Augustine and Boethius on Suffering and Human Freedom

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Human beings often struggle most intensely with events they cannot control. Political instability, imprisonment, financial loss, illness, damaged reputations, 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 precisely this problem. Although they lived almost a century apart and wrote under different circumstances, both attempted to explain how individuals could maintain hope when external events seemed to destroy everything they valued.

Augustine wrote *The City of God* after the sack of Rome in 410 CE, an event that shocked people throughout the Roman world. Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* while imprisoned and awaiting execution after being accused of treason under the Ostrogothic king Theodoric. Augustine responded to the apparent collapse of a civilization, whereas Boethius responded to the collapse of his personal life. Both argued that lasting happiness cannot depend entirely on political power, wealth, social status, or good fortune because such things are unstable. However, their responses are not identical. Augustine locates hope in God, divine grace, eternal peace, and membership in the City of God. Boethius teaches that suffering becomes more bearable when people understand the changing nature of Fortune and ground their happiness in reason, wisdom, virtue, and the highest good.

Augustine and the Sack of Rome

Augustine of Hippo was born in 354 CE in Thagaste, a town in Roman North Africa. After studying and teaching rhetoric, he converted to Christianity and eventually became the bishop of Hippo Regius. Although geographically located in North Africa, Augustine belonged intellectually and politically to the Roman world. He had been educated in Roman literature, rhetoric, philosophy, and political culture. He therefore understood why the sack of Rome created such a profound psychological crisis.

In 410 CE, Alaric and his Visigothic forces entered and sacked Rome. The city was no longer the administrative capital of the Western Roman Empire, but it remained an enormously powerful symbol of Roman identity, stability, civilization, and imperial greatness. Rome had long been imagined as the “eternal city,” and many people believed that its institutions and traditions would endure indefinitely. Its capture demonstrated that even the most celebrated political order could be shaken by war and historical change.

Some pagan Romans blamed Christianity for the disaster. They argued that Rome had become

vulnerable because its people had abandoned the traditional Roman gods and accepted Christianity. Augustine began writing *The City of God* partly to answer this accusation. The work was begun shortly after the sack and completed over many years. However, it developed into far more than a defense of Christianity. It became an extensive examination of political power, human history, suffering, justice, happiness, peace, and the ultimate destiny of humanity (Augustine, 1998; Tornau, 2024).

Augustine's Criticism of Roman Greatness

Augustine did not simply celebrate the Roman Empire as a model of justice. He questioned the moral assumptions beneath Rome's power and reputation. Roman culture often praised conquest, military success, public honour, political authority, wealth, and fame. Augustine argued that these achievements could not by themselves make a society just or an individual virtuous.

Rome had achieved extraordinary political and military power, but its expansion was frequently driven by what Augustine called the desire for domination. Political greatness could therefore hide pride, ambition, violence, and the hunger to control others. For Augustine, an empire was not just merely because it had laws, armies, impressive buildings, and an organized government. Genuine justice required a proper moral order in which individuals loved what was truly good.

This idea is central to Augustine's distinction between the earthly city and the City of God. These "cities" are not simply two geographical locations or two political states. They represent two fundamentally different orientations of human love. The earthly city is formed by disordered self-love, pride, and the desire for domination. The City of God is formed by the love of God and the humble recognition that human beings are not the highest source of truth or goodness.

The distinction does not mean that every member of the institutional Church belongs automatically to the City of God or that every government belongs exclusively to the earthly city. Augustine presents the two cities as intermingled within history. Their members may live beside one another, obey the same laws, experience the same wars, and participate in the same society. Their deepest difference lies in what they love and where they locate their ultimate hope (Augustine, 1998; Tornau, 2024).

What Comfort Does Augustine Offer When the World Seems to Be Ending?

Augustine's first source of comfort is the recognition that no earthly political system is eternal. Rome's decline did not mean that moral order, divine justice, or human hope had disappeared. It meant that people had placed excessive confidence in an institution that was always temporary.

For Augustine, Christians should not confuse the Roman Empire with the City of God. Empires rise and fall, governments change, cities are destroyed, and political institutions lose their power. The City of

God, by contrast, does not depend on the survival of any single human government. Augustine describes it as living by faith during the “fleeting course of time” while awaiting a final condition of perfect peace (Augustine, 1998, Book I, Preface).

This perspective does not require individuals to deny the reality of suffering. Augustine was not claiming that the sack of Rome was harmless or that the deaths, assaults, displacement, and destruction caused by war were unimportant. Rather, he argued that suffering does not have the power to determine a person’s ultimate moral worth.

In Book I, Augustine observes that “good and bad men suffer alike,” but he immediately explains that the character of the sufferers may differ even when their external circumstances are similar (Augustine, 1998, Book I, Chapter 8). One person may respond to loss with cruelty, despair, or greater selfishness, while another may respond with patience, courage, compassion, and humility. The event itself is not the only morally significant factor; the response to the event also matters.

Augustine therefore offers comfort by separating temporary circumstances from ultimate happiness. A person may lose property, status, political security, or even physical life without losing the possibility of spiritual good. Earthly prosperity is not proof of virtue, and earthly suffering is not proof of moral failure.

Augustine, Human Freedom, and Divine Grace

The original version of this argument suggested that, according to Augustine, humans can do nothing because the world is fated to collapse. This interpretation requires correction. Augustine strongly emphasized the limitations of human beings and their dependence on divine grace, but he did not teach simple fatalism.

Fatalism suggests that human choices have no real significance because every action has been mechanically predetermined. Augustine, however, continued to treat human beings as morally responsible. People make meaningful choices, form habits, direct their love toward particular objects, and remain accountable for how they act. His emphasis on grace means that human beings cannot achieve perfect righteousness through pride or unaided effort, not that they should become passive in the face of injustice.

Augustine also did not claim that people should abandon every attempt to construct better societies. Earthly justice will always be incomplete, but political communities can still pursue relative peace, lawful order, and the protection of human life. In Book XIX of *The City of God*, he explains that members of the heavenly city can make use of earthly peace and cooperate with others in matters necessary for mortal life. The imperfection of political society does not remove the responsibility to improve it.

Acceptance, in Augustine’s thought, is therefore different from resignation. A person should accept

that no earthly institution can provide complete security or permanent happiness. At the same time, that individual should continue to act with justice, mercy, humility, and responsibility. Hope in the City of God does not excuse neglect of the earthly city.

Augustine's Understanding of Suffering and Hope

When the world seems to be "coming to an end," Augustine encourages people to reconsider what exactly is ending. A familiar political system may be ending. A period of personal security may be ending. A powerful city may be losing its influence. None of these developments necessarily means that goodness, truth, or hope has ended.

Augustine's argument is psychologically demanding because it challenges people to release their belief that stability can be guaranteed. Human beings often treat temporary goods as though they were permanent. When these goods disappear, the loss feels like the destruction of life itself.

Augustine redirects hope toward what he considers the highest good. Perfect happiness cannot be produced by political power, wealth, public recognition, military victory, or physical security. It is completed in eternal life and peace with God. He does not deny that people naturally desire safety and peace in the present world. In fact, he describes peace as a good desired by everyone. Nevertheless, earthly peace remains vulnerable, whereas the final peace of the City of God cannot be destroyed by war or political change (Augustine, 1998, Book XIX).

Boethius and His Fall from Political Power

Boethius was born around 475 or 477 CE into an aristocratic Roman family. He became an accomplished scholar, philosopher, translator, theologian, and political official. His intellectual project included translating and interpreting major works of Greek philosophy for Latin readers. He also served under Theodoric, the Ostrogothic ruler of Italy, and eventually held the powerful position of Master of Offices.

Boethius's political success ended suddenly. After becoming involved in court conflicts and apparently challenging corruption, he was accused of treason and other offenses. He was imprisoned and probably executed in 526 CE. During his imprisonment, he composed *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a dialogue combining prose and poetry in which the imprisoned Boethius is visited by an allegorical woman called Lady Philosophy (Marenbon, 2021).

At the beginning of the work, Boethius is overwhelmed by grief. He has lost his office, political influence, freedom, reputation, property, and public standing. He believes that he has acted honourably but has been punished while corrupt people continue to prosper. His suffering is therefore not only physical or political. It creates an intellectual crisis: if the world is governed by justice, why do innocent people suffer while unjust people succeed?

Lady Philosophy does not merely tell him to stop feeling sad. Instead, she gradually challenges the beliefs that have made his suffering unbearable. She argues that he has misunderstood the nature of Fortune, happiness, power, and goodness.

The Wheel of Fortune

Fortune is personified as an unstable power who gives and removes material advantages. Wealth, public office, popularity, influence, and social status are among her gifts. People enjoy these goods when Fortune is favourable and then feel betrayed when circumstances change.

Lady Philosophy argues that Fortune has not changed her nature by taking Boethius's possessions away. Changefulness is her nature. A person who accepts the gifts of Fortune must understand that those gifts are temporary. Boethius writes that if Fortune's wheel stopped turning, "it ceases to be the wheel of Fortune" (Boethius, 1999, Book II, Prose 1).

The image of the wheel illustrates the instability of external success. A person may stand at the top of the wheel today and be carried downward tomorrow. Someone who is currently poor, unknown, or powerless may later rise. Because the wheel continually turns, no position on it can provide permanent security.

Boethius does not argue that loss is painless. Instead, he explains that suffering becomes more destructive when individuals mistakenly assume that temporary goods belong to them permanently. Acceptance begins when a person recognizes the conditions under which these goods are received.

What Is and Is Not Within a Person's Control?

According to Boethius, people should distinguish between external circumstances and their internal moral life. They cannot always control political decisions, accusations, other people's opinions, economic changes, physical illness, or unexpected loss. They can, however, examine their judgments, desires, values, and responses.

Boethius therefore advises people not to build their entire identity upon wealth, power, reputation, or office. These possessions remain dependent on forces outside the individual. Wealth may be stolen, public opinion may change, and political authority may be withdrawn. If happiness depends completely on such things, then happiness belongs to Fortune rather than to the person.

However, Boethius's argument should not be exaggerated into the claim that love, family, and friendship have no value. Scholarly interpretations of *The Consolation of Philosophy* emphasize that Lady Philosophy distinguishes superficial gifts of Fortune from genuine human goods. Boethius's family and loyal friends still possess real value. The problem is not loving other people; it is expecting any finite relationship or external condition to provide complete, permanent, and invulnerable

happiness (Marenbon, 2021).

True Happiness in Boethius's Philosophy

Lady Philosophy examines several things that people commonly identify with happiness: riches, political office, power, fame, physical pleasure, and public honour. She argues that none of them can provide the completeness people seek.

Riches do not produce self-sufficiency because wealthy people still fear loss and require protection. Political office cannot make a corrupt person morally worthy. Power is limited because even rulers cannot control everything. Fame is unstable because public opinion changes, and human reputation occupies only a tiny place within the vastness of time and the universe.

People pursue these goods because they desire sufficiency, respect, security, joy, and power. Their desires point toward a complete good, but the external objects they select cannot fully provide it. Boethius ultimately identifies perfect happiness with the highest good, which he associates with God. True happiness is therefore rooted in participation in goodness rather than in possession of unstable advantages.

This reasoning gives Boethius a basis for accepting what cannot be changed. If a person's deepest good remains accessible through wisdom, virtue, and moral integrity, then external loss does not destroy everything. Fortune can remove an office, but it cannot by itself make an honourable person corrupt. It can damage a reputation, but it cannot automatically remove wisdom. It can imprison the body, but it cannot entirely control how the mind understands its condition.

Why Bad Fortune Can Be Instructive

Boethius presents the surprising argument that bad fortune may sometimes be more useful than good fortune. Good fortune can deceive people by making temporary possessions appear permanent. It attracts false friends, encourages pride, and allows individuals to believe that their success proves their goodness.

Bad fortune removes this illusion. It reveals which friends are loyal, exposes the fragility of wealth and status, and forces people to examine what genuinely matters. The loss remains painful, but it can produce clearer moral vision.

This does not mean that injustice should be welcomed or that victims should be blamed for their suffering. Boethius himself maintains that the accusations against him were unjust. His philosophical response does not transform injustice into justice. Instead, it attempts to prevent the unjust actions of others from gaining complete control over his inner life.

Acceptance, from this perspective, means refusing to let external misfortune define the whole of one's existence. It involves acknowledging pain while resisting the conclusion that pain has destroyed every source of value.

Comparing Augustine and Boethius

Augustine and Boethius agree that material prosperity is unstable and cannot serve as the foundation of lasting happiness. Both witnessed the collapse of conditions that had appeared secure. Augustine saw the symbolic vulnerability of Rome, while Boethius experienced a personal descent from political authority to imprisonment.

Their approaches differ in emphasis. Augustine interprets historical suffering through Christian theology, divine grace, the two cities, and the hope of eternal peace. Boethius presents a philosophical dialogue centred on Fortune, reason, virtue, providence, and the highest good. Explicit Christian language is largely absent from *The Consolation of Philosophy*, even though Boethius was a Christian and wrote separate theological works.

Neither thinker recommends emotional numbness. Augustine recognizes grief, fear, violence, and loss. Boethius begins his work in despair. Their point is not that people should feel nothing, but that grief should not become a false judgment that all goodness has disappeared.

Both also reject the idea that external success accurately measures human worth. A victorious ruler may be unjust, while a defeated prisoner may remain virtuous. A wealthy person may be inwardly enslaved by fear, while someone who has lost possessions may retain wisdom and integrity.

How Can These Ideas Be Applied to Unpleasant Situations?

The insights of Augustine and Boethius suggest several ways of responding to circumstances that are beyond personal control.

First, individuals can distinguish between temporary loss and total loss. The end of a career, relationship, political order, or period of financial security may be devastating, but it does not necessarily eliminate every source of meaning.

Second, people can avoid treating external achievements as their complete identity. Employment, social status, property, and reputation matter, but they remain vulnerable to change. A stable identity must also include character, values, relationships, knowledge, and moral commitments.

Third, acceptance should be distinguished from passivity. Accepting that an event has occurred does not mean approving of it. A person may accept the reality of an injustice while still appealing a

decision, seeking help, protecting others, or working for reform.

Fourth, suffering can be examined without being romanticized. Misfortune may reveal false assumptions, unreliable relationships, or misplaced priorities. This possibility does not make suffering desirable, but it can prevent suffering from being entirely meaningless.

Finally, both thinkers encourage people to direct attention toward goods that are less dependent on chance. For Augustine, these include faith, rightly ordered love, divine grace, and hope in eternal peace. For Boethius, they include wisdom, virtue, rational understanding, and orientation toward the highest good.

Conclusion

Augustine and Boethius wrote during moments of profound disruption. Augustine responded to the sack of Rome and the fear that the Roman world was collapsing. He argued that no earthly empire should be mistaken for an eternal source of security. A person can take comfort in the City of God, divine grace, and the promise that temporary suffering does not determine ultimate moral worth or final happiness.

Boethius wrote after losing his political office, freedom, reputation, and security. Through Lady Philosophy, he learned that Fortune is changeable by nature. People suffer more deeply when they treat temporary advantages as permanent possessions. Acceptance becomes possible when individuals recognize the limits of their control and ground happiness in wisdom, virtue, goodness, and rational judgment rather than in status or material success.

Neither Augustine nor Boethius teaches simple resignation. Their shared lesson is that external events do not possess unlimited authority over the human person. People may not control everything that happens to them, but they can still examine what they love, how they judge their circumstances, and what kind of person they choose to become. Acceptance is therefore not surrender. It is the disciplined refusal to let uncontrollable events destroy one's capacity for truth, virtue, hope, and meaningful action.

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