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The Richest Are Not Always the Wealthiest

Daniel Schlant

In his classic treatise on the ideals of philosophy, Boethius discusses several principles such as fortune, fame, power, and honor. Much of his commentary on these issues, which he recorded in the sixth century B.C., still rings true in today's society. Written around the year 524 while imprisoned for treason, *The Consolation of Philosophy* reflects an intersection between the classical Greek views on philosophy and relatively recently formed Christian beliefs. As a result, Boethius wrote of classic ideals, such as happiness and fortune, as well as new ideas, such as the Christian God. Despite the span of the centuries since the writing of this piece, many of the stances Boethius proposes concerning these subjects can be applied to today's world. One such case is the generosity of Allen and Violet Large, lottery winners who donated all of their winnings. The Larges' use of their draw embodies what Boethius feels is the nature of many of the concepts he analyzes in his thesis, particularly fortune, wealth, and happiness.

An article attributed to the *Associated Press* that was carried by *The Miami Herald* describes an instance in which the principles outlined by Boethius are displayed in the modern world. The article concerns an elderly couple, Allen and Violet Large, and their interesting response to winning the lottery. The Larges, who live in a rural area of Nova Scotia, won approximately \$10.9 million dollars in a July 2010 lottery draw. Upon receiving their winnings in the fall of the same year, after taking care of a few minor affairs for themselves and their immediate family, the couple promptly gave away all of the remaining cash. Ninety-eight percent of the Larges' cash prizes went to various organizations in the Lower Truno area, their hometown. Among these organizations were the local Red Cross, churches, fire departments, and cemeteries. When asked why they were so willing to donate all of the money, an action few in today's society can honestly say they would do if in the same position, Allen Large simply responded, "We have no plans. We're not travelers. We're not night-prowlers. We're not bar-hoppers" (CBS/AP). The Larges have found themselves content with the simple life, and their astounding generosity reflects this happiness. Perhaps the most heart-warming aspects of the story can be found in

one of the organizations a large portion of their money went to. A large sum of money was donated to the facilities at the hospital where Violet Large is currently undergoing treatment for cancer. Despite all of the adversity the Larges have undergone, which would leave many bitter, they remain extremely altruistic people. The fame the Larges have experienced of late is a kind of fame that is all too rare in the modern society. Scandals and crime fill the papers, and it seems that fame has an inherent notoriety. However, the Larges justly deserved fame has been thrust upon them due to their inspiring generosity, and they are treated with the highest regard as a result. Many of the ideals that Boethius describes in great detail in his work on philosophy can be applied to and viewed in the context of the Larges' story.

The Larges' incredible generosity and subsequent fame strongly supports the philosophical ideals that Boethius outlines in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. One such ideal that Boethius discusses is the concept of fortune and luck. Boethius held that one should not put too much stock in the hands that fortune has dealt them. Many curse their bad fortune, and find themselves fed up and very bitter. Others pine endlessly for the opportunity to reap the benefits that come with good fortune. Boethius, however, finds the people who are guilty of such states of mind to be foolish. Boethius put very little value in the prizes fortune awards, and the losses that one forfeits when misfortune is experienced. As he writes, while speculating on the true nature of fortune, "You will realize that you neither had, nor have lost, anything of worth through your association with her" (19). Boethius goes on to claim that most people are actually ignorant to the good blessings that fortune actually bestows on them. The personification of philosophy, a character Boethius uses in his work to explain some of the concepts he discusses, feels the need to remind Boethius of the blessings he has been granted. Boethius is upset that he can no longer enjoy the freedoms he once did, but Philosophy chides him. She reminds him that some inhabitants of the world would be grateful to be in Boethius' position. He has a wife and children who care about him, which should be one of the main sources of meaning and happiness for Boethius. Boethius holds that most men largely place value

and their estimation of their fortune in worldly possessions and money. He considers these people to be blind to the objects of actual worth in their lives. The Larges seem to have embraced the tenets of fortune that Boethius illustrates.

The Larges, in the way they put their winnings to use, exemplify Boethius' writings on fortune. The couple has experienced both the results of fortune and misfortune. Violet is currently battling cancer. Many would become bitter upon experiencing that sort of calamity. However, the Larges do not curse their poor luck, as the ignorant men Boethius admonishes. Nor do they become greedy and hoard their money for their own purposes. The Larges looked past the false value many in today's society place in large sums of wealth. They instead realized the value of each other's companionship, and the contentment of the simple life they led. They resisted the temptation of pursuing the transitory happiness that many think wealth offers. The Larges felt they had found happiness, and their lottery winnings would not offer them any further benefits. As Boethius commented in his work, "So why, mortal men, do you pursue happiness outside yourselves, when it lies within?" (27). The Larges seem to have found this inner peace that Boethius describes, and have placed their value in the aspects of their lives that Boethius would find satisfactory. Just as Boethius concludes that men should treasure both self and family, the only winnings that the Larges personally spent went to aiding their family. This generosity and contentment also relates to Boethius' thoughts on the concept of riches and the accumulation of wealth.

Boethius discusses the actual value and nature of riches and wealth at length in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius feels that money and riches as the ignorant majority of society deals with actually carries very little value. The possession of money provides very little value. Boethius actually states that a person's wealth does not actually belong to them. He instead holds that the actual value of wealth belongs to the wealth itself, rather than the owner. While this seems to be a very abstract idea, he explains it in a few simple analogies. In one of these analogies Boethius questions to whom the beauty of a jewel belongs. People buy and wear jewelry to draw attention to themselves, and to accentuate their own beauty. However, Boethius argues, "Their brightness of the jewel is the property of the jewels, not of the men who own them" (29). The stone's brilliance draws fascination for the stone, but really does not

describe the owner whatsoever, other than possible ignorance on the owner's behalf, Boethius might argue. In fact, Boethius contends that not only does the possession of riches not hold any value, but that it can even impose negative effects upon the owner. It does not necessarily cure their owner of wants or worries, but instead can serve as the catalyst for annoyance. When asked by Philosophy about the calming effects of wealth, Boethius answered, "I cannot recall ever feeling free from one worry or another" (45). The protection of immense riches creates a burden upon the wealthy man that the poor man never needs to feel. As the popular 1990's rapper Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace once said in his former hit single, "More money, more problems." Wallace was trying to convey the sense that life became much more confusing when he became rich, as compared to his earlier days of modest income. The concepts that Boethius uses to form his opinion on wealth are readily visible in the Larges' decision, especially his commentary upon generosity.

Allen and Violet Large clearly saw little value in the stockpiling of wealth, just like Boethius. The Larges saw no major personal uses to put the money towards. Many in the same position would elect to live out the remainder of the years in opulence, with nice clothes, diamonds, and the like. However, as Boethius would advise, they chose the life of simplicity they already possessed. They were not in great want, having saved up from years of labor. And, according to Boethius, wealth does not quell want anyway. With nothing they wished to spend the money on, and not perceiving any value in the simple possession of wealth, the couple gave the money to organizations that would work towards eliminating the needs that the accumulation of wealth would not satisfy. In doing so, the Larges supported the concept Boethius outlines that states that the amassing of immense wealth among the few isn't healthy, not only for the sole possessor of the wealth, but for the society as a whole. As Boethius states, "How restrictive and poverty-stricken are these riches, which cannot be possessed in their entirety by the many, and which do not pass to any single person without leaving the rest in want!" (29). When only a few collect the wealth of a society, and it is not put to any productive use, the whole society has suffered significantly. Instead, the Larges contributed the money to the collective good of society, thus bettering society and themselves. This act of generosity is exceptionally significant when viewed in the context of Boethius' commentary on the only true value that money

holds. Boethius writes, when considering generosity and the passing on of wealth, “Money only becomes valuable when bestowed on others by the practice of giving, thus ceasing to be possessed” (29). Boethius feels that the Larges’ use of their riches is the only proper way to truly utilize the value of wealth. And it is for this reason that the Larges have come into the impressive amount of fame that they have experienced.

For an elderly couple in rural Canada who mostly keep to themselves, the Larges have come into quite a position of fame in the short time since their inspiring use of the lottery funds. The *Associated Press* article written about their decision has been carried in newspapers across North America in the past two weeks. As Allen Large told the new organization, “We’re not used to all this attention ... We’re just plain, old country folks” (CBS/AP). In a day when so many news stories are negative, and fame frequently assumes a sense of infamy, the Larges incredible generosity has inspired people. Boethius would feel that this fame was only natural considering their actions. Boethius comments at great length about fame in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, including a commentary on fame in the context of wealth. He writes, “Their sheen is more attractive when they are doled out rather than gathered in, for avarice always breeds hatred, whereas generosity brings men fair fame” (28). Boethius feels that people who generous with the wealth they have will gain not only a sense of righteousness, but fame as well. The Larges are a perfect example of this principle at work. They have become famous due to their generosity, and the fame has come with the utmost respect for their virtue.

The article about Allen and Violet Large is a testament to the fact that the principles Boethius set down to paper in *The Consolation of Philosophy* still endure today. Wealth remains just as much a false happiness and source of value today as it did in Boethius’ time. Just as he wrote, “Wealth cannot ensure sufficiency, nor kingship power, nor high offices due respect, nor glory fair fame, nor pleasures joy” (53). The Larges actions proved that great wealth cannot cure want, and cannot provide happiness for the virtuous. Good fortune is not as beneficial as it seems, and most people overlook their true blessings. Allen and Violet, however, realize their blessings in each other and family, rather than riches and worldly possessions. Fame remains a fleeting goal that many men strive for, but only the generous and honest truly attain in the fairest sense. The Larges, on the whole, are a true

representation of the principles of Boethius’ philosophy incarnate in the modern world.

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