Few instances of equanimity in the face of personal ruin inspire wonder as the final days of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy* movingly narrates Boethius’s reversal of fortune, relating his fall from high political favor into the disgrace of exile and execution as a traitor.¹ A genuinely wise man—inspired to public service by a “desire for good” and by reading Plato (1.pr.4)—he feels the full force of destitution and wavers momentarily before coming to himself. Through the persistent and patient nursing of Lady Philosophy, Boethius is reminded that “no sudden change of circumstances ever occurs without some upheaval in the mind; and that is why you, too, have deserted for a while your usual calm” (2.pr.1). Unwilling to see one of her most discerning disciples despair, Lady Philosophy undertakes first to diagnose and then to treat Boethius. As book one concludes, she completes her diagnosis. Her desolate disciple knows that the world is not the result of “haphazard and chance events” because it is governed by God, but he does not know how God rules creation. He remembers that God is the “source from which all things come,” but because his “memory has been blunted by grief” he no longer recalls “what is the end and purpose of things.” And tellingly, he acknowledges that “man is a rational and mortal animal,” but insists assuredly that humankind is “not something more.” In response, Lady Philosophy says, “Now I know . . . the major cause of your illness: *quid ipse sis nosse desisti*” (1.pr.7.17). *You have forgotten what you are.*² “And so,” Lady Philosophy asserts, “I have found out in full the reason for your sickness and the way to approach the task of restoring you to health.”

A more fitting judgment of us and of our time, at the end the modernity, could scarcely be found. We too share in Boethius’s malady, having forgotten what we are. Perhaps unlike Boethius, our failure of self-understanding is no mere blunting of memory through grief-worn care, but instead constitutes a willful giving over of, a desisting from, knowledge of what we are—and more. While we share with Boethius the failure to know what we are, our failure is deeper than his, for
only seldom do we moderns profess the modest knowledge that he embraces when acknowledging God as Creator, the world as meaningfully ordered, and humankind as rational and mortal. If Boethius’s deficiencies are “grave” and “lead not only to illness but even death,” what peril indeed must we, at the end of modernity, confront? Can philosophy offer us consolation or cure?

I want to argue—in light of the insights that Boethius offers in his wildly popular medieval text—that philosophy can both console and cure us. When it succeeds, it is not through the false therapies that, as Lady Philosophy warns Boethius, “slay the rich and fruitful harvest of Reason with the barren thorns of Passion” (1.pr.1). Instead, philosophy succeeds where therapeutic drivel cannot precisely when it discerns what we are within the context of our source and our end. By so doing, knowledge of what we are offers morally significant direction for our lives. And lest we dismiss Boethius’s confidence as the overblown buoyancy of a broken down old man who imagines a shapely goddess of truth, let me insist that philosophy need not be any less efficacious when we encounter it in its more pedestrian forms.

I will offer my favorable estimate of Boethius’s movement from dispossession to consolation by way of lively engagement with a couple of leading sources of philosophical discontent with the idea of human nature. These two means of erring in one’s philosophical anthropology come by way of scientific rationalism and misologistic nihilism. Ancient forms of both scientific rationalism and misologistic nihilism variously enervate Boethius, giving rise to his uncertainty about what he is and his moral torpor; likewise, contemporarily clad manifestations of scientific rationalism and misologistic nihilism beset us in late modernity, giving rise to our uncertainty about what we are along with our own troubling species of moral ambiguity. It thus should be clear that I occupy a definite position in relation to the central issues of this book, namely that human nature rightly understood is morally normative; that modern philosophy is discontent with the idea of human nature and is, ipso facto, lacking sound knowledge not only of what we are but of how we should live; and that philosophy ideally in theory and practice offers us—like the beautiful specter of wisdom that Boethius beholds—the prospect of true consolation and cure.

1 Scientific Rationalism

In book one of the *Consolation*, Boethius, forlorn and caught in the grip of despair, offers a succinct account of what we are. The dialogue between Lady Philosophy and Boethius unfolds straightforwardly:

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\ldots \text{I want you to answer this too: do you remember that you are a man?}
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\[
\text{Why shouldn’t I? I said.}
\]

\[
\text{Can you, then, tell me what man is?}
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\[
\text{Are you asking me if I know whether man is a rational and mortal animal? I do know it and I acknowledge that that is what I am.}
\]

\[
\text{Are you sure you are not something more?}
\]

\[
\text{Quite sure.}
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