that, because of the incompatibility between determinism and freedom, the latter is impossible.

By 'compatibilism' I mean, in a symmetrical and corresponding manner, the position of those who hold that freedom is by no means incompatible with determinism – and, this is the crucial qualification in the present context, with any form of determinism, and not merely with that imposed by physical or natural laws. Even this initial and general characterisation does not, in itself, commit one either to affirming or to denying the existence of freedom: compatibilism, taken simply as such, allows that freedom is possible even within a deterministic structure or system, that is, that there are "possible worlds that contain free beings, even if all the events that occur in those worlds are determined".[5] A super-compatibilist position, by contrast, is one which maintains that freedom is possible only within a deterministic system.

49-55; R. W. Sharples, "Fate, prescience and free will", in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. J. Marenbon, Cambridge 2009, 207-227; R. Fedriga, *La sesta prosa. Discussioni medievali su prescienza, libertà e contingenza*, Milano-Udine 2015, 39-58. In contrast, K. Rogers does not seem to rule out a compatibilist perspective; see K. Rogers, "Defending Boethius: Two Case Studies in Charitable Interpretation", in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 51 (2011), 241-257. I find Noble's recent interpretation, in an openly compatibilist sense (with an interesting reference to the possible Proclean roots), very convincing and plausible; see C. I. Noble, "All That Heaven Allows: Boethius on Divine Foreknowledge, Contingency, and Free Choice", in *Phronesis*, 69 (2024), 182-225.

[5] See, for instance, M. De Caro, *Il libero arbitrio. Una introduzione*, Roma-Bari 2009, 24, footnote 55.

Having made these elementary clarifications concerning the relationship between freedom and determinism, it is perhaps necessary to explain how I understand 'freedom' and 'free will' in the present discussion. First of all – and this may again seem a superfluous clarification – the two notions do not coincide, not only in contemporary debates, but already in medieval ones, to the point of legitimising formulas that may appear pleonastic or tautological to us, such as (for example, in Anselm of Canterbury) *libertas liberi arbitrii*, "freedom of free will". The dividing line between these two notions, however, does not always correspond, in the Middle Ages, to the one we might draw today.[6] In very general terms, freedom may be understood as the self-determination that characterises a rational agent or power, regardless of the manner in which it acts, whereas free will concerns precisely the way in which that same agent decides to act or operate. Freedom is thus – for most medieval philosophers and theologians – a feature pertaining to the nature or essence of a rational agent (and hence to its will, its intellect, or the combination of the two), and which underlies the possibility of choosing and acting; free will, by contrast, is the actual capacity to make choices, that is, to opt among the various alternatives available. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to assume constancy or homogeneity in the use of these notions throughout the Middle Ages, which span no less than ten centuries.

Thus, in medieval debates, freedom may signify, for example:

1. the mere absence of external coercion or compulsion;

2. independence with respect to any material condition, that is, the capacity to direct oneself towards an end identified by abstracting from sensible data, and thus from matter in general;

3. the ability to do otherwise, in a synchronic and counterfactual sense;

4. or, finally, full mastery or dominion over one's own acts and the objects of one's own acts, in accordance with what is commonly referred to as the 'potestative' aspect of acting.[7]

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[6] I take the liberty of referring in this regard to P. Porro, "Trasformazioni medievali della libertà/1. Alla ricerca di una definizione del libero arbitrio" and "Trasformazioni medievali della libertà/2. Libertà e determinismo nei dibattiti scolastici", both in *Libero arbitrio. Storia di una controversia filosofica*, ed. M. De Caro, M. Mori, E. Spinelli, Roma 2014, 171-190 and 191-221.

[7] See G. Alliney, *Il nodo nel giunco. Le questioni sulla libertà di Enrico di Gand*,

At this preliminary stage, this suffices to show that there may exist agents endowed with freedom, in one or even several of the senses just distinguished, but not with free will in the strict sense, if the latter – understood as an operative capacity to choose – implies a form of mutability or the possibility of opting for a lesser good or even for evil (a full capacity to choose evidently entails, in this sense, the possibility of sinning, which Christian theology denies to certain free agents – God, the angels, and the blessed). Conversely, there may be agents endowed with free will, but not properly with freedom. To cite an example predating medieval discussions, it suffices to recall that, in responding to perhaps his most difficult and challenging opponent, Julian of Eclanum, Augustine had already observed that, as a result of Adam's sin, humanity lost its freedom to possess full justice together with immortality (a freedom that can only be restored through grace), but did not lose the free will by which the sinner consents to sin. Freedom is understood by Augustine, at least in this context, as freedom from sin or injustice, whereas, inversely, sinners are freed from justice through their will.[8] Thus, for Augustine, as a consequence of original sin, human beings lost their freedom, but not their free will – and this, too, may be an important indication for understanding, in my view, Boethius' later position.[9]

As for the Boethian definition of free will recalled above – the one taken from the second commentary on the *De interpretatione: liberum nobis de voluntate iudicium*[10] – it conveys a manifestly 'intellectualist' interpretation of free will: free will is not a judgement made by the will, but a judgement of reason concerning matters of volition, that is, what pertains to the will. The Latin formulation leaves no room for alternative interpretations, and the act of judging is very explicitly referred by Boethius to the sphere of reason. Alongside Siger of Brabant, Godfrey of Fontaines, and Dante, Boethius may thus rightly be regarded as one of the most radical intellectualists of the Middle Ages.[11]

Bari 2009, 35-36 and 47.

[8] See Augustinus Hipponensis, *Contra Iulianum <opus imperfectum>*, I, cc. 79 and 82, ed. M. Zelzer (CSEL 85/1), Wien 1974, 94.16-17 and 96.16-20.

[9] Indeed, Boethius himself seems to distinguish, in the *Consolatio*, between free choice and the freedom we can attain by turning towards the divine mind (IV, pr. 6; V, pr. 2).

[10] Cf. *supra*, footnote 3.

[11] Boethius, *In librum Aristotelis De interpretatione, editio secunda,* III, c. 9, ed.

By contrast, we do not find in Boethius an equally explicit definition of freedom, and it is probably precisely his understanding of freedom that is decisive for a correct or at least plausible interpretation of the solution proposed in Book V of the *Consolation*. For present purposes, and by further specifying what has already been said, it may be useful to recall that freedom can, in general, be traced back to two essential conditions – conditions that are still, to some extent, accepted today and that do not necessarily coincide or overlap:

- mastery over one's own actions, that is, the agent's 'potestative' capacity mentioned earlier: the fact that actions proceed from the conscious and deliberate activity of the agent;
- the possibility of acting otherwise.

The latter condition clearly involves a counterfactual dimension, insofar as it refers to the possibility for a subject to do something different, or even contrary, to what he or she is doing, with reference to the same instant (according to the model that John Duns Scotus would later formalise in terms of strictly synchronic possibility or contingency).[12] This counterfactual dimension, however, may itself be understood at different levels: for example, with respect to the current order of things; with respect to another possible world; or with respect to the totality of possible worlds.

The first condition of freedom – conscious or deliberate mastery over one's own actions – primarily concerns voluntariness: I am free to the extent that I do what I (consciously) want to do. As noted above, these two conditions are not always found together and can indeed come apart, as is famously illustrated by the thought experiment proposed by John Locke in Book II of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, to which I shall return shortly.

Meiser, 196.25-197.2: "hoc est enim uti ratione, uti iudicatione. omne enim commune nobis est cum ceteris animantibus, sola ratione disiungimur. quod si sola etiam iudicatione inter nos et cetera animalia distantia, cur dubitemus ratione uti hoc esse quod est uti iudicatione?". On the history of intellectualism in later scholastic debates (13th century), see F.-X. Putallaz, *Insolente liberté. Controverses et condamnations au XIIIe siècle*, Fribourg-Paris 1995.

[12] See S. D. Dumont, "The Origin of Scotus's Theory of Synchronic Contingency", in *The Modern Schoolman*, 72 (1995), 149-167.

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I have not recalled all these distinctions and elements for the sake of redundancy, nor for merely didactic purposes (which would in any case be inappropriate here). Rather, I believe that they are directly implicated in Boethius' solution to the question that dominates Book V of the *Consolatio*, to which it is now time to turn.

The first point to be emphasised – if Book V is considered within the work as a whole, and not as an entirely detached and independent section – is that, when we begin to address the last and perhaps most intractable of the problems Boethius raises to Lady Philosophy, we already know the solution for the most part, much as in those detective stories in which the solution is presented from the outset and it is merely a matter of guiding the reader towards an understanding of how it is to be reached. Indeed, Boethius has already made it clear in Book IV (sixth prose) that fate is nothing other than "the arrangement present in things subject to movement, through which providence binds each thing in its own proper order": "fatum vero inhaerens rebus mobilibus dispositio, per quam providentia suis quaeque nectit ordinibus".[13] Everything that is subject to fate is therefore subject to providence, which in truth also embraces those realities that lie beyond the mutability of fate. And since providence extends to all things, we already know that all earthly events or states of affairs are included within an immutable and all-encompassing order:

> Ordo enim quidam cuncta complectitur, ut quod ab adsignata ordinis ratione decesserit, hoc licet in alium, tamen ordinem relabatur, ne quid in regno providentiae liceat temeritati.[14]

To forestall any possible misunderstanding or objection, it should be recalled that already in Book IV of the *Consolation* Boethius (through

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[13] A. M. S. Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, IV, pr. 6, ed. C. Moreschini, in Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae. Opuscula theologica. Editio altera* (Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana), München-Leipzig 2005, 122.32-33; tr. R. W. Sharples in Cicero, *On Fate (De Fato)* and Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy (Philosophiae Consolationis)*, IV.5-7, V, ed. with an Introduction, translations and commentaries by R. W. Sharples, Warminster 1991, 107.

[14] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, IV, pr. 6, ed. Moreschini, 128.186-129.189; tr. Sharples, 115: "For a certain ordering embraces all things, so that what departs from its place in that order falls back into an order, admittedly a different one, so that in the kingdom of providence nothing should be permitted to random chance".

Lady Philosophy) shows no hesitation in including human actions within the 'connection' of what is subject to fate and providence:

> Haec actus etiam fortunasque hominum indissolubili causarum connexione constringit; quae cum ab immobilis providentiae proficiscatur exordiis, ipsas quoque immutabiles esse necesse est.[15]

In the course of illustrating her theodicy, Philosophy goes so far as to explain to Boethius that the states and actions of the good and the wicked in this world themselves constitute the rewards and punishments of their conduct. The eschatology of the *Consolatio* is thus largely intramundane rather than otherworldly, and coincides with the providential ordering itself.[16]

That chance – and thus the Aristotelian sphere of accidental causality, to which contingent events belong – has no place in Boethius' universe is further confirmed by the first prose of Book V, which develops Aristotelian assumptions in a markedly more deterministic direction than Aristotle himself. Boethius in fact concedes what Aristotle denies (especially in *Metaphysics* VI, 3), namely the possibility of tracing all accidental causes back to a form of essential causality. If, for Aristotle, chance arises from a spontaneously generated cause that interrupts a natural chain of causal connections, for Boethius:

> Licet igitur definire casum esse inopinatum ex confluentibus causis in his quae ob aliquid geruntur eventum. Concurrere vero atque confluere causas facit ordo ille inevitabili conexione [*sic*] procedens, qui de providentiae fonte descendens, cuncta suis locis temporibusque disponit.[17]

At this point, the question with which the discussion of free will opens in V, 2 – "Sed in hac haerentium sibi serie causarum estne ulla nostri

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[15] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, IV, pr. 6, ed. Moreschini, 124.82-86; tr. Sharples, 109: "It also constrains the actions and fortunes of human beings by an indissoluble connecting of causes; since this has its starting-points in the immobility of providence, the causes too must be unalterable".

[16] As the sixth prose of Book IV clearly shows.

[17] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 1, ed. Moreschini, 138.51-56; tr. Sharples, 127-129: "[…] chance may be defined as an unexpected outcome, as the result of causes that come together, in these things that are being done for the sake of something. But the coincidence and coming together of causes is brought about by that order, advancing by unavoidable connections, which descends from providence as its source and arranges all things in their proper times and places".

arbitrii libertas, an ipsos quoque humanorum motus animorum fatalis catena constringit?"[18] – is already circumscribed and situated within a well-defined framework. On the basis of what we have seen, we can already establish – even before following the entirety of Boethius' discussion of free will – that if Boethius is an incompatibilist, he can only be a hard determinist. If, however, we rule out incompatibilism on the grounds that Boethius clearly seeks to affirm the existence of free will, we must *a fortiori* rule out any 'libertarian' reading of his position. The only remaining option, then, is to recognise Boethius as a compatibilist – and I hope that, at this point, the conclusion anticipated earlier no longer appears arbitrary.

To present the existence of providence (understood as a causal order) as a final obstacle that undermines what Boethius elaborates throughout Book V – as, for example, John Marenbon, in his influential interpretation, does – and to speak in this regard of a "*bouleversement inattendu de ce que la Philosophie avait établi par ses arguments serrés*" ("an unexpected upheaval of what Philosophy had established by her tight arguments"),[19] is to commit a *hysteron-proteron*, an inversion of terms. The problem of an all-encompassing causal connection and of providence is not a residue, an additional and external difficulty that ultimately weakens the solution devised by Boethius; rather, it is the presupposition from which – or, more precisely, the horizon within which – the Boethian solution must be situated and interpreted.

4.

Let us therefore begin from this fixed point: if Boethius intends to defend the freedom of human free will, he can do so only from a compatibilist perspective, and it is therefore Boethius' compatibilism that must be explained and interpreted. It is commonly acknowledged that Boethius' solution rests on at least three distinct pillars or building blocks:

(i) the thesis according to which everything that is known is grasped not according to its own nature, but according to the capacity of the

[18] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 2, ed. Moreschini, 138.1-139.4; tr. Sharples, 129: "But in this sequence of causes that are fastened together, is there any freedom for our choice, or are the very movements of human minds also constrained by the chain of fate?".

[19] Marenbon, *Le temps, l'éternité et la prescience de Boèce à Thomas d'Aquin*, 54.

knower ("omne enim quod cognoscitur non secundum sui vim, sed secundum cognoscentium potius comprehenditur facultatem");[20]

(ii) the timelessness or atemporality of divine knowledge or science ("Quoniam igitur omne iudicium secundum sui naturam quae sibi subiecta sunt comprehendit, est autem deo semper aeternus ac praesentarius status, scientia quoque eius, omnem temporis supergressa motionem, in suae manet simplicitate praesentiae infinitaque praeteriti ac futuri spatia complectens, omnia, quasi iam gerantur, in sua simplici cognitione considerat");[21]

(iii) the distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity ("Duae sunt etenim necessitates, simplex una, veluti quod necesse est omnes homines esse mortales, altera condicionis, ut, si aliquem ambulare scias, eum ambulare necesse est").[22]

While everyone acknowledges these three building blocks – as indeed they are explicitly formulated in the text – the real difficulty lies in determining the function each of them performs and the way in which they are related to one another. What must not be overlooked is that these elements, or at least the first two of them, are introduced by Boethius not primarily in relation to the main issue discussed in Book V (namely, that of free will), but rather in response to the celebrated 'epistemic objection' raised at the outset of the discussion, which undoubtedly constitutes Boethius' most original and significant contribution to the problem of the relationship between divine knowledge and contingent future events. The objection, in my view, is formulated with great precision:

> Sicut enim scientia ipsa impermixta est falsitati, ita id quod ab ea concipitur, esse aliter atque concipitur nequit. Ea namque causa est cur

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[20] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 4, ed. Moreschini, 149.72-75; tr. Sharples, 143.

[21] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, 6, ed. Moreschini, 157.58-64; tr. Sharples, 153: "Since therefore it is in accordance with its own nature that all judgement comprehends the things that are subject to it, and God's condition is always eternal and present, his knowledge too, surpassing all temporal change, abides in the simplicity of its own present, embracing the infinite extent of past and future, and in its simple act of knowing considers all things as if they were happening now".

[22] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, 6, ed. Moreschini, 158.100-159.103; tr. Sharples, 155: "For there are two types of necessity; one is simple, as with its being necessary that all men are mortal, the other depends on a condition, as, if you know that someone is walking, it is necessary that he be walking".

> mendacio scientia careat, quod se ita rem quamque habere necesse est uti eam sese habere scientia comprehendit. Quid igitur, quonam modo deus haec incerta futura praenoscit? Nam si inevitabiliter eventura censet quae etiam non evenire possibile est, fallitur; quod non sentire modo nefas est sed etiam voce proferre. At si ita uti sunt, ita ea futura esse decernit, ut aeque vel fieri ea vel non fieri posse cognoscat, quae est haec praescientia, quae nihil certum, nihil stabile comprehendit? Aut quid hoc refert vaticinio illo ridiculo Tiresiae: quicquid dicam aut erit aut non? Quid etiam divina providentia humana opinione praestiterit, si uti homines incerta iudicat quorum est incertus eventus?[23]

It is evidently to this passage that the question formulated in the title of this paper refers: "How does God's knowledge differ from Tiresias' oracles?". For, as anticipated, if God knows in a necessary way – and as necessary – events that are in themselves contingent, He would be constantly and structurally deceiving Himself; indeed, one might say that in this case God would be far more ignorant and fallible than most human beings. If, on the other hand, God knows human events as contingent and therefore as uncertain and mutable, how would His knowledge differ from human opinion, or indeed from Tiresias' prophecies, which grasp only the truth in a composite sense – namely, the truth of a disjunction of states of affairs (for example, 'tomorrow there will or will not be a sea battle', preserving the principle of excluded middle even if the principle of bivalence is suspended) – but not the determinate truth that concerns individual events or states of affairs?

It is in order to remedy this difficulty that Lady Philosophy introduces the first of the principles listed above – (i) that everything that is known is known not according to its own nature, but according to the

[23] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 3, ed. Moreschini, 143.59-144.77; tr. Sharples, 135: "For just as knowledge itself is unmixed with falsehood, just so that what is grasped by it cannot be otherwise than it is grasped as being. This indeed is the reason why there is no deception in knowledge, that each thing must be as knowledge understands it to be. What then? In what way does God have foreknowledge that these uncertain things are going to be? For if he judges that those things will come about inevitably which can also not come about, he is mistaken – a view that it is wrong (for us) not only to hold but even to utter. But if he judges that these things are going to be in the way that they actually are going to be, so that he realises that they can equally well come about or not come about, what is this 'foreknowledge', which grasps nothing firm or certain? Or how is this different from that ridiculous prophecy of Tiresias, 'Whatever I say either will happen or won't'? And how would divine providence be superior to human opinion, if, like human beings, it judged those things as uncertain of which the outcome is uncertain?".

capacity of the knower. This principle encapsulates the essence of that 'Copernican revolution' which philosophy textbooks are accustomed to attribute emphatically to Kant, but which in fact belongs to the centuries-old tradition of Proclean Neoplatonism.

The application of this principle to the present case allows us to maintain that what human reason apprehends as contingent may be known, at a higher level, by the divine intellect as necessary, just as what appears multiple, individual, and mutable to sense perception and imagination can be grasped as universal and stable by human reason.[24] Yet it is equally clear that this principle contributes nothing, in itself, to the central problem of human free will, except insofar as it enables us to circumvent the epistemic objection initially raised by Boethius. On the contrary, to claim that what human beings know as contingent is in fact necessary from the standpoint of a higher and truer form of knowledge does not argue in favour of the actual contingency of human actions, but rather the reverse.

The same holds true of the second principle, that of the timelessness of divine knowledge, which for many interpreters – and (at least in part) for contemporary philosophers such as Linda Zagzebski[25] – constitutes the true hinge or fulcrum of the Boethian solution.[26] Lady Philosophy explains that the manner in which God knows must be derived from the divine nature or essence, and that this nature is characterised by eternity understood as absolute timelessness. God knows everything as present, not as past or future. This principle, too, helps to clarify more fully in what sense God does not deceive Himself when knowing contingent things as necessary: for God there are no future contingents; everything is known with certainty and necessity in an eternal present.

Yet it is not difficult to see that this second principle, taken in itself, contributes very little to the defence of human free will. Once again, it is only indirectly relevant, insofar as it allows the epistemic objection to be definitively overcome. On the contrary, for an expert commentator on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* such as Boethius, the principle of

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[24] As is extensively illustrated in the fourth prose of Book V.

[25] See L. Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, New York-Oxford 1991, esp. 43-63.

[26] On this specific point, I fully agree with Marenbon.

the timelessness of divine knowledge, when directly applied to the contingency of human actions, raises more difficulties than it resolves. In the famous ninth chapter – however one interprets it – Aristotle appears to allow an exception to the principle of bivalence for propositions concerning the future, but not for those concerning the present. Paradoxically, the fact that God apprehends all events as present imposes a very strong necessity upon the events themselves: if God knows infallibly and timelessly that I shall go for a walk today, then this event could not fail to occur, not even at a purely counterfactual level, since otherwise divine knowledge would be fallible. Thus, even the principle of the timelessness or atemporality of divine knowledge – so often regarded as the keystone of the Boethian solution – does not, strictly speaking, advance the cause of human free will. If God knows infallibly everything that happens as present, then everything that happens is subject, at least, to the so-called necessity of the present (*omne quod est, quando est, necesse est esse*).

It is therefore no coincidence that Lady Philosophy hastens to introduce the third principle, almost compelled to do so by Boethius' – this time implicit – objection:

> Hic si dicas quod eventurum deus videt id non evenire non posse, quod autem non potest non evenire id ex necessitate contingere, meque ad hoc nomen necessitatis adstringas […] respondebo namque idem futurum, cum ad divinam notionem refertur, necessarium, cum vero in sua natura perpenditur, liberum prorsus atque absolutum videri.[27]

The distinction between absolute necessity and hypothetical necessity – also of Aristotelian origin – is thus, among the three pillars listed above, the one that bears most directly on the central problem of Book V, namely the question of free will, rather than on the preliminary epistemic objection raised by Boethius. Obviously, the condition or hypothesis that serves as the protasis here does not depend on human action, but on divine knowledge. Thus – however obvious this may be

[27] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 6, ed. Moreschini, 158.92-100; tr. Sharples, 155: "Here you may say that what God sees is going to happen cannot happen, and that what cannot not happen happens of necessity. If you tie me to this term of 'necessity' […] I will reply that the same thing that is going to be in the future is seen to be necessary, in relation to divine knowledge, but absolutely free and unrestricted when it is considered in its own nature".

– the hypothetical necessity to which Boethius refers is not expressed by a formula of the type 'if I do this, it is necessary for God to know' (which would also fall within the scope of the necessity of the present), since, as Boethius himself says (V, 6) it would be unworthy or even blaspheme to say that our actions are the cause of divine knowledge. The hypothetical necessity is rather expressed by a formula of this type: 'if God knows that I do this, it is necessary for me to do it'. Or to stay with our example: it is not because I have accepted to write this paper that God cannot help but know it, but: since God knows eternally and timelessly that I have accepted to write this paper, I necessarily could not help but bore the readers with this paper.

In what sense then would not the hypothetical necessity imposed by the condition of divine knowledge compromise human free will? In the first instance, one could appeal here[28] to the distinction between *necessitas consequentiae* and *necessitas consequentis*, between the necessity of the consequence [necessarily, if *p,* then *q*; $L(K_G p \dashrightarrow p)$] and the necessity of the consequent [if *p*, then necessarily *q*; $K_G p \dashrightarrow Lp$]. This is evidently a distinction known to Boethius, which we can cross with that between modality *de dicto* and modality *de re.* In other words: it was and it is not necessary in an absolute sense for me to write this paper; but under the condition of divine knowledge, that is, taking into account the fact that God from eternity knew (or, better, knows) that I would write this paper, the fact that I am writing it becomes necessary. If we were to apply the distinction, we would have to say that I, and not God, chose to accept the invitation to write this paper, however necessary my writing under the condition of divine knowledge (i.e. once God knows in his eternal present my being writing today). It is to this that Boethius seems to refer with the example of the charioteers' gestures in *Cons.* V, pr. 4 or when, in V, pr. 6, he states that our gaze adds no necessity to the things it sees present.[29]

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[28] Marenbon, on the other hand, seems rather perplexed about the real significance, in Boethius, of the distinction between absolute necessity and hypothetical necessity (as well as that between the necessity of the consequent and the necessity of the consequence) because of Boethius's fidelity to Aristotelian logic (as the logic of terms), which would prevent him from analysing inferences in a propositional sense. See Marenbon, *Le temps, l'éternité et la prescience de Boèce à Thomas d'Aquin*, esp. 44-47.

[29] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 6, ed. Moreschini, 157.73-77: "Num enim quae praesentia cernis, aliquam eis necessitatem tuus addit intuitus? Minime. Atqui si est divini humanique praesentis digna collatio, uti vos vestro hoc temporario praesenti quaedam

5.

Is this distinction sufficient to safeguard human freedom? For those interpreters who read Boethius in a 'libertarian' sense, the answer is affirmative, as – according to their interpretation – the exhortation with which the *Consolatio* concludes would demonstrate.[30] Almost all such interpreters, however, rely at this point on the principle of the timelessness of divine knowledge.[31]

I believe that the effectiveness of Boethius' solution must instead be assessed in light of the two conditions of freedom outlined above. With respect to the first condition, Boethius' account fully satisfies the requirement according to which we are free insofar as we are the origin or source of our actions. For Boethius, we are indeed the source of our actions: we deliberate about them and we perform them voluntarily;

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videtis, ita ille omnia suo cernit aeterno"; tr. SHARPLES, 153: "Surely, when you see present things, your gazing does not impart any necessity to them? Certainly not. But, if it is right to compare the divine present with the human, then, just as you see some things in this temporal present of yours, just so does God see all things in his eternal present".

[30] BOETHIUS, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 6, ed. MORESCHINI, 161.165-171: "Nec frustra sunt in deo positae spes precesque, quae, cum rectae sunt, inefficaces esse non possunt. Aversamini igitur vitia, colite virtutes, ad rectas spes animum sublevate, humiles preces in excelsa porrigite. Magna vobis est, si dissimulare non vultis, necessitas indicta probitatis, cum ante oculos agitis iudicis cuncta cernentis"; tr. SHARPLES, 157: "Nor are hopes placed in God and prayers made to him in vain; if they are righteous they cannot be without effect. So turn aside from vices, cultivate virtues, lift up your mind to righteous hopes, extend humble prayers on high. A great necessity to be good is laid upon you, if you do not want to pretend otherwise, when you act before the eyes of a judge who sees all things". But in reality, as Thomas Aquinas shows (for instance in the *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, q. 6, art. 6), the effectiveness of prayers can also (and indeed, according to Aquinas, *must*) be understood in a compatibilist sense: prayers contribute to producing the effect of divine decision, and are effective only in this role of subordinate secondary causes, but their effectiveness falls entirely within the order already established by God. In other words: it is the First Cause that enables the secondary causes to contribute to the production of the effect, and it is the foundation of their effectiveness. In this sense, it must therefore be understood that prayers are a tool that predestination uses to achieve the effect that has already been immutably established, and in this – and only in this – does their effectiveness consist. See P. PORRO, "Dalla parte di Giacobbe. Predestinazione, prescienza e provvidenza in Tommaso d'Aquino", in *Lexicon Philosophicum*, 13 (2025), 139-165.

[31] Marenbon, who questions the weight of this pillar, remains rather perplexed, complaining that Boethius ultimately remains a prisoner of the contradiction denounced above.

in this regard, the gaze of divine knowledge in no way supplants our 'potestative' capacity. In short, Boethius never doubts that our actions are deliberate and voluntary, as is clear from a crucial passage in the sixth prose:

> […] haec divina praenotio naturam rerum proprietatemque non mutat taliaque apud se praesentia spectat qualia in tempore olim futura provenient. Nec rerum iudicia confundit unoque suae mentis intuitu tam necessarie quam non necessarie ventura dinoscit, sicuti vos cum pariter ambulare in terra hominem et oriri in caelo solem videtis, quamquam simul utrumque conspectum tamen discernitis et hoc voluntarium illud esse necessarium iudicatis.[32]

Here, however, Boethius appears to be appealing to more than the mere distinction between the necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the consequent. Rather, he seems to rely on a distinction between the intrinsic modal status of a thing and its extrinsic modal status – a distinction that will later be systematised by Avicenna and the Latin scholastics in terms of an intrinsic modality (belonging to the nature of the thing, event, or state of affairs itself) and an extrinsic modality (arising from the relation of that thing, event, or state of affairs to external factors or conditions). Thus, the rising of the sun, or human mortality, are necessary *ex se*, by their very nature, just as the choice to take a walk at a given moment is contingent in itself. Yet *ex suppositione causae* or *ex suppositione finis* – or even through the mere addition of a condition or an epistemic clause – even such an event, which is contingent in an absolute sense, becomes necessary. This is ultimately the modal framework that Siger of Brabant, in *De necessitate et contingentia causarum*, contrasts with the strongly extrinsicist causal determinism defended by Thomas Aquinas. Thus, even for Boethius – if my interpretation is correct – human actions, insofar as they are voluntary, may be contingent in themselves.

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[32] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 6, ed. Moreschini, 157.77-158.85; tr. Sharples, 153: "divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and character of things, and sees things present to itself in the same way as they are going to come to be at some future time. And he does not make confused judgements about things; rather, with a single gaze of his mind he distinguishes both things that are going to come to be necessarily and those that are not, just as, when you see together a man walking on the earth and the sun rising in the sky, although you see both at the same time, you make a distinction and say that the one is voluntary, the other necessary".

The second fundamental requirement of freedom, however – the possibility of doing otherwise, that is, the counterfactual dimension of freedom – raises a more delicate issue. In this respect, the answer cannot but be qualified. In this universe, in this world, even a voluntary action could not, for Boethius, occur otherwise once divine knowledge is assumed. In an absolute or radical counterfactual scenario, by contrast – that is, in a world in which God does not exist, or in which God, in accordance with the Aristotelian position, neither cares about nor knows human affairs – voluntary actions would remain entirely contingent. This, in my view, constitutes the core of Boethius' compatibilism: human freedom of will and agency satisfies the criterion of self-determination, deliberation, and voluntariness (being the source of one's own actions), and, in an absolute sense, also satisfies a very broad counterfactual condition – namely, that of a possible world in which God either does not exist or does not know human actions, or, more simply, a world in which divine knowledge is not infallible and cannot be distinguished from the charlatan prophecies of Tiresias.

To be more precise, the counterfactual dimension of freedom is preserved for Boethius only if contingent events are isolated from external conditions (and in particular from the epistemic clause of God's knowledge) and considered solely with respect to their intrinsic modality in an absolute sense. It is not inscribed in my nature (in my DNA, as we would say today) that I must write this paper on this particular topic and at this particular time; this is a voluntary and contingent choice. Yet this is no longer the case if an oracular intelligence – returning to the question with which we began – is able to predict all my actions and behaviours infallibly and timelessly, without any possibility of interference. Thus, for Boethius, with respect to the present ordering, to this world – which for him is not merely the actual world, but perhaps also the only metaphysically possible one – a voluntary action remains non-free insofar as there is no possibility that it might not be performed, or might be performed otherwise.

Can voluntariness or self-determination, however, be dissociated from full (counterfactual) freedom? As noted earlier, Locke famously answered this question in the affirmative, through the thought experiment of a man who is transported, while asleep and without his knowledge, into a room he recognises, in which there is a person he knows and with whom he takes pleasure in conversing. The room is locked,

and he cannot leave; yet he is unaware of this constraint and, in fact, deliberates and wills to remain in the room.[33] For Boethius, human beings find themselves in an analogous situation: they will something and act freely in this respect, without knowing (except in the case of the wise) that, under the condition of divine knowledge, they could not will or act otherwise. This, ultimately, is the essence of Boethius' compatibilism:

> Fient igitur procul dubio cuncta quae futura deus esse praenoscit, sed eorum quaedam de libero proficiscuntur arbitrio, quae, quamvis eveniant, exsistendo tamen naturam propriam non amittunt, qua prius quam fierent etiam non evenire potuissent.[34]

6.

This brings me to a few concluding remarks.

(1) I hope to have shown that Boethius' solution can be properly understood only if we abandon the attempt to portray Boethius himself as a libertarian incompatibilist, and instead regard him – together with Augustine, and in particular the late Augustine of the semi-Pelagian controversy (as in *De gratia et libero arbitrio*) – as one of the founders of Christian compatibilism. It remains true that Augustine and Boethius articulate compatibilism in markedly different ways, beginning with the elementary observation that the central themes of Augustinian thought from 397 onwards – predestination, original sin, and undeserved and irresistible grace – are entirely absent from Boethius' work. Nevertheless, in both cases the possession of free will is, as such, compatible with the absence of effective (and fully counterfactual) freedom. Broadly speaking, Augustine's compatibilism is grounded in predestination and the divine will, and radically excludes the role of foreknowledge; Boethius' compatibilism, by contrast, rests primarily

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[33] J. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, ch. xxi, § 10 ("Of Power"), London 1690; as is well known, Locke introduced this example precisely to demonstrate the dissociation between freedom and volition.

[34] Boethius, *Cons. Phil.*, V, pr. 6, ed. Moreschini, 159.116-120; tr. Sharples, 155: "And so all the things which God knows beforehand will happen do without doubt come about, but some of them proceed from free choice; and these, although they do come about, do not by existing lose their own proper nature, through which, before they came about, they were also able not to come about".

(or almost exclusively) on the epistemic and metaphysical constraint imposed by divine knowledge.

(2) Secondly, I hope to have shown that at least two of the usual pillars or building blocks of Boethius' solution must be understood as arguments devised to resolve the epistemic objection that Boethius himself raises at the outset of the discussion, rather than as direct arguments in defence of human free will. The core of Boethius' solution lies more directly in the distinction between absolute necessity and hypothetical necessity, and, even more fundamentally, in the distinction between an intrinsic modal status and an extrinsic modal status – that is, between the modal status an event or state of affairs possesses in itself, when considered independently of any connection with its extrinsic causes (efficient and final causes, or the epistemic constraints linked to an external knowing subject), and the modal status it acquires *ex suppositione finis*, *ex suppositione efficientis*, or even merely by virtue of being infallibly known as present. This same difference may also be correlated with that between an absolute counterfactual scenario, in which human events remain contingent in themselves, and a narrow counterfactual scenario, in which the epistemic and metaphysical constraint imposed by the infallibility of divine knowledge applies.

(3) Thirdly, I hope to have shown that Boethius dissociates the voluntariness or self-determination of an action from its full counterfactual freedom. The conception of human free will defended by Boethius satisfies the first condition of freedom, but not entirely the second – unless one is willing to consider a possible world in which there is no God endowed with infallible and timeless knowledge. For Boethius, however (or so it seems), such a world would be an impossible world rather than a genuinely possible one, and therefore does not constitute a real counterfactual alternative, but merely a theoretical or absolute one.

(4) Finally, I believe that a reconsideration of Boethius' position contributes more generally to questioning a long-established historiographical cliché, easily found, for instance, in Gilson's interpretation of medieval philosophy: namely, the idea that medieval Christian thought introduces and defends contingency in opposition to the necessitarianism of the Peripatetic Greek–Arabic tradition. Historical reality, I suggest, is rather more complex. By postulating a provident God endowed with timeless and infallible knowledge, Christian thought – or at least some of its most influential strands – drastically reduces the margin

of indeterminacy present in the universe, almost to the point of eliminating it altogether. This can be seen in the way Aquinas rereads *Metaphysics* VI, 3, contesting the Aristotelian thesis that not all accidental causes can be traced back to an essential cause; it can also be seen, as noted earlier, in the criticism that Siger of Brabant – who is himself commonly regarded as a 'necessitarian', and was perhaps condemned as such in 1277 – levels against Aquinas' position.[35] And it is, I think, what we encounter in Boethius' own position with respect to Aristotle. In the latter, setting aside the Proclean tradition, we do not find the necessitating constraint of an omniscient, infallible, and timeless agent – a constraint to which I might, with a certain cunning, trace and attribute the necessity that compelled me to write this paper. By contrast, appealing to my intrinsic modal status and to my free will, I can, voluntarily, thank you for your patience and indulgence in reading it.

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[35] See P. Porro, "*Lex necessitatis vel contingentiae*. Necessità, contingenza e provvidenza nell'universo di Tommaso d'Aquino", in *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 96 (2012), 401-450; Id., "Contingenza e impedibilità delle cause. Presupposti e implicazioni di un dibattito scolastico", in *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, 68 n.s. (2013), 113-147.