Ambrose of Milan, Christian Sage

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Resourcing Humanity and Goodness from Late Antiquity

By

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Dedicated to the students, faculty, staff, administration, alumni,
and benefactors of St. Ambrose University

It is second nature for all people to seek the truth, which urges us to study and fills with a desire for asking questions. To excel in this is recognized by everyone to be a beautiful thing. (De Officiis I.26.125)

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Dedication and Thanks

This book is generated by the past, offered to the present, and oriented toward the future of St. Ambrose University, the only Catholic university in the world dedicated to the Bishop of Milan. It is dedicated to the students, faculty, staff, and administration (past, present and future).

The source of our tradition as a Diocesan Catholic university is the Senator-Bishop of Milan, who lived over 1600 years ago. He is the perfect patron for a diocesan university because, as I hope this book shows, because of his enormous, if under-utalized, contribution to to the creation of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

My deepest gratitude goes to Bea Jacobson, friend and colleague, who read, proofed, and corrected the manuscript. I am sure that I've managed to sneak more than a few errors in behind her, for which she is not responsible.

Ethan Gannaway read an earlier version of this. His encouragement and exceedingly gentle advice made this a better book. Our collaboration on all things Ambrosian make our work of introducing our patron saint to St. Ambrose University and the world is a great deal of fun.

Patrick Schmadeke also read a version of this and offered his typically insightful suggestions and I hope this book can become a resource and inspiration for his vital work in evangelization.

Thanks to all the Ambrose scholars and friends who have been meeting in Milan, Oxford, and Davenport, Iowa for years learning from one another and enjoying one another's kindness.

PREFACE

Sometime in the 380s CE, Ambrose of Milan produced his magnum opus, *De Officiis*. The content, even the title, is derived from a work of Cicero. Ambrose is so consonant with Cicero's vision of the "good and happy life,"[1] despite his loud and frequent protestations to the contrary, that one might wonder why he bothered writing his own version. He wrote, not because Cicero was wrong, but because he was incomplete. Ambrose asserts, in *De Officiis*, that "we have nothing at all except that which may be decorous and virtuous (*deceat et honestum*) and we measure by the rule of the future rather than the present; we define nothing to be useful except that which may be a grace for eternal life" (I.9.28). For Ambrose, Scripture substantiates philosophical arguments and adds the missing piece.

Ambrose not only joined Greco-Roman philosophy with Judeo-Christian faith, but, in his own genius, he quite simply changed both. It hard for us to realize just how scandalous that union was, both for Christians and for those Hellenized Romans who were paying any attention. The child born of that union of Jerusalem and Athens has grown to become the Catholic intellectual tradition. Bearing the heritage of both parents, it is itself neither Semitic nor Hellenic and, some might worry, no longer Christian. This intellectual synthesis is thoroughly infused into Western intellectual history. Its central conviction, exemplified by Ambrose, is that faith and reason are not opposed to one another but rather are held in dynamic tension in pursuit of the highest truth and the common good. It goes without saying that the Church has not always been particularly faithful to this union of mind and spirit.

The origins of this theological tradition are complex, but not unclear. Its Jewish antecedent is found in the oeuvre of Philo of Alexandria. It is notable already in the writings of St. Paul. Through subsequent centuries, it became increasingly explicit as Christian apologists gained confidence. Origen's second-century theological anthropology was deeply influenced by Platonism and had tremendous influence on later generations of theologians. In the

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[1] *Bene beateque vivendum*, literally "living well and happily." Cicero, *De Officiis,* trans. Walter Miller. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1913), I.6.18. Translation mine.

fourth century, the theologians collectively known as the Cappadocians accomplished an enduring fusion of Stoicism's natural law with that of God.

Most of that was accomplished in Greek, the language of both philosophy and the Gospel. By the mid-fourth century this synthesis was finding new expression in the Latin West, thanks to the works of a stunning congregation of Christian philosophers thriving in Rome. Several commentaries on Paul's Letter to the Romans were produced there, including that of Ambrosiaster. Also in Rome, Marius Victorinus produced a Latin translation of Plotinus. There too Cicero's *De Officiis* (inspired by Panaetius's Stoicism), was rediscovered.

Ambrose of Milan, competent in Greek, conversant with philosophy, and the first elite Roman to become a Christian bishop, is the Western embodiment of the union of Greco-Roman philosophy and Judeo-Christian Scripture. Born or elevated into the senatorial class in the first generation after the legalization of Christianity, he was native to both Roman tradition and Christian faith. It would never have occurred to him that he should have to choose between his classically trained reason and his God-given faith. Many elements of his unique synthesis may be retrieved and resourced to inform contemporary Christian theology in its own struggles to maintain the creative tension between faith and reason.

The premise is simple: since the same God that freely endows us with reason also graces us with faith, then these two media of understanding cannot contradict one another. On the contrary, they reinforce and correct one another. As Ambrose explains:

> God created mankind and implanted in him morals [*mores*] and feelings, then God established the royal sovereignty of the mind over human emotions so that all human feelings and emotions would be governed by its strength and power. God added to this . . . so as to inform the mind itself of divine precepts and instruct it with the disciplines of wisdom . . . the mind, therefore, by right reason, holds to the discipline of wisdom, so as to know both the divine and the human.[2]

[2] Etenim cum Deus hominem constitueret, et in eo mores sensusque plantaret, tunc motibus ejus imposuit regale mentis imperium; ut omnes sensus motusque hominis, ejus vigore ac potestate regerentur. Adjunxit…ut mentem ipsam divinis informaret praeceptis, et sapientiae instrueret disiplini…mens igitur recta ratione tenens disciplinam sapientiae, ut divina ac humana cognoscat. Ambrose of Milan, *De Iacob I.4.* Unless otherwise stated, all Latin quotes of Ambrose's works come from *Sancti Ambrosii, Mediolanensis Episcopi. Opera Omnia*, ed. J.P. Migne. Patrologiae Latine (Paris: Migne, 1845).

Note that all people can acquire wisdom through reason alone. To this natural capacity, Ambrose adds that "the mind is good if it is directed by reason, but hardly perfect unless it has the governance of Christ." Having asserted the conjunction of natural reason with inspired faith he concludes that "this is the happy life (*beata vita)* for humans, is rational, according to the management of reason and the vigor of the mind."[3] Ambrose's principle can easily be and urgently should be applied in response to the alarming fissure between intellect and faith that has too often erupted and which, alarmingly, we see even in contemporary Christianity. The insidious ideological polarization that infects the church spills over into civil society. It triggers a paralysis in addressing cataclysmic environmental crises, a scandalous abandonment of the dispossessed immigrant, the marginalization of indigenous, women, minorities, and the poor, and it demonizes the LGBTQ+ community who are already vulnerable.

The time is right for a new inquiry into the historical roots of the theological union of reason and faith. In 2023 Pope Francis issued *Laudate Deum*, an addendum to his 2015 environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si*. The latter is an urgent apostolic exhortation to address climate change before it is too late (if it isn't already). Also, in 2023 clerics and laity, Catholics and others, gathered in Rome to launch the "Synod on Synodality," that is, "a gathering about gathering."

The Pope invited the synod to look at issues such as the ordination of women and the blessing of LGBTQ+ couples again. The authority of Ambrose of Milan has been recognized not only in the Catholic Church, but also the greater Christian theological community. As broadly as possible, this book seeks to find theological groundings for such initiatives in Ambrose's vision of rational faith and faithful reason. A few words about the Latin of this text are in order. I have relegated the Latin to the footnotes so as not to impede the reader. I have included the Latin because it serves as an anthology of Ambrose's anthropology and ethics, organized by specific themes.

The second point about Latin is that there is no Opera Omnia in English. Some translations are wildly out of date, some are unreliable for other reasons, all of them have strengths and weaknesses. For De Officiis, Ivor Davidson's work is a god-send, though I still find myself disagreeing with some of his interpretations (and all translations are interpretations). De Romestin's translations are often misleading but they are also often beautiful. The translators of the Fathers of the Church series are, I think, all

[3] Mens ateque bona si ratione intendat sed parum perfecta nisi habeat guberernacula Christi (5.17); Est ergo beata vita in hominibus…illa rationabilis secundum tractationem rationis et mentis vivacitatem (7.29) Ambrose, *De Iacob*.

quite good. I rely very heavily on John Savage for the Hexameron and De Paradisio (vol. 42) and Michael McHugh especially for De Isaac, De Bona Mortis, De Iacob (vol. 65). Brian Dunkle's "Treatises on Noah and David" (vol. 140), not to mention the hymns, are excellent, as anyone who knows Fr. Brian would expect.

So, I find myself relying on a variety of translations. Occasionally, and very softly, I tweak them for clarity or to restore an Ambrosian touch, so to speak. If I go too far as to change the meaning of the text, I no longer associate their works with the translation, tacitly claiming them (for better or worse) as my own. Having the Latin allows the inclined reader to evaluate my choices. Rarely, and for practical reasons, I excuse myself from offering the Latin. This is because the citation is very brief, arguments do not hinge on the translation, and the translation is broadly accepted. This is especially evident in the treatments of De Bona Mortis, and De Iacob, De Isaac, Hexameron, and less often for De Officiis.

Having dared to attempt my own translations I find myself in awe, gratitude, and full of respect for those who do it so well.

INTRODUCTION

> It is inherent in all people, in accordance with human nature, to search for the truth, which leads us to the study of understanding and knowledge and instills a desire to search into it. To excel in this is seen as beautiful by everyone. But few are able to come near to that happy and virtuous way of life, and they only by spending no mean effort reconsidering their ideas and reviewing their insights.[4]

Goulven Madec's 1974 work, *Saint Ambroise et la philosophie*, makes a series of important statements about Ambrose's use of philosophy. First, Madec notes Ambrose's belief that Christ, not philosophy, is the source of true wisdom. Though Ambrose uses elements of both Stoicism and Platonism whenever he finds it useful, sometimes simply for flourish, he is not committed to either. If anything, Madec says that Ambrose is *principalment ciceronien*. Madec leaves room for a reappraisal of his conclusions. In a chapter called "La Sagesse Chrétienne," Madec describes a tripartite Christian sagacity: *de naturalibus, de moralibus,* and *de mysticis*, that is, wisdom in reference to nature, to morality, and to spirituality.[5] This describes Ambrose's take on natural law and it suggests a much richer philosophical influence than Madec's own conclusions admit. It also re-opens the question of how Ambrose managed to maintain both Stoic and Platonist concepts.

Baziel Maes wrote his doctoral dissertation, *La Loi Naturelle selon Ambroise de Milan,* in 1967.[6] It is not cited in Madec's bibliography, but it provides a brilliant study of what amounts to Ambrose's Christian Stoicism, particularly in regards to his anthropology and ethics. His demonstration that Ambrose is an adept Christian Stoic is extremely compelling.

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[4] Ambrose, *De Officiis* I.26.125. Hereafter abbreviated *De Off.* Translation mine.

[5] Goulven Madec, "*Saint Ambroise et la philosophie*" (Paris: Êtudes Augustiennes, 1974), 137, 144.
137, "Il semble donc qu Ambroise se suit livrè encore une fois à une combinaison d' élements pris à droite et a gouche." [It seems then that Ambrose, in his writings is once again combining elements plucked from the right and the left], 144. He finds this tripartite system in Philo and Origen as well as in Ambrose.

[6] Baziel Maes, *La Loi Naturelle selon Ambroise de Milan* (Roma: Université Grégorienne, 1967).

Marcia Colish wrote her two-volume work, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, in 1990. Ambrose gets extensive treatment in her second volume, "Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century." In the course of her historical survey, she notes that Stoicism is not a single, unchanging, system, but one that is malleable to the reworking of its primary adherents. She observes that Ambrose's use of Stoicism is limited to ethics and makes the case that, within that context, Ambrose is imagining a new, Christian, sage: "The chief characteristic of the wise man, says Ambrose, is equanimity. Unaffected either by good or bad fortune, he possesses tranquility of mind." And more, his peace passes understanding: "His rewards . . . are the Christian's true inheritance . . . perfected in Christ."[7]

If Madec underestimated the influence of Stoicism on Ambrose, Maes and Colish make extraordinary compensation for that. We are left the problem of how Ambrose's robust use of Stoicism and the Neoplatonist influences on his Christian theology stand in *tonos* (a Stoic word meaning "held together in creative tension"). He isn't the first theologian to try to meld all of these systems.

Like those before him, Ambrose maintained that the wisdom of the philosophers was derived from that of the Bible, asking "where did they pick up such teachings if not from our Scriptures?"[8] However implausible that claim may be, it gave him license to demonstrate the harmony between philosophy and Christian beliefs. In practice, Ambrose's philosophical interpretations of faith claims, written in Latin, created a peculiarly Roman Christian theology that contributed enormously to the nascent Western Catholic intellectual tradition.[9] The ultimate purpose of this book is to determine what he offers to contemporary Christian theology as it continues to hold the gifts of reason and faith in dynamic *tonos*. There are three parts to this study.

The first chapter lays the groundwork by tracing the efforts of early Christian theologians to integrate philosophy into religion. It begins with a very brief sketch showing that philosophy, not religion, was the primary Roman source for learning what it means to be human and good. The rest

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[7] Marcia Colish, "The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages," *Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century*. Vol. 2 (Leiden, New York, København Köln: E.J. Brill, 1990), 54.

[8] Unde hoc misi de scripturis nostris dicendum adsumpserunt? Ambrose, *De Off.* I.28.133.

[9] The term "catholic," in Ambrose often means the universal church. see Michael Stuart Williams, "No Arians in Milan? Ambrose on the Basilica Crisis of 385-6." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bt. 67, H. 3 (218) 45019295. 346-365, 382.

of the chapter traces the development of Christianity as a philosophical religion, drawing primarily on the teleological system of Plotinus and the deontological system of the Stoics. These are intertwined and adapted by early theologians, aiding them to address the two central and closely related questions. The first is anthropological: what is the purpose of life? The second is ethical: what is the meaning of life? The theologians we encounter in this chapter are selected because of their more or less obvious influence on Ambrose. First is Philo, the Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, followed by Paul, a Jewish Christian, and Origen, a Greek theologian, also from Alexandria. Then we reach the contemporary sources whom Ambrose knew well, if not personally. In the Greek speaking East we find Basil, Gregory Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzen. In the Latin West are Lactantius, Marius Victorinus, and Ambrosiaster, among others, some of whom were in Rome while Ambrose was still in the city.

Apart from Judaism, ancient religions known to the Romans were concerned primarily with performing rituals properly in order to get a desirable result from the gods. They did not inquire into human nature or questions about truth and goodness. Such questions were mostly the domain of philosophy. Christianity, born of Judaism, did probe these questions, using the same language and similar concepts as philosophy. Embracing the rational arguments of philosophy to express their faith appealed to many early theologians. Not to be too dramatic about it, this decision changed Western culture. Even today, maintaining equilibrium between faith and reason remains the most basic and most fragile impetus of Christian theology. It is perpetually navigating between pietistic fundamentalism and secular skepticism. That fact alone makes the focus of this first essay of perennial, immediate, and practical interest.

The second chapter takes up Ambrose of Milan's unique contribution to the Catholic intellectual tradition. We note from his biography that Ambrose was fundamentally a teacher and most of his writings are derived from homilies or letters addressed to specific people in specific circumstances. In consequence, he often appears inconsistent and even contradictory. Notably, both the Protestants and Catholics of the Reformation era believed he was on their side. Nonetheless, we can deduce distinct, if inchoate, traces of a sort of manual of instruction on the meaning and purpose of life.

Ambrose makes liberal and creative use of both the teleological anthropology of Plotinus and the deontological natural law of the Stoics. In a way reminiscent of St. Paul, Ambrose delighted in using tonos to hold together these seemingly contrary theological models. This extends to his core concepts. Faith and reason are in tonos, so also are grace and free will, merit and duty, virtues and expediencies, the natural and the divine law, the

vita beata and the *vita aeterna*. Rather than conclude that he was simply inconsistent, it seems more likely that he deliberately exploited the elasticity of contradictory concepts, accentuating one or the other depending on his needs. The key to holding then all in orbit is the Christian virtue of *misericordia,* meaning both forgiveness and benevolence, without which his system would collapse beneath the weight of either Pelagian perfectionism or Augustine's determinism.

In Ambrose's theology, the meaning of human life is the vita beata, or the happy life. It is found in fulfilling one's ethical duty in service of the common good. The purpose of life is to attain the vita aeterna, that is, eternal life. Implicitly, these two are not entirely distinct. The happy life on this side of death is not essentially different from its reward on the other side. This, in turn, suggests that salvation is truly universal: all who live the vita beata by being of service to the common good are already, in a real sense, experiencing the vita aeterna, including non-Christians.

Like the philosophers, Ambrose first asserts a set of primary truth claims which apply to everyone and are not optional. Then he offers illustrations of how those principles can be applied, through the exercise of the virtues, to specific situations in different times, places, and circumstances. Misericordia, for example, is an absolute, but it will manifest itself differently depending on the situation: are we aiding the innocent refugee or rehabilitating the criminal?

Finally, in the third chapter we figure out how Ambrosian theology might apply to our contemporary circumstances. This is an exercise of *ressourcement*, a methodology for applying the wisdom of the Christian tradition to our condition while recognizing its blind spots and rejecting its errors. Caution is required. We will review the idea of tradition as being less a law set in stone than an organic process. We then anchor the conversation by laying some ground rules for how to use the tradition. With that in place, the utility of Ambrose's theology can be evaluated.

Some of the issues that Ambrose himself addressed feel very contemporary: refugees, political and ecclesial corruption, economic injustice, marginalization, militant Christianity, diversity, government overreach, and care for creation. We can acknowledge that Ambrose did not always apply his own ethical principles in the best way, even when measured by his own standards. We might wish, for example, that he would be more generous in defending religious tolerance. Furthermore, he changed his enlightened

judgment on the independence of women religious.[10] He only glancingly addressed the ethics of one issue that he might have, slavery.[11] In any case, a critique of how well or poorly Ambrose applies his theory to the issues of his time demonstrates the enduring usefulness of his system.

Ambrose could not have conceived certain ethical dilemmas facing the twenty-first century such as ecological collapse, gender fluidity, or racial injustice. So, to apply Ambrose's theology in a contemporary context requires that it be transformed. As used by Anne Carpenter this means to apply ressourcement methodology, which she describes as "giving the past back to itself, renewed—renewed by the present."[12] It is no criticism to suggest that not all of Ambrose's applications are still useful or to acknowledge that some never were. It is to his inestimable credit that others are and that, if we are honest, we are in sore need of them in our age. We may benefit by applying his formula in new ways in order to address concerns that escaped his attention or which he could never have imagined.

With these three essays I hope, first, that it polishes the too long dimmed luster of Ambrose's preeminence within the Catholic intellectual tradition. Simply put, he is a person worth knowing. Second, it may serve as a test of Ambrose's theological model, which is a good one, even now. Finally, I hope it may be part of a fresh conversation about theological matters long deemed settled but that remain thornily divisive, unnecessarily so.

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[10] In *De Virginibus* (circa 377) he claims that he "cannot rule over the spiritually independent virgins" (1-2). In *De Virginitate* (circa 386-7) he "takes control over the life of virgins" (6). See Metha Hokke, "Community in Transition: Ambrose's De Virginitate as Testimony of a Hierarchical Reversal Between Virgins and Bishop" in *Ambrose of Milan and Community Formation in Late Antiquity,* ed. Ethan Gannaway and Robert Grant (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2021), 58-76, 59.

[11] He was not alone, indeed "the Christian ideology of slavery which emerged in the late fourth century represented neither a critique of, nor a challenge to, the Roman ideology of slavery, but rather a baptized version of it." Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World AD 275-425* (Cambridge University Press, 2022, 212). Only John Chrysostom spoke directly to this evil. c.f. Chris De Wet, "John Chrysostom on Slavery" in *Studia Historiae ecclesiasticae* 43.2 (2008), 1-13, 4; and Mako A. Hagasawa, "Slavery and Christianity: First to Fifteenth Centuries," http://nagasawafamily.org/article-slavery-and-christianity-1st-to-15th-centuries.pdf. 2016.

[12] Carpenter, Anne M, *Nothing Gained is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 119.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WEDDING OF FAITH AND REASON

The Bible addresses the key questions about the purpose and meaning of life in a singular way. So why and how did it adapt the language, concepts, and arguments of philosophy? Before we get to some ideas on those subjects, we should begin by noting that, aside from Judaism and then Christianity, ancient religions really had nothing much to say about either what it means to be good or human nature. That any religion would probe into those issues was a shocking breach of disciplines, as upsetting to some Christians as it was insulting to philosophers. Stoicism and Neoplatonism were particularly attractive to Christian apologists. This is already interesting because the two are very different. To put it simply, Stoicism emphasizes the meaning of existence, arguing that humans are the rational dimension of nature, and that the good life is one of duty. Neoplatonism understands that the purpose of a rational soul is to disengage from the tainting influences of the physical world, seeking dissolution into the One. What then, did ancient Christian theologians take from their foray into philosophy's realm and how did they reconcile these contradictions?

Since our focus in this chapter will be on anthropology and ethics, we have to establish their intended concerns. Anthropology is the study of human nature. Are we our bodies, our minds, our spirits? Are we essentially good or evil? What is the end or purpose of life and how is it attained? Ethics is the study of the good. Is it my good or the common good or something else entirely? Is it a duty or a reward? Is knowledge of the good innate or infused? Christianity has always had a great deal to say about these questions, but that simply was not the case for classical religions. So, what was their function?

Ancient Religion as *recta rituale*

The function of Rome's religions, in the broadest sense, was to ensure that the sacred rites were performed correctly so as to gain the favor of the gods. Religious practice was essentially transactional: if one offers the ritual sacrifice with exact propriety to the appropriate deities, they will reciprocate

by answering their client's prayer. Hence the Latin phrase *do ut des* (I act so that you might act). Rome's traditional deities were the vouchers for and even party to oaths taken at their altars.[13] The only moral law implied by this is crude obedience, that is, vows had better be kept or there would be divine consequences. In his *relatio* (a kind of a brief addressed to the emperor) on the Altar of Victory, Symmachus extols the power of the rites and the customs of traditional Roman religion. He suggests that "the mere presence of religion can be a very powerful deterrent to wrongdoing."[14] He is referring to the divine threat implicit in taking an oath before giving evidence in a court of law. The divine was perceived in every facet of daily life, meaning that everything was either pleasing or displeasing to the gods. Religion monitored and maintained the right relationship with the gods through right ritual.

In fact, the Latin word *religio* means to do something scrupulously and with exactitude, especially in reference to the rites offered to the gods. Incidentally, it also has the sense of binding or fastening, as in the pact between the gods and their human supplicants. *Pietas* (piety) usually meant fulfilling the duty owed to one's father (*pater*, hence patron), the fatherland (*patria*, hence patriotism), and the gods. In fact, within the home, sacred rites were performed for the family by the *pater familias* (male head of the household). Priests of the major cults were chosen from among fellow citizens, often the rich, preeminent, and politically ambitious, including women. Cicero was an augur and Julius Caesar was Pontifex Maximus, as was Augustus and every emperor until Gratian.

As Rome spread its hegemony, especially in the East, mystery cults from those areas trickled into Rome. These "votive religions," as Hans-Josef Klauck calls them, offered salvation from illness, debt, threat, or other distress. As in the case of the Greek Eleusian cult, salvation might even include eternal life as an escape from death.[15] But, as deeply human as are

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[13] Not surprisingly, then, *mithras* can be translated either as 'contract' or 'mediator of the contract.' See Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A guide to Graeco-Roman Religions,* trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 141.

[14] Symmachus, "*Epistula* 72A.5," in *Ambrose of Milan, Political Letters and Speeches*, trans. J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz and Carole Hill (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 75. This threat of divine retribution is, at best, the very lowest stage of moral development, according to Lawrence Kohlberg. See https://educationaltechnology.net/stages-of-moral-development-lawrence-kohlberg/.

[15] Walter Burkett, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 14, 21.

these desires, they neither suggest any clear anthropology nor necessarily touch on ethics. There's no sense that the gods favored the morally good, only those who did a good job of completing the rituals. The uncomfortable disconnect between one's moral behavior and divine patronage was recognized. Diogenes Laertius famously mocks the idea that moral people would suffer while "useless people dwelt on the island of the blessed just because they had undergone initiation." Epictetus, with a bit of hopeful optimism, attempts a *rapprochment* by suggesting that the rites aren't efficacious unless one has "purified oneself and prepared oneself inwardly" so that the mysteries can "train us and . . . improve our life."[16] Purification could but does not necessarily allude to a moral condition. As in the Hebrew Bible, not all sins are immoral: purification often refers to right ritual.

Some cults, such as Mithraism, imposed certain ascetic practices on those who desired to be inducted. Yet these are more of an extension of the sacrifices offered to attain one's desire than a moral practice.[17] Similarly, Orphicism and Pythagoreanism hinted at a moral rubric so as to avoid reincarnation. But this rubric is philosophically natural and "morally neutral" even if it was later taken up by those who derived from it a "strong moral value."[18] In general, then, major religions common in the Roman Empire were concerned with right ritual in order to attain a desired outcome. Indeed, it is speculated that the mystery cults' emphasis on ritual, not on ethics, was a major influence on Christianity.[19]

Hellenistic Culture and Moral Training

This is not to say that Romans were morally untrained, of course, only that this wasn't the function of religion. As J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz points out, "as a rule, the moral was taught on an entirely secular level."[20] This was accomplished in a number of ways as, of course, it still is. First of these, we assume, is the inculcation of Roman mores in the home. It was also taught

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[16] Laertius and Epictitus cited in Klauck, *Religious Context,* 105.

[17] Walter Burkett, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 15. Besides, asceticism is a spiritual, not a moral, discipline, of course.

[18] Mario Vegetti, *L'Etica degli antichi* (Lecce: Editori Laterza, 1989), 85. "moralmente neutra," "forte valenza morale."

[19] Certain historians of religion "postulate a genetic derivation of the Christian sacraments from the quasi-sacramental rites of the mystery cults." Klauck, *Religious Context,* 151.

[20] J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 40. In Latin the term for secular is *profanum,* literally 'on the outside of the sanctuary.'

in the schools and by public exemplars, especially as evoked in civic art.[21] This included the monumental statues dedicated to those who modeled Roman virtues such as the Farnese Hercules, paragon of Stoic ekpyrosis; the "Orator," the noble Roman statesman (albeit Etruscan); the Ludovisi Gaul's honorable death; and the hellenic Boxer at Rest, the epitome of quiet endurance.

Hellenistic literature, plays, and poetry, all replete with models of virtue, were studied by students and presented to audiences. Among Romans, male virtues were quasi-military: duty, sacrifice, renunciation, absolute devotion to the community and a general tamping down of the too-Greek hero's violent pursuit of individual honor and fame.[22] Women were to be formed by the examples of such as the Sabine women who brokered peace between their husbands and fathers;[23] Lucretia, who chose death over dishonor;[24] and Cloelia, who, having freed herself and other victims, returned to captivity in order to honor Rome's peace treaty.[25] Generally, women were to be modest, chaste, sexually faithful, fertile, and brave. Literary myths and legends also alluded to the gods and goddesses and to some notions of divine virtue, to be sure. It is just that the cults and their priests (qua priests) were neither their authors nor even their editors.

There are a few exceptions. Liebescheutz, for example, comments that "Abstract cults" such as those of "the Victory of Caesar, the Clemency of Caesar, and the Peace of Augustus" as well as "abstract deities" such as Fides (devotion), Concordia (harmony), Pietas (loyalty), Pudicitia (purity), Spes (hope), and Virtus (virtue or 'manliness') emerged in the second and third centuries CE. These allegories of Roman virtues represent the growing influence of Stoic ethics in Roman society. In other words, they show philosophy trying to infuse ethics into religion, not the other way around. While these abstract deities were legitimate objects of religious worship, "there were limits to the extent to which Roman religion could be made

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[21] H.I. Morrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Mentor Book, 1956), 358-9.

[22] Morrou, *History of Education,* 316-7 and Mario Vegetti, *L'Etica,* 17, 21. Achilles comes to mind rather easily in this regard.

[23] Robert Brown, "Livy's Sabine Women and the Ideal of Concordia." *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-) 125 (1995)*: 291–319. 292. https://doi.org/10.2307/284357.

[24] See Giuseppe Cades' "The Virtue of Lucretia" 1774-1782, Toledo Museum of Art.

[25] M. Roller, *Cloelia: Timelessness and Gender. In Models from the Past in Roman Culture: A World of Exempla* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 66-94. doi:10.1017/9781316677353.004

explicitly moral by giving greater emphasis to the cult of a deified virtue." Abstract deities remained minor and, "in all but highly specialized situations, men continued to turn to the gods with names, and especially to Jupiter."[26]

Interestingly, philosophers noted that the ethical void in religion was exploited by politicians for their own purposes, allowing them to dodge the rigor of philosophy. Varro, for example, "thought that religious institutions were constructed and manipulated by political rulers as an alternative means of preserving and communicating truths (alternative, that is, to the philosophical tradition itself)."[27] This observation seems to imply, first, that one could exploit religious sentiment by injecting into it a preferred moral stance and, secondly, that this "moralizing" was an abuse and misappropriation of religion, not to mention an infringement on the role of philosophy. Of course, it could just mean that appeals to *religio* or *pietas* provided ancient (and modern) politicians with an ethics-free legitimacy.

In the other direction, from the post-Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity there was a growing passion among philosophers for retrieving seeds of ethical truth buried within (if also distorted by) elements of religion, especially the mystery cults. This interest stems from a suspicion that religion, even if unconsciously, communicated some sense of the order that governs the universe. Thus, by careful extraction, philosophers could demonstrate that religion echoed—however inchoately and crudely—the same ethical principles that they taught. The point seems to have been to appropriate religious sentiment for the purposes of advancing their own (competing) philosophical claims.[28]

Roman law did seek to legislate ethics. Augustus's attempts to govern marriage and procreation are the most famous examples. More importantly, Ulpianus infused natural law into his legal interpretations.[29] The Theodosian Code offers numerous illustrations of laws which determined who is a virtuous man; it also defended the virtues of women, punished graft, etc.

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[26] Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 177-9.

[27] George Boys-Stones, review of *Rethinking the Gods: Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period*, by Peter Van Nuffelen. Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, 07.26.2012.

[28] Peter Van Nuffelen, *Rethinking the Gods: Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15, 17-28, 239, 240.

[29] Marsha Colish, "Stoicism in Classical Latin Literature," *Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century,* vol.2 (Leiden, New York, København, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1990), 358.

One judgment in particular stands out for its (presumably unintentional) irony. The emperors ruled that spoiled grain is to be mixed with new grain so as to conceal it and thus save money to the treasury. The person in charge of this covert operation must be "a noble man, faithful, prudent, of the best conscience, by virtue of the merits of his integrity."[30] Less cynically, Cicero anchors the law firmly in ethics: "The supreme law is the common good."[31]

Philosophical Ethics and Anthropology: Meaning and Purpose in Cicero, Plotinus, Philo, and Paul

In all the fluidity and divergencies of opinions, Romans were attracted to one or another or to some blending of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism. All three systems agreed that the physical cosmos was rationally ordered. Thus, to be human means to be rational. These laws of nature form the nucleus of the natural law, or what Jaroslav Pekilan calls a "natural theology," an alternative—or even an antidote—to the cultic practices and sacred narratives of traditional religious observance."[32] Plato and Aristotle agreed that the distinctive good of rational beings is a *telos* or goal to be sought. Plato understood telos to be transcendent, whereby the soul returns to its original place in the One, (Timaeus, 90d5-7). Aristotle's immanent teleology countered that all creatures seek to be the best versions of themselves and, for humans, that means eudaimonia (*ευδαιμονία*): rational, virtuous, flourishing (Aristotle, *Nicomachaean Ethics* 1097b22–1098a4.). Stoicism, in contrast to both, believed the good to be a duty to be done, (*καθήκον*) not a goal to be pursued. Jack Visnjic notes that Stoics "equate the perfect performance of one's duties with living on the basis of virtue . . . which . . . is the same thing as living in accordance with nature, which is the same thing as obeying the common law that binds all rational beings,

[30] Theodosian Code XI. Title 14.1 Valentinian and Valens to Volusianus, Urban Prefect, April, 364 or 5. From https://archive.org/details/theodosiancodeno0000unse/page/304/mode/2up?view=theater&q=virtue Latin: nobilis prudens fidelis optime sibi conscius pro integritatis meritis, from https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Constitutiones/CTh11.html#14

[31] Solus publica suprema lex esto. Leg. III.8, cited in Morrou, 8.

[32] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), 38.

which is the same thing as following the right reason which permeates all things."[33]

All three schools agree that the common good is one of, if not the core moral value, though the definition of community varied, as did the relationship between one's individual autonomy and one's ethical responsibility to the community. Stoics are particularly clear that "there could be [no] conflict between the good of the individual, the good of the group, and the good of the universe, for the same Logos permeates and rules them all."[34] All three spoke of virtuousness as the means of addressing the (common) good. The 'four cardinal virtues,' as Ambrose calls them, are Stoic: Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice (*Expositio Evangelii Secundum Lucam* V.62).

In the Roman world, as suggested earlier, these three schools tended to blend into one another. We can trace this syncretic tendency to Sulla's sack of Athens in 87 CE and his pillaging its libraries. Not coincidentally, this began a process that quickly made Rome, the recipient of this theft, one of the great centers of philosophy.[35] Panaetus had already brought a version of Stoicism to Rome, sometime around 120 BCE. His work was advanced and 'Romanized' through the works of Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus (a Phrygian-Greek who taught in Rome), and Marcus Aurelius. Plotinus opened a Neoplatonic school in Rome in 245 CE where, in the mid-fourth century, Marius Victorinus translated Plotinus's *Enneads* into Latin.[36] This text, while claiming only to represent the teachings of Plato, unselfconsciously weaves in a great deal of Aristotle and Stoicism. It is no coincidence, then, that the two systems most evident in the works of Ambrose are Neoplatonism and Stoicism.[37] The syncretic or "eclectic" tendencies of Rome had come a long way toward blending the various schools. Even so,

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[33] Jack Visnjic, *The Invention of Duty: Stoicism as Deontology* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021), 3.

[34] Colish, *Stoicism,* vol. 1 (1990), 36.

[35] Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Setting the Scene: Stoicism and Platonism in the Transitional Period in Ancient Philosophy," in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, ed. Toumas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Ismo Dunderberg (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 2-3.

[36] There is understandable speculation that Ambrose would have known Victorinus. see Andrew Selby, *Ambrose of Milan's On the Holy Spirit* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press 2020), 125, note 22. see also Angelo Paredi: *Sant'Ambrogio e la sua età* (Milan: Jaca Book 2015), 67-8; Augustine, *Confessions* VIII.2; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Geste,* XXII.10.

[37] Ernst Dassmann, *La Sobria Ebbrezza dello Spirito: La Spiritualità di S. Ambrogio Vescovo di Milano,* trans. Bonifacio Baroffio (Varese, Romite Ambrosiane, 1975), 49.

it isn't really obvious how philosophical syncretists managed to fuse the very different conceptions of ethics and human nature as expressed in Stoicism and Neoplatonism.[38] Although the schools were syncretic, the differences between them can still be illustrated by comparing Cicero and Plotinus.

Cicero (106-43 BCE**)** having been senator, consul and finally, the honorary father of the Senate, ended his career and his life playing lethal political chess with and against Caesar, Pompey, Crassus, Octavian and Marc Antony. He sought, through the hazards of the two triumvirates, to save the Republic against "monsters who have torn their fatherland to pieces with every form of outrage and who are and have been engaged in compassing [Rome's] utter destruction."[39] It is astonishing that in the last two years of his life, while a hunted fugitive, he produced thirteen works of philosophy, including his last masterpiece, *De Officiis.* Cicero failed and his death tolled the death of the Republic. There is a Stoic lesson even in this. Doing the right thing is one's duty and its own reward. Whether or not it is successful is quite beside the point.

Cicero was remembered mostly for his oratory, which was, by his own admission, his true expertise. His philosophy, again by his own admission, is derivative, an eclectic mélange of Plato, Aristotle, and Stoicism, but not without purpose. Cicero adapts the Greek ideas to his Roman purposes. As a political man he is less interested in the purity of the principles than the practical utility of their applications. In fact, "to be drawn by study away from active life is contrary to moral duty."[40] He makes it quite clear that he is interested in the duties that "regulate everyday life." He calls these "medial" duties.[41] And yet he seems to speak across the ages when he utters what must have been among his last words to his son: "And therefore, my

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[38] Troels Enberg-Pedersen, "Setting the Scene: Stoicism and Platonism in the Transitional Period in Ancient Philosophy" in *Stoicism in Early Christianity,* ed. Toumas Rasimus, Troels Engber-Pedersen, Ismo Dunderberg (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 5.

[39] Immanitas qui lacerarunt omni scelere patriam et in ea funditus delenda occupati et sunt et fuerunt. Cicero, *De Officiis* I. xvii.57. He name-drops these friends and monsters throughout e.g. I. xxviv.108, Crassus; 1.viii.26, Caesar; II. xiv.79, Marcus Antoninus; II. xvi.57 and "our (nostri) Pompey."

[40] Cuius studio a rebus gerendis abduci contra officium est. Cicero, *De Officiis* I. vi.19.

[41] Ad institutionem vitae communis…medium officium, Cicero, *De Officiis,* I. 3.7-8. This becomes a proported point of dispute between him and his fourth-century disciple, Ambrose, who asserts that there can be no such compromise of virtue to expediency. Ambrose, *De Off.*, I.9.28.

dear Cicero, I cordially recommend you to read carefully not only my orations but also these books of mine on philosophy."[42]

Four hundred years after Cicero's death, Jerome, Augustine, Lactantius, and "especially Ambrose" rediscovered Cicero's philosophical treatises *De Res Publica* and *De Officiis*. In Marcia Colish's assessment, "The Christian apologists and Church Fathers . . . found in Cicero's dialogues and treatises a convenient shorthand [in Latin] to Greek philosophy and a rich source of information on pagan theology . . ."[43] And, we can add, they found a very congenial Roman way of thinking about theology.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE)

Though not claiming to be a Stoic, Cicero mostly follows the Stoics in his understanding of natural laws. These laws that govern nature apply to everything that exists: plants and animals conform to it and are perfect, each in its own way. Humans, possessing a mind "derived from Divine reason," are capable of "perfect understanding . . . which is the same as virtue" (*Tusculan Disputations* V.xiii). For humans, then,

> True law is right reason conformable to nature, universal, unchangeable, eternal, whose commands urge us to duty, and whose prohibitions restrain us from evil . . . It needs no other expositor and interpreter than our own conscience. It is not one thing at Rome, and another at Athens; one thing to-day, and another to-morrow; but in all times and nations this universal law must forever reign, eternal and imperishable. It is the sovereign master and emperor of all beings. God himself is its author, its promulgator, its enforcer (*De Re Publica* III.xxii).

Natural Law provides the universal and necessary principles that constitute the good, and govern our actions "to live a good and happy life." These laws are embedded in nature and they are discernible to human reason. The primary principle of the natural law is to do one's duty "solely or chiefly for its own sake." This duty is that by which "society and what may be called its common bonds are maintained."[44]

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[42] "Quam ob rem magnopere te hortor, mi Cicero, ut non solum orationes meas, sed hos etiam de philosophia libros." Cicero, *De Officiis* I. i.2; I. i.3.

[43] Marcia Colish, *Stoicism,* vol.1, (1990). 158-9.

[44] Cicero, *De Officiis,* I.7.19: ad bene et beateque vivendum; I.2.6: qui solam, aut ab iis, qui maxime honestatem propter se; I.7.20: qua societas hominum inter ipsos et vitae quasi communitas continetur. See *De Republica* III.22.33; *De Officiis* I. xxviv 107.

This is not to say that human actions are determined by those laws as is the case with plants and animals. Cicero's idea of fate is physical (the laws of nature), logical (the rules of reason), moral (natural law), and even rhetorical (grammatical rules). In any of these settings, if 'x' and 'y' are done in exactly the proper way, then 'z' is the outcome (*De Fato* X): "All effects owe their existence to anterior causes . . . it follows therefore that everything which happens, happens by fate." Really, then, "fate" just means "a cause," or better, "a set of causes," including those of which we may be unaware. It is not a denial of free will since "our will is not submitted to antecedent and exterior causes."[45] We have a degree of control over, or at least knowledge of, the conditions, factors, and circumstances of our situation and that influences our choices. Stoics call this the *ἐφ' ἡμῖν* ("what is up to us" or "what is in our power").[46] Even if conditions minimize and constrict our choices, there is some wiggle room for us to reasonably will alternatives: "It is [Cicero's] axiomatic belief in free will within the framework of causal order providing the foundations for the kind of moral order life that he finds acceptable."[47]

Will is an act of assent to, though not necessarily the power to ensure, a certain outcome.[48] Fate contextualizes our free will within a rational cosmos. Reason prudently identifies as many variables as we can, (the 'x's and 'y's). Then the will commits us to a course of action. Possibility (or chance, the variables) and necessity (what must happen, having identified the relevant variables) operate in tonos. Cicero acknowledges that "in some things it can truly be said that when certain antecedent causes have occurred it is not in our power to prevent [an event] from happening, yet in some things, although antecedent causes have occurred, it is nevertheless within our power to make the event turn out otherwise."[49] So says the Republic's last hero.

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[45] Cicero, *De Fate.* XI. 23, 25.
Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/treatisescicero00ciceuoft. I read Cicero a bit differently than Frede, who reduces this choice to us simply acting in accordance with our personal idiosyncratic nature. "An object of desire is an external antecedent cause that evokes a pleasurable impression (a second cause)." We are responsible for our action because "given the sort of person we are, we give assent, whether we can help it or not." Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought,* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2011), 93.

[46] See Frede, *A Free Will,* (2011), 17-19, inter alia. He equates the term with Augustine's "*liberum arbitrium*" (free will), 168.

[47] Colish, *Stoicism,* vol. 1, (1990), 125-6

[48] Frede, *A Free Will,* (2011), 158.

[49] Cicero, *De Fate*, 45 (19).

Stoics agree. The sage is one who, being supremely accomplished in virtue, is uniquely "rich," and immune to suffering. The sage possesses the quality of equanimity (*απάθεια*). Whatever befalls other humans, the final end (*τέλος*) for the sage is to rise through apotheosis into union with the immortal reason (*νούς*) that pervades the universe as *logos* which Cicero envisions as a "unitary deity."[50]

In sum, according to Cicero's anthropology, nature is governed by laws. In human society natural law "lifts us above the brute" and "is found in the bonds among all the members of the whole human race."[51] From this are derived all morality and propriety (*honestum decorumque*). At the heart of morality lie the virtues and "that first of all virtues . . . is the common good," or justice, which means "giving to everyone what belongs to him, as preserving equity in all things . . . desirous of doing good and serving as many people as possible."[52] In this consists the happy life.

Cicero describes three tiers of morality, each with their own sense of the good, of duties, and of the virtues. First and highest is that perfect "goodness worth seeking chiefly for its own sake." It requires a mind that is improved and preserved from error, becoming "perfect understanding, that is to say absolute reason" (*Tusculan Disputations* VI.viii). This requires absolute duties, always doing only that which is right (*officia perfecta*) such as the fundamental duty to serve the common good, with respect to which the virtue of justice must be practiced without compromise: "We may be well guided by those fundamental principles of justice . . . first, that no harm be done to anyone; second that the common interests be conserved."[53]

While admitting natural preferences for one's nation, tribe, and family, the person of virtue "will dedicate himself unreservedly to the public good, without aiming at influence or power for himself; and he will devote himself the public good in its entirety in such a way as to further the interests of

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[50] Colish, *Stoicism,* vol. 1, (1990) 80, 140, 129, 114.

[51] "Est enim primum, quod cernitur in universi generis humani societate. Cicero, *De Officiis* I.xvi.50; "intellegendum etiam est duabus quasi nos a natura indutos esse personis; quarum una communis est ex eo, quod omnes participes sumus rationis praestantiaeque eius, qua antecellimus bestiis, a qua omne honestum decorumque trahitur, et ex qua ratio inveniendi officii exquiritur" Cicero, *De Officiis* I.xxx.107. c.f. I.xvi.51& xxx.107.

[52] Cicero *Re Publica and Tusculan Disputations,* Trans. C.D. Yonge (Belfast: Aquila Press, 2022), *Re Publica* III.vii and *Tusculan Disputations* V.xi-vii and, especially xxv.72: "what then can be found wanting in such a life as to make it more happy?" (quid haec tandem vita disiderat, quo sit beatior)?

[53] Referri enim decet ad ea, quae posui principio, fundamenta iustatiae, primum ut ne cui noceature, diende eut communi utilitati serviatur. Cicero, *De Officiis* I.x.31.