

Augustine and Boethius on Suffering and Human Freedom

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Introduction

Human beings often struggle most intensely with events they cannot control. Political instability, imprisonment, financial loss, illness, damaged reputation, bereavement, and the collapse of familiar institutions can make life appear meaningless or unjust. Two influential thinkers of late antiquity, [Augustine](#) of Hippo and Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, confronted this problem from different circumstances. Augustine wrote *The City of God* after the sack of Rome in 410 CE, an event that shocked the Roman world and raised questions about whether political decline represented a collapse of moral order. Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while imprisoned and awaiting execution after losing political office, freedom, reputation, and property. Both argue that lasting happiness cannot depend entirely on wealth, power, public recognition, or political stability because these goods are vulnerable to change. Augustine locates ultimate hope in God, rightly ordered love, grace, and the eternal City of God, while Boethius uses philosophy to expose the instability of Fortune and to redirect happiness toward wisdom, virtue, providence, and the highest good.

Augustine: Rome, the Two Cities, and the Meaning of Suffering

Augustine was born in 354 CE in Roman North Africa and became bishop of Hippo after a long intellectual and religious journey. The sack of Rome by Alaric's Visigoths in 410 had enormous symbolic importance even though Rome was no longer the administrative capital of the Western Empire. For centuries the city had represented political continuity, military power, civilization, and imperial identity. Some pagan critics blamed Christianity for Rome's vulnerability, arguing that abandoning traditional Roman gods had weakened the empire. Augustine began *The City of God* partly as an answer to this charge, but the work grew into a much broader analysis of history, justice, political power, suffering, peace, and human destiny (Augustine, 1998; Tornau, 2024).

Augustine rejects the assumption that military success or political longevity proves moral superiority. Rome had achieved extraordinary power, but conquest could also express ambition, pride, violence, and the desire to dominate. His distinction between the earthly city and the City of God is therefore

not simply a contrast between two geographical states. The earthly city is organized by disordered love of self and domination, while the City of God is organized by love of God and a different understanding of the highest good. The two communities remain intermingled in history. Their members may live under the same laws, experience the same wars, and participate in the same institutions; their deepest difference lies in what they ultimately love and where they place their hope.

This framework allows Augustine to interpret suffering without claiming that suffering is unreal or deserved. In *The City of God*, he observes that good and bad people may endure the same external disasters, while their moral responses can differ. Property, status, security, and political order are genuine goods, but they are not permanent and cannot guarantee happiness. The destruction of a city or loss of possessions can therefore be devastating without proving that goodness, divine justice, or the possibility of meaningful life has disappeared. Earthly prosperity is not reliable evidence of virtue, and earthly suffering is not reliable evidence of moral failure.

Freedom, Grace, and Responsible Action in Augustine

Augustine's emphasis on divine grace does not amount to simple fatalism. Human beings remain morally responsible because they make choices, develop habits, direct their love toward particular objects, and act toward other people in ways that matter. Grace, in Augustine's theology, means that human beings cannot perfect themselves through pride or unaided will; it does not mean that their actions are irrelevant. His account of freedom is complex because it combines moral responsibility with a strong doctrine of divine providence and dependence on God. The result is a view in which human agency is real but never fully self-sufficient.

Nor does Augustine's criticism of earthly politics imply that people should abandon political responsibility. The City of God is not a program for withdrawing from every civic obligation. In Book XIX, Augustine treats earthly peace as a genuine good that Christians can use and support even though it is incomplete. Governments can pursue order, protect life, restrain wrongdoing, and create conditions for ordinary social cooperation. Acceptance therefore differs from resignation. A person may recognize that no political institution can provide permanent security while still working for justice, mercy, lawful order, and the welfare of neighbors.

Augustine's consolation when the world appears to be ending is therefore a reordering of hope. Political systems, careers, wealth, and public honor can matter without becoming the foundation of identity. When they fail, the loss does not need to be minimized, but it can be interpreted within a larger account of human purpose. Perfect peace cannot be guaranteed by empire, military power, or social prestige. For Augustine, lasting hope rests in a good that is not destroyed when circumstances change.

Boethius: Fortune, Happiness, and the Limits of External Goods

Boethius was born into an aristocratic Roman family around the late fifth century and became a scholar, translator, philosopher, theologian, and senior political official under the Ostrogothic king Theodoric. His career ended abruptly when he was accused of treason, imprisoned, and eventually executed. While awaiting death, he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a dialogue in prose and poetry between the imprisoned Boethius and the allegorical figure Lady Philosophy. At the beginning of the work, Boethius is overwhelmed by grief because he believes he acted honorably yet has lost office, freedom, property, reputation, and security while unjust people prosper (Boethius, 1999; Marenbon, 2021).

Lady Philosophy responds by examining the assumptions that make these losses seem equivalent to the destruction of happiness itself. Fortune is personified as a power that gives and removes wealth, political office, popularity, status, and other external advantages. Her defining characteristic is change. The image of Fortune's wheel represents the instability of worldly success: a person standing at the top today may be carried downward tomorrow, while someone previously powerless may rise. The lesson is not that loss is painless. It is that external goods cannot provide permanent security because they were never fully under the individual's control.

Boethius therefore distinguishes between external circumstances and internal moral life. Political decisions, accusations, illness, public opinion, and economic change may lie partly or entirely outside a person's control. Judgment, values, desires, and moral responses remain more closely connected to the person. Wealth can be stolen, office can be removed, and reputation can be damaged, but these events do not automatically make a wise person foolish or a virtuous person corrupt. Boethius does not deny the value of family, friendship, or ordinary human goods. His argument is that finite goods become dangerous when they are expected to provide complete, permanent, and invulnerable happiness.

Providence, Bad Fortune, and Human Freedom in Boethius

Lady Philosophy examines wealth, fame, power, pleasure, and public honor and argues that each represents an incomplete attempt to obtain something deeper: sufficiency, respect, security, joy, or power. Because these goods remain fragmented and unstable, none can provide the complete happiness people seek. Boethius ultimately identifies perfect happiness with the highest good and associates that good with God. The philosophical movement of the work therefore shifts attention from possession toward participation in goodness, wisdom, and rational order.

The claim that bad fortune can sometimes be more useful than good fortune is one of the work's most provocative ideas. Prosperity can create the illusion that wealth, power, and social relationships are secure, whereas misfortune reveals their fragility. Loss may expose false friends, unrealistic expectations, or an identity built too completely around public success. This does not make injustice desirable or transform wrongful punishment into justice. Boethius continues to regard his situation as unjust. The point is that the wrongdoing of others does not have to determine the entire moral meaning of his life.

The later books of the *Consolation* also confront the tension between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. If God knows all events, Boethius asks, how can human choices remain free? His answer distinguishes divine eternity from ordinary temporal prediction. God does not simply look ahead from one moment to another as a human observer might; all time is present to divine knowledge in a different mode. This argument attempts to preserve moral responsibility without limiting divine knowledge. Whether one accepts the solution or not, the issue matters to the book because consolation depends on the belief that the universe is not governed by blind chaos and that human moral choice retains significance.

Comparing Augustine and Boethius

Augustine and Boethius share a distrust of external success as the foundation of happiness. Both lived in a world where Roman political institutions no longer seemed secure, and both wrote in response to radical instability. Augustine addresses the symbolic vulnerability of Rome and the larger problem of historical suffering, while Boethius writes from the intensely personal experience of imprisonment and impending death. Each asks what remains when wealth, status, power, and social recognition disappear.

Their methods and emphases differ. Augustine writes explicitly within Christian theology and organizes his response around sin, grace, rightly ordered love, the earthly city, the City of God, and eternal peace. Boethius presents a philosophical dialogue dominated by classical reasoning about Fortune, happiness, providence, and the highest good. Although Boethius was a Christian and wrote theological works elsewhere, explicit Christian doctrine is strikingly limited in the *Consolation*. His argument proceeds through philosophy rather than through biblical revelation.

Neither thinker recommends emotional numbness or passive acceptance of wrongdoing. Augustine does not deny grief caused by war, and Boethius begins his work in despair. Their common insight is that suffering becomes even more destructive when a person concludes that external loss has erased every source of value. Acceptance means recognizing what has happened and what cannot be controlled without surrendering moral responsibility. One can acknowledge an injustice while still appealing a decision, protecting others, seeking reform, or refusing to become morally defined by the injustice.

Applying Their Ideas to Unpleasant Circumstances

Several practical insights emerge from this comparison. First, temporary loss should not automatically be interpreted as total loss. The end of a career, relationship, period of financial stability, or political order can be severe without eliminating every source of identity and meaning. Second, achievements that depend heavily on external recognition should not become the whole self. Employment, possessions, status, and reputation matter, but character, knowledge, relationships, commitments, and values can remain when circumstances change.

Third, acceptance should be distinguished from approval. Recognizing that an event has occurred is not the same as agreeing that it was right. Augustine's account leaves room for responsible action within imperfect political communities, while Boethius's philosophy protects the possibility of moral resistance even when political power has been taken away. Finally, suffering can be examined for what it reveals without being romanticized. Misfortune may expose false assumptions or misplaced priorities, but that possibility does not make trauma desirable or justify the person who caused it.

Augustine and Boethius ultimately redirect attention toward goods that are less vulnerable to Fortune. For Augustine these include faith, rightly ordered love, grace, and eternal peace. For Boethius they include wisdom, virtue, rational understanding, and orientation toward the highest good. Their answers are not identical, but both argue that human dignity depends on more than favorable circumstances.

Conclusion

Augustine and Boethius respond to suffering by challenging the assumption that lasting happiness can be secured through political power, wealth, reputation, or social stability. Augustine interprets the sack of Rome through the distinction between the earthly city and the City of God, insisting that human beings remain responsible for acting justly even though no political order can provide perfect peace. Boethius, writing from prison, uses the image of Fortune's wheel to show why external success is unstable and why wisdom, virtue, and the highest good provide a more durable foundation for happiness. Both acknowledge real suffering without allowing suffering to become the final measure of human worth. Their continuing relevance lies in this distinction between circumstances and character: individuals cannot control every event that happens to them, but they can still examine what they love, what they value, and how they respond.

Works Cited

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