# CHAPTER 3

# Agency and dialectic in the *Consolation of Philosophy*

Despite Chaucer's deep engagement with the *Consolation of Philosophy* throughout his poetic career, virtually no major study of the *Canterbury Tales* in the last fifteen years has had much to say about Boethius.[1] The reason for this widespread exhaustion or boredom with Boethius is that the underlying critical terms for understanding Chaucer's relation to the *Consolation* have remained unchanged for quite some time. There are, of course, important disagreements within this broadly shared set of terms. Opinion runs from the view that the *Consolation* is the source for a set of core philosophical doctrines which Chaucer illustrates in his poetry, to the view that Boethius stands for a philosophically and politically dangerous idealism that Chaucer subjects to a searching critique; there is also a moderate position according to which Chaucer is in many ways committed to Boethian ideals, but nonetheless reveals their limitations by placing them against a rich panoply of competing desires, beliefs, and other commitments.[2] Underlying these disagreements, however, is a shared belief that what centrally matters about the *Consolation* is a set of philosophical doctrines or positions that can be independently summarized in clear propositional form, and that can therefore become in a straightforward way the objects of a propositional attitude, whether belief or qualified assent or outright rejection. That is, the fundamental goal of Boethian philosophy is understood to be that of saying the truth about the topics it engages; and one's relationship to such philosophy – Boethius's, or Chaucer's, or for that matter ours – is understood to be fundamentally cognitive or intellectual, one of assent or dissent.

This is a recipe for critical exhaustion for two reasons: first, because we have all known for a long time what Boethius's philosophical

positions are, so very quickly there can be nothing new to say on that score; and second, because focusing narrowly on those positions virtually requires us to be insufficiently attentive to the dialectical character of Boethian philosophizing. As I will argue, it is this dialectical character that finally matters most both for an assessment of Boethius's philosophical achievement and for an account of that achievement's importance to Chaucer. Boethian dialectic has not exactly gone undiscussed by Chaucerians, and much of what is best in the critical discussion of Boethius attends to the dialectical character of the *Consolation* in ways that complicate the sketch of critical views I have just offered. I agree with Winthrop Wetherbee, for instance, that both Boethian dialectic and the philosophical and poetic traditions that grow out of the *Consolation* are more interested in exploratory psychology than they are in the abstract articulation of a doctrine.[3] But dialectical form tends to be imagined in even the best discussions of the *Consolation* as something essentially external to the philosophy itself – perhaps, as Seth Lerer has it, as a necessary treatment for the confusions that must be transcended to reach the realm of true philosophical thought, or perhaps, as Wetherbee has it, as a register of the passionate human commitments that philosophy cannot adequately take into account.[4] I will argue, however, that the problem posed by dialectical form in the *Consolation* concerns aporias that arise internally to the very nature of philosophical reflection; the problems that arise concerning the relationship of philosophy to something else, such as prephilosophical confusion, or the emotions, or the limits of linguistic expression, derive from this more basic one. My argument is in some respects similar to ones that have been made about Platonic dialectic.[5] As is the case in such discussions of Plato, an emphasis on aporetic structures is not meant to discount the arguments that occupy so much of the *Consolation*, or the powerful claims that are meant to be the upshot of those arguments. I have no doubt that Boethius, and for that matter Chaucer, is committed to the power of those arguments and the truth of those claims. Attention to the aporetic dialectics of the text suggests instead that no one's fundamental relationship to these claims, or to the work of philosophy that surrounds the articulation of these claims, can finally be one of either assent or dissent, even in the ideal case in which nothing "unphilosophical" intrudes to spoil the day.

Understanding the more complex forms taken by a relationship to the work of philosophy will bring us back to Wetherbee's point about a Boethian interest in exploratory psychology. As I will argue, the *Consolation* provides ways of understanding psychological phenomena – such as repression, disavowal, perversion, fetishism, and masochism – which we have come to associate too narrowly with modern sexual forms and their psychoanalytic theorization. A fuller understanding of Boethian dialectics will thus help as well with this book's project of deriving medieval conceptions of such phenomena by detaching them from the sexual context we have come to think of as their ground, and clearing a path for understanding them in other terms; this will then set the stage for a return to the analysis of sexuality in the next chapter's discussion of the *Roman de la Rose*. More specifically, the complexities of misrecognition, disavowal, and attachment in this analysis will emerge as the psychological upshot of the structure of practical rationality. This is in keeping with a broader medieval and classical tendency to derive accounts of psychology from accounts of agency, a tendency Daniel Westberg and Candace Vogler have illuminated in the work of Aquinas.[6] This tendency is counterintuitive to our dominant modern intellectual traditions, shaped as they are by an empiricist explanatory trajectory that works the other way around – a trajectory, that is, that takes accounts of psychological states as the basis for an understanding of action. Far from arguing that Boethius, the *Rose*, or Chaucer are protomodern, or that it takes psychoanalysis to reveal the underlying truth of their texts, I will be reconstructing a mode of analysis made virtually unrecognizable by the empiricist idiom of high modernity, an idiom in which we remain deeply embedded, however we may protest to the contrary.

Given the depth of our entanglement in these matters and the real philosophical difficulties Boethius engages, such reconstruction will require extended philosophical work in the context of close reading of Boethius's text rather than the kind of capsule summaries on which intellectual history traditionally relies. In order to be clear about how the revisionary reading of Boethius I will ultimately suggest emerges from concerns we have long recognized in the *Consolation*, I want to begin with the familiar, the core argument concerning desire and happiness in Books II and III of the *Consolation*. Understanding what

is both powerful and elusive about this argument – quite apart, at first, from any attention to the specific form of the Prisoner's engagement with it – will take us some way towards an account of the psychology that emerges from Boethius's analysis of action and that informs his use of philosophical dialogue.

## THE HAPPINESS ARGUMENT AND BOETHIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Philosophy's argument concerning desire and happiness is familiar enough from its classical sources.[7] The argument goes as follows. If we ask what people want, the first thing we might do is produce a list of multiple goods. People want all sorts of things: possessions, money, power, fame, sex, love, honor, and so on. But if we then ask why people want these things, the answer is that they want them because they think that having these things will make them happy. What people really want, then, is happiness, and they want whatever particular goods they say they want because they think that these are the things whose possession will bring happiness. But then a little reflection about the status of these goods raises some troubling questions. Can you *really* get happiness from something that might suddenly disappear from the world? Or from something you just happen to have by luck, something that might disappear from your grasp if your luck changes? Or from something that, however satisfying the possession of it is, leaves other wants unmet, so that desire for things you lack continues to press in on you? The answer to these questions, Philosophy says, is no; our ordinary pictures of happiness are shot through with anxiety and bitterness. And this suggests that what we really want in wanting happiness is something other than possession of any of the goods we ordinarily say we want. For none of the goods we routinely pursue can be said to be fully and truly good; they are all missing something; they all leave desire, even in its apparent fulfillment, haunted by lack. Real happiness can only be achieved through the possession of what is supremely good: something that suffers no lack, something that can never change, something that relieves you of the desire for anything else. And there is only one candidate for the status of a supreme, unchangeable, perfect good that contains within itself all other goods, and that is God. True happiness, then, rests in union with the divine; and since everyone

wants happiness, what everyone really wants is union with the divine. What is more, since all action aims at the good, union with the divine is the end towards which all action – even the most vicious, unjust action – aims. It is the intended aim of everything everyone does.

There are a host of problems with this as a philosophical argument. For one thing, its logic involves collapsing two very different claims about the relationship between action and an agent's notion of what is good: on the one hand, that everything an agent pursues is pursued under the aspect of some good – "omne appetitum appetitur sub specie boni," in the scholastic formulation that would become a commonplace by the later Middle Ages – and on the other, the much stronger claim that all action aims at one thing, which is "the good" as such.[8] We might well think, for instance, that people always perceive the ends they pursue as in *some* sense good – morally good in some cases, but more often just pleasant, or useful for some other end we have in mind – without thinking that there is any one final end which is *the* good, and towards which all action of whatever kind aims. What makes the collapse of these distinct claims into one formulation so much as credible is just a plain article of metaphysical and theological faith: that there is such a thing as a "supreme good," something in which a complete and permanent happiness, free from any taint or lack, resides, and something that contains within itself everything that truly deserves the label of a good. The function of this article of faith is important, and I will return to it. But we should not allow ourselves to think that we are somehow beyond this faith just because we have a cultural and historical distance on it, utterly disavow it, and can subject it to critique. Nor should we assume that Boethius is simply some sort of naïve or authoritarian adherent of tradition. The first thing we must do is try to see both what makes this argument powerful and what makes it problematic from Boethius's own point of view.

I take it that one motive for consigning this argument to the scrap heap of history is that, in claiming that desire has only one true object, it seems to rely on a thin and overly prescriptive psychology. There is some sense to this objection, but its sense is more limited than we may be tempted to believe. It might seem, for instance, that the claim that what people "really" want is happiness denies some obvious facts about what people want in pursuing the many goods at which action aims.

Don't people sometimes become so fixated on the pursuit of wealth or power or sex – or, for that matter, obsessive hand-washing – that they just don't care whether or not doing these things makes them happy? And for that matter, don't people sometimes sacrifice themselves and their personal happiness for a greater cause, like Bogart in *Casablanca*? One might think Boethius is advocating a strange kind of Stoicism in which passionate attachments and deep commitments of these kinds are not only prohibited but, insanely, declared to be impossible.[9] This would make it look as though the happiness argument provides too slight a notion of people's attachments and commitments to the actual goods they pursue, as though they took the form of an attachment to the instruments by which one pursues a happiness separately conceived. But anybody who ever wanted sex or clean hands or any of those other goods knows that our attachments to these things is more than merely instrumental. So if it looks like Boethius is denying this, the hinge on which the happiness argument turns will look like simple nonsense.

Part of the work of what follows will be to suggest that this objection is misplaced. It takes something Boethius knows full well and seeks to investigate – and moreover, something he reveals to be quite difficult to understand – and occludes it by pretending that it is common sense he somehow does not know or ignores. The core mistake being made in this objection, I think, involves the assumption that happiness amounts to a desirable psychological state, so that any investment in a state of affairs known by the agent to entail undesirable psychological states – as is certainly the case with an obsession or a self-sacrificing commitment – looks like an investment in something quite different from happiness.[10] But the various terms from Aristotle and Boethius and Aquinas that get translated as "happiness" – *eudaimonia*, *felicitas*, *beatitudo*, or for that matter the English word "happiness" itself on a sufficiently supple account of it – are not well understood by an empiricist psychology that takes its start from the description of psychological states. Happiness is not a matter of "feeling good" or of being in any other desirable psychological state; it should rather be understood as something like an agent's fulfillment in pursuing an activity she sees as good. Some such definition would allow us to hold on to what is lost if we think of being happy as like being in a good mood. For the activities in which agents find fulfillment – not just dramatic pursuits of self-sacrifice, but ordinary

activities such as jogging or raising children or watching movies – can entail much in the way of undesirable psychological states, without that compromising the happiness agents find in them.

With this objection to the happiness argument set aside, we can now see how surprisingly rich is the account of desire on which that argument relies. In thinking about the psychic life of Boethian dialectic, let us begin by granting something to which Boethius, and for that matter Chaucer, is surely committed, a belief in a perfect divine essence that is the metaphysical ground, source, and telos of all being. What is interesting about the happiness argument is that, given this enabling belief, it is simultaneously easy to assent to the argument and impossible to take its force. The argument says that union with the divine is the one thing everyone actually wants and the one goal everyone's actions actually aim at. In a sense this is prescriptive: it says that you will only reach *felicitas* if you achieve *beatitudo*.[11] But the sense of a prescription here is quite restricted, for this is also a claim about what everyone already wants and already does. This was the source of the objection above, but we should notice an attractive result of this initially unattractive claim. On this account, the ordinary desire for the many things people want, which Philosophy refers to as the desire for the "goods of fortune," and the desire that aims at union with the divine are not to be conceived as naturally reified psychological states that can be cleanly marked off from each other. This account rather suggests that the reification of psychological states is something that people *do*. The desires for fame, money, erotic satisfaction, and so on are desires for "false goods," and so diversions from the desire for *beatitudo*; in this sense, to be sure, we are dealing with two kinds of desire. But the former kind are also expressions and representations of the latter: they are ways that a creature that perpetually "dreams of its origin" gives voice to its desire to return to the state of repletion it knows it lacks. The ordinary desires that occupy human life are more properly understood then not as *opposed* to the desire for union with the divine, but as *deflections* of it. To use an Augustinian term that has already had an important place in my discussions, they are *perversions*, "turnings-away" from the very thing that would fulfill them and towards the substitutions by which we both represent it and fragment it.[12]

As Philosophy puts the point in Book III, "human depravity, then, has broken into fragments that which is by nature one and simple;

men try to grasp part of a thing which has no parts" (III.pr. 9) ("Hoc igitur quod est unum simplexque natura, pravitas humana dispertit et dum rei quae partibus caret partem conatur adipisci").[13] The language of grasping here suggests that an essential feature of perversion is a fantasy of mastery: what all the goods of fortune have in common is a tendency to figure the relation to objects of desire as one of possession, and moreover one in which happiness consists in the perfection of possession, a condition in which nothing could intervene between us and the world to tear the objects of our desires from our grasp. This further suggests that perversion involves the fantasy of a perfected instrumental relation to the world, as though it were the world's manipulability that ideally could render it up to us as a space in which happiness could be attained. But, as Philosophy insists, these fantasies involve a falsifying reification and fragmentation of an object of desire that is metaphysically simple. Perversion, that is, operates according to a logic of fetishism, whereby desire gets cathected on to objects that are imagined as discretely possessable instruments of satisfaction, even as that very imagining depends on the way the fetishized objects point to an object of desire which cannot be broken into parts, and our relationship to which cannot be properly understood in instrumental terms.[14] And, as I suggested above, this structure of fragmentation, reification, and deflection applies not only to objects of desire but also to desires themselves. It is part of what constitutes a desire for any of the goods you ordinarily want that it deflects your desire for happiness by fragmenting and reifying what is already for you a desire for *beatitudo*. Philosophy's argument then is simultaneously an argument about the constitutively perverse construction of the phenomenal world and about the constitutively perverse structure of the psyche.[15]

One of the characteristics of a perversion is that we simultaneously think of it as something that characterizes our will and something by which we are compelled. It is not as though the shoe fetishist, for example, could simply substitute some other object for the one on to which his desire is cathected, and it is not as though he could simply put an end to his attraction to shoes. But then neither is it the case that he is simply passive before the object's power: he devotes himself to the shoe; he invests himself in his fetish. Boethius captures this double

structure in the rebuke with which Philosophy counters the Prisoner's initial outburst of grief over having been forced into exile:

> You have not been driven out of your homeland; you have willfully wandered away. Or, if you prefer to think that you have been driven into exile, you yourself have done the driving, since no one else could do it.
>
> Sed tu quam procul a patria non quidem pulsus es sed aberrasti; ac si te pulsum existimari mavis, te potius ipse pepulisti. Nam id quidem de te numquam cuiquam fas fuisset. (I.pr. 5)

The Prisoner seems to think of his unhappiness as the result of his sheerly passive victimization by forces beyond his control. Philosophy counters that if he is the victim of a lash, it is a lash he wields himself. The argument of books II and III suggests that what Philosophy finally has in mind here is nothing local to the Prisoner, but rather the way we all drive ourselves into exile through our devotion to the goods of fortune, which we routinely think of ourselves as just naturally desiring. In this sense we are all in the Prisoner's situation of imagining ourselves to be passive in the face of what causes our loss of happiness, and we do so in part to hide from ourselves our willing investment in that loss. The trope of the Prisoner driving himself into exile involves the collapse of this distinction between activity and passivity, as well as the redirection of his sense of a homeland from a geographical to a spiritual location. His homeland is the origin and *telos* Philosophy says we perpetually dream of, and from which we have wandered away, like a drunken man who knows he has a home but cannot find his way back to it. If the tropes of dreaming and drunken wandering are helpful in suggesting both that everything we do is a way of trying to get back home and that nothing we do is done in full self-consciousness, the trope of driving oneself into exile suggests that we positively desire the suffering that attends our perverse self-deflections from happiness, as though we wished to punish ourselves, or as though we suspected that punishment were what we really deserve.

One way Boethius has of understanding this psychic structure, in which desires that come with apparently perspicuous labels are simultaneously expressions of the desire for *beatitudo* and veilings of it, and in which we seem to desire both the veiling and the tearing away of the veil, is that it is a structure of repression. "You have forgotten what you

are," "quid ipse sis, nosse desisti" (I.pr. 6), Philosophy tells the Prisoner, and she hardly thinks that this could be a matter of mere absent-mindedness. Our commitment to our ordinary pictures of the world and what we want from it, expressed in the daily business of living as much as in anything we are prepared to say, is a purposeful, motivated forgetting of our true identities and our one true desire, which we cannot properly name and whose force we do not understand, but which we simultaneously give voice to and work to keep out of sight in everything we do. The ordinary condition of the human creature, then, is one in which we are compelled by a false picture of happiness, a picture in which happiness consists in the possession of a set of goods we seemingly cannot help desiring. But since we drive ourselves into exile, we are the makers of the picture by which we are compelled. We cling to our false view of happiness in such a way that we reify it, making it real for us; we represent the world and our own desires to ourselves in terms of this picture, and give it power over us in doing so. And because of our investment in imagining the substantial reality of this picture, we repress the many signs of its incoherence, such as the anxiety and lack which always track it even in the best cases.

We are now in a position to see why I claimed earlier that what initially looks like a thin and overly prescriptive psychology has its advantages. One advantage is that it makes available a way of understanding the links among the psychological phenomena I have just catalogued: perversion, fantasies of possession and mastery, the instrumentalization of the world, the reification of psychic life, fetishism, masochism, and repression. These phenomena have been essential to this book from the start, and it is far too easy to think that to discuss them at all is to invoke a specifically modern technical discourse such as psychoanalysis, and so perhaps to invoke a further explanatory trajectory that leads to such concepts as the Oedipus complex or castration anxiety. But Boethian psychological theory allows for a different kind of explanatory trajectory, one more responsive to the ancient and medieval concern with agency and the normative structure of the will, and one that might help us clarify our understanding of the historical specificity attending such psychological phenomena. The rest of this section will suggest the basic form that such an explanatory trajectory might take.

Since on any adequate theory of repression, repression is something people do rather than just something by which they are victimized, one basic question any such theory must try to answer is what *motivates* repression. This is something other than the question of what *causes* repression, and a failure to keep these questions separate can lead to a good deal of confusion. However committed Boethius may be to a metaphysics we would reject, his theory of repression has the advantage of trying to answer the question of motive directly, and of doing so in a purely formal way that does not require an appeal to some specific traumatic content which then must be posited as universal. As we pursue this formal account we will see that, far from an overly thin psychology, what Boethius offers is quite a capacious one that accounts for both the depth and the specificity of our attachments.

On Boethius's account, in order to redirect our actions and desires towards our true *telos* we would have to give up much of what we want and much of what we believe about ourselves and the world. One thing that motivates repression, then, is just the desirability of what we ordinarily desire – the desirability of more money, say – and the believability of what we ordinarily believe – in this case, that having more money will secure some greater quantity of happiness. But the motivation runs deeper than this. Any of the local desires and beliefs we adhere to can be called into question easily enough, and the falsity of each of them routinely registers with us, although often not in ways we could articulate. I get more money, and still I am not happy; in fact, I may be less so, as the ante is continually upped on my perceived need for more. Often what will happen in such a case is that my continued dissatisfaction will ever more desperately lock me into the false belief in money's liberatory power that contributes to my unhappiness. Another thing that can happen, of course, is that I can reject the belief that money will make me happy. But even this hardly amounts to overcoming my repression of my true desire: the most likely outcome here is that I simply add some other possessable good to my picture of what I want, and aim, say, at money and political power together. What keeps repression in place, then, is something much larger and less clearly defined than the desirability of any particular goods or the believability of any candidate answers to the question of where happiness lies. It is

something more like the sheer weight of the entire world in which we act, and our nearly inevitable sense of ourselves as having a recognizable and functional identity in that world.[16] This weight takes the form of multiple local and momentary stabilizations of our attitudes – convictions that money or fame is what we are after, that we ought to be properly pious, that our self-interest trumps other considerations, that justice constrains us – stabilizations that jostle each other in ways of which we are usually only vaguely aware, and that are individually dispensable without challenging the structure of repression at all. This weight also takes the form of larger-scale stabilizations that we almost never question or even bring to articulate awareness, such as the conviction that instrumental reasoning is the only thinking in principle required to get what we want. And these larger-scale stabilizations can persist so strongly partly because they can express themselves differentially locally, and so can allow for the substitutability of object-fixed desires. So, if money does not do the trick, then sex will, or power; in any case, when I am in the grip of this larger unarticulated conviction, the only question that occurs to me is that of the means I can find to the ends I am prepared to recognize.

In the grip of these functional dreams of normalcy, the human creature will typically not stop to reflect on its condition enough to disturb its routinized sense of what it wants and how to get it. But, as the *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *Knight's Tale* explore at great length, there are times when this sense of a functional routine gets disturbed. Something happens that you cannot succeed in picturing as merely a practical impediment to being happy. Then, instrumental reasoning utterly fails you, and it begins to seem as though the very nature of things denies you the possibility of happiness. An unbridgeable gulf has opened between you and the object of a desire you cannot forgo: perhaps a love object has come to seem in principle unattainable, like some emanation of the divine that, in its perfection, could never allow itself to be polluted by contact with your wretched creatureliness; perhaps someone who matters to you intimately has died, leaving the entire world scarred by his absence; perhaps your own death, and the death of all the projects to which you have devoted yourself, has become imminent because of some terrible and unjust turn of events. The first thing the creature will typically do in such

a case is complain, as though by absorbing itself in its grief – and perhaps even by making that grief the occasion for the production of beautiful self-expression, in little gems of lyrical love poetry or melancholic lament – it could somehow simultaneously fill up the distance between itself and its lost object and impale itself on the impossibility of doing so. This is the territory Freud charted in "Mourning and Melancholia," in which a fixation on the psychic pain of loss allows the grieving subject to imagine the continued interior presence of the lost object in the desire that fixation keeps alive.[17] But again this concern is hardly specific to psychoanalysis; for this is also the territory charted in much of the lyrical eroticism in medieval poetry, including Chaucer's, as well as in the literature of grief and consolation such as *Pearl*, *Sir Orfeo*, and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*.[18] And, as *Pearl* and the *Consolation* and the philosophical valence of Palamon and Arcite's laments suggest, this is also the situation in which the creature both becomes available for philosophical therapy and digs in against its own desire for a cure. In the *Consolation*, it is immediately after the Prisoner "poured out my long sad story" ("continuato dolore delatravi," I.pr. 5), that Philosophy remarks that he has "willfully wandered away" from his true homeland ("non quidem pulsus es sed aberrasti," I.pr. 5). She thus diagnoses his absorption in his misery, like that of the dreamer in *Pearl*, as a way of working to keep himself from moving towards a cure, even as it is also a request for the very therapy it resists. According to the *Consolation* and the traditions of writing that grow out of it, philosophy – conceived as the impulse to extended reflection rather than as a technical discipline – emerges in the psychic life of the human creature as a therapy for a condition of divided identity and desire which the creature masks as normalcy, and to which it positively devotes itself, even in those moments when its suffering of that condition becomes most manifest.

This initial sketch of Boethian psychology begins, I hope, to give a sense of its depth and complexity. I now want to turn more squarely to the dialectical structure of the *Consolation* to think further about how such therapy works and about what impedes it. This in turn will lead us to the aporetic structures to which I referred at the beginning of this discussion, and which, I think, are ultimately the source of the psychological phenomena sketched so far.

## BOETHIAN *APORIA* AND DIALECTICAL FORM

In turning to dialectic, it is important to notice that Boethius does not simply dramatize a process of confused resistance to Philosophy's arguments, in which the Prisoner exhibits his carnality, emotionalism, and human partiality, and only gradually transcends these impediments as he gives way to reason's claim.[19] The Prisoner does of course object at times, and often in a confused way. But more commonly, and more strikingly, he engages in repeated gestures of facile assent to Philosophy's claims. In the core middle stretch of the dialogue, for instance, when his contributions go beyond such comments as "that is true," "certainly not," "this is a beautiful and precious idea," and so on, they are usually excited elaborations of Philosophy's points, meant to prove that he is "getting it." And then, at the end of Book III, as Philosophy presents her theodicy in an argument that does no more than draw out the consequences of claims to which the Prisoner has long ago agreed, the discussion takes a striking turn. First, in response to Philosophy's repetition of the familiar claim that God "is the supreme good which rules all things firmly and disposes all sweetly," "est igitur summum . . . bonum quod regit cuncta fortiter suaviterque disponit" (III.pr. 12), the Prisoner replies "I am delighted, not only by your powerful argument and its conclusion, but even more by the words you have used, so that at long last the folly which so tore me to pieces is ashamed" ("Quam . . . me non modo ea quae conclusa est summa rationum, verum multo magis haec ipsa quibus uteris verba delectant, ut tandem aliquando stultitiam magna lacerantem sui pudeat," III.pr. 12, translation mine). But the Prisoner's brave announcement of an end to his self-laceration is perhaps qualified by his continued desire to displace the shamefulness of his condition on to some distinctly locatable cause: as he puts it, it is his folly that is ashamed, not him. Sensing that he is still making things too easy for himself, Philosophy suggests some logical stock-taking in terms that promise both the production of rare beauty and an ominous conflict: "But would you like us to cause our arguments to clash against each other? Perhaps from such a conflict a beautiful spark of truth will fly forth" ("Sed visne rationes ipsas invicem collidamus? Forsitan ex huiusmodi conflictatione pulchra quaedam veritatis

scintilla dissiliat," III.pr. 12, translation mine). And such a conflict is just what Philosophy produces:

> "No one can doubt that God can do anything," Philosophy said.
> "Anyone whose mind is stable," I said, "could not possibly doubt it."
> "So there is nothing that he, who can do anything, cannot do."
> "Nothing."
> "Now God cannot do evil, can he?"
> "Hardly!"
> "Evil, therefore, is nothing, since God, who is incapable of nothing, cannot do it." (translation mine)

> "Deum," inquit, "esse omnium potentem nemo dubitaverit." "Qui quidem," inquam, "mente consistat, nullus prorsus ambigat." "Qui vero est," inquit, "omnium potens, nihil est quod ille non possit." "Nihil," inquam. "Num igitur deus facere malum potest?" "Minime," inquam. "Malum igitur," inquit, "nihil est, cum id facere ille non possit, qui nihil non potest." (III.pr. 12)

Now, suddenly, things do not look so easy: "Are you playing with me, weaving a labyrinth of arguments from which there is no exit?" (" 'Ludisne,' inquam, 'me inextricabilem labyrinthum rationibus texens?' " III.pr. 12, translation mine). But there is nothing particularly labyrinthine about this argument. Philosophy has introduced nothing new here, and in contrast to other more convoluted passages that provoked no such resistance, but in which substantive claims *have* gotten smuggled in under the guise of sheer logical operations, this stretch is a model of argumentative transparency. That is part of what gives the Prisoner's earlier agreements their facile character: for if he really agreed then, it would seem, he ought to be having no such trouble now. The Prisoner's sudden loss of his bearings makes it seem as though he has never had any real understanding of what he has been agreeing to.

This is more than just the familiar problem of not fully grasping the ramifications of an argument as you are presented with it. That makes it sound too much as though the Prisoner's overly easy agreements were the sign of a merely cognitive limitation on his part, and it gives too slight a sense of his investment in agreeing so readily. As Philosophy prepares to turn her attention from false to true happiness, for instance, the Prisoner interrupts:

> But this is clear even to a blind man . . . and you revealed it a little while ago when you tried to explain the causes of false happiness. For,

> unless I am mistaken, true and perfect happiness is that which makes a man self-sufficient, powerful, worthy of reverence and renown, and joyful. And, to show that I have understood you, I acknowledge that whatever can truly provide any one of these must be true and perfect happiness, since all are one and the same.
>
> Atqui haec . . . vel caeco perspicua est eamque tu paulo ante monstrasti, dum falsae causas aperire conaris. Nam nisi fallor ea vera est et perfecta felicitas quae sufficientem, potentem, reverendum, celebrem laetumque perficiat. Atque ut me interius animadvertisse cognoscas, quae unum horum, quoniam idem cuncta sunt, veraciter praestare potest hanc esse plenam beatitudinem sine ambiguitate cognosco. (III.pr. 9)

What is wrong with the Prisoner's somewhat overexcited contribution here is not that it fails to include the specification that union with the divine is the only thing capable of meeting these criteria. It is rather that, in his eagerness to declare everything perfectly clear, he is ignoring – or rather, working to keep out of sight – the very thing that provoked the dialogue in the first place, namely his sense that the possibilities for his happiness have been quite deeply affected by what has happened to him. Here we have another form of repression than the one so easily moralizable as the motivated forgetting of one's divine origin. For here what is getting repressed is the ongoing claim of the very appearances that are supposed to be melting away; agreement here serves the function of denying the force of Philosophy's arguments even more effectively than would a digging-in-of-the-heels disagreement. For what the Prisoner proves that he has understood here is nothing more than the definition of an abstract concept. Far from merely presenting difficulties of application, the problem with such an abstract concept in this case is that it blocks a proper appreciation of philosophy by offering the chimera of a theoretical solution to what is finally not a theoretical problem. The Prisoner's goal – the human goal, according to Philosophy – is not to be capable of providing true definitions of happiness, but *to be happy*. The Prisoner's display of understanding is as much of a diversion from this goal, and as much a sign of his resistance to it, as was his earlier wallowing in grief. This is something Philosophy herself suggests with a dry humor that the Prisoner could not appreciate, as she responds to his interruption by addressing him with

condescending affection as her "alumnus," a term that has a range of meanings from "scholar" or "pupil" – as though the Prisoner had regressed to thinking that what is at stake here was book-learning – to "nursling" and "foster-child," as though his regression were even more extreme.[20]

In a sense, then, the Prisoner's overt resistance to Philosophy's argument for the insubstantiality of evil is a sign of philosophical *progress*: at least he has finally begun to see how deeply counterintuitive Philosophy's argument is, how it runs against the grain, not only of his perception of his own personal misfortunes, but of much more deeply seated beliefs about the structure of the world. Whatever evil is, surely it is *something*. Is he to believe, not merely that what has happened to him is not so bad because it does not really compromise his ultimate happiness, but that *nothing* has happened to him? What could this even mean? Having been brought to this point, the Prisoner might now be able to hear the terse humor in the remark with which Philosophy greeted his early outpouring of grief: "what you regard as a change has greatly upset you," "Ea tantum animi tui sicuti tu tibi fingis mutata pervertit" (II.pr. 1). What makes that earlier comment read like a rather unsympathetic joke is the extreme bluntness with which it jars against what the Prisoner must take to be his most basic observations of empirical reality. While there may be a question as to how one should regard the change he has undergone, it would seem to be just a fact that there has been a change; this much does not seem to be a matter of how anyone *regards* anything at all. But if the jarring produced by this earlier comment had the feel of a confrontation between a subjective world of phenomenal appearances and a philosophical claim that comes at the human as though from beyond all appearances, by the middle of the dialogue the Prisoner can have no such comfortable misunderstanding of the case available to him. For since then he has been led through a process of thought in which he has granted that Philosophy makes sense of what he *already* believed from the beginning. Philosophy does not proceed by supplying doctrine the Prisoner must accept because of some authority external to him; she rather proceeds by taking the simplest logical steps from the very appearances to which the Prisoner has appealed, and calling on beliefs he already has. And if he now sees how strange her argument is, so that he does not know how to make sense of it and his earlier agreements look facile, we might well ask what

he was *supposed* to have done as Philosophy took him through the earlier stages in her argument, stages which at the time seemed clear enough. Should he have manufactured disagreement, or obstinately held out against lines of thinking whose force he certainly felt? The grip of this deadlock on the Prisoner's intuitions will only tighten in the next sections of book IV, as Philosophy extends her argument to claim that evil men are powerless, to which the Prisoner replies that "to doubt that would be to disregard the nature of things and the force of argument" ("Quisquis . . . dubitat, nec rerum naturam nec consequentiam potest considerare rationum," IV.pr. 2). The nature of things and the force of argument may require him not to doubt the point, but it is quite a different thing for him to find the argument convincing or bring himself to give it his wholehearted assent. And what could be more evident than that evil men are often quite powerful? What could be more evident to Boethius as he sits in prison, waiting to have his head stuck in a vise until his skull cracks open and his brains seep out of his ears? But the Prisoner cannot simply rest with this apparent self-evidence, digging in his heels against the power of philosophical reason. The force of argument compels his *assent*, not just his submission; it does not just have power over him, it has authority for him, an authority he must grant whether he wishes to or not. For it gains its authority from nothing more than beliefs he already has, together with the logical pressure of reflection on what those beliefs entail.

In examining the aporetic deadlock to which Philosophy's arguments lead the Prisoner, I have been putting the issue in terms of the Prisoner's intuitions and the claim of Philosophy's arguments on them. But the Prisoner is hardly particularized here, and as I have said, Philosophy is not the voice of an external authority: this *aporia* is supposed to get its grip from nothing more than the rationality common to everyone. And it is clear that we are not supposed to see this rationality as simply muddled or confused. In book V, for instance, it turns out that even such basic categories as space and time are products of our capacities as knowers rather than features of the basic structure of reality. In fact, any knowledge that can be put in propositional form contains an irreducible subjective element that marks its difference from the act of intellection, which alone can know the pure forms of things.[21] This suggests just how deep the problem of the normative authority of reflection goes: reflection

might lead towards a more objective view of the objects of thought, but no one could say that a belief in space and time, or a dependence on propositional knowledge, is simply subjectivist folly, for there is no way to imagine a human life without such things. On Boethius's account, then, it is a basic condition of the human that the reflective drive cannot reach an absolute limiting point, a perspective stripped of all subjective contribution. There is no point at which a rational creature, no matter how intent on reflection, can declare itself free of the danger of finding itself compelled once again by the incoherent seemings that masquerade as a firm and fixed reality. Nor is there any way to put a principled stop to the drive towards a more objective perspective, a drive that ultimately takes the creature away from any of the appearances that give it a recognizable footing in the world.

At the beginning of this chapter I claimed that the problem concerning dialectical form in the *Consolation* concerns aporias that arise internally to the nature of philosophical reflection. The point, however, needs putting more strongly. It does not simply concern *philosophical* reflection, or even any distinctive act of reflection at all, but rather the entire agentive and subjective life of a creature with reflective capacities. In the next section I will address agency directly; for now let us turn to the constitution of subjectivity. If the reflective drive does not come at the creature from outside – if it is the product of the internal structure of rationality – then one upshot of this argument is that subjectivity cannot constitute a realm of determinate appearances detached from what they are appearances of.[22] We can say, for instance, that it seems to the Prisoner that the possibility of his happiness has been destroyed by what has happened to him; but the force of Philosophy's argument is not just that this is an incorrect appraisal, but that *it is not the way it really seems to him*.[23] The point is crucial for understanding the way Boethius – and, I think, Chaucer – conceive of psychological phenomena. One way of putting one of the central arguments in chapter one would be to say that, while it seems to the Miller that what he wants sexually is to possess a woman as a pure object, that is not the way it really seems to him: we need some such formulation to account for the phenomenal structure of his desire, in which the wish for a pure erotic objectification is driven by desires and beliefs that wish cannot accommodate and serves to repress, but which become apparent under reflective pressure. In Boethian terms, this

suggests that the drive towards reflective distance is already internal to the most "unreflective" action and the most reified, subjectively "present" desire or belief. While the literary form of philosophical dialogue represents dialectic through a conversation between the Prisoner and Philosophy, that representational mode serves to display the dialectical structure of psychic life and all of its contents. The most obvious, transparent things you would say about what you want and what you think can thus never be reports on pure subjective seemings. Desires or beliefs that have the feel of reportable psychological states function instead as internally fractured reifications that always remain dialectically engaged with the reflective drive they serve to refuse.

## AN ANTINOMY AT THE HEART OF AGENCY

Let me turn to one more example of the aporetic structures this text works to make manifest, which will return us more squarely to Boethius's concerns with agency and autonomy, as well as to the problem I raised in the book's introduction concerning the two aspects of normativity. As I have already suggested, much of the second half of the *Consolation* is devoted to tracking the consequences of the happiness argument. One such consequence is a Platonist proposal for the reform of the judicial system:

> based on the principle that wickedness by its very nature makes men miserable, we see that an injury done to another causes unhappiness in the doer rather than in the recipient. But at present, lawyers take the opposite tack. They try to arouse sympathy in the judges for those who have suffered grave injury, when those who have harmed them are much more deserving of pity. Such criminals ought to be brought to justice by kind and compassionate accusers, as sick men are taken to the doctor, so that their disease of guilt might be cured by punishment. In this way, defense attorneys could be dispensed with, or, if they wanted to help their clients, they would become accusers.
>
> Hinc igitur aliis de causis ea radice nitentibus, quod turpitudo suapte natura miseros faciat, apparet inlatam cuilibet iniuriam non accipientis sed inferentis esse miseriam. Atque nunc . . . contra faciunt oratores. Pro his enim qui grave quid acerbumque perpessi sunt miserationem iudicum excitare conantur, cum magis admittentibus iustior miseratio

> debeatur; quos non ab iratis sed a propitiis potius miserantibusque accusatoribus ad iudicium veluti aegros ad medicum duci oportebat, ut culpae morbos supplicio resecarent. Quo pacto defensorum opera vel tota frigeret, vel si prodesse hominibus mallet, in accusationis habitum verteretur. (IV.pr. 4)

Boethius is not so naïve as to think that this proposal could exactly be put into practice. Even if we tried to imagine a comprehensive judicial reform such that compassionately accusatory defense attorneys made sense, there would be unsolvable problems concerning how the reformed system would work in a world in which people guilty of crimes mostly do not desire to be cured by punishment, and so seek defense of more conventional kinds, and in which the injuries done to victims are considered at least as worthy of concern as the diseased soul of the criminal. Such a judicial system would have to dispense with so much of the network of conceptual, emotional, and social relations binding our notions of guilt, injury, compassion, defense, punishment, and justice that those notions would become unrecognizable. But these conceptual relations, the beliefs and emotions that express them, and the political and social institutions associated with them, all have a normative authority that cannot be dissipated by anything Philosophy says. Someone who is not moved by the injury done to the recipient of a wicked action is not being properly affected; likewise, a defense attorney who tried to help his clients by pleading for their conviction, even if he believed that their conviction and punishment would result in their being cured of moral disease, would not be a good attorney. And of course Boethius knows this. But Philosophy's proposal is not thereby rendered absurd. For as she indicates in the first phrase cited above, the proposal gains its normative authority from that of the argument concerning happiness, to which the Prisoner has already assented. If wickedness by its very nature makes men miserable, then this proposal has a normative authority that cannot simply be dismissed.

This example helps to drive home the point that the aporetic deadlocks into which Philosophy leads the Prisoner cannot be resolved in the way it is so frequently suggested they might be, by transcending all earthly appearances and commitments. It is not even right to say that the text works to keep in view the costs of such a transcendence. The *Consolation* suggests the inadequacy of any such formulation through

the epistemological considerations I have already discussed from book V: for how are we to transcend space and time? Still, in the face of that question one might imagine that the text is advocating a complete mystical transformation, even if it suggests that such a thing would be strictly speaking unrepresentable, or impossible for all but the saints. The example of Philosophy's judicial reform, however, suggests that the world of ordinary appearances and social relations and political institutions must necessarily maintain a normative authority for us, or we would simply not be functional in it, and there would be no way to tell whether we were philosophically enlightened or just massively lacking in ethical resources. And even the attainment of a mystical *beatitudo* would not change that. Nothing short of a complete transformation of the entire world could change it, and that will only happen when we *collectively* return to that homeland from which we perpetually wander, and see God "face to face" as full members of the *civitas dei* that will only be realized at the end of time. If philosophy is a therapy for self-estrangement, then, it is not a therapy that can result in a cure; it is more like an exploration of our resistances to understanding that self-estrangement, and a critique of the compromise arrangements in social and psychic life which keep that self-estrangement in place, but without which it would not be possible to do anything.

To see the impact these considerations have on conceptions of agency and autonomy, let us return to the notion, introduced in the previous chapter, of reflective endorsement. In effect, all Philosophy does until quite late in the dialogue is require the Prisoner to ask which of his attitudes can support his conviction under reflective pressure. The centrality of the trope of imprisonment for representing the Prisoner's inhabitation of attitudes that cannot stand up under such pressure, the repeated suggestion that such unendorsable attitudes are marked by pathological compulsion, and the promise of Philosophy to free the soul of its self-imposed chains, all suggest that autonomy is the condition towards which philosophical reflection aims. But the *Consolation* does not stop with this questioning by holding up an admirable character as the ground of endorsability, as the Knight tries to do in his Thesean theory. Instead, Philosophy argues that action and belief and desire necessarily aim at autonomy in the much more ambitious way the Knight tries to keep at bay. For the *Consolation* takes its start

from the questionability of all of the attitudes that depend for their authority on one's character; it poses the question of what actions, beliefs, and desires might be said to be *truly* autonomous, with the implication being that nothing can be so if it can turn out, from some future turn of events or some further position of reflective distance, to take on the nature of a compulsion. And this expanded range of the compulsive quite pointedly includes such things as an attachment to glory and honor and political power, which as we have seen are essential to the motivational structure of Thesean agency.

There is real force to the way the *Consolation* makes such character-specific attachments wither away under the force of the reflective drive. For Philosophy's arguments reveal the claim on the Prisoner of an imperative to leave behind any attachments that can be seen as accidents of some parochial fact about the agent who has them: accidents, perhaps, of his particular character, but also accidents of what we would now call the agent's culture and ideology, and even, as Philosophy insists, accidents of the way members of the agent's species are constituted as knowers and perceivers. As each of these categories of accidents in rather different ways suggests, the notion of the accidental here includes things without which agency would be inconceivable. But the imperative to leave such things behind, as we have seen, derives from no more than the intrinsically normative force of the ambition of freely chosen ends, an ambition without which agency would *also* be inconceivable. While we may find Boethius's formulation of the ground and *telos* of this drive in the simplicity of divine Being to be itself parochial, dependent as it is on theology and a metaphysics to which we do not subscribe, this does nothing to diminish the force of the problem concerning agency and autonomy posed by the *Consolation*. For Boethius's metaphysical commitments suggest that ways of understanding the reflective drive can themselves be parochial. No doubt we have our own parochialisms on this score, since we have hardly understood these problems once and for all. Whether or not we share Boethius's sense of where the reflective drive ultimately leads, we are subject to its normative authority, and subject in ways that define our freedom, even as they also make the very territory of that freedom unrecognizable.

My argument in this chapter, then, does not just concern the interpretation of Boethius, or even the question of his relevance to Chaucer.

I have wanted so much from the *Consolation* partly because I think it can help us understand a difficult philosophical problem; and this is worth doing both for its own sake, and because our substantive understandings of the problems texts engage must necessarily inform our interpretive engagements with those texts. The *Consolation* powerfully captures a problem in the theory of autonomy that continues to be of interest in philosophical ethics. In aiming at autonomy, we aim at a position from which we could in principle identify, and fully inhabit, all and only those attitudes worthy of endorsement, attitudes that would not from a position of further reflective distance appear as terribly wrong, nightmares of our personal or cultural or speciate history. As Kant and contemporary philosophers influenced by him have argued, this is something that, as reflective creatures, we must want; there is no way not to want this, there are only ways of repressing the desire for it.[24] Now let us imagine that we could get to such a position. Who would be free, there? Boethius's answer to this question is roughly the same as the one offered by Bernard Williams in *critique* of Kant, although the conclusions they draw from this are quite different. There would in a certain sense not be a "who" there; there would just be "the characterless moral self."[25] As the increasing silence of the Prisoner in the late stages of the *Consolation* suggests, this would be a creature without a voice; or, to the extent it had a voice, it would be merely the utterly impersonal voice of assent to the deliverances of what Thomas Nagel calls "the view from nowhere." Such a creature would be one with no projects, and no particular attachments. According to Boethius, it would lack a sense of time and space in which to pursue projects, and its activity would consist in nothing but a ceaseless and unchanging contemplation of the divine perfection, which is an activity without the kind of temporal and spatial structure, and internal and external impediments to overcome, that projects have. But we do not need to put the point in a Boethian way. A creature of pure autonomy would not preferentially care about some things or people or projects more than others; and such preferential caring is an essential feature of what we mean by a person's "character."

For Williams, this gives us a reason to suspect that something is wrong with the Kantian imperative. What drives Boethius's argument – and Kant's for that matter – is that all such preferential attitudes can look, from a position of reflective distance greater than we usually take

towards them, like sources of subjection. So in aiming at autonomy, in a certain indefeasible sense we aim at being creatures without such attitudes. Part of what gives Williams's counterargument its bite is that if you ask almost any of us whether we would want to be such a creature our answer would be no. And this is not just because there is some metaphysical or theological belief we do not share with Boethius or Kant. What was attractive about the Knight's theory of Thesean autonomy was that it took account of the specificities of character and concrete historical relations and particular social and political responsibilities; even if we disagree with some of the specificities in this case, we recognize that there is no such thing as an agent without such commitments, and certainly no such thing as a life we would want. Without such commitments, we would be divorced from most of what we care most about, and it is questionable whether we would be able to care about anything at all.[26]

We should not think Boethius denies this, just because he represents a movement whereby such cares are transcended; instead, the *Consolation* suggests that we inevitably want incompatible things out of our agentive lives. But Boethius does not take the upshot of this to be a tragic story about desire; instead he wants to outline a problem concerning the conditions necessary for a functional agency. On the one hand, in order to persist as an agent with a psychologically and socially functional character, with the particular cares, concerns, and projects an agent necessarily thinks of as characteristically hers, a person must heed the imperative towards a reification of her psyche and of the world of objects in which she operates; she must fetishize the objects of desire these reifications yield up to her; she must embrace her historical imbeddedness in socially sanctioned norms that are necessarily ideological. On the other hand, her very activity of doing so is always inflected by another imperative towards reflective distance, an imperative she necessarily associates with the autonomy that *also* characterizes her actions, desires, and will as hers, but that marks her potential difference from everything particular about her. Autonomy is such a difficult problem, then, because agency is structured around an antinomy, a conflict between irreconcilable imperatives neither of which can be set aside.[27]

My references throughout the preceding paragraphs to ideology, a concept Boethius did not have in any rich sense, are meant to flag a

further upshot of this argument for the problem concerning normativity I raised in the book's introduction. If agency is structured around an antinomy between what we might call the law of historical-ideological imbeddedness and the law of reflective distance, and if those laws function in the lives of agents in ways that constantly intermingle, so that our imbeddedness in personal, social, and speciate history is always inflected by the drive to reflective distance on it, while every attempt at reflective distance remains necessarily ideological, then I think we have good reason to say that "normativity" is after all the name of a single phenomenon, not merely a verbal coincidence between distinct projects of ideological critique and philosophical ethics. Further, if I am right that this is truly an antinomy rather than a resolvable conflict, then we have found in the structure of agency itself a source of the grip ideological regimes have on those who inhabit them, as well as a reason why the formation of agency and subjectivity through the internalization of ideology must always. remain fragile and porous to that which ideology cannot formulate. This is why I claimed in the introduction that a satisfying account of normativity must rely on the irreducibility of the perspective of agency: for this source of ideology and its discontents issues from the ontology of agency rather than from any ameliorable set of social-historical conditions; and it can only be seen by attending directly to questions concerning agents' reasons for acting and desiring and believing, rather than solely to the historical causes of their formation as subjects.

Let me conclude this section by returning to the psychology that emerges from Boethian theory. Much of my argument in this chapter has been a gloss on the central Boethian tropes of imprisonment and exile: for an agent to embrace attitudes conditioned by accidents of her history, her habits, and her culture is for her to embrace features of her will that mark her imprisonment in the pathological, and mark her as in exile from her autonomy. Boethius's mentor Augustine captures the pathos of this condition succinctly in a passage I cited in the introduction: "Surely I have not ceased to be my own self . . . and yet there is still a great gap between myself and myself . . . Oh that my soul might follow my own self . . . that it might not be a rebel to itself." As Augustine and Boethius attempt to make sense of the aching gap in agents' relations to themselves and their longing to be at one with themselves, they

repeatedly produce plots with nostalgic structures: as representations of psychological and moral alterity, imprisonment, exile, and rebellion get their punch from imaginary references to a lost freedom, homeland, and peace. The *Consolation* is full of such nostalgia, from its notions of the human creature as dreaming of its origin and drunkenly searching for its home, to its lyrical evocations of the Golden Age and of the radiance and harmony of the divine mind dimmed and scattered by our attempts to grasp it. It is easy enough to locate this nostalgia culturally, for it is clearly present in the Platonist myth, cited by both Boethius and Augustine, of the descent of an originary unity into corruptible materiality; in the biblical narrative of the Fall that so concerned Augustine, and that can never be far from Boethius's mind even if he does not invoke it explicitly here; and in the theological-moral notion of original sin that develops from the Fall narrative, a notion that locates the human as a creature whose identity, agency, and subjectivity are constituted through a founding self-estrangement that somehow retains a narrative structure, and for which the creature somehow remains responsible. The engagements with normative longing produced by Boethius, Augustine, and the Judeo-Christian and Platonist traditions that inform their thinking are thus heavily inflected by their imagination of states that would be free of it and by their sense of the pollution and guilt attending its necessary compromises.

A fastidious nostalgia is thus a deep part of the inheritance of western thinking about normativity, and it continues to have a life in intellectual traditions that have long since rebuked theological metaphysics, for instance in some traditions of Marxist theory and in various movements for a liberatory sexuality. But the power of normative nostalgia does not simply stem from the cultural weight of Judeo-Christian and Platonist myth. Rather than taking that weight as the resting place for analysis, we need to ask what makes nostalgic narrative of this kind seem like an explanation of something. And the Augustinian-Boethian tradition gives us resources for doing just that, even if neither would have used those resources to analyze his own nostalgia. Augustine's sense of a true self by which he is drawn and the Boethian sense of an authentic identity associated with the reflective drive have their source in an identification with autonomy, the capacity freely to choose one's own ends, not merely to be compelled by ends one happens to have. If a pure

autonomy cannot be *narratively* prior to our ordinary condition of self-estrangement – if there never was an agency fully in possession of itself – there is a certain *ontological* priority to the sense of self associated with autonomy; for ends we freely choose are in a sense the only ones that are truly ours, the only ones that are not shadowed by a sense of enslavement or imprisonment. But, as the *Consolation* also reveals, what is ontologically prior in this sense is perpetually forgone, not by any particular act or decision on the part of an agent, but by the necessity of having and wanting some specific character, a distinctive voice, ends that are particular to you just because of the person you happen to be and the social world you happen to live in. It is of the nature of the human creature, then, to long for a freedom whose possibility is perpetually foreclosed, even as the completion of the movement towards that freedom would involve its dissolution as a distinctive inhabitant of the world, an agent with some specific set of habits and a character of its own. Normative nostalgia may find its most direct expression in literalized narratives of loss, but those are always at the same time phantasmatic narratives, attempts to render the antinomy at the heart of agency in familiar, graspable terms.

If the ache of normative nostalgia has its ultimate source in the way agency depends on irreconcilable demands, the same can be said for the other dominant feature of the moral psychology we have been exploring here, the sense of guilt and pollution that does not have its source in anything particular the agent has done, but whose taint spreads across all action as an inevitable condition of it. For while a pure autonomy is forgone not by any particular act but by virtue of the necessity of having and wanting a specific character, that necessity is not a causal one but a necessity of the will. To persist as ourselves we must resist the call of the reflective drive, and so resist the conditions of our autonomy. This attachment to self-division and to an agentive implication in unfreedom is what Boethius and Augustine express in their tropes of a desiring, motivated "loss" of ourselves and of a willful "fall" into imprisonment and abjection. The psychological fallout of the antinomy I have been describing is thus a kind of double death wish. On the one hand, in wanting to follow "its own self," to heed the call of the reflective drive, the human desires its death as the particular one it is, for that existence seems like an impediment to its autonomy; and since it still desires and wills

that existence, it feels marked as guilty, unworthy of freedom. On the other, in wanting to maintain the particularity of its attachments and the solidity of its sense of itself, the human desires the death of its autonomy, and in so doing embraces the unworthiness that marks it.

A creature whose will is built around simultaneous desires for abject particularity and self-dissolution: one way of putting this is to say that such a creature is constitutively masochistic. To some, such a suggestion will no doubt seem excessive; to others, it may seem rather late in coming, something already theorized well enough by psychoanalysis, and in no need of the philosophical derivation I have given it. Let me then take a minute to explain what I mean by the term *masochism*, my reasons for using it and others that have psychoanalytic resonances, and more broadly the relation between the kind of analysis I pursue here and throughout this book and the kind, or rather kinds, properly classified as psychoanalytic.

On an initial definition, the term *masochism* as I am using it refers to a range of phenomena constituted by a willing investment in suffering, that is, a relationship to suffering which involves taking pleasure in it and identifying with it. Some such definition reflects the way the term has passed from what was once a technical psychoanalytic usage into ordinary language, where it is frequently invoked in ways that do not depend on any particular theory, and that need not refer to sexuality, much less to a sexuality judged to be "abnormal." So we speak, for instance, of the masochism of the ultramarathon runner without necessarily thinking that running 100 miles through the desert represents a sublimation of sexual urges; and we speak of the masochism of someone who enjoys being bound and whipped by his partner without necessarily thinking that his tastes reflect a state of mental unhealth, or that they issue from unresolved Oedipal anxieties. One might insist that such usage is the sloppy-minded misapplication of a scientific term that should only be invoked consistently with a technical psychoanalytic definition of it. But I think that the ordinary usage has something to say for it, since it locates the historically and psychologically specific case of a sexual taste for leather, whips, and fur as one instance of a broader phenomenon, without assuming that a particular theory owns the use of the term, or that the contours of that specific case constitute the core of the phenomenon and the basis for explaining it.

I have meant for the topic of masochism in this broad sense to be in play throughout this book, from the claim in the book's introduction that a willing investment in suffering attends all normative phenomena, to the discussion in chapter one of the punishments the Miller brings on a masculinity he associates with his agentive capacities, to the link made in chapter two between the conventional rhetoric of the wretched lover "slain by desire" and the Knight's longing to both complete and obliterate his agency by being taken up into the stasis of a beautiful formal stucture. In both Chaucerian instances, as in those I will discuss in later chapters of this book, sexuality provides central scenes for fantasies of the undoing and violent remaking of the self and for explorations of the pleasure to be found in suffering. As I will argue in the next chapter, this conjunction of topics emerges partly from an analysis of courtly or romantic sexuality Chaucer learned from the *Roman de la Rose*. Masochism becomes a convenient shorthand for this conjunction because of the way the social and psychological form that goes by its name – Masoch adoring his icily cruel mistress, the hard-nosed businessman stopping in for a quick whipping from his dominatrix during lunch – inherits and allegorizes a split in romance masculinity of which Chaucer and the writers of the *Rose* were very much aware.

One of the main purposes of this chapter has been to argue that while this collection of cases should be understood as bearing some family resemblance to, and standing in a genealogical relationship to, what we ordinarily call masochism, the abjections and thrills of hegemonic masculinity do not provide the stopping point for an explanation of them. In order to understand what drives these cases, we need to see them as ways of instantiating and representing something much more general, a drive to self-violation and a willing investment in suffering that does not reduce to *any* set of empirical instances of it, and cannot be fully understood through a focus on sexuality, but is rather a constitutive condition of agency as such. On the account I am proposing, masochism in this further sense is thus not an aberration, and not even something that picks out one group of people with a distinctive kind of desire. The masochist as a distinct type is rather someone who, to use Leo Bersani's term, is attached to a "melodramatic" expression of the self-violation intrinsic to agency.[28]

To see more fully how this argument engages with and differs from psychoanalysis, we need to expand the scope of the discussion to include not just the theory of masochism but the question of what psychoanalysis is in the first place. I will use as a touchstone a recent critique of psychoanalysis and its use in medieval studies, Lee Patterson's essay "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies."[29] Patterson follows critics of psychoanalysis such as Frederick Crews and Adolf Grünbaum in arguing that if psychoanalysis has any explanatory value, it must be understood as a scientifically verifiable theory of the causes of human behavior.[30] The core of that theory, in turn, resides in the centrality of the Oedipus complex and castration anxiety to Freud's analysis of infantile sexuality and sexual development. Patterson argues that there is no scientific or clinical evidence for these theories, and that since psychoanalysis has never had any evidentiary basis for its central claims, it proceeds preemptively, by assigning preordained significance to all data and refusing to rethink its premises, thus giving "an impression of immense explanatory power while concealing empirical emptiness."[31] If Patterson's account of psychoanalysis is accurate, then surely he is right that the entire enterprise, including psychoanalytic readings of medieval texts, is deeply flawed; and indeed, like Crews, Patterson is responding to some of Freud's most basic and repeated claims about the nature of his project. These claims belong to what we might call the technological ambition of psychoanalysis, the goal of providing, in Foucault's term, a "scientia sexualis," a transmissible and professionalized epistemology of sex.[32] But that technological ambition is not the only thing animating Freud's writings; as Bersani among others has argued, there is a profound tension in Freud between "the ambition of elaborating a clinically viable theory" and an impulse towards radical speculation that resists the normalizing and institutionalizing aspects of that theory.[33] Partly as a result of Bersani's readings of Freud, I am less convinced than Patterson is that psychoanalysis as a whole stands or falls on the explanatory value of the Oedipus complex, particularly insofar as what gets called "the Oedipus complex" refers to a literalized family romance that serves as a universal source of psychic trauma and the basis for the production of all sexuality and gender identity. Much of Freud amounts to speculative

phenomenology rather than pseudoscientific theorizing, and we can learn a good deal from his brilliant reflections on such matters as the combination of affection and aggression in the child's game of fort/da, the interpenetration of mourning and melancholia, and the distinction between the sexual instinct and its socially produced "soldering" to sexual aims, without signing off on the idea that such reflections ultimately depend on a theory of Oedipal conflict.[34] The same holds for later writers in the psychoanalytic tradition, such as Lacan, Laplanche, Bersani, and Žižek; Bersani's writings on masochism, for instance, exist well to the side of Oedipal theory.[35] Within medieval studies, Aranye Fradenburg's work, particularly her recent book *Sacrifice Your Love*, is a luminous psychoanalytic meditation on the enjoyment surrounding the cultural and psychic drive to renunciation, which never as far as I can tell depends even implicitly on the Oedipus complex. And even when the Oedipal does appear in these writers, it often functions, as it sometimes does in Freud, not as the basis of a scientific explanation of anything, but as an allegory of much more general questions concerning how subjects come into being through the internalization of others and the identification with authority. In short, psychoanalysis as I understand it is not a unified theoretical edifice grounded in a set of core propositions, but is rather a live project of thinking that grapples with a set of problems that it sometimes powerfully illuminates, and sometimes formulates in problematic ways whose very problems can offer us opportunities for further thought.

As these comments suggest, I think that Patterson is wrong in declaring psychoanalysis intellectually bankrupt, partly because psychoanalysis has always been more than the theory and procedures of analysis Patterson critiques, and partly because psychoanalysis itself has pursued versions of some of those critiques. That being said, I am in wholehearted sympathy with what I take to be two central motives of Patterson's essay, a desire not to shortchange the self-understandings of the past, and a belief that simply adopting some theoretical and interpretive scheme – or, as I would put it, taking an intellectual tradition such as psychoanalysis to provide such a scheme – cuts short the work of theory. The two motives are closely linked, since it shortchanges the self-understanding of the past to think we can articulate it absent the

work of theory, and since that work is bypassed just as effectively by the dogmatic thought that we already have a theory as by the empiricist thought that we do not need one. Patterson sums this up wonderfully in a closing slogan of his essay: "our task, in short, is not to become less but more theoretical."[36] Quite apart from the question of whether there is more in psychoanalysis than Patterson sees there, then, I think he is right that one way to be more theoretical is to ask how we might understand complex psychological structures, such as those he explores in the Pardoner, without invoking what is after all one main line of psychoanalytic theory, features of which are shared by psychoanalysis even at its most revisionary. That line pursues a causal analysis of psychological phenomena, locating their sources in terms of a developmental narrative centered on the polymorphous perversity of infantile sexuality and the various biological and cultural demands – sometimes, though by no means always, those surrounding the Oedipus complex – that lead to the renunciation of infantile pleasures and to attempts to recapture them in other forms. Whatever the value of such analysis, it is a mistake to assume that it is necessary for, or always the best path into, discussions of psychological complexity, even ones that focus, as this book does, on misrecognition, gender anxiety, and the ambivalences that haunt sexual desire.

One of the great values of studying Chaucer and the premodern intellectual and literary traditions in which he was steeped is that it makes available to us an alternative path of analysis that is obscured by a tendency to see psychological complexity as the exclusive province of psychoanalysis, a path that reveals features of misrecognition and of sexuality that do not clearly emerge from a psychoanalytic discussion. As I have argued, this alternative path leads not to the causal sources of psychological phenomena but to the structure of reasons that informs them; and as I have suggested and will continue to do so, it can help us provide an analysis that resists an impulse much medieval thought shares with some versions of psychoanalysis, that of locating the sources of moral and psychological alterity in traumatic narrative. Further, this alternative path of analysis inverts the procedure psychoanalysis sometimes follows, or seems to follow, of locating sexuality as the inner secret that determines human behavior and psychology.[37] My argument is that sexuality is important to Chaucer not because he sees it as the

source of agency and misrecognition and self-violation, but because sexuality provides him with a rich site for exploring the misrecognition and self-violation that inevitably attend the antinomy structuring practical reason and an agent's sense of herself and her projects. No causal analysis, psychoanalytic or otherwise, can capture that antinomy, since a causal analysis necessarily sets the perspective of practical reason and agency to the side.[38]

Boethius has helped us formulate this account because of the way he pursues questions of misrecognition and an agentive investment in suffering in ways that were clearly influential for Chaucer, but that in themselves have nothing to say about sexuality. To understand the relation between this argument and Chaucer's representations of erotic life, then, we need to ask how a Boethian account of masochism that is in the first instance agentive and moral can illuminate the constitution of sexuality. I will pursue that question in depth in the next chapter by turning to the *Roman de la Rose*. Before doing that, however, I want to address more directly the question of what it means to think of Chaucer as a Boethian poet – which means, in this context, how Chaucer developed a poetic project out of Boethian interests in dialectic, the aporetic structures of thought and desire, and the willing self-division with which agents confront their desire for autonomy.

## BOETHIUS, CHAUCER, AND NORMATIVE NOSTALGIA

It is often thought that Boethius's influence on Chaucer's poetry can best be seen in passages that cite the *Consolation* or, more broadly, in any way that Chaucer might be said to hold a set of views characterized as "Boethian doctrine," which usually means the positions staked out by Philosophy in the course of the dialogue. My argument is that Boethius's influence is at once less direct and more pervasive than that. I do not deny that Chaucer thinks the positions Philosophy articulates are correct; there is no question of irony or critique here, any more than there is within the *Consolation* itself. But for Boethius and for Chaucer, the articulation of a philosophically correct position is not the final goal. The fundamental philosophical interest of both writers is not to be found in positions, or even in arguments, but rather in problems; and the basic question to ask of each is not "What do they

believe?" but rather "How do they investigate the problems that animate them?" For both, in other words, philosophy is not a set of doctrines or arguments but a project of inquiry. And the best way to see Boethius's influence on Chaucer's poetry is to see how Chaucer engaged the problems Boethius has brought us to, and how Chaucer developed and redirected inquiry into them.

I have argued that in the *Consolation* Boethius uses an explicitly dialectical mode of representation to explore the aporias that structure our thinking about happiness, desire, freedom, and justice. Early in his career, in the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer experimented with dialectical form by writing a dialogue between interlocutors in need of a therapy neither could provide; in doing so, he explored aporetic structures of thought informing mourning and erotic stasis. But Chaucer – unlike Langland, the *Pearl*-poet, Gower, Jean de Meun, Guillaume de Machaut, Dante, and other writers important to or contemporary with him – lost interest rather quickly in the philosophical dialogue in any version, abandoning extensive use of it with the exceptions of a deeply parodic experiment in *The House of Fame*, and a late return to it in *The Tale of Melibee*. That does not mean, however, that he lost interest in dialectic. I have already argued that dialectical structures inform the *Miller's* and *Knight's Tales* in the absence of any explicitly dialectical representation, and even in the absence of any direct reference to philosophical topics. Two relatively minor poems,"The Former Age" and "Lak of Stedfastnesse," will help to focus this argument further.

"The Former Age" and "Lak of Stedfastnesse" belong to a loose group of short poems often referred to as "Boethian lyrics," poems written in a direct authorial voice with no intervening narrator; here, it would seem, we have Chaucer's Boethianness in its purest and rhetorically simplest form. These poems imagine the "blisful lyf" (FA, 1) of a Golden Age in which excessive desire was unknown – people "helde hem payed of the fruites that they ete" (FA, 3) and "ne were nat forpampred with outrage" (FA, 5) – and in which everyone unfailingly obeyed the dictates of moral duty, for "mannes word was obligacioun" (LS, 2) and all were "wed . . . to stedfastnesse" (LS, 28). Chaucer says of these folk that "hir hertes were al oon" (FA, 47), by which he means that they were both individually and collectively wholehearted, suffering neither psychic nor social conflict. By contrast, the present is marked by

"doublenesse" (FA, 62), by multiple forms of individual and collective self-division: war, tyranny, envy, covetousness, pride, a whole array of familiar ethical and political pathologies. In short, "the world hath mad a permutacioun / Fro right to wrong" (LS, 19–20). There is in Chaucer's poetry no simpler and more direct expression of the longing for a will perfectly at one with itself, a condition from which Chaucer imagines us to have lapsed into "wilful wrecchednesse" (LS, 13), a wicked indulgence in willfulness which is at the same time a miserable suffering we embrace as though it were our heart's desire.

In the compact form of these lyrics, then, Chaucer pursues Boethian interests in the desiring, agentive attachment to suffering; in a reflective viewpoint from which the possibility of an authentic, undivided selfhood appears bound to the drive to autonomy; and in the normative nostalgia that locates such autonomy in an irrecoverable past whose claim on the present cannot be erased. And Chaucer's pursuit of these interests begins to look as dialectical as Boethius's – though in an entirely different rhetorical mode – when we ask what exactly in these poems gives their longing its distinctive ache, and what would be required to assuage it. As Andrew Galloway has argued, "The Former Age" is not a poem that asks us simply to imagine the desirability of returning to the idyllic state it represents: that state is too thoroughly marked by what can only appear to us as sheer privation rather than a pleasingly Edenic simplicity.[39] If the inhabitants of the Former Age were not "forpampred with outrage," this is because they lacked the technology to produce food any better than pig fodder: "unknowen was the quern and ek the melle; / They eten mast, hawes, and swich pounage" (FA, 6–7). While grain may spring up unsown, this turns out to be a sign less of Golden Age abundance than of the inability to cultivate, for of this grain "they . . . eete nat half ynough" (FA, 11). And, in lines that comically reverse the rhetorical effect of Diogenes's tag concerning poverty's safety from depradation, Chaucer describes the unwillingness of tyrants in the Former Age to set out on campaigns to conquer wilderness and "busshes" (FA, 33–34), a description complicated by the fact that there should by definition have been no tyrants in the first place. What is important to see here is that none of these rhetorical complexities works to undermine the normative longing the poems voice. They rather work to divide us against our identification

with an imagined past in which we would have been free of such longing by making us feel the claim of a "doublenesse" that yearns for "trouthe" and of a picture of "trouthe" that remains embedded in "doublenesse." For we could only assuage our longing for the Former Age as these poems represent it if we no longer desired to have enough to meet our most basic material needs, and no longer understood that a creature deprived of enough is free from tyranny only because its possessions are so undesirable.

"Lak of Stedfastnesse" provides some terms to drive this point home. To live in the Former Age as Chaucer depicts it would not be to attain the moral perfection of "steadfastness," but rather to suffer a peculiar kind of lack of steadfastness. This would not be the kind Chaucer depicts in the present of the poem, in which we fail in our reach for autonomy because we cannot bring ourselves to be true to our deepest convictions and most important obligations. It would rather be the lack involved in having nothing to be steadfast about: there would be no need for "trouthe" in relation to ourselves or in our bonds with others because no one would realize they lacked anything, and even if they did, there would be nothing worth breaking one's trouthe for. But then this condition could not begin to assuage the longing Chaucer so evidently feels. The longing for the Former Age rather involves a wish to obliterate the conditions in which any possible longing could ever arise, and to establish amnesia about the very thing that made it attractive in the first place. What makes Chaucer's poems so powerful is the way they resist such amnesia and show the impossibility of its ever being complete. They do so through their appeal to a notion of steadfast commitment that the fantasy of the Former Age cannot sustain; through their reminders that, unlike our imagined ancestors, we *are* creatures of deprivation and desire, and we know it; and through the paradoxical appearance of the figure of the tyrant, the one inhabitant of the Former Age who is *not* happy with "less than half enough," and so who functions as a kind of reservoir for the consciousness of deprivation on which the very possibility of steadfastness depends, but which cannot be an acknowledged part of Golden Age fantasy, and so must appear there only in displaced, demonized form. In each of these ways Chaucer's lyrics work to exhibit the way normative nostalgia erases the very possibility of the perfection it imagines, and depends for its tug on

this very erasure. To invoke Susan Stewart's memorable phrase, the nostalgia of these poems is "a sadness without an object."[40]

Here, we might think, we have at last come across a deep difference between Chaucer and Boethius, a place where Chaucer substantially differs from Boethian doctrine and subjects it to critique. For we have just seen that Boethius remains subject to normative nostalgia in his metaphysics and theology, as well as in the account he would give of the ultimate source of moral failure; whereas we have seen, not only in the *Knight's* and *Miller's Tales*, but even in poems that lack an intervening narrator, that Chaucer again and again makes nostalgia an object of analysis, investigating its self-contradictions and, especially in the *Tales*, its implication in the blindness and violence of various social ideologies.[41] And, we might think, this difference reflects an even deeper one concerning each writer's relations to the ideal of philosophical truth. The aporetic structure of Chaucerian nostalgia may link it to Boethian dialectics, but for Boethius, dialectical investigation seems ultimately to stop in the articulation of philosophical truth, while Chaucer seems a more modern and skeptical figure who keeps his distance from any such claims, always complicating them rhetorically, placing them back in the realm of situated, interested, "doubled" discourse. To put the thought being entertained here in a nutshell, while Boethius places metaphysics in the mouth of Philosophy, Chaucer places Boethian metaphysics in the mouth of Theseus, a ruler with a distinct political agenda who is himself the imaginative product of a narrator whose moral, political, and erotic attitudes are shot through with ambivalence and misrecognition.

Such a thought would return us more or less to the prevalent view of both Chaucer and Boethius, and it would respond to much of what I have been arguing, but while I find it preferable to a Robertsonian view of Chaucer as a dogmatic poet, I think it shares with Robertson a tendency to garble questions of how to read Chaucer's analytical habits of mind with broad issues of skepticism and belief to which they are unrelated. Let us begin with Boethius. As we have seen, the *Consolation* begins with nostalgia, in the Prisoner's lament for a lost past of freedom and pleasure which Philosophy claims is only the perception of a change. Nostalgia is itself here an example of misrecognition, an attempt to narrativize a lack that is finally not historical. Golden Age

nostalgia appears later in the first half of the dialogue, shortly before Philosophy begins the happiness argument; but while the invocation of the Golden Age appears now in the voice of Philosophy, it too functions as an expression of something else that it cannot quite formulate, suited to a moment in the dialectic in which historical narrative seems the only way to capture what will later be revealed as an atemporal metaphysical structure. And while that structure itself later gets expressed in narrative form, as a story about the workings of the cosmos rather than a sequence of historical ages, the reason for the production of that story is that the atemporal metaphysical structure towards which Philosophy points is scarcely conceivable except in mythical narrative form.[42] Even in metaphysics, then, narrative is not literal but phantasmatic, a way of trying to give imaginative form to something that, strictly speaking, cannot be represented. That is part of the point of Philosophy's distinction, late in the dialogue, between cognition and intellection: because cognition is always temporally and linguistically mediated, it can never grasp the truth complete and plain, but breaks what is whole and simple into reified parts; and while intellection involves direct contact with the essence of a thing, for that very reason it must be nonrepresentational.[43]

It is perfectly Boethian, then, for Chaucer to think that all representation carries doubleness and misrecognition within it – or, to put the point in terms from earlier in this chapter, to think of representation as essentially fetishistic, as reifying one's relationship to an unrepresentable object of thought and desire which it simultaneously points to and conceals. And it is equally Boethian for Chaucer to understand the production of narrative as a paradigmatic site for fetishistic reification. But it goes along with this way of thinking that if fetishistic reification involves a kind of false consciousness, then poetry, like all other representational forms, cannot supply a superior vantage-point from which such reifications can be subjected to a disinterested critique. The last thing a Boethian poetics would pursue, then, would be a Robertsonian moralism; and Chaucer's interest in the investigation of false consciousness from within, with no recourse to a discursive ground outside ideology, far from being protomodern, belongs quite centrally to the medieval intellectual tradition we have always placed him in.

The same can be said when we turn, as the Boethian lyrics do, from metaphysics to morals. Through the doubled rhetoric of these poems – through their way of distancing us from a longing to which they continue to give powerful and unironized expression – Chaucer pursues a critical investigation of something to which he finds himself deeply subject. And here too Chaucer is quite close to Boethius's intellectual commitments. For the force of Chaucer's appeals to trouthe and stedfastnesse suggests that, if no sense can finally be given to the idea of a prior state in which all were wed to those ideals, the appeal to a narrative priority misrecognizes another kind of priority, the ontological priority of the sense of self associated with autonomy, that is, with a nonpathological attachment to freely chosen ends. And what is more, the poems include in the realm of pathological attachment such things as the taste for human food rather than pig fodder and the desire for adequate material sustenance, both of which mark our desiring participation in a world of covetousness and tyranny, even as it is impossible to imagine a life without them, or at least a life anyone could want. Chaucer's rhetoric thus points to something it does not directly represent: a Boethian antinomy of the will, a conflict between the normative authority of autonomy and that of a way of life determined by practical and historical necessities. For both Boethius and Chaucer, such a conflict is constitutive of the human, and definitively marks the human as a creature of normative longing. Chaucer's Boethian lyrics present nostalgia as a way of trying to picture this fundamental deadlock by rendering it into fetishistic narrative, producing as its desired object a reified state that both expresses and diverts us from the problem for which it imagines a solution.

While Chaucer's Boethianness is not to be found in his poetry's exemplification of Boethian doctrine, then, neither is it true that the differences between Chaucer and Boethius are to be found in doctrinal disagreements. For all his interest in psychology and the limits of discursive knowledge, Boethius retains a commitment to making arguments about philosophical topics and to trying to say what is true about them. Chaucer's lack of interest in making arguments and in aiming at philosophical truth, on the other hand, is the sign not of an anti-Boethian skepticism, but of a much more powerful interest than Boethius has in exploring the social and psychological specificities of persons'

inhabitation of philosophical problems. As I have argued with respect to the Knight and the Miller, and will argue with respect to the Wife of Bath and the Clerk, Chaucer deliberately produces a poetic rhetoric that invites the philosophical work necessary for such exploration. In this he participates in the larger intellectual and poetic culture I sketched in the book's introduction – the culture of Jean de Meun, Dante, and Langland, among others – although Chaucer's is perhaps the most subtle contribution to that culture, as it moves far afield of any explicit philosophical references or themes. But that subtleness should not be mistaken, as it often is, for a move to a realist poetics that rejects philosophy in favor of social and psychological portraiture. To think that is to deny ourselves the resources Chaucer assumed for a reading of his portraits.