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BOETHIUS

THE THEOLOGICAL TRACTATES

TRANSLATION BY

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THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

TRANSLATION BY

S. J. TESTER



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ANICII MANLII SEVERINI BOETHII
V.C. ET INL. EXCONS. ORD. EX MAG. OFF. PATRICII
PHILOSOPHIAE CONSOLA-
TIONIS

LIBER I

I

- (31) Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi,
Flebilis heu maestos cogor inire modos.
Ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda camenae
Et veris elegi fletibus ora rigant.
- 5 Has saltem nullus potuit pervincere terror,
Ne nostrum comites prosequerentur iter.
Gloria felicitis olim viridisque iuventutis
Solantur maesti nunc mea fata senis.
Venit enim properata malis inopina senectus
10 Et dolor aetatem iussit inesse suam.
Intempestivi funduntur vertice cani
Et tremit effeto corpore laxa cutis.
Mors hominum felix quae se nec dulcibus annis
Insertit et maestis saepe vocata venit.
- 15 Eheu quam surda miseros avertitur aure
Et flentes oculos claudere saeva negat.

Skip a head
to Dante

BOETHIUS
THE CONSOLATION OF
PHILOSOPHY

BOOK I

I

Verses I made once glowing with content ;
Tearful, alas, sad songs must I begin.
See how the Muses grief-torn bid me write,
And with unfeigned tears these elegies drench my face.
But them at least my fear that friends might tread
my path
Companions still
Could not keep silent : they were once
My green youth's glory ; now in my sad old age
They comfort me.
For age has come unlooked for, hastened by ills,
And anguish sternly adds its years to mine ;
My head is white before its time, my skin hangs loose
About my tremulous frame : I am worn out.
Death, if he come
Not in the years of sweetness
But often called to those who want to end their
misery
Is welcome. My cries he does not hear ;
Cruel he will not close my weeping eyes.

BOETHIUS

lectuli mei parte consedit meumque intuens vultum
 50 luctu gravem atque in humum maerore deiectum
 his versibus de nostrae mentis perturbatione con-
 quista est.

II

Heu quam praecipiti mersa profundo
 Mens hebet et propria luce relicta
 Tendit in externas ire tenebras,
 Terrenis quotiens flatibus aucta
 5 Crescit in inmensum noxia cura.
 Hic quondam caelo liber aperto
 Suetus in aetherios ire meatus
 Cernebat rosei lumina solis,
 Visebat gelidae sidera lunae
 10 Et quaecumque vagos stella recursus
 Exercet varios flexa per orbes,
 Comprensam numeris victor habebat.
 Quin etiam causas unde sonora
 Flamina sollicitent aequora ponti,
 15 Quis volvat stabilem spiritus orbem
 Vel cur hesperias sidus in undas
 Casurum rutilo surgat ab ortu,
 Quid veris placidas temperet horas,
 Ut terram roseis floribus ornet,
 20 Quis dedit ut pleno fertilis anno
 Autumnus gravidis influat uvis
 Rimari solitus atque latentis
 Naturae varias reddere causas,

^a *Numeris* here refers to mathematical astronomy: from Plato's pupil Eudoxus onwards, Greek astronomers were concerned to make mathematical "models" (in the modern philosophical sense) of the movements of the sun, moon and

CONSOLATION I

my bed, and seeing my face worn with weeping and
 cast down with sorrow, she bewailed my mind's
 confusion bitterly in these verses:

II

Ah! How steep the seas that drown him!
 His mind, all dulled, its own light fled,
 Moves into outer dark, while noxious care
 Swollen by earthbound winds
 Grows beyond measure.

This man

Used once to wander free under open skies
 The paths of the heavens; used to gaze
 On rosy sunlight, and on the constellations
 Of the cold new moon,
 And on each star that on its wandering ways
 Turns through its changing circles—all such things
 He mastered and bound by number and law.^a
 Causes, moreover, he sought and knew:
 Why the winds howl and stir up the waves of the sea,
 What breath turns the fixed stars' sphere,
 Why the sun rises in the red east
 And sinks beneath the Western waves,
 What warms the spring's calm hours
 So that the earth is lovely with flowers of roses,
 And who makes fruitful autumn heavy, as the year
 fills,
 With the full grapes. He sought and told
 All Nature's secret causes.

planets—the "wandering stars"—which would enable their positions and motions to be accurately computed. Boethius studied astronomy, and wrote a Latin textbook of the subject, based on Ptolemy, which has not survived.

BOETHIUS

25 Nunc iacet effeto lumine mentis
Et pressus gravibus colla catenis
Declivemque gerens pondere vultum
Cogitur, heu, stolidam cernere terram.

II

(H)
Sed medicinae," inquit, "tempus est quam que-
relae." Tum vero totis in me intenta luminibus:
"Tunc ille es," ait, "qui nostro quondam lacte
nutritus nostris educatus alimentis in virilis animi
5 robur evaseras? Atqui talia contuleramus arma
quae nisi prior abiecisses, invicta te firmitate tue-
rentur. Agnoscisne me? Quid taces? Pudore an
stupore siluisti? Mallem pudore, sed te, ut video,
stupor oppressit." Cumque me non modo tacitum
10 sed elinguem prorsus mutumque vidisset, admovit
pectori meo leniter manum et: "Nihil," inquit,
"periculi est; lethargum patitur communem inlu-
sarum mentium morbum. Sui paulisper oblitus est;
recordabitur facile, si quidem nos ante cognoverit.
15 Quod ut possit, paulisper lumina eius mortalium
rerum nube caligantia tergamus." Haec dixit ocu-
losque meos fletibus undantes contracta in rugam
veste siccavit.

III

Tunc me discussa liquerunt nocte tenebrae
Luminibusque prior rediit vigor,

CONSOLATION I

But now he lies
His mind's light languishing,
Bowed with these heavy chains about his neck,
His eyes cast down beneath the weight of care,
Seeing nothing
But the dull, solid earth.

II

"But," she said, "now is the time for cure rather
than complaint." Then, gazing keenly and directly
on me, she said: "Are you the same man who was
once nourished with my milk, once fed on my diet,
till you reached your full manhood? And did I not
furnish you with such weapons as would now keep
you steadfast and safe if you had not thrown them
away? Do you recognize me? Why do you say
nothing? Were you silent because you were
ashamed or stupefied? I should like to think that
you were ashamed, but I can see that you are quite
stupefied." Seeing that I was not merely silent, but
altogether speechless and dumb, she gently laid her
hand on my breast and said: "He is in no real
danger, but suffers only from lethargy, a sickness
common to deluded minds. He has for a little for-
gotten his real self. He will soon recover—he did,
after all, know me before—and to make this possible
for him, let me for a little clear his eyes of the mist
of mortal affairs that clouds them." And so saying
she gathered her dress into a fold and dried my eyes,
flowing as they were with tears.

III

Then was the night dispersed, and darkness left me;
My eyes grew strong again.

BOETHIUS

Ut, cum praecipiti glomerantur sidera Coro
 Nimborisque polus stetit imbribus,
 5 Sol latet ac nondum caelo venientibus astris,
 Desuper in terram nox funditur ;
 Hanc si Threicio Boreas emissus ab antro
 Verberet et clausam reseret diem,
 Emicat ac subito vibratus lumine Phoebus
 10 Mirantes oculos radiis ferit.

III

Haud aliter tristitiae nebulis dissolutis hausi
 caelum et ad cognoscendam medicantis faciem
 mentem recepi. Itaque ubi in eam deduxi oculos
 intuitumque defixi, respicio nutricem meam cuius
 5 ab adulescentia laribus obversatus fueram Philo-
 sophiam. "Et quid," inquam, "tu in has exilii
 nostri solitudines o omnium magistra virtutum supero
 cardine delapsa venisti? An ut tu quoque mecum
 rea falsis criminationibus agiteris?
 10 "An," inquit illa, "te alumne desererem nec
 sarcinam quam mei nominis invidia sustulisti, com-
 municato tecum labore partirer? Atqui Philosophiae
 fas non erat incommittatum relinquere iter innocentis;
 meam scilicet criminationem vereretur et quasi novum
 15 aliquid acciderit, perhorrescerem? Nunc enim
 primum censes apud improbos mores lacessitam peri-
 culis esse sapientiam? Nonne apud veteres quoque
 ante nostri Platonis aetatem magnum saepe certamen
 cum stultitiae temeritate certavimus eodemque

^a The cave of Aeolus, the lord of the winds; "Thracian" is a poetic adjective for "northern" (as seen from Greece).

CONSOLATION I

Just as when north-west winds pile up the weather
 And rain-clouds fill the sky and the sun is hidden,
 And before the stars come out
 Night comes flooding down upon the world;
 And then the north wind from the Thracian cavern^a
 Sweeps away night and lets the daylight out
 So that the sparkling sunlight
 Suddenly flashes on our wondering eyes.

III

Just so the clouds of misery were dispelled, and I
 drank in the clear light, recovering enough to recog-
 nize my healer's face. So, when I looked on her
 clearly and steadily, I saw the nurse who brought
 me up, whose house I had from my youth frequented,
 the lady Philosophy. And I said: "Why have you
 come, Queen of all the virtues, why have you come
 down from your high seat in heaven to these wastes
 where I am banished? So that you too stand in the
 dock with me, falsely accused?" "Should I desert
 you, my pupil?" she replied; "Should I not share
 your labour and help to bear your burden, which you
 bear because my name is hated? It could not be
 right that Philosophy should leave an innocent man
 companionless on the road. Surely I should then be
 afraid that I should be charged myself; I should
 shudder with horror at such an unheard-of thing!
 Do you think that this is the first time that Wisdom
 has been attacked and endangered by a wicked
 society? Did I not often of old also, before my
 Plato's time, have to battle in mighty struggle with
 arrogant stupidity? And in his day, was I not beside

BOETHIUS

- 20 superstitie praeceptor eius Socrates iniustae victoriam
mortis me adstante promeruit? Cuius hereditatem
cum deinceps Epicureum vulgus ac Stoicum ceterique
pro sua quisque parte raptum ire molirentur meque
reclamantem renitentemque velut in partem praedae
25 traherent, vestem quam meis texueram manibus,
disciderunt abreptisque ab ea panniculis totam me
sibi cessisse credentes abiere. In quibus quoniam
quaedam nostri habitus vestigia videbantur, meos
esse familiares imprudentia rata nonnullus eorum
30 profanae multitudinis errore pervertit.
- Quod si nec Anaxagorae fugam nec Socratis venenum
nec Zenonis tormenta quoniam sunt peregrina
novisti, at Canios, at Senecas, at Soranos quorum nec
pervetusta nec incelebris memoria est, scire potuisti.
- 35 Quos nihil aliud in cladem detraxit nisi quod nostris
moribus instituti studiis improborum dissimillimi
videbantur. Itaque nihil est quod admirare, si in
hoc vitae salo circumflantibus agitemur procellis,
quibus hoc maxime propositum est pessimis displicere.
- 40 Quorum quidem tametsi est numerosus exercitus,
spernendus tamen est, quoniam nullo duce regitur,
sed errore tantum temere ac passim lymphante
raptatur. Qui si quando contra nos aciem struens
valentior incubuerit, nostra quidem dux copias suas in
45 arcem contrahit, illi vero circa diripiendas inutiles
sarcinulas occupantur. At nos desuper inridemus

^a Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, the Pre-Socratic philosopher, fled from Athens for fear of persecution in 450 B.C.; Zeno of Elea is said to have died helping to rid his native city of a tyrant in the second half of the fifth century B.C.; Socrates was condemned to death in Athens in 399 B.C.; Canius, or better, Canus, Seneca and Soranus are quoted as types of the

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his teacher Socrates when he won the prize of a martyr's death? And after him the crowd of Epicureans and Stoics and the rest strove as far as they could to seize his legacy, carrying me off protesting and struggling, as if I were part of the booty, tearing my dress, which I wove with my own hands, and then went off with their torn-off shreds, thinking they possessed all of me. And because they seemed to be wearing certain bits of my dress, some were ignorantly accepted as my servants, and were abused by the delusions of the uneducated mob. But even if you knew nothing of Anaxagoras' flight from Athens, or Socrates' draught of hemlock, or Zeno's sufferings, all these being foreign events, surely you could have thought of Canius and Seneca and Soranus^a whose stories are neither ancient nor obscure? The only cause of their deaths was that they were brought up in my ways, so that their behaviour and pursuits were seen to be utterly different from those of wicked men. So it is no wonder if we are buffeted by storms blustering round us on the sea of this life, since we are especially bound to anger the wicked. Though their forces are large, yet we should hold them in contempt, for they are leaderless and are simply carried hither and thither at random in their crazed ignorance. If ever they range against us and press about us too strongly, Wisdom our captain withdraws her forces into her citadel, while our enemies busy themselves ransacking useless baggage. But we are safe from all their mad tumult and from our heights we can laugh at

"Stoic opposition" to the emperors: Canus died under Caligula in about A.D. 40, Seneca and Soranus under Nero in 65 and 66.

BOETHIUS

vilissima rerum quaeque rapientes securi totius furiosi
tumultus eoque vallo muniti quo grassanti stultitiae
adspirare fas non sit.

IV

Quisquis composito serenus aevo
Fatam sub pedibus egit¹ superbum
Fortunamque tuens utramque rectus
Invictum potuit tenere vultum,
5 Non illum rabies minaeque ponti
Versum funditus exagitantis aestum
Nec ruptis quotiens vagus caminis
Torquet fumificos Vesaeus ignes
Aut celsas soliti ferire tures
10 Ardentis via fulminis movebit.
Quid tantum miseri saevos tyrannos
Mirantur sine viribus furentes ?
Nec speres aliquid nec extimescas,
Exarmaveris impotentis iram.
15 At quis quis trepidus pavet vel optat,
Quod non sit stabilis sui que iuris,
Abiecit clipeum loco que motus
Nectit qua valeat trahi catenam.

IV

Sentisne," inquit, "haec atque animo inlabuntur
tuo, an ὄνος λύρας ? Quid fles, quid lacrimis manas ?

Ἐξαύδα, μὴ κεύθε νόω.

5 Si operam medicantis exspectas, oportet vulnus de-
tegas."

¹ Perhaps iecit; cf. Virg. Georg. ii. 491 sq.

^a Iliad, i. 363.

CONSOLATION I

them as they carry off all those worthless things ;
we are protected by such a wall as may not be scaled
by raging stupidity.

IV

He who has ground proud fate beneath his heel
Calm in his own well-ordered life
And has looked in the face good and ill fortune
Still able to keep erect his unconquered head,
He shall not be troubled by the rage or threats of the
sea
Driving the turning tide up from the deep,
Nor by Vesuvius
However often it break from its deep forges
Flinging its smoking fires abroad,
Nor by the blazing thunderbolt
That strikes down lofty towers.
Why are wretched men so stupefied
By cruel tyrants raging with no real power ?
Leave hope and fear aside
And anger is impotent, weaponless ;
But he who trembles with fear or desire,
Fickle at heart, nor master of himself,
Has thrown away his shield, and left his post,
And links the chain by which he can be led.

IV

" Now," she said, " have you understood what I
have been saying ? Has it penetrated your stricken
mind ? Or are you like an ass hearing the sound of
a lyre ? Why do you go on weeping, dissolving in
tears ? As Homer says, ' Speak out, don't hide it in
your heart.'^a If you are looking for a healer's cure,

BOETHIUS

Tum ego collecto in vires animo: "Anne
 adhuc eget admonitione nec per se satis eminent
 fortunae in nos saevientis asperitas? Nihilne te
 10 ipsa loci facies movet? Haecine est bibliotheca,
 quam certissimam tibi sedem nostris in laribus ipsa
 delegeras? In qua mecum saepe residens de hu-
 manarum divinarumque rerum scientia disserebas?
 Talis habitus talisque vultus erat, cum tecum naturae
 15 secreta rimarer, cum mihi siderum vias radio de-
 scriberes, cum mores nostros totiusque vitae rationem
 ad caelestis ordinis exempla formares? Haecine
 praemia referimus tibi obsequentes? Atqui tu hanc
 sententiam Platonis ore sanxisti: beatas fore res
 20 publicas, si eas vel studiosi sapientiae regerent vel
 earum rectores studere sapientiae contigisset. Tu
 eiusdem viri ore hanc sapientibus capessendae rei
 publicae necessariam causam esse monuisti, ne im-
 probis flagitiosisque civibus urbium relicta guber-
 25 nacula pestem bonis ac perniciem ferrent.

Hanc igitur auctoritatem secutus quod a te inter
 secreta otia didiceram transferre in actum publicae ad-
 ministrationis optavi. Tu mihi et qui te sapientium
 mentibus inseruit deus conscii nullum me ad magis-
 30 tratum nisi commune bonorum omnium studium
 detulisse. Inde cum improbis graves inexorabilesque
 discordiae et quod conscientiae libertas habet, pro
 tuendo iure spreta potentiorum semper offensio.

^a *Republic*, 473 D.

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you must lay bare the wound." So I gathered my
 strength of mind and said: "Do you really still need
 to ask? Is my harsh treatment at fortune's hands
 not obvious enough? Are you not affected by the
 very appearance of this room? Do you not recognize
 the library, which you once chose for yourself as a
 secure dwelling-place in my house—the very room
 in which you used often to sit with me discoursing
 on the knowledge of all things human and divine?
 Was this how I looked, was this my expression, when
 I used to seek out with you the secrets of Nature?
 When with your rod you drew for me the paths of
 the stars? When you shaped my character and the
 whole manner of my life according to celestial
 models? Are these our rewards for obedient service
 to you? It was you who established through the
 words of Plato the principle that those states would
 be happy where philosophers were kings or their
 governors were philosophers.^a You, through that
 same Plato, told us that this was why philosophers
 must involve themselves in political affairs, lest the
 rule of nations be left to the base and wicked, bring-
 ing ruin and destruction on the good. It was in
 accordance with that teaching that I chose to apply
 in the practice of public administration what I learned
 from you in the seclusion of my private leisure. You,
 and God, who has set you in the minds of philosophers,
 know me well, and that I undertook office with no
 other motives than the common purposes of all good
 men. That is why there arose serious and irrecon-
 cilable disagreements with wicked men, and, as a con-
 sequence of keeping my conscience free, I have always
 maintained what is right and lawful in spite of the
 fact that I offended those more powerful than myself.

BOETHIUS

Dum levibus male fida bonis fortuna faveret,
 Paene caput tristis merserat hora meum.
 Nunc quia fallacem mutavit nubila vultum,
 20 Protrahit ingratas impia vita moras.
 Quid me felicem totiens iactastis amici?
 Qui cecidit, stabili non erat ille gradu.

I

Haec dum mecum tacitus ipse reputarem queri-
 moniamque lacrimabilem stili officio signarem, ad-
 stitisse mihi supra verticem visa est mulier reve-
 rendi admodum vultus, oculis ardentibus et ultra
 5 communem hominum valentiam perspicacibus colore
 vivo atque inexhausti vigoris, quamvis ita aevi
 plena foret ut nullo modo nostrae crederetur aetatis,
 statura discretionis ambiguae. Nam nunc quidem
 ad communem sese hominum mensuram cohibebat,
 10 nunc vero pulsare caelum summi verticis cacumine
 videbatur; quae cum altius caput extulisset, ipsum
 etiam caelum penetrabat respicientiumque hominum
 frustrabatur intuitum. Vestes erant tenuissimis filis
 subtili artificio, indissolubili materia perfectae quas,
 15 uti post eadem prodente cognovi, suis manibus ipsa
 texerat. Quarum speciem, veluti fumosas imagines
 solet, caligo quaedam neglectae vetustatis obduxerat.
 Harum in extrema margine ·Π· Graecum, in supremo
 vero ·Θ·, legebatur intextum. Atque inter utrasque
 20 litteras in scalarum modum gradus quidam insigniti
 videbantur quibus ab inferiore ad superius elementum

^a For the twofold division of Philosophy, into Practical and Theoretical.

CONSOLATION I

While fortune favoured me—
 How wrong to count on swiftly-fading joys—
 Such an hour of bitterness might have bowed my
 head.
 Now that her clouded, cheating face is changed
 My cursed life drags on its long, unwanted days.
 Ah why, my friends,
 Why did you boast so often of my happiness?
 How faltering even then the step
 Of one now fallen.

I

While I was thinking these thoughts to myself in
 silence, and set my pen to record this tearful com-
 plaint, there seemed to stand above my head a
 woman. Her look filled me with awe; her burning
 eyes penetrated more deeply than those of ordinary
 men; her complexion was fresh with an ever-lively
 bloom, yet she seemed so ancient that none would
 think her of our time. It was difficult to say how tall
 she might be, for at one time she seemed to confine
 herself to the ordinary measure of man, and at
 another the crown of her head touched the heavens;
 and when she lifted her head higher yet, she pene-
 trated the heavens themselves, and was lost to the
 sight of men. Her dress was made of very fine,
 imperishable thread, of delicate workmanship: she
 herself wove it, as I learned later, for she told me.
 Its form was shrouded by a kind of darkness of for-
 gotten years, like a smoke-blackened family statue
 in the atrium. On its lower border was woven the
 Greek letter Π (P), and on the upper, Θ (Th),^a and
 between the two letters steps were marked like a
 ladder, by which one might climb from the lower

BOETHIUS

esset ascensus. Eandem tamen vestem violentorum
 quorundam sciderant manus et particulas quas
 quisque potuit abstulerant. Et dextera quidem eius
 25 libellos, sceptrum vero sinistra gestabat.

Quae ubi poeticas Musas vidit nostro adsistentes
 toro fletibusque meis verba dictantes, commota
 paulisper ac torvis inflammata luminibus: "Quis,"
 inquit, "has scenicas meretriculas ad hunc aegrum
 30 permisit accedere quae dolores eius non modo nullis
 remediis foverent, verum dulcibus insuper alerent
 venenis? Hae sunt enim quae infructuosis affectuum
 spinis uberem fructibus rationis segetem necant homi-
 numque mentes assuefaciunt morbo, non liberant.
 35 At si quem profanum, uti vulgo solitum vobis, blan-
 ditiae vestrae detraherent, minus moleste ferendum
 putarem; nihil quippe in eo nostrae operae laederen-
 tur. Hunc vero Eleaticis atque Academicis studiis
 innutritum? Sed abite potius Sirenes usque in
 40 exitium dulces meisque eum Musis curandum sanan-
 dumque relinquit."

His ille chorus increpitus deiecit humi maestior
 vultum confessusque rubore verecundiam limen tristis
 excessit. At ego cuius acies lacrimis mersa caligaret
 45 nec dinoscere possem, quaenam haec esset mulier
 tam imperiosae auctoritatis, obstipui visuque in terram
 defixo quidnam deinceps esset actura, exspectare
 tacitus coepi. Tum illa propius accedens in extrema

^a The Eleatics and the Academics were two ancient schools of philosophy. That of Elea was founded by Xenophanes in the mid-sixth century B.C.; its best known representatives are the great monist Parmenides and Zeno, the author of the

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letter to the higher. But violent hands had ripped this dress and torn away what bits they could. In her right hand she carried a book, and in her left, a sceptre.

Now when she saw the Muses of poetry standing by my bed, helping me to find words for my grief, she was disturbed for a moment, and then cried out with fiercely blazing eyes: "Who let these theatrical tarts in with this sick man? Not only have they no cures for his pain, but with their sweet poison they make it worse. These are they who choke the rich harvest of the fruits of reason with the barren thorns of passion. They accustom a man's mind to his ills, not rid him of them. If your enticements were distracting merely an unlettered man, as they usually do, I should not take it so seriously—after all, it would do no harm to us in our task—but to distract this man, reared on a diet of Eleatic and Academic thought!^a Get out, you Sirens, beguiling men straight to their destruction! Leave him to *my* Muses to care for and restore to health." Thus upbraided, that company of the Muses dejectedly hung their heads, confessing their shame by their blushes, and dismally left my room. I myself, since my sight was so dimmed with tears that I could not clearly see who this woman was of such commanding authority, was struck dumb, my eyes cast down; and I went on waiting in silence to see what she would do next. Then she came closer and sat on the end of

famous paradoxes concerned with motion. The Academics were the later (3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.) successors of Plato in the Academy in Athens; theirs was a sceptical philosophy, in some respects not unlike contemporary analytical thought.