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“A True Philosopher of Christ:” Ambrose of Milan’s Reworking of Cicero’s *De Officiis*

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Honors Senior Thesis
Spring 2018

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Introduction

*Tunc ille, turbatus revertens domum, philosophiam profiteri voluit,
futura sed verus philosophus Christi.*

“Then he, completely shaken up and returning home, wished to profess philosophy, but instead would become a true philosopher of Christ.”¹

This line from Paulinus’ early fifth-century biography of Ambrose of Milan poses the question that has shaped my line of inquiry in this thesis: how do early Christian authors interact with Roman intellectual culture? In this excerpt, Ambrose is pulled between the Roman culture of which he is an elite member and the Christian community that is calling him to serve as bishop of Milan. He wishes to pursue classical philosophy but is denied this desire. Instead, Ambrose takes up an alternate identity as a *verus philosophus Christi*, or “true philosopher of Christ.” By setting up a dichotomy between philosophy and Christian philosophy, Paulinus reveals an underlying tension between the classical and Christian cultures during Ambrose’s career in the fourth century.

Ambrose was a fully inducted member of both Roman and Christian cultures. Through his education in *paideia*, the intellectual culture reserved for elite men in the Roman Empire, Ambrose wielded great social and political capital. He enjoyed a successful political career and rose to the rank of provincial governor by 374. Soon after he became governor, Ambrose was ordained as the bishop of Milan. Due in part to Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313, Christianity underwent a rapid transformation in the fourth century from an oft-persecuted minority group to one with increasing power within the Empire, and the role of bishop entailed both religious and civic influence. Ambrose rose to power in both spheres of influence within the Roman Empire.

¹ Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 3.7. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

In Chapter One, I explore the ways these two cultures of *paideia* and Christianity overlap and compete with each other in the fourth century.

In the remaining three chapters, I use the first book of Ambrose's *De Officiis* as a case study through which I focus my questions about his dual identity as educated elite and Christian leader. Ambrose models his *De Officiis* off of Cicero's text of the same name. Both versions of the *De Officiis* are philosophical treatises that set up a system of ethics, and both authors build off of the Middle Stoic philosopher Panaetius' *περὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος*, or "About Ethics." Because Ambrose explicitly references Cicero's text in his own Christian version, his *De Officiis* offers fruitful ground for exploring the interactions between Christian authors and classical culture.

I have organized my three chapters on the *De Officiis* thematically, and all three of my themes can be pulled out of the rest of Paulinus' "true philosopher of Christ" passage. After identifying Ambrose as a Christian philosopher, the biographer explains what this hybrid role looks like:

Qui contemptis saecularibus pompis piscatorum secuturus esset vestigial, qui Christo populos congregarunt non fucis verborum sed simplici sermone et verae fidei ratione; missi sine pera sine virga etiam ipsos philosophos converterunt.

[One] who, because he held the excesses of the age in contempt, would succeed the fishermen who gathered people to Christ, not with ornamentation of words but with simple speech and the argument of true faith; these men, having been sent without a wallet, without a walking stick, converted even the philosophers themselves.²

In the passage, Paulinus lays out Jesus' disciples as exemplary figures for Ambrose to follow as he leads the Milanese church. These idealized attitudes and actions provide the jumping off points for each of my chapters on Ambrose's *De Officiis*.

² Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 3.7.

That Ambrose communicates “not with ornamentation of words but with simple speech and the argument of true faith” is the topic of Chapter Two. In this chapter, I perform a textual comparison between Ambrose’s introduction to his *De Officiis* and its Ciceronian counterpart. Just as Paulinus describes the fishermen-models of the true philosopher, Ambrose claims to speak simply and without the decorative trappings that Cicero is known for. As Ambrose both conforms to and diverges from Cicero’s *De Officiis*, he expresses his identity as an educated Christian author.

Paulinus’ claim that Jesus’ disciples “converted even the philosophers themselves” falls in the same vein as Ambrose’s discussion of classical philosophy in his *De Officiis*. Chapter Three analyzes Ambrose’s multivalent attitude towards the philosophers. He claims that the ideas he agrees with are first found in the Bible and only secondarily belong to Greek and Roman thinkers. Whenever he disagrees with a philosophy, he condemns it and offers a far superior Christian alternative. In this way, Ambrose performs Paulinus’ conversion of the philosophers long after they have died.

Finally, Paulinus’ description of the disciples as holding “the excesses of the age in contempt,” “gather[ing] people to Christ,” and doing so “without a wallet, without a walking stick” capture many aspects of Ambrose’s complicated attitude towards wealth, social status, and common people. In Chapter Four, I take up Peter Brown’s label of “Christian populism” to describe this web of attitudes while calling for a more nuanced reading of Ambrose’s text than Brown’s framework allows. Despite an idealization of poverty and simple living, Ambrose is himself highly privileged and expects leaders of the church to act in accordance with the standards of elite Roman society. It is when his elite status comes into conflict with his populist and egalitarian Christian values that Ambrose’s complex identity comes further into focus.

Chapter One: Pagan *Paideia* and Christian Culture

The English word “pagan” derives from the Latin *paganus*, which literally means “rustic” or “from the countryside.” This original definition is alien to the 21st century English speaker, for whom “pagan” holds negative connotations with witchcraft and the occult. How then did the neutral *paganus* become used to describe a negative “other?” Roman Christians began to refer to all non-Christians and non-Jews as *pagani* in the fourth century.³ After nearly three hundred years spent amid Roman culture, what caused fourth-century Christians to create a label for everyone outside of their own religious community? The fourth century in Rome was a time of dramatic political change, social upheaval, and shifting religious landscapes. These contextual elements combine to create an ideal environment in which Christianity could define its own cultural identity and contrast it with the identities of other religious traditions. In particular, fourth century Christians used both the content and techniques of pagan *paideia*, or educational culture, as a tool to support the formation of a communal Christian identity.⁴

Political, Social, and Religious Context of the Fourth Century

The Roman Empire underwent dramatic political change throughout the fourth century. Under Diocletian’s tetrarchy, from 293 to 305, Christianity was persecuted as a way of promoting Roman traditional culture.⁵ After Diocletian’s abdication, the institution of the tetrarchy began to disintegrate, and several years of conflict among the tetrarchs resulted in

³ Christopher P. Jones, “The Fuzziness of ‘Paganism,’” *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 2 (2012): 250, doi: 10.1215/0961754X-1544932.

⁴ This chapter is adapted from the term paper I wrote in the fall of 2017 for CLAS401, the required senior seminar for Classics majors at Trinity College.

⁵ Raymond P. Davis, “Diocletian,” in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) doi: 10.1093/acref/9780198606413.001.0001.

Constantine taking control of the Roman Empire in 312.⁶ In 313, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which instituted religious tolerance for Christianity within the Empire.⁷ Although this declaration by no means transformed the Roman Empire into a Christian nation, the Edict of Milan reversed Diocletian's oppressive measures against Christianity.⁸ Throughout the political changes of the fourth century, the Empire remained consistently authoritarian: "Imperial government in [the fourth century] was unmatched in Graeco-Roman history in its scale and complexity of organization, in its physical incidence upon society, the rhetorical extravagance with which it expressed, and the calculated violence with which it attempted to impose its will."⁹ Even in times of relative political stability, the Roman Empire of the fourth century created a landscape of imposing control and even violence. Any man who desired political power during this time period needed to navigate a delicate system in which an individual's fortune depended on the good favor of more influential men.

One of the ways in which Roman men negotiated power in the fourth century was through *paideia*. *Paideia* originated in Greek culture, and Libanius, a fourth century rhetorician from Antioch, describes it as an induction into civic responsibility: "[The educated man] will think that his duty is to make the cities happy; he will rejoice when the executioner's sword lies idle; he will make the citadels beautiful with buildings; and he will remain throughout a servant

⁶ Raymond P. Davis, "Constantine I, 'the Great,'" in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) doi: 10.1093/acref/9780198606413.001.0001.

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 256.

⁸ Johnson, 256.

⁹ John Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London: Duckworth, 1989), 253.

of the Muses.”¹⁰ For Libanius, *paideia* creates model citizens who care about the state of their city, strive for peace, fund public works, and pursue the life of the mind. A Roman education emphasized the use of language: “Typically that schooling was purely literary [...]: mastery of correct language, command of a fairly small number of classical texts, and an ability to turn the knowledge of language and literature to a facility in composition and speech.”¹¹ The full use of *paideia* required both an understanding of literary content and skill in writing and public speaking. The mastery that Robert Kaster describes here involves intimate knowledge and internalization of the curriculum of *paideia*.

In addition to cultivating a particular type of knowledge, *paideia* distinguished elite men from their uneducated counterparts. Because both the cost of hiring grammarians and rhetoricians as teachers and the investment of time and intellectual work required to learn the skills of *paideia* prohibited the majority of Roman youths from becoming part of the educated culture, *paideia* functioned as a marker of class distance.¹² Peter Brown notes that even once the hurdles to acquire *paideia* had been overcome, a Roman man could only demonstrate his newfound culture in a small set of circumstances and through a limited range of conventional expression.¹³ The class marker of *paideia* primarily communicated status to others who had been educated in the same way.

¹⁰ Libanius, *Epistles*, 1261.4, quoted in Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 38.

¹¹ Robert Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 11.

¹² Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 39.

¹³ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 39.

In a time of political uncertainty in Rome, the structure of *paideia* provided a system to control social mobility and understand the ways that classes relate to each other.¹⁴ *Paideia* created a sense of social cohesion between elite men across the empire: “A late Roman education produced remarkable cultural homogeneity. [...] Ever since the early empire, a common culture had provided a language that enabled members of the educated classes from as far apart as Arles and Arabia to meet as equal devotees of Greek rhetoric.”¹⁵ *Paideia* both distinguished learned men from their illiterate counterparts and united them with other men who had, as Libanius describes, “installed Demosthenes in [their] soul.”¹⁶ By connecting *paideia* to the soul, Libanius makes an external social institution seem like a defining internal quality, which further justifies the class differences expressed through educational culture in late antique Rome.

A correlated function of *paideia* in the fourth century was its use as an accessory to political power. Because *paideia* was linked with class difference, Roman elites used it to justify their inherent right to political authority over the uneducated masses.¹⁷ In addition to supporting a sense of natural right to rule over lower classes, *paideia* allowed Roman elites with varying spheres of power across the empire to negotiate their relationships with each other. By appealing to *paideia*, an elite man in a Roman province could successfully interact with a governor, despite the latter’s possession of the political upper hand.¹⁸ Because the structure of the Roman Empire

¹⁴ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 39.

¹⁵ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 39.

¹⁶ Libanius, *Ep.* 1261.2, quoted in Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 38.

¹⁷ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 42.

¹⁸ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 42.

was increasingly fragile in the fourth century, elites relied on *paideia* more than ever to maintain the existing systems of power:

Politics and *paideia* were so strenuously linked in the fourth and fifth centuries because there was no guarantee that the tacit agreement which ensured the effectiveness of rhetoric would remain operative. Once there was a danger that the common code of formalized speech, and all that this stood for, might be brushed aside, the notables of the Greek world had to face a degree of vulnerability to the power of the emperor and his servants...¹⁹

Under an authoritarian empire, Roman elites and their counterparts in the Greek East relied on a mutual concern for *paideia* to protect them from the most powerful players in society, including the emperor. Even though Brown is perhaps overzealous in his discussion of *paideia*'s role in the power dynamics of fourth century Rome, his identification of the link between *paideia* and political influence is helpful.

In addition to allowing elites to interact well with each other, fourth century Romans viewed *paideia* as a tempering force for the authoritarian power of the emperor. In the second half of the third century, the Egyptian grammarian Lollianus complimented the emperors Gallienus and Valerian: "Your heavenly magnanimity and your fellowship with the Muses (for *Paideia* sits beside you on the throne) have given me confidence to offer a just and lawful petition."²⁰ Lollianus cites *paideia* as the reason that he has faith in the justice of the two emperors. Having an education in common secures the interaction between Roman elites at different levels of political power—Lollianus was just a scholar of grammar, but his possession of *paideia* puts him on an even intellectual playing field with the leaders of the Roman Empire. In contrast, the Christian author Gregory Nazianzen expressed concern about the later emperor

¹⁹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 43.

²⁰ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 35.

Julian. Julian was skilled in his use of *paideia*, but Gregory feared that he had not fully “installed *paideia* in his soul” because he looked restless and laughed at odd moments.²¹ Time spent learning *paideia* was not enough to create a good emperor; he must allow *paideia* to tame every aspect of his personality, even his physical expressions.

The shifting landscape of fourth century Rome created a unique moment for Christianity and its development of a religious identity. When Constantine took the throne, he did not support Christianity only through the granting of legal recognition in the Edict of Milan. Rather, throughout his reign he acted as a patron of the Church by funding basilicas, commissioning copies of the Bible, establishing Sunday as a holy day throughout the empire, and founding a new Christian city at Constantinople.²² Furthermore, Constantine called to order the Council of Nicaea in 325, which was the first ecumenical gathering of Christian leaders in an attempt to reach consensus on matters of orthodoxy. Despite the imperial support for Christianity during the first half of the fourth century, the majority of the empire continued to practice traditional Greco-Roman religion.²³

Even though Rome did not become an empire populated by Christians under Constantine’s rule, his support of the Church caused a dramatic shift in the social status of Christianity. Under Diocletian, Christianity had not only lacked legal recognition but was persecuted by the state. Constantine’s reign brought both political legitimacy and an increase of social power to the Church. Luke Johnson writes: “Christians moved from a place of hiding to a posture of display, from a condition in which their property could be dispossessed to a condition

²¹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 60.

²² Johnson, 256.

²³ Johnson, 256.

in which property was bestowed on them, from a marginal to a central social status [...]. History has known few such profound reversals of fortune.”²⁴ The total reversal of fortunes which Christianity underwent in the fourth century created an environment where the Church was suddenly free to construct new definitions of what it meant to be a Christian, both in terms of right belief—orthodoxy—and right practice—orthopraxy.²⁵ The emergence of ecumenical councils in the fourth century demonstrates this desire to draw boundaries around Christian identity in an official capacity, but individual Christian writers also expressed increasingly detailed opinions about what Christians believe and what Christians do.²⁶ The change in status that Christianity experienced in the fourth century allowed the Church to pursue more explicitly a cohesive Christian identity.

Scholarly Consensus: A Shifting Landscape of Identity Definition

Scholarship surrounding fourth-century Rome has shifted dramatically in the last fifty years. In the tradition of Edward Gibbon’s influential six-volume work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), historians have often marked the history of Rome in the third century CE and following with deterioration: “If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus.”²⁷ By claiming universal agreement on the second century as the

²⁴ Johnson, 258.

²⁵ Johnson, 271.

²⁶ Johnson, 272.

²⁷ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. D.M. Low (New York: Harcourt, 1960).

golden age of not only Rome, but of the entire world, Gibbon framed the discussion of the later Empire as one of stagnation and decline.

This perspective continued to be dominant among classicists and ancient historians for two centuries until Peter Brown revolutionized the way that this era is understood. In the wake of Brown's 1971 re-articulation of the period as "late antiquity," classicists have begun to look at the third through eighth centuries as a dynamic time of political, cultural, and religious change and growth in the Roman Empire.²⁸ Because of the scholarly revolution of the past fifty years, many points of consensus among modern scholars of late antiquity would have been unpopular or even unvoiced of in the era of Gibbon's influence. Concerning the interaction between Christians, pagans, and both groups' use of *paideia*, scholars agree that fourth century Rome was characterized by dramatic changes in power dynamics and the overlapping of both Christian and Greco-Roman religion, which led to increased definition of group identities.

Contemporary scholars concur that Christianity did undergo a "profound reversal of fortunes," as Luke Johnson suggests.²⁹ Peter Brown argues that Constantine's public political alignment with Christianity not only changed the social position of individual Christians, but also the relationship of the whole empire to its provincial subjects:

The Christian court offered a new, empire-wide patriotism. This was centered on the person and mission of a God-given, universal ruler, whose vast and profoundly abstract care for the empire as a whole made the older loyalties to individual cities, that had been wholeheartedly expressed in the old, polytheistic system, seem parochial and trivial.³⁰

²⁸ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, (New York: Harcourt, 1971).

²⁹ Johnson, 258.

³⁰ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 19.

Brown suggests that the change in political status of Christians and the rule of a nominally Christian emperor transformed the Roman understanding of what empire entails; what was formerly a collection of individual cities governed from Rome became a cohesive nation with an almost pastoral ruler. Constantine transformed Christianity from a persecuted minority religion to a legally recognized and imperially endorsed system of patriotic belief.

Marcel Simon adds to this discussion of the shifting Christian position of the fourth century, noting that it is only this transformation that makes a discussion about the overlap of pagan *paideia* and Christian culture possible:

At first sight, and if we take into account the actual relationship between the ancient Church and the pagan world, from the beginnings of the Christian era onwards to Diocletian, we might feel tempted to conclude that, undeniably, those two confronted forces had nothing in common at all. The opposition between them—even if we leave aside the phases, in fact comparatively short, of violent and general persecution—cannot be ignored.³¹

Simon argues that, even if Christian persecution under Diocletian is put aside, Christianity had been at odds with Greco-Roman society for centuries, which makes the comparison of Christian practice and Greco-Roman religion seem difficult. The reversal of fortunes for Christianity in the fourth century eases this tension between Roman society, and consequently the *paideia* it produces, and the Church.

A further point of consensus among scholars is that the newfound social capital of Christianity under Constantine did not translate into a dramatic increase in practicing Christians. Brown argues, “Fourth century Christianity, in fact, was far from being a ‘popular’ movement. It is not certain that it had become the majority religion of any one region before the conversion of

³¹ Marcel Simon, “Christianity and Pagan Thought: Confluences and Conflicts,” *Religious Studies* 9, no. 4 (Dec. 1973): 386.

Constantine in 312, still less that it appealed to any broad stratum of the population.”³² Although Brown does note that Christianity began to grow among Roman elites towards the end of the fourth century, he rejects the idea that the legal toleration of Christianity by Constantine led to a sudden “Christianization” of the Roman people.³³ In the same vein, Johnson points to the emperor Julian’s return of the empire to “pagan supremacy” in 362 and 363 as an indicator of the general population’s opinion of traditional Roman religion:

A significant portion, perhaps a majority, of the population of the empire probably remained pagan for a substantial period of time. Temples to the gods continued to exist, and worship of the gods continued to thrive. Eloquent spokespersons defended the glories of Greco-Roman religion and philosophy against the newly privileged but still barbaric Christian interloper.³⁴

Not only did Christianity not absorb traditional “pagan” religion when it became legally recognized, but some pagans actively preached against the Church and its growth. At the same time that Christianity gained significant political power, the empire itself remained dominated by traditional Greco-Roman religion. The current scholarly understanding of the complicated dynamic between Christianity’s cultural growth but persistent minority status continues to push back against Gibbon’s simplistic description of Christianization within his narrative of decline and fall at Rome.

Because Greco-Roman religion maintained popularity throughout the fourth century, scholars agree that Christian culture and “pagan” culture were frequently indistinguishable. Roman Christians all grew up in a world saturated by traditional Roman culture—when Christianity was a minority religion, most Christians’ neighbors, business partners, and local

³² Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 76.

³³ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 76.

³⁴ Johnson, 256-257.

authorities were pagans. Johnson argues that “Christianity was a ‘Greco-Roman religion’ virtually from the start and grew increasingly closer to the forms and expressions of religion found in the Greco-Roman environment. Rather than a foreign and forced imposition, the Greco-Roman character of Christianity was a natural development that required no external or political assistance.”³⁵ Because Christians in the Roman empire were Greco-Roman, it follows that their expression of Christianity would also be distinctly Greco-Roman in flavor. Simon agrees, writing “The best in [paganism], as regards forms of thought, was integrated into Christianity so intimately that even now there are still controversies about the heritage and legitimacy of the association.”³⁶ Because Christianity grows and develops in the Greco-Roman milieu, it naturally appears similar to Greco-Roman religious traditions in some ways.

Because of the proximity between Christianity and the pagan culture in which it develops, there is scholarly consensus that elite Christians in the fourth century made use of the culture of *paideia*. As Peter Brown argues, this is particularly true of Christian men whose writings became influential within the empire: “Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries wielded with dazzling effect the rhetoric of paradox [...] It was an open secret that many Christian bishops owed their prestige in society at large to the fact that they had once been rhetors.”³⁷ Although *paideia*’s centuries-long existence was firmly rooted in a non-Christian culture, influential Christians skillfully employed Roman educational culture as a way to gain power within society. Not only did Christians use *paideia* for its secular benefits, but some Christian authors cited it as a positive form of spiritual training, including Gregory Nazianzen:

³⁵ Johnson, 255-256.

³⁶ Simon, 398.

³⁷ Brown, 74-75.

“With measured words, I learned to bridle rage.”³⁸ Gregory reinterprets the outward composure and guidelines of comportment of *paideia* as a way of correcting an internal expression of sin.

Christian authors employed the rhetorical training of *paideia* regardless their personal opinions of it. Even Tertullian, who expressed concern about the pagan origins of *paideia*, relied on it in his own writing. He writes, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? [...] We need not be concerned to know anything but Jesus Christ, in quest of anything but the Gospel.”³⁹ Tertullian argues that *paideia* is irrelevant to the Christian because it does not provide knowledge of Christ. However, Simon notes Tertullian’s extensive use of rhetoric, which is learned through *paideia*: “[rhetoric is] a field, by the way, in which even he [Tertullian] proves to be dependent of Graeco-Roman culture.”⁴⁰ Simon’s observation of Tertullian’s simultaneous rejection of and reliance on *paideia* highlights the bipartite nature of education as mastery of both content and a set of skills. This dual form of *paideia* as both substance and a technology for making use of this substance lies at the heart of Tertullian’s, and indeed Christianity’s, ambivalent interaction with Roman educational culture. The tools of rhetoric prove indispensable to the process of proclaiming the gospel throughout the Empire, but authors like Tertullian grow uncomfortable with the non-Christian content used to teach rhetoric. Although early Christian authors talk about *paideia* in drastically different ways, classicists agree that the tool of *paideia* was regularly used by influential Christians in late antiquity.

Finally, the scholarship which I have read in the course of my research agrees that Christian authors in the fourth century demonstrated an increasing desire to distance Christianity

³⁸ Brown, 50.

³⁹ Simon, 385.

⁴⁰ Simon, 386.

from the pagan culture it inhabited. Even though Christianity was still a minority religion during the fourth century, Peter Brown observes that Christian writers of this time period conceived of themselves as engaging in a form of culture war and emerging victorious:

It is just at this time that the more aggressively populist components of the Christian representation of the triumph of the church reached their peak. [...] It was essential to invoke such themes in order to challenge, in as dramatic a manner as possible, the monopoly of culture associated with traditional non-Christian leaders.⁴¹

Because of the cultural predominance of Greco-Roman religion and the promise of power under the reign of Constantine, fourth century Christians felt the need to push back against the pagan traditions of the Roman empire.

In the upcoming chapters, I continue to explore the dynamics between *paideia*, Christianity, and identity navigation through a case study of Ambrose's *De Officiis*. His positions of power both within the Church and in the political structure of the Empire, as well as the classical framework of his text, make him a particularly enlightening example of the complex tensions at play in fourth-century Rome.

⁴¹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 76.

Chapter Two: A Tale of Two De Officiis

While *paideia* manifests itself in many different situations as a flag of social status and identity, its most direct impact on the lives of its inductees is in the use of the written and spoken word. Therefore, when considering Ambrose's interaction with *paideia* and the classical culture it transmits, the textuality of his *De Officiis* provides a natural starting point for inquiry. In the opening chapters of Book 1 of *De Officiis*, Ambrose claims that his words are not marked by *supellectilem neque artem dicendi*, or "ornamentation or skill of speaking," but are instead simple expressions of truth.⁴² This point puts Ambrose's *De Officiis* into dialogue with Cicero's text of the same name, because it directly references Cicero's acclaimed rhetorical style. Throughout the introduction of his *De Officiis*, Ambrose's literary choices engage him in a push and pull relationship with Cicero and the culture of *paideia* that he represents.

Ambrose's Literary Relationship to Cicero

Although Ambrose does not name Cicero as one of his predecessors until 1.24, he makes it clear throughout his text that he is writing with the great republican orator in mind. As Ivor Davidson argues, even Ambrose's preamble in 1.1-22, which scholars have at times cast aside as an unrelated sermon that was interjected into the text to fill space, echoes Cicero's text in its structure, style, and content.⁴³ When Ambrose finally mentions Cicero by name in 1.24, he does so in a twofold way. First, he names him among *quidam philosophiae studentes*, or "other

⁴² Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.29.

⁴³ Ivor Davidson, "A Tale of Two Approaches: Ambrose, *De Officiis* 1.1-22 and Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.1-6," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 52, no. 1 (2001): 66. Davidson has been one of the only scholars to write about Ambrose's *De Officiis* in the past twenty-five years, and his introduction, text, translation, and commentary of this text are indispensable resources. As such, I refer to Davidson frequently throughout this chapter.

scholars of philosophy” including the Greek Stoic Panaetius.⁴⁴ Cicero comes last in this list of philosophers, and Ambrose chooses to refer to him by his nomen, or family name, Tullius. Although this use of a generic name and delayed placement of Cicero within a list of his philosophical forerunners might suggest that he played a lesser role in the development of Ambrose’s own work, Cicero receives a second billing in the following sentence: *Et sicut Tullius ad erudiendum filium, ita ego quoque ad vos informandos filios meos*, (“and just as Tullius did for the education of his son, so also I do for the shaping of you all, my sons”).⁴⁵ While Ambrose downplays the importance of Cicero in the first sentence of 1.24, his repeated reference to Cicero in the second sentence solidifies Cicero’s role as an exemplary philosophical writer upon whom Ambrose bases his own writing. *Et sicut* makes it clear that Ambrose seeks to write in the same vein as Cicero; he does not claim to write “just like” Panaetius or any of the other *philosophiae studentes*.

The parallels between the two versions of *De Officiis*, as well as Ambrose’s repeated reference to Cicero as a philosophical role model, demonstrate that Ambrose wrote the introduction to his text with Cicero’s text in mind, though perhaps not physically in front of him.⁴⁶ As Robert Kaster writes, elite education in late antiquity consisted of three goals: “mastery of correct language, command of a fairly small number of classical texts, and an ability to turn the knowledge of language and literature to a facility in composition and speech.”⁴⁷ The final goal of adapting knowledge to aid elite Roman men in their political, social, and literary

⁴⁴ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.24.

⁴⁵ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.24.

⁴⁶ Ivor Davidson, “Introduction,” *Ambrose, De Officiis*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 37.

⁴⁷ Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 11.

pursuits demands an intimate understanding of the set curriculum. The education of *paideia* is intended to serve a utilitarian purpose, and because of this purpose, literary texts become tools that a young man can use throughout his life to garner social status or political power. Cicero was undoubtedly one of the authors featured in late antique Roman education, and his *De Officiis* was one of the texts commonly included on reading lists.⁴⁸ By participating in the culture of *paideia*, Ambrose had certainly studied and internalized Cicero's ethical text. The plethora of references and similarities to Cicero's text in Ambrose's work does not necessarily mean that he was working off of a physical copy of the earlier *De Officiis*, but rather confirms that Ambrose was a fully inducted member of *paideia*.

Because of Cicero's prominence in Roman culture, Ambrose's engagement with Cicero reflects his relationship with classical culture in general. Part of the unifying power of induction into *paideia* was the curricular emphasis on a few prominent authors, including Homer, Demosthenes, Virgil, and Cicero.⁴⁹ Partaking in elite Roman society in late antiquity meant knowing Cicero. In the four-hundred-year period between Cicero's *De Officiis* and Ambrose's text of the same name, Cicero had become synonymous with being a cultured member of *paideia*. Davidson calls the fourth century "the *aetas Ciceroniana* of later Latin" because of the defining influence of Cicero's work.⁵⁰ Since Cicero and his work stand so clearly as symbols of classical Roman intellectual culture in the fourth century, Cicero himself becomes elided into the broader system of *paideia* in Ambrose's text. The ways Ambrose interacts with Cicero's text reflect his interaction with all of pagan Roman culture. Ambrose's *De Officiis* acts as a

⁴⁸ Davidson, "Introduction," 14.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 39.

⁵⁰ Davidson, "Introduction," 13.

microcosm through which the dynamics of the larger cultural struggle between Christianity and classical culture can be seen.

Comparing Cicero and Ambrose: Close Readings

When Ambrose and Cicero's *De Officiis* are read in conjunction, significant similarities are disrupted by points of difference. That Ambrose diverts from Cicero's model at all is more indicative of his relationship to classical culture than the places in the text where he conforms. As Peter Brown describes, "A late Roman education produced remarkable cultural homogeneity. [...] Formalized, elevated, reassuringly predictable, and invariably fulsome, rhetoric provided a permanent background music to the consensus in favor of Roman rule."⁵¹ Elite education's ability to provide social and political power rests in its drive for cohesion. *Paideia* is designed to produce elite men who are good citizens within the Empire. Ambrose, an inductee into *paideia*, could be expected to conform to Cicero's example when reading and writing, and in most of his writing he does. However, at key points of inflection within his *De Officiis*, Ambrose diverges from Cicero's model. Given the literary cohesion expected of him because of his education, these points of departure speak louder to the reader than the many points where Ambrose conforms to Cicero.

Like Cicero, Ambrose begins his discussion of duty with an exploration of the role of a father teaching his son. In his first sentence, he reveals his concerns about writing on such a sweeping philosophical subject: *Non adrogens videri arbitror si inter filios suscipiam adfectum docendi*, ("I believe that I do not seem arrogant if I will take up the task of teaching among my sons").⁵² Ambrose's foremost worry about his *De Officiis* is that he will seem arrogant, so he

⁵¹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 39-40.

⁵² Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.1.

leads with the assurance that he writes in good faith, as a father teaching his sons. While Cicero also begins by speaking about teaching sons, in contrast he leads with a proud recounting of the accomplishments of his son Marcus: *Quamquam te, Marce fili, annum iam audientem Cratippum idque Athenis abundare oportet praeceptis institutisque philosophiae propter summam et doctoris auctoritatem et urbis*, (“Although it is fitting that you, Marcus my son, hearing now for a year from Cratippus of Athens, should overflow with the rules and institutes of philosophy, because of the highest authority of both the teacher and the city...”).⁵³ Both authors foreground their filial audience, but where Cicero boasts about the quality of education his son is receiving, Ambrose frets about appearing arrogant.

In 1.24, Ambrose further justifies his purpose for writing over and against Cicero’s cause of writing. As mentioned above, he claims to write to his spiritual sons “just as Tullius did for the education of his son,” and continues: *neque enim minus vos diligo quos in evangelio genui quam si coniugio suscepissem*, (“And indeed, I do not love you all less, whom I have borne in the gospel, than if I had begotten you from a marriage”).⁵⁴ Ambrose argues that his relationship to his gospel children is as legitimate as Cicero’s relationship to Marcus. He even goes a step further: *Plus certe diligere debemus quos perpetuo nobiscum putamus futuros quam quos in hoc tantum saeculo*, (“Certainly we ought to love those whom we think will be with us forever more than those in this age only”).⁵⁵ Even as Ambrose models how he refers to his audience off of Cicero, he places his own work above that of his predecessor’s, on account of the superiority of his spiritual family to Cicero’s blood relatives. Ambrose chooses to follow in the literary

⁵³ Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.1.

⁵⁴ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.24.

⁵⁵ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.24.

footsteps of Cicero as he shapes his new text but makes it clear that his way is superior to that of the pagan classical author.

When comparing the opening lines of both texts, the most immediate distinction between the two is in their sentence structure. Cicero's first sentence is sixty-three words long and consists of nine dependent clauses. The famous orator acknowledges this complexity himself:

Nec vero hoc arroganter dictum existimari velim. Nam philosophandi scientiam concedens multis, quod est oratoris proprium, apte, distincte, ornate dicere, quoniam in eo studio aetatem consumpsi, si id mihi assumo, videor id meo iure quodam modo vindicare,

And indeed I do not wish for this thing to be considered arrogantly spoken. For, granting the knowledge of philosophy to many others, if I take for myself what is fitting for an orator, namely to speak appropriately, clearly, and elegantly (since I have used up my time in this pursuit), I seem to be justified by my right in some way.⁵⁶

Cicero claims to be the foremost possessor of the knowledge that is fitting for an orator. Like Ambrose, he expresses concern about being considered arrogant, but instead of claiming humility as Ambrose does, he justifies himself through an account of his skills. Cicero does not present a front of false modesty, and instead grounds his entire text in his ability to present information with rhetorical skill.

In contrast, Ambrose writes with a simpler sentence structure. Most of his sentences are brief and clear, with a restrained number of clauses when compared to Cicero's fondness of excess. Although this difference in syntax could simply reflect Ambrose's lesser rhetorical skill when compared to the greatest Roman orator, Davidson argues that Ambrose intentionally chooses a simple writing style: "Rhetorical eloquence, in his view, is a distraction from the exposition of vital truth. The 'right' use of language is not simply a matter of clear communication: it is an ethical responsibility, part of the Christian's overall obligation to act in a

⁵⁶ Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.2.

way that will earn divine approval (cf. 1.8).”⁵⁷ In Davidson’s view, the very ability that Cicero uses to support his treatise is what Ambrose fears will disqualify his work. However, this seems to overly simplify the complex relationship Ambrose must have to rhetoric as a member of both elite Roman and Christian communities. Ambrose handles his use of his education in *paideia* by putting it in the background and foregrounding a new kind of education. Instead of claiming some prior knowledge or skill that has prepared him to write *De Officiis*, Ambrose places himself among his students: *et hanc ipsam ut docendi studio possim discere*, (“and this very thing I desire, that in my zeal for teaching, I might be able to learn”).⁵⁸ Cicero’s pedagogy stems from his prior learning, but Ambrose speaks of his teaching as a tool for his own learning.

Despite his posturing as an unlearned man hoping to glean a little knowledge from the *enim verus magister*, or “one true master,” Ambrose was fully initiated into the culture of *paideia* and lived as a member of elite Roman society. Ambrose’s “mind is steeped in the language of the two giants of his school curriculum, Cicero and Vergil.”⁵⁹ Although Ambrose seems distrustful of rhetoric, the inculcation of *paideia* in him from a young age means that his sense of Latin style and syntax bleeds out in his writing. Whether intends to or not, Ambrose writes as someone who has not only read, but closely studied, Cicero’s prose. Despite his claims of ignorance and lack of teaching qualification, Ambrose is highly educated by the standards of his contemporary Roman culture. As Davidson points out, even as Ambrose claims to write without the trappings of rhetoric, he produces several pithy and elegant “one-liners.”⁶⁰ Even his

⁵⁷ Davidson, “Introduction,” 106.

⁵⁸ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.3.

⁵⁹ Davidson, “Introduction,” 107.

⁶⁰ Davidson, “Introduction,” 110.

statement positioning himself as the ultimate student fits this description: *ut docendi studio possim discere* is to the point, yet packs a complex idea into five words.⁶¹ Pithy statements like this one are both elegant and accessible, which reflects the Christian's unique concern for reaching a broad range of people with the message of the gospel. Kaster identifies "the need for compelling, authoritative, yet accessible speech, capable of opening up texts singularly important in their truth but often obscurely deep or seemingly ambiguous" as a concern at the front of the minds of early Christian authors.⁶² Short and straightforward sayings demystify the Christian life and make it accessible to a greater number of people. The one-liners that pepper Ambrose's *De Officiis*, while rhetorically impactful, reflect a broader concern for his audience.

In terms of structure, Ambrose's introduction closely follows the convention of Cicero's. Cicero chooses to begin with an apologetic for the value of an education in Greek and Latin literature and philosophy in 1.1. He follows this with a robust list of his best qualities which validate his writing in 1.2-1.4. In 1.5 and 1.6, he writes a justification for his choice of topic, *officium*, before launching into the meat of his argument, which he models off of Panaetius' *περὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος*.⁶³ By and large, Ambrose follows Cicero's organizational system when he writes his own *De Officiis*. He writes about his role as a teacher in 1.1-1.4, and he provides his rationale for writing on *officium* in 1.23-25. In the middle of these two justifications of himself and his topic, Ambrose inserts a lengthy reflection on Psalm 38.⁶⁴ At first glance, this seems out of place in a text modeled on Cicero, and some scholars have suggested that 1.5-22 originally

⁶¹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.3

⁶² Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 84.

⁶³ Davidson, "Introduction," 8.

⁶⁴ Ivor Davidson, "Commentary," *Ambrose, De Officiis*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 465.

existed as an independent sermon which was inserted into the text at a later date.⁶⁵ Although a multi-paragraph tangent reflecting on scripture is a far cry from Cicero's three-paragraph indulgence in his own ego, Ambrose's intentions with this passage come into focus when viewed in contrast with its parallel section in Cicero's text.

Psalm 38, Silence, and an Un-Ciceronian Perspective

As Ambrose expands on the structure of Cicero's introduction, he shifts the topic of his text to the value of silence, which seems particularly un-Ciceronian. Surely Cicero never hesitated to speak due to respect for silence or concern over his own fitness to do so. Because of his rigorous induction into the culture of *paideia* and his internalization of Cicero's content, structure, and prose in the *De Officiis*, the points where Ambrose chooses to depart from his model are what strike the reader. Instead of diving into his philosophical treatise, which Cicero does at this point, Ambrose slows down and shows his readers what he values. By diverging from the expected structure of such a text as laid out by Cicero, Ambrose draws attention to his meditation on silence and highlights the ways that this theme signals his Christian identity and ethics.

Ambrose begins his meditation on silence from a posture of rational questioning. After placing himself in the position of one who wishes to learn, Ambrose asks the next logical question: what is the most important thing to learn? A reader familiar with Cicero's version of *De Officiis* would expect the answer to this question to be *officium* itself—this question seems to naturally lead into the topic of the philosophical treatise. Instead, Ambrose shifts gears: *Quid autem prae ceteris debemus discere quam tacere*, ("But what else ought we to learn before the

⁶⁵ Davidson, "A Tale of Two Approaches," 67.

rest than to be silent?”).⁶⁶ Just as his audience expects Ambrose to begin the philosophical work of his treatise, he brings up the importance of silence. Lest his readers think him hypocritical for spilling so much ink on the value of saying nothing, he qualifies this assertion: *...tacere, ut possimus loqui*, (“...to be silent, so that we are able to speak well”).⁶⁷ Skill in speaking is Cicero’s defining characteristic, and Ambrose acknowledges its value while simultaneously dismissing the skill of anyone who speaks without properly valuing silence. Ambrose seems to recognize the irony of his own lengthy discussion of silence, continuing: *...loqui, ne prius me vox condemnet mea quam absolvat aliena? Scriptum est enim: Ex verbis tuis condemnaberis*. (“...to speak well, so that my voice might not condemn me sooner than another voice could absolve me. For it is written: ‘From your words you will be condemned’”).⁶⁸ Ambrose references Matthew 12:37 to ground his writing in Biblical authority, but this reference serves a second purpose. By writing extensively about the merits of silence and learning to speak well, Ambrose escapes the very condemnation that such activities should engender. Ambrose’s argument in favor of silence works to justify his own breaking of the silence.

Although Ambrose’s discussion of silence may seem tangential at first, he uses the culmination of 1.5-1.22 to set the tone for the rest of his work. Throughout the passage, Ambrose explores silence, speech, humility, and pride, providing examples and scripture references to support his argument in favor of humble silence. From 1.5-1.20, the only person Ambrose names is Susanna, who was silent when unjustly tried for adultery in the disputed thirteenth chapter of Daniel. He holds her up as an exemplar of productive silence: *negotiosum silentium, ut erat*

⁶⁶ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.5.

⁶⁷ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.5.

⁶⁸ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.5.

Susannae, (“hardworking silence, as Susanna’s was”).⁶⁹ In 1.21, he presents his reader with a second case study, this time of David: *Cur non imitamur dicentem: ‘Obmutui et humiliatus sum et silui a bonis?’* (“Why shouldn’t we imitate the one who says ‘I was speechless and I was abased and I was silent about my good works?’”).⁷⁰ By calling his readers to imitate David’s posture of humble silence, Ambrose taps into Roman convention of exemplarity.⁷¹ Instead of appealing to examples of men like Pompey the Great or Scipio Africanus, like Cicero would, Ambrose turns to the Bible to provide men worthy of emulation. Ambrose conforms to the expectations of Roman *paideia* by writing about exempla, but he distinguishes himself from classical culture by relying on an ancient Hebrew king as the role model for his readers.

To further put to rest any arguments that 1.5-1.22 were shoehorned into the text to fill out the introduction, Ambrose clarifies the purpose of this meditation. He writes, *Neque improvide, ad vos filios meos scribens, huius psalmi prooemio usus sum*, (“I did not use the preface of this Psalm recklessly while writing to you, my sons”).⁷² Ambrose anticipates confusion over his choice to diverge from the structure laid out by Cicero, and he reassures his readers that his choice was not *improvide*, or reckless. Although at first this lengthy tangent seems disconnected from the body of his text, for Ambrose the connection between the two is clear. He explains that Psalm 38 teaches about patience, silence, and the rejection of earthly wisdom, *quae maxima*

⁶⁹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.9.

⁷⁰ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.21.

⁷¹ For further information on exemplarity in Roman literature, see Matthew Roller, “The Exemplary Past in Roman Historiography and Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Historians*, ed. Andrew Feldherr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214-230.

⁷² Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.23.

virtutum fundamenta sunt, (“which are the greatest foundations of virtues”).⁷³ Rather than distracting from the ethical topics at hand, Ambrose’s meditation on the Psalm gets to the foundation of all virtue. For Ambrose, there can be no appropriate treatise on duties without a grounding in scripture. Where Cicero relies on the authority of his philosophical predecessors to ground his work, Ambrose appeals to ancient Hebrew scripture. By making the choice to diverge from the structure of Cicero’s introduction, Ambrose makes his scriptural meditation and inspiration stand out more than if he had conformed to the expected flow of such a text.

In 1.25, when he finally turns to the same task that Cicero attended to in 1.5, Ambrose justifies *officium* as his choice of topic. He writes,

Ergo quoniam personae conveniunt, videamus utrum res ipsa conveniat scribere de officiis et utrum hoc nomen philosophorum tantummodo scholae aptum sit an etiam in scripturis reperiatur divinis.

Therefore, since the players have been assembled, let us see whether this thing is suitable, namely to write about duties, and whether this word is appropriate only for the schools of the philosophers, or if it is also discovered in the divine scriptures.⁷⁴

Ambrose’s reference to *personae*, a word with dramatic connotations that can even denote the masks which actors wore in classical theater, comes at the heels of his explanation in 1.24 that his spiritual children are even more fitting addressees than Cicero’s blood relative.⁷⁵ By using *personae* in this context, Ambrose suggests that he is playing the role of Cicero, and his readers play the role of Marcus. Despite the fact that he goes on to ground his treatise in Biblical precedent, Ambrose preconditions the further development of his argument on the fulfilling of the roles set by Cicero in his treatise. In addition, the first part of Ambrose’s inquiry into the

⁷³ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.23.

⁷⁴ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.25.

⁷⁵ Oxford Latin Dictionary, 2nd ed. (2012), s.v. “persona.”

suitability of his topic echoes Cicero's claim to write *quod et aetati tuae esset aptissimum et auctoritati meae*, ("that sort of thing which is most fitting both for your age and for my authority").⁷⁶ As he begins to treat *officium*, Ambrose follows Cicero's precedent.

Only in the latter half of his indirect question does Ambrose forge into new territory by asking whether *officium* lies wholly in the realm of the philosopher or if it is a topic warranted by scripture. Here, as with his conclusion to the lengthy reflection on Psalm 38, he concludes with a specific example from the Bible: the priest Zacharias is described as having *officium* in Luke 1.⁷⁷ Ambrose expresses concern about stepping outside of his prescribed role as a Christian and into the realm of the philosophers, despite the flexibility of boundaries between both social groups. In her exploration of social identity formation within Roman intellectual culture, Kendra Eshleman describes the dynamic at play here: "Yet despite—or because of—this patent fluidity, sophists, philosophers, and Christians all treat participation and social contact with other insiders as an index of insider status. Members of all three groups implicitly and explicitly portray themselves as defending their community's borders."⁷⁸ Ambrose's concern for the border between the community of the philosophers and that of the Church does not reflect a reality where the two are completely separated, but instead defends a performative boundary that is unclear and easily crossed. Ambrose lands on the right side of this symbolic boundary by appealing to Zacharias rather than past philosophical thinkers. In 1.25, Ambrose takes his reader through the same paces that he repeats in the rest of his text by starting in alignment with Cicero and ending with scriptural support for his argument.

⁷⁶ Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.4.

⁷⁷ Davidson, "Commentary," 470.

⁷⁸ Kendra Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2012), 260.

Throughout the introduction to his *De Officiis*, Ambrose engages in a dance of cohesion and divergence with Cicero's treatise of the same name. From the beginning, Ambrose makes it clear that his work is based on Cicero's earlier version, and in many ways his text conforms to its predecessor. This consistency in structure and theme makes the points where Ambrose chooses to go his own way particularly meaningful. Ambrose's meditation on Psalm 38 in 1.5-1.22 seems out of place and unnecessary at first glance, but upon closer consideration plays an important rhetorical role in the text. By introducing this reflection on scripture, Ambrose makes his values—*officia*—eminently clear, while signaling his own education, social status, and group identity.

Chapter Three: Ambrose's Adaptation of Classical Philosophy

Throughout the introduction to his *De Officiis*, Ambrose sets up a contrast between himself and the *philosophiae studentes*, or devotees of philosophy.⁷⁹ His meandering injections of Biblical anecdotes and concern about whether he is qualified to teach contribute a less philosophical tone to his work. As he sets up his text, Ambrose defends himself against his Roman predecessor, Cicero, and the orator's predecessors, ancient Greek philosophers. Such intentional contrasts serve to obscure what Ambrose is doing through the *De Officiis*: as much as he protests that he is not one of the philosophers, he produces a three-volume text devoted to the study of ethics. Ambrose does the work of a philosopher. That Ambrose was intimately familiar with the fourth century canon of classical philosophy would be immediately apparent to a reader who, like Ambrose, had been inducted into *paideia*. Throughout the *De Officiis*, Ambrose signals his elite status and education by obliquely referencing classical philosophers and engaging in the tradition of Panaetius' *περὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος*, or "About Ethics."⁸⁰ However, Ambrose does not simply demonstrate his knowledge of existing ethical philosophy. Instead, he picks and chooses the ideas that fit with his Christian worldview and gives them Biblical origin stories while casting aside those that do not. As he adapts Cicero, Stoicism, and other Greek philosophers, Ambrose demonstrates his own induction into *paideia* while constructing a new and superior system of ethics.

Ambrose's Philosophical and Religious Tradition

As I argued in the previous chapter, Ambrose deliberately models his *De Officiis* on Cicero's original version of the same name. The first chapter traced the literary ways that

⁷⁹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.24.

⁸⁰ Davidson, "Introduction," 8.

Ambrose engages with Cicero, but the similarities between the two texts do not stop here. Ambrose goes so far as to ground his philosophy in Cicero's text. His philosophical engagement with Cicero is most obvious when Ambrose explicitly references him in the midst of philosophical discourse. In 1.43, he says that Plato is considered the originator of the devil's advocate role, and that Cicero implemented this concept in his *De Re Publica*.⁸¹ This reference, which is echoed in 1.180, shows that Ambrose was considering Cicero as a philosophical thinker, not simply as a skilled writer.

In 1.82, Ambrose takes his use of Cicero the philosopher one step further. He states that everyone should act in appropriate ways and seek order in their lives, and then brings in Cicero to support his argument: *Unde Tullius etiam ordinem putat in illo decore servari oportere idque positum dicit 'in formositate ordine ornatu ad actionem apto' [...]*, ("From this Cicero also thinks that it is necessary that order be guarded in that honor, and he says that this thing is situated in 'beauty, order, and decorations appropriate to action'").⁸² Despite the fact that he immediately disputes Cicero's evaluation of *formositate*, his inclusion of a Ciceronian quote reveals that Ambrose is engaging with the republican author on a philosophical level.

Additionally, Ambrose takes up Cicero's concerns with the good, *honestum*, and the expedient, *utile*, in ethical decision making and maintains his understanding of the four cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, justice, and temperance.⁸³ In his explicit reference to Cicero as a philosopher and his modelling of philosophical content to his predecessor's structure, Ambrose makes it clear that Cicero is his most immediate point of reference when writing his philosophical text.

⁸¹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.43.

⁸² Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.82.

⁸³ Davidson, "Introduction," 16-17.

By framing his philosophical treatise around Cicero's earlier version, Ambrose builds off of Cicero's predecessors as well. Cicero models his work on that of Panaetius, a Greek stoic who wrote in the second century BCE. As much as Cicero became an integral part of the curriculum of *paideia* in the fourth century, Greek philosophy was central to the elite education that Cicero received in the first century BCE.⁸⁴ In writing *De Officiis*, Cicero was one of the first Roman authors to attempt "to render conceptual ideas which had long been mediated in Greek into the less flexible structures of the Latin language."⁸⁵ Despite the long-held idea among scholars of Classics, which Gisela Striker identifies, that Cicero's philosophy is derivative and uninspired when compared to its Greek counterparts, Cicero states in his *De Officiis* that he is writing in order to fill a gap in Panaetius' previous work.⁸⁶ He writes, *Panaetius igitur, qui sine controversia de officiis accuratissime disputavit, quemque nos correctione quadam adhibita potissimum secuti sumus*, ("Therefore Panaetius, who without controversy investigated duty the most carefully, and whom we are following as much as possible, with some improvement having been applied").⁸⁷ Cicero claims to follow Panaetius' model *potissimum*, yet simultaneously claims to have improved upon the Greek philosopher. The need for *correctione* to which Cicero refers is the opportunity for conflict between the good and the expedient in Panaetius' system.⁸⁸ Cicero seeks to innovate upon the existing philosopher's work by providing a solution to one of

⁸⁴ Gisela Striker, "Cicero and Greek Philosophy," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 97 (1995): 53.

⁸⁵ Davidson, "Introduction," 6.

⁸⁶ Striker, "Cicero and Greek Philosophy," 54-55.

⁸⁷ Cicero, *De Officiis*, 3.7.

⁸⁸ Davidson, "Introduction," 9.

its flaws. Thus, it seems that philosophical text on which Ambrose models his *De Officiis* owes its philosophy to Panaetius, an even earlier author.

Panaetius wrote his *περὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος* within the tradition of Stoicism. Stoicism originated in Greece in the late fourth and third centuries BCE, but Panaetius and his peers wrote in the second century and are consequently referred to as the middle Stoa in scholarly discussion.⁸⁹ John Sellars writes that the middle Stoa is characterized by “increasing eclecticism,” which is exemplified in Panaetius’ non-Stoic belief in the eternity of the world and the necessity of material belongings for happiness, combined with his traditional Stoic rejection of Plato’s concept of the immortal soul.⁹⁰ In *περὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος*, written around 139 BCE, Panaetius writes about how to make ethical choices. He divides right actions into the good, *καλόν*, and the expedient, *συμφέρον*. Panaetius does not address what the right course of action is when the good and expedient seem to conflict with each other, and Cicero sees the lack of such an explanation as a flaw in his predecessor’s work.⁹¹ Furthermore, Cicero’s four cardinal virtues, which Ambrose also adopts, are associated with Stoic thought.⁹² Although Panaetius’ *περὶ τοῦ καθήκοντος* no longer survives, through the transmission of his Stoic ideas in Cicero’s, and later Ambrose’s, *De Officiis*, a modified system of Stoic ethics is accessible to the modern reader.

By modeling his own *De Officiis* on Cicero’s contribution to Stoic thought, Ambrose engages with an ancient Greek school of philosophy. Because the dichotomy between

⁸⁹ John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 8.

⁹⁰ Sellars, *Stoicism*, 8-9.

⁹¹ Davidson, “Introduction,” 9.

⁹² Davidson, “Introduction,” 10.

Christianity and “paganism” has been engrained in discussions about religious communities over the centuries, it seems unlikely to the casual reader that a Christian author would write a three-volume work based on a pagan text. However, Christian authors had been working with and adapting classical philosophy from the start. E.P. Sanders highlights Paul’s praise of contentedness in Philippians 4:11-12 as consistent with the sentiment and tone of a Stoic author.⁹³ Even though this similarity does not necessarily mean that Paul bought into the Stoic philosophical system, it does show that the schools of philosophy entrenched in his world influenced the way he wrote his letters.⁹⁴ Because even the apostles lived in a non-Christian world, it is not surprising that Greek philosophy has touched Christian writing from its beginning.

In the centuries between Paul and Ambrose, Jewish and Christian authors engaged in discourse with and about the classical philosophers. Philo of Alexandria, a first century Jew who became influential within early Christianity, has been pejoratively described as a “jackdaw” because of the ease with which he “steals” bits and pieces of other philosopher’s work.⁹⁵ David Runia reframes this observation in positive terms: “It cannot be denied that when he is trying to explain the words of Mosaic scripture, Philo picks and chooses precisely those doctrines or insights from the fund of Greek philosophy which suit his exposition.”⁹⁶ Philo participates in classical philosophy as far as it serves his purposes as a Biblical interpreter. In the second

⁹³ E.P. Sanders, “Paul Between Judaism and Hellenism,” in *St. Paul Among the Philosophers*, ed. John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 76.

⁹⁴ Sanders, “Paul Between Judaism and Hellenism,” 77.

⁹⁵ David Runia, “The Rehabilitation of the Jackdaw: Philo of Alexandria and Ancient Philosophy,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, Supplement*, 94 (2007): 494.

⁹⁶ Runia, “The Rehabilitation of the Jackdaw,” 494.

century, Justin Martyr claimed that classical philosophers “spoke well in proportion to the share [they] had of the seminal Logos.”⁹⁷ For Justin, any truth that can be found within the writings of Greek philosophers reflects a connection to the Logos, which the Gospel of John identifies with the person of Jesus.⁹⁸ The third century writer Origen borrowed the Stoic concept of natural law in contrast to civic law to explain why Christians could reject the laws of Rome which commanded them to violate their consciences.⁹⁹ Throughout the history of Christian thought, Christian authors, along with non-Christian authors who became subsumed into the Christian tradition, interpret and adapt classical philosophy to fit their own interpretations of the world.

When Ambrose writes a treatise on ethics, he writes not only in the vein of Cicero and the middle Stoa, but also in that of previous Christian writers. As Marcia Colish notes, Ambrose’s primary method of interpreting classical philosophy falls neatly in line with the strategy used by his Christian predecessors: “Sometimes, in dealing with philosophical doctrines that he regards as compatible with Christianity, he adverts to a patristic and apologetic commonplace, derived in turn from Hellenistic Jewish apologetics, which claims that the Greek philosophers acquired their wisdom from the Old Testament.”¹⁰⁰ While Colish’s dismissive characterization of Ambrose’s interaction with philosophy may be unnecessarily critical, her location of his method within a Christian interpretive tradition is helpful. In particular, she highlights the inclination of Ambrose, along with many Christian authors, to point to the Bible as the source of all true

⁹⁷ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, 13.3, quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1:32.

⁹⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 32.

⁹⁹ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1:32.

¹⁰⁰ Marcia L. Colish, “Classicism and Catechesis in the Patriarch Treatises of Ambrose of Milan,” *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, 61 no. 1 (2006): 21.

philosophy. The construction of such narratives is the most blatant way that Ambrose engages with the classical philosophy he encounters in *De Officiis*. Additionally, he rejects the parts of Stoic philosophy that he finds inconsistent with his Christian worldview. As he both affirms and undermines different aspects of Greek philosophy, Ambrose demonstrates his internalized knowledge of classical philosophers and their ideas.

Ambrose's Adaptation: Close Readings

As Ambrose launches his philosophical inquiry in the first book of *De Officiis*, he provides a prime example of the retrojection of philosophical values into the Biblical narrative. As he justifies his choice of the topic of duty, Ambrose locates the source of this idea in the Old Testament:

Numquid prior Panaetius, numquid Aristoteles, qui et ipse disputavit de officio, quam David, cum et ipse Pythagoras, qui legitur Socrate antiquior, prophetam secutus David legem silentii dederit suis?

Was Panaetius, was Aristotle, who investigated duty, earlier than David, and was not Pythagoras himself, who is considered more ancient than Socrates, following the prophet David when he gave the law of silence to his own followers?¹⁰¹

Throughout his text, Ambrose rarely refers to his classical predecessors by name, instead indicating them through vague third-person pronouns. In this passage, Ambrose breaks this norm and names not one but four famous Greek philosophers, each of whom belongs to a distinct philosophical tradition. By specifically naming these thinkers, Ambrose's transposition of the origins of their ideas becomes more pointed. This allows him to claim whatever he wishes from any of the four traditions as a biblical truth. Ambrose argues that Pythagoras' institution of silence among his disciples must be *secutus*, following in the footsteps of David, simply because the Jewish king lived before the archaic Greek philosopher. Ambrose appeals to the historicity of

¹⁰¹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.31.

the Bible as an apology for David as the original philosopher upon whom all others are modelled.

Not only does Ambrose locate the origin of classical philosophy in the ancient land of Israel, but he argues that David's version of philosophy is superior to that of the Greek philosophers. He continues with the example of Pythagoras' *legem silentii*, or law of silence:

Sed ille ut per quinquennium discipulis usum inhiberet loquendi; David autem non ut naturae munus imminueret sed ut custodiam proferendi sermonis doceret,

But he acted so that he might hold back the enjoyment of speaking from his disciples for five years; but David did not act so that might diminish the gift of nature, but so that he might teach the safe-guarding of the producing of speech.¹⁰²

Ambrose constructs a stark contrast between Pythagoras and David in this sentence through the words that he chooses to describe each man. Pythagoras is a kill-joy whose primary goal is *usum inhiberet loquendi*—to prevent the enjoyment of speaking. Ambrose furthers this characterization by emphasizing the five-year period of silence that Pythagoras prescribes. Not only does the Greek philosopher limit the lives of his disciples for limitation's sake, but he does so for an arbitrarily long time. The Pythagorean life looks bleak in this passage. In contrast, David does not *naturae munus imminueret*, or lessen the gifts of nature, as Pythagoras does. Instead, the shepherd-king takes a more pastoral approach and focuses on teaching his people to take care of the natural gift of speech. Where Pythagoras is stern, David is gentle, and where Pythagoras' purpose is opaque, David's is both clear and admirable. Ambrose portrays Pythagorean silence as a poor copy of the Biblical original.

After he proves that David's silence both precedes and supersedes Pythagoras', Ambrose turns to an exploration of the two types of duty. One of Cicero's innovations on Panaetius' work

¹⁰² Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.31.

is his introduction of the category of *media officia*, or middle duties, which provide opportunities for everyday people to act honorably, instead of the Stoic idea that the good is an ideal unattainable by most.¹⁰³ Ambrose takes up Cicero's division of duty into the lofty perfect and the easier to reach middle. However, in keeping with the way that he treated Pythagoras in 1.31, he traces the origins of this concept back to the Bible: *Officium autem omne aut medium aut perfectum est, quod aequae scripturarum auctoritate probare possumus.* ("But all duty is either middle or perfect, which we are equally able to prove by means of the authority of Scripture").¹⁰⁴ Even though Ambrose does not name Cicero or any other philosopher in this paragraph, his inclusion of *aeque*, equally, acknowledges that his reader is likely thinking of a non-Biblical proof for this concept. Even though an educated reader would be familiar with the division of duty from studying Cicero, Ambrose suggests that it is the scriptural proof that should be foremost in the Christian's mind.

Once he establishes the scriptural basis for middle and perfect duty, Ambrose provides an example of perfect duty that brings together Christian and Stoic ideas to form a Christian ethical injunction. He writes, *Bona etiam misericordia, quae et ipsa perfectos facit, quia imitatur perfectum Patrem,* ("Mercy is also good, which itself makes men perfect, because it imitates the perfect Father").¹⁰⁵ Even as he continues to use the Ciceronian language of middle and perfect duty, he points to God as the only source of perfection. He continues, drawing together the Christian conception of *Misericordia*, or mercy, and the Stoic belief in the commonality of humanity:

¹⁰³ Davidson, "Introduction," 13.

¹⁰⁴ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.36.

¹⁰⁵ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.38.

Nihil tam commendat Christianam animam quam misericordia, primum in pauperes, ut communes iudices partus naturae quae omnibus ad usum generat fructus terrarum,

Nothing commends the Christian spirit more than mercy, first towards the impoverished, so that you may consider the yields of nature to be communal, that fruit of the earth which it begets for the enjoyment of all.¹⁰⁶

Ambrose carries mercy into this sentence, which on its own gives this statement a Christian flavor. Furthermore, his focus on the poor is a distinctly Christian concern. Peter Brown argues that care for the impoverished was a foreign concept in pre-Christian Rome: “To put it bluntly, it was Christian bishops who invented the poor. [...] Step by step, they soaked significant areas of late antique society in the novel and distinctive dye of a notion of ‘love of the poor.’”¹⁰⁷ By advocating for mercy *primum in pauperes*, Ambrose puts forward a Christian construction of right action.

However, Ambrose also endorses a Stoic concept in the same breath. Immediately following his mention of the poor, Ambrose nearly quotes Cicero’s *De Officiis* 1.51: *In qua omnium rerum quas ad commune hominum usum natura genuit est servanda communitas*, (“In which the common holding of all things, which nature begets for the common enjoyment of men, must be kept safe”)¹⁰⁸ Ambrose uses similar vocabulary in his own passage, repeating *communes, naturae, omnibus, usum, and generat*. In this passage Ambrose explicitly calls back to Cicero’s pre-Christian text while simultaneously describing an idealized version of Christian mercy. Furthermore, Davidson describes the concept that Ambrose references as the “fundamental Stoic doctrine that the earth’s produce is given for all in common.”¹⁰⁹ As much as

¹⁰⁶ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.38.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 8-9.

¹⁰⁸ Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.51.

¹⁰⁹ Davidson, “Commentary,” 482.

Ambrose's mention of the poor signals his Christianity, this reference to the commonality of earthly resources signals Stoic thought. By drawing attention to both his Christian faith and his Stoic influences, Ambrose creates a compound ethic of charity that incorporates the Christian concern for the poor and the Stoic understanding of all humanity's common standing in the world.

As he continues exploring ethics in *De Officiis*, Ambrose goes so far as to retroject a fundamentally Greek philosophical method into the Old Testament. He interrupts his own discussion of the book of Job to bring up a classical philosopher by name: *Laudatur in Platone quod in Politia sua posit eum...* ("There is praise for Plato because he put this thing into his *Republic...*").¹¹⁰ By placing *laudatur* in the passive voice, Ambrose avoids directly commending Plato himself and sets up his reader to expect a reversal in this initial premise. He goes on to say that this supposedly praiseworthy thing is Plato's introduction of a devil's advocate into his dialogue. This character's purpose is *veri inveniendi atque examinandae disputationis*, ("the finding of the truth and the examining of the argument").¹¹¹ Such a figure is central to the dialogic form that defines Platonic philosophy. Ambrose acknowledges the influential nature of this construct, noting that Cicero employed it in his own rendition of the *Republic*.¹¹² In this paragraph Ambrose draws attention to one of the most iconic features of Ancient Greek philosophy in order to make it Biblical in the following paragraph.

As he has now trained his reader to expect, Ambrose sets up Job as both the originator and the best implementer of the devil's advocate character. He writes, *Quanto antiquior illis Iob,*

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.43.

¹¹¹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.43.

¹¹² Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.43.

qui haec primus repperit nec eloquentiae phalerandae gratia sed veritatis probandae praemittenda aestimavit! (“How much older than them [Plato and Cicero] is Job, who discovered this thing first, and not for adorning eloquence but for demonstrating the truth did he value sending ahead excuses”).¹¹³ Ambrose returns to his favorite refrain: the men in the Bible predate the philosophers of Ancient Greece. Even as he applies this argument to rhetorical advice, he claims that Job’s use of dialogue stands above the shallow adornment of rhetoric. *Phalerae* was typically used to refer to jewelry for women or military decorations for men.¹¹⁴ Given the Christian suspicion of external appearances, as laid out in 1 Peter 3:3, Ambrose’s use of *phalerandae* takes on a negative connotation. He suggests that eloquence is as superficial as costume jewelry, despite the rhetorical nature of the device he claims for Job. In contrast, Job uses the devil’s advocate for the more serious and sober-minded task of *veritatis probandae*, proving what is true. Through this phrasing, Job takes up the mantle of a philosopher, more so than even Plato and Cicero. Ambrose claims that Job invents rhetoric without succumbing to its shallowness and inquires after truth with more commitment than any Greek philosopher.

Ambrose continues his interpretation and adaptation of classical philosophy in much the same way throughout his text. At some points, however, Ambrose discards his strategies of adaptation and outright rejects a concept, philosopher, or entire school of philosophy. In 1.29, he makes space for his new treatise on ethics by dismissing one of the core principles of all other texts: *Non superfluum igitur scriptiois nostrae est opus, quia officium diversa aestimamus regula atque illi aestimaverunt.* (“Therefore our work of writing is not unnecessary, because we

¹¹³ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.44.

¹¹⁴ Oxford Latin Dictionary, 2nd ed. (2012), s.v. “phalerae.”

evaluate duty by different rules than those men [philosophers] evaluate it by”).¹¹⁵ Here Ambrose claims that his own understanding of ethics is vastly different from that of any classical philosopher, but he does not reject the other philosophers until he moves on to the next sentence:

Illi saeculi commoda in bonis ducunt, nos haec etiam in detrimentis, quoniam qui hic recepit bona, ut ille dives, illic cruciatur, et Lazarus, qui mala hic pertulit, illic consolationem invenit.

They consider the advantages in this age to be in good things, but we consider them to be in the harmful, since he who receives good things in this one, as that rich man, are tormented in the next one, and Lazarus, who endured bad things in this age, found comfort in the next.¹¹⁶

This sentence raises the stakes on Ambrose’s claims: not only are the classical philosophers *diversa* from Christian thought, but their views can lead to torment in the next life. Ambrose writes to provide a better, and even a regenerative, way to understand ethics.

Later in Book I, Ambrose turns his critical eye to a different group of philosophers: the Epicureans. As he considers the plight of the sinner who indulges in fleshly desires, Ambrose self-consciously pivots his discussion to rebut Epicureanism: *Sed revertamur ad propositum, ne divisionem factam praeterisse videamur...* (“But let us turn back to the plan, so that we might not seem to pass over the pre-determined sections...”).¹¹⁷ The word *praeterisse* calls to mind the *praeteritio*, a rhetorical device that Cicero employs frequently, which gives this sentence a sense that Ambrose is poking fun at his literary and philosophical model.¹¹⁸ Despite his voiced concern with deviating from the structure of his argument, Ambrose continues on with his digression: *videntes sceleratos quosque divites laetos honoratos potentes, cum plerique iustorum egeant*

¹¹⁵ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.29.

¹¹⁶ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.29.

¹¹⁷ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.47.

¹¹⁸ Davidson, “Introduction,” 14.

atque infirmi sint, putant vel Deum nihil de nobis curare, ut Epicurei dicunt. (“[Some people], seeing those who are criminals partaking in wealth and happiness and honor, while many of the just are lacking and weak, think that God does not care about us at all, as the Epicureans say”).¹¹⁹

While this statement is not in itself a condemnation, in the next phrase he describes people who think that God does not know what people do as *flagitiosi*, or “disgraceful.” Ambrose makes it clear that any philosophy that claims that God is not knowledgeable of and involved in his creation is incompatible with Christianity. Rather than seeking out a way to adapt Epicureanism to his own worldview, Ambrose does not hesitate to condemn this system of philosophy.

An undercurrent of *paideia* runs through all of Ambrose’s interactions with classical philosophy. Only an education in *paideia* could have prepared Ambrose to reference what the Pythagoreans, Epicureans, Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics think on a variety of ethical issues. Additionally, Ambrose’s explicit and implicit philosophical references require a reader who shares in his elite classical education. Despite the implications of the title used by the Maurist editors in the 17th century, *De Officiis Ministrorum*, Ambrose does not seem to write exclusively for the benefit of Roman clergy.¹²⁰ Even if Ambrose’s audience is broader than a select number of churchmen, the philosophical themes of his text and the references to classical philosophy would hinder any readers who had not benefited from an education in *paideia*. While the primary purpose of his engagement with classical philosophy seems to be the construction of his hybrid form of Christian ethics, every instance in the text serves the secondary purpose of signaling Ambrose’s education and social status to his readers.

¹¹⁹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.47.

¹²⁰ Davidson, “Introduction,” 1-2.

Throughout his *De Officiis*, Ambrose picks and chooses from the fourth century canon of classical philosophy. If he comes across a concept that he agrees with, his primary strategy is to identify the same concept within the Bible. Even with ideas that he finds amenable, he frequently argues that the Bible is the source of the best possible version of the idea in question, which makes the classical version a lesser derivative of the original. Some ideas he finds completely incompatible with Christianity, in which case he sets up a contrast between the Christian interpretation, which leads to life, and the Greek philosophical position, which leads to death. In every case, Ambrose performs the identity of a man who has been inducted into *paideia*. Even though he never explicitly references his own education or social status, his project reveals these aspects of his identity.

Ambrose's Ambiguous Intentions

When scholars study Ambrose's engagement with classical philosophy in *De Officiis*, they tend to ask to what end Ambrose was writing. Because of the multivalent way that he discusses earlier philosophers, his motivation is not immediately clear. Davidson lists some possible interpretations:

The treatise has variously been taken as proof that Ambrose was a fraudulent plagiarist, a creative genius, and unreconstructed Roman chauvinist, a proto-Marxist, a Stoic masquerading as a Christian, a cultural anthropologist, a philosophical bridge-builder, a detester of all philosophy, and, last but not least, a spiritual giant whose gracious humility and self-effacement render his achievement in ennobling pagan virtue all the more remarkable.¹²¹

Each of these pithy descriptions of Ambrose seem to reveal more about the scholars making these cases than about the motivations of the fourth-century Milanese bishop. Several of these categories, like “plagiarist” and “Marxist,” are anachronistic to late antique Rome, and others

¹²¹ Davidson, “Introduction,” 45.

assume that it is possible to condense Ambrose's three-volume text down to one clear mission. Because Ambrose does not explicitly state his purpose, the only way to evaluate his work is in terms of what he produced. Here the scholarship divides into three camps: either Ambrose Christianized Stoicism, Stoicized Christianity, or constructed a new ethical system altogether.¹²²

The theory that Ambrose created a Christianized form of Stoicism is the most popular in the scholarship. This makes sense, given the overt ways that Ambrose imposes Biblical narratives onto Stoic thought. Among the proponents of this theory is James Gaffney, who claims, "Stoic thought, especially in ethics, was not so much annihilated as assimilated by Christianity."¹²³ Within this category of scholarship, the understanding is that Ambrose transforms Stoicism to make it palatable to Christianity, while still maintaining the essence of the Greek philosophy. The opposite theory, that Ambrose changed Christianity into a form of Stoicism, was most popular at the beginning of the twentieth century. The claims made about orthodoxy by scholars like M.B. Emeneau do not fit well with current scholarly trends: "Ambrose may be considered the last of the Roman Christians, the last of those who, nurtured on pagan ideals, could not be possessed of true Christianity."¹²⁴ The argument that participation in Roman culture prevents "true" participation in Christianity goes against the premise of this thesis, as well as that of modern religious and classical scholarship. Christians were Romans and Romans were Christians in the fullest sense from the beginning of Christianity, so the suggestion

¹²² I owe many of my sources for these theories to Ivor Davidson's detailed catalogue of Ambrosian scholarship in his Oxford Early Christian Studies edition of the *De Officiis*.

¹²³ James Gaffney, "Comparative Religious Ethics in the Service of Historical Interpretation: Ambrose's Use of Cicero," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 9, no. 1 (1981): 36.

¹²⁴ M.B. Emeneau, "Ambrose and Cicero," *The Classical Weekly*, 24, no. 7 (1930): 53.

that Ambrose was a Christian in name only and Stoic in practice ignores the complex ways that religious and philosophical identities can intersect.

Davidson takes the third stance, that Ambrose constructs a new system to replace the Ciceronian one.¹²⁵ This position gives Ambrose the most creative potential. Rather than reading his *De Officiis* as a make-over of existing material, this perspective leaves room for Ambrose to exercise authorial power over his own text. Out of all three theories, the argument that Ambrose is creating something new in the *De Officiis* safeguards against a one-dimensional reading of this dynamic text's interaction with classical philosophy.

Philosophical Engagement as Identity Formation

If Ambrose's interactions with classical philosophy were limited to unilateral condemnation or acceptance through association with scripture, the question of Ambrose's purpose and result would be simple enough to answer. What complicates his engagement with past thinkers is his induction into the culture of *paideia*. Elite Roman manhood was a distinctive identity, and through his specific references to philosophers, Ambrose repeatedly signals to his readers that he participates in this identity. In fourth century Rome, *paideia* was a source of both political and social capital, and as such it opened doors for those who had been inducted into it.

Ambrose partakes in a second distinctive social identity: Christian-ness. Like an elite educational background, Christian identity opened the door to participation in a community, and like *paideia*, Christianity in the fourth century carried with it the potential for political and social power. What differentiates Christianity from *paideia* or Stoicism is the exclusivity it demands from its members. Even though, in reality, Christianity has always overlapped with other social and cultural identities, the New Testament warnings about not serving two masters and that there

¹²⁵ Davidson, "Introduction," 54.

is no other way to reach God than through Christ set up an unease for Christians about the way they interact with everything outside the Church.¹²⁶ Ambrose participates in *paideia* and in Christianity, but the Christian claim of exclusivity troubles his relationship with “pagan” culture.

Perhaps then Ambrose has no single intention in writing his *De Officiis*. Instead, I propose reading Ambrose’s ethical treatise as a working out of the bishop’s continuous navigation between his Christian and elite Roman identities. Because Christianity and *paideia* intersect in countless ways, the boundaries between the two are blurred, despite the increasing Christian impulse in the fourth century to define the edges of the religion. Within this framework, Ambrose’s eclecticism feels natural because it reflects his project of defining the boundaries, as well as points of connection, between his two identities.

¹²⁶ Matthew 6:24, John 14:6.

Chapter Four: Ambrose's Populist Self-Presentation

Up until this point, the primary concern of this thesis has been the way that Ambrose presents classical authors, whether his immediate intellectual predecessor Cicero or the more distant figures of the classical philosophical tradition. He explicitly shows his readers what he thinks about these authors and their opinions on a multitude of ethical questions. Even though Ambrose's interactions with the figureheads of classical intellectual culture are multivalent and nuanced, that he is presenting them in a particular way to his audience is immediately clear. Underneath this more obvious project lies Ambrose's subtler secondary motive: the construction of his own self-presentation. As a prominent public figure, within both the Christian and pagan communities in Milan, everything that Ambrose writes contributes to his reputation. Throughout the first book of the *De Officiis*, Ambrose constructs a multi-faceted image of himself as both an elite Roman citizen and an egalitarian Christian with no concern for worldly status. As he negotiates the balance between a populist affirmation of the masses and the specialized training he provides for clergy, Ambrose signals his powerful identity while denouncing elitism.

Ambrose's Position in Milanese Society

In both civic and ecclesiastical contexts, Ambrose lived much of his life in the public eye. Paulinus, in his biography written around 412, describes Ambrose's birth in terms of his father's position at the time: *Igitur posito in administratione praefecturae Galliarum patre eius Ambrosio natus est Ambrosius*. ("Therefore, when his father Ambrose was put in charge of the administration of the prefecture of Gaul, Ambrose was born").¹²⁷ Ambrose shares his father's name, and from the beginning of Paulinus' account, his life is linked with his father's

¹²⁷ Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 2.3.

participation in public office. In Paulinus' retelling of Ambrose's life, the eventual bishop was primed to wield social power practically from birth:

Cum videret sacerdotibus a domestica, sorore, vel matre manus osculari, ipse ludens offerebat dexteram dicens et sibi id ab ea fieri oportere, siquidem episcopum se futurum esse memorabat.

When he saw that the hands of priests were kissed by a housemaid or his sister or mother, playing, he offered his right hand, saying that this thing was appropriate to be done to him by her, since he said that he would be a bishop.¹²⁸

Whether or not this anecdote reflects “the Holy Spirit who was nurturing him for bishophood” as Paulinus claims, its inclusion in a near-contemporary retelling of Ambrose's life reveals a sense of importance and entitlement to positions of power.¹²⁹ Even if the whole story is apocryphal, the existence of such a story demonstrates that Ambrose had a reputation for casually assuming roles of authority.

Ambrose quickly climbed the ranks of the Roman political system. Paulinus emphasizes *paideia* as the prerequisite to Ambrose's civic success:

Sed postquam edoctus liberalibus disciplinis ex urbe egressus est professusque in auditorio praefecturae praetorii, ita splendide causas perorabat ut eligeretur a viro illustri Probo, tunc praefecto praetorii, ad consilium tribuendum. Post quod consularitatis suscepit insignia ut regeret Liguriam Aemiliamque provincias, venitque Mediolanum.

But after having been thoroughly instructed in the liberal arts, he departed from the city and began a career in the court of the Praetorian Prefect, and so splendidly pleaded his causes that he was plucked out by the honorable man Probus, who was then the Praetorian Prefect, to give advice. After this he received the honor of the consulship so that he might rule the provinces of Liguria and Aemilia, and he came to Milan.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 2.4.

¹²⁹ *Loquebatur enim in illo Spiritus Sanctus qui illum ad sacerdotium nutrebat.* Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 2.4.

¹³⁰ Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 2.5.

Despite Paulinus' presentation of Ambrose's youth as lived in the public eye and with a conscious desire to gain power in the future, the future bishop cannot begin his career in earnest until he has completed his education in the liberal arts. It is precisely his skill in the rhetorical arts of this education that allow him to advance to the role of adviser to the prefect, and ultimately to that of governor in 374. By his mid-30s Ambrose had achieved great political success.

Ambrose's ordination to the bishopric of Milan came about while he was performing his public role as governor. Soon after his appointment as governor, Ambrose needed to subdue a brewing revolt among the Milanese Christian community.¹³¹ The local church was lacking a bishop, and when Ambrose went to the church Paulinus claims that he was met with cries of "Ambrose bishop" from the congregation.¹³² At this point Ambrose was only a catechumen and not yet a full member of the Church.¹³³ Paulinus spends no time describing Ambrose's earlier experiences with the Christian community; there is nothing on his resume that directly qualifies him for this position of spiritual leadership. Rather, it is his public Roman civic office that puts Ambrose in a position to become bishop.

Once Ambrose became bishop of Milan, he continued to wield significant power. The legitimization of Christianity in 313 allowed officers of the Church to begin to accrue influence beyond their own congregations. As Rita Lizzi Testa argues, "This complex process [of consolidating ecclesiastical power] was gradual and reached different stages in different regions of the empire. [...] The foundation of such power, however, was already implicit in the status

¹³¹ Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 3.6.

¹³² *Ambrosium episcopum*. Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 3.6.

¹³³ Paulinus, *Vita Sancti Ambrosii*, 3.7.

that Constantine had granted to the officiants of the Christian cult at the same moment in which Christianity was recognized as the lawful religion of the empire.”¹³⁴ By the time Ambrose was ordained, the power of the bishopric had grown for the past sixty years. In the late fourth century, bishops “became the center of the late antique city,” so Ambrose’s transition from imperial to ecclesiastical leadership did not require him to step out of public life or lay down a significant amount of political power.¹³⁵

Although Paulinus’ account of Ambrose’s life may exaggerate or dramatize events for the sake of its hagiographical aim, the episodes that he chooses to include reveal information about Ambrose’s reputation in Milan. From this account, it is reasonable to conclude that Ambrose possessed considerable social power as a public figure. His education alone places him among the Roman elites, and his family history of political involvement further establishes him as a civically engaged citizen. His civic influence bleeds over into his religious life, which leads to his appointment as bishop immediately following his confirmation in the Church. Paulinus’ hagiography of Ambrose reveals the importance of reputation and social status in the bishop’s political and religious careers.

Given the public nature of Ambrose’s image, it is unsurprising that his self-representation in the *De Officiis* is carefully crafted. From his youth, Ambrose lived as a prominent member of Roman society, and part of his status involved his induction into *paideia*. By design, an elite Roman education taught young men to be strategic and restrained in their presentations of themselves, both verbally and physically, as the latter portions of this chapter will expand upon.

¹³⁴ Rita Lizzi Testa, “The Late Antique Bishop: Image and Reality,” in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 527.

¹³⁵ Lizzi Testa, “The Late Antique Bishop,” 527.

As he writes the *De Officiis*, which details appropriate beliefs and actions for Christians, Ambrose does not forget that he is the public face of the church in Milan. Instead, he projects a proto-populist image of himself and the Christian faith that he represents, while simultaneously upholding the value of *paideia* and signaling his own elite status.

“Christian Populism” and Reinterpreting Peter Brown

Ambrose lived and wrote within a society with enormous gaps in power between the elite and common people. Because of his inborn status and his successful navigation of the political system of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century, Ambrose wielded significant social capital. Despite his own elevated position in society, he demonstrates a sensitivity towards the non-elite, and particularly the impoverished, throughout his *De Officiis*. In *Power and Persuasion*, Peter Brown identifies the tension between the elite world of influential Christian authors and the broad audience they aimed to reach. He writes, “We are dealing with what might be called a Christian populism, that flouted the culture of the governing classes and claimed to have brought, instead, simple words, endowed with divine authority, to the masses of the empire.”¹³⁶ As the title suggests, Brown’s focus within *Power and Persuasion* is to explore Christian interactions with the power dynamics of fourth-century Rome. Although this emphasis at times leads to a more cynical reading of the motives of Church fathers than is necessarily warranted in their texts, Brown helpfully identifies the umbrella phenomenon of “Christian populism” and the effects that fall underneath it.

In this chapter, I will borrow Brown’s “Christian populism” as a shorthand term for a network of interconnected ideas. Despite the anachronism of applying “populism,” a modern political term, to late antique Rome, I find it useful as a way of identifying the posture towards

¹³⁶ Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, 74.

common people that Ambrose and other elite authors take.¹³⁷ When I use “populism” in this chapter, I seek to convey a certain generosity of attitude towards “the masses,” as Brown highlights, as well as a sense of intentional outward messaging within this attitude. While the populist concerns that Ambrose expresses may very well be genuine, he is simultaneously crafting his own image as a bishop who cares for the poor. I choose to take up Brown’s “Christian populism” because it captures the political nature and humanitarian attitude of the writings of early Christian authors.

Within the valence of “Christian populism” lie several complimentary motifs of Ambrose’s *De Officiis*. He emphasizes the virtue of humility, which is not one of the cardinal Stoic virtues included in his philosophical models. Ambrose claims to write with simple language that is more accessible to a broader audience than Cicero’s text. He inverts typical attitudes about wealth and poverty, claiming that wealth is a spiritual hindrance and poverty is a spiritual blessing. While disavowing his own earthly advantages, Ambrose uplifts the appropriate etiquette and comportment learned through an education in *paideia* as signs of virtuous modesty. He portrays the Church as an egalitarian space where all are welcome but suggests that clergy should be held to a higher standard of education, and by extension, social class. All of these patterns within Ambrose’s text fall under the umbrella of “Christian populism” as I have defined it. Throughout his *De Officiis*, Ambrose constructs a multivalent image of his elite interactions with the common people of the Roman Empire.

¹³⁷ According to Peter Worsley, the term “populism” was first used in reference to the People’s Party, which rose to prominence in American politics in the 1890s. For more information on the history of this term and its modern applications, see his entry on “Populism” in *The Oxford Companion to Comparative Politics*, ed. Joel Krieger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Appeals to the People in the De Officiis

From the opening line of the text, Ambrose expresses his concern with the possibility of appearing prideful: *Non adrogans videri arbitror*, (“I trust that I will not seem arrogant...”).¹³⁸

Throughout his introduction he continues to discuss his humble position within the church. In

1.3, Ambrose casts his purpose in writing in lowly terms:

Non igitur mihi apostolorum gloriam vindico (quis enim hoc nisi quos ipse Filius elegit Dei?) non prophetarum gratiam, non virtutem evangelistarum, non pastorum circumspectionem, sed tantummodo intentionem et diligentiam circa scripturas divinas opto adsequi quam ultimam posuit apostolus inter officia sanctorum.

Therefore I do not claim for myself the glory of the apostles (indeed who does, except those whom the Son of God chose himself?), nor the grace of the prophets, nor the valor of the evangelists, nor the foresight of the pastors, but I wish to attain such great effort and care around the divine scriptures as the apostle placed last among the duties of the saints.¹³⁹

Even as he ambitiously sets out to rewrite a well-known treatise on duty, Ambrose claims to strive after the bare minimum duty of a Christian. He uses *vindico*, a legal term, to strengthen his point that he does not deserve any share in the glory, grace, valor, or foresight of his spiritual superiors. In this passage, Ambrose humbly portrays himself as the lowest member of his religious community. Despite his protestations, Ambrose’s readers cannot separate this lowly version of himself from his public image as Bishop of Milan. He can continuously claim to perform only the most basic religious duties, but it is difficult to take him seriously given the high status of his position.

Ambrose goes on to use his political success as further justification for his humility as a Christian leader. After explaining that most teachers must learn their material before they teach it

¹³⁸ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.1.

¹³⁹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.3.

to others, he complains that he did not have this same luxury: *Ego enim raptus de tribunalibus atque administrationis infulis ad sacerdotium, docere vos coepi quod ipse non didici*. (“Indeed, having been snatched away from the tribunals and the administrative insignias to the priesthood, I began to teach you all that which I had not learned”).¹⁴⁰ This passage highlights the dual-message of Ambrose’s expression of Christian populism. On the surface, he is further humiliating himself by confessing his insecurities about teaching within the Church. He paints his time spent in public office as futile and ill-equipped for his eventual role as bishop.

At the same time, his choice to mention his success in a previous life signals Ambrose’s extensive social and political power. Brown describes such accounts of giving up secular success: “[Men such as Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine’s] very insistence on the extent to which their own conversion and subsequent duties in the Christian church had led them to sacrifice the advantages attached to wealth and refined diction drew attention to just those qualities.”¹⁴¹ Although Ambrose describes his previous success as a hindrance to his current role, his use of the violent *raptus* to capture his transition into the life of the church reminds his reader that he has made political sacrifices to become a bishop. Brown takes up Dipesh Chakrabarty’s wording in his history of working class people in 20th century India: “To talk of sacrifice was then to talk of possessions, and hence of power.”¹⁴² Ambrose could have written this introduction without mentioning his former positions by name, but instead he chooses to draw attention to his social status and political success. In particular, *administrationis infulis* describes the ornamental symbols of those who work within the administration of the Empire. Ambrose wants his readers

¹⁴⁰ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.4.

¹⁴¹ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 74-75.

¹⁴² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 152, quoted in Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, 75.

to visualize the symbols of his political power even as he disavows the advantages of his former life.

Ambrose's discussion of giving up political success is further complicated by the power inherent to his new role as bishop. While he has certainly given up the outward adornments of his political office, Ambrose has exchanged them for the spiritual and political authority of the bishopric. Ambrose is fully aware of the power of church office, and elsewhere describes the Church as a "horse's bit...to restrain the insolence of emperors, to curb the unrestrained boldness of tyrants."¹⁴³ Even though Ambrose makes much of sacrificing his political office in exchange for the humble position of teacher, his sacrifice is primarily a symbolic one.

Another way that Ambrose conveys a sense of Christian populism is through his use of simple language throughout his treatise. In 1.29, Ambrose suggests that his *De Officiis* will be accessible to more people than the works of earlier philosophers. *Deinde qui illa non legunt, nostra legent si volent, qui non sermonum supellectilem neque artem dicendi sed simplicem rerum exquirunt gratiam.* ("Then those who do not read those things may read ours if they wish, those who do not seek ornamentation or skill of speaking, but rather the simple grace of things").¹⁴⁴ Ambrose is concerned with reaching a broader audience than his predecessors did, and he seeks to do so by writing in a simpler way. This sentiment falls within the valence of Christian populism because it seems to extend an invitation to the less educated to participate in philosophical discourse. Rather than reserving his ethical treatise for the intellectual elite of the Roman Empire, Ambrose claims to open up his text to a broader range of people.

¹⁴³ Ambrose, *De Obitu Theodosii* 50.1-4, quoted and translated in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 525.

¹⁴⁴ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.29.

In order to clear the way for the less educated to read his texts, Ambrose must set himself up as the metaphorical gatekeeper. While he says that he writes without any particular skill, he reminds his reader that he has been methodically trained in both the Greek and Roman philosophers who have already written about ethics. Ambrose's induction into *paideia* empowers him to choose simplicity in his writing style. Furthermore, his goal of wider access to his ethical treatise was likely never actualized, as Averil Cameron writes: "[The Christian] attachment to written texts was remarkable in itself, even if it did not penetrate far down the social scale; there was little or nothing in Roman culture as a whole to induce such a development, and many features in this highly traditional society worked against it."¹⁴⁵ While Cicero's complicated prose likely did not entice readers from outside of the culture of *paideia*, the solution to his narrow readership does not primarily lie in simplifying the language of the text. When Ambrose expresses a desire to reach "those who do not read those things" in 1.29, he presents himself as an author for the masses, despite the widespread illiteracy among the non-elite members of fourth-century Roman society.¹⁴⁶

Literacy in fourth-century Rome is inherently connected to economic status, which is another topic that Ambrose expresses interest in. As he seeks to set himself apart from his philosophical forebears, he describes the inverted economics of Christianity:

Neque aliqua commoda in facultatibus et copiis opum constituimus, sed incommoda haec putamus si non reiciantur: eaque oneri, cum adsunt, aestimari magis quam dispendio, cum erogantur.

¹⁴⁵ Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 110.

¹⁴⁶ Although the *De Officiis* did not reach the illiterate majority, it is important to note that Ambrose is particularly well known for his sermons, which were delivered to an audience that represented a broad cross section of the population of Milan. For more on Ambrose's congregation and incorporation of classical culture in his sermons, see Marcia Colish's *Ambrose's Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

And we do not consider there to be any advantages in opportunities and abundance of wealth, but rather we think these things to be disadvantages if they are not thrown off: they are considered more to be a burden when they are present than a loss when they are given away.¹⁴⁷

With this evaluation of material wealth, Ambrose gives value to the lives of the poor. Within the ethical system he puts forward, the poor are not doomed to a lesser existence than the rich—just the opposite. The poor do not carry the *onus*, or burden, of wealth, which suggests that their poverty is in fact a kind of freedom. In Ambrose’s system, it is dignified to live without material wealth. However, his assertion that the burden of wealth is greater than the loss of not having any comes across as tone deaf. To be in a position to “throw off” wealth is to have tremendous privilege; a Milanese Christian who had never been financially stable is unlikely to view material resources so casually. Even as Ambrose ennobles the poor, he describes their situation as spiritually beneficial without acknowledging the hardships that poverty entails.

A few paragraphs later, Ambrose deals more truthfully with the realities of poverty while still presenting himself in favor of the common people. He gives an ethical suggestion to those who have expendable resources: *Tu nummum largiris, ille vitam accipit; tu pecuniam das, ille substantiam suam aestimat. Tuus denarius census illius est.* (“You lavishly bestow a coin, he [the poor man] receives life; you give money, he considers it his very existence. Your pocket change is his wealth”).¹⁴⁸ By acknowledging the real discrepancies between the rich and poor in the Roman Empire, Ambrose approaches an understanding of wealth and poverty that aligns more closely with the interests of Christian populism. Rather than glossing over economic lack as a spiritual benefit, as he did in 1.28, in this passage Ambrose reminds his reader that the wealthy

¹⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.28.

¹⁴⁸ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.38.

man's excess resources could sustain the life of the poor man. This passage further humanizes the poor by acknowledging the real suffering that accompanies poverty.

Ambrose takes his positive view of the poor one step further and identifies poverty as an outward symbol of interior morality. While he describes wealth as unbeneficial and a lack of material possessions as helpful in 1.28, in 1.44 he connects economic status with the state of the soul:

Moritus innocens in potestate simplicitatis suae, in abundantia propriae voluntatis, sicut adipe repletam animam gerens. At vero peccator, quamvis foris abundet et deliciis diffluat, odoribus fragret, in amaritudine animae suae vitam exigit et ultimum diem claudit, nihil eorum quae epulatus fuerit referens boni, nihil secum auferens nisi pretia scelerum suorum.

The innocent person dies in his own power of honesty, in the fullness of his personal will, bearing a spirit that is sated as with fat. But indeed the sinner, although he may abound with wealth in the forum, abandon himself to luxuries and smell of perfumes, ends his life and closes his last day in the bitterness of his own spirit, taking away nothing good from these things which he had feasted upon, bringing nothing with him except the costs of his own crimes.¹⁴⁹

In this passage, Ambrose equates innocence with lack and sin with abundance. The innocent person's primary hope for comfort and satisfaction is in the spiritual reward of death, and the sinner enjoys material wealth but suffers after death. This passage, while giving the poor the moral high ground, swings back into the dehumanizing tone of 1.28. If poverty is the burden of the innocent, why should the poor complain of their poverty? Rather than acknowledging the difficulty of living without sufficient resources, this passage turns poverty into a positive feature of the individual's life.

The passages regarding wealth and poverty in Ambrose's *De Officiis* suggest that the bishop genuinely cares for the poor and seeks to improve their reputations by casting them in a

¹⁴⁹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.44.

positive moral light. Despite this sincere goal, Ambrose does not always strike a tone that recognizes the suffering involved in a life of poverty. Ambrose's expression of Christian populism in these passages rings true at times and hollow at others. While Peter Brown might argue that this reflects Ambrose's drive to gain personal power and persuade his audience of his beneficence, I suggest that the inconsistency in Ambrose's treatment of the poor in the *De Officiis* reveals his struggle to articulate a Christian system of ethics while also sympathizing with the poor despite his own elite status.

Polishing the Priesthood: Clergy Selectivity

In the same text that Ambrose professes to value humility, simplicity, and even poverty, he provides guidelines of behavior for clergy that are influenced by his elite training in *paideia*. Ambrose never explicitly states that he holds church officers to the standards of the Roman elite, but instead uses ethical terminology to put these standards in a Christian context. Ambrose's desire to raise up well-mannered and well-spoken clergy complicates the populist attitudes he espouses elsewhere in the *De Officiis*.

Ambrose broaches the topic of personal comportment after extolling the virtue of modesty in 1.65 and following. In his characteristic way, he grounds his discussion in a biblical anecdote by citing the modesty of Isaac, Joseph, Moses, and Jeremiah.¹⁵⁰ He continues in a theoretical discussion of the value of modesty for several paragraphs before providing his readers with a practical application for this virtue. He asks his readers to recall a mutual acquaintance: *Meministis, filii, quemdam amicum, cum sedulis se videretur commendare officiis, hoc solo tamen in clerum a me non receptum, quod gestus eius plurimum dedeceret*; ("You remembered, my sons, a certain friend, when he seemed to commend himself with his diligent carrying out of

¹⁵⁰ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.66.

duties, nevertheless was not received by me into the clergy for this reason alone, that his carriage of himself was very unbecoming”).¹⁵¹ Suddenly Ambrose’s discussion of modesty takes on a more serious tone. His ethical musings quickly shift as he tells his readers that *dedecus*, or unbecoming, actions can counteract the diligent carrying out of duty. A candidate for church office can do everything right but still be deemed ineligible if he does not control himself well in public.

Ambrose continues, growing harsher in his critique of clergy who act without appropriate decorum: *Alterum quoque, cum in clero reperissem, iubere me ne umquam praeiret mihi, quia velut quodam insolentis incessus verberare oculos feriret meos.* (“There was another man also, in the clergy when I had encountered him, that I ordered to never go in front of me, because the gait of that immodest man scourged my eyes just as with a whip”)¹⁵² By framing the posture of this man in violent terminology, Ambrose makes it clear that he views physical comportment as a matter of morality. An ill-mannered way of carrying oneself is not just unpleasant, but even scarring to Ambrose. How can a man serve the church when his walk does violence to those who observe him?

For Ambrose, the link between outward comportment and spiritual qualification is clear.

He explains that he was right to remove both of these men from ministry:

Hoc solum excepi, nec fefellit sententia: uterque enim ab ecclesia recessit, ut qualis incessu prodebat, talis perfidia animi demonstraretur. [...] Lucebat in illorum incessu imago levitatis, species quaedam scurrarum precursantium.

For this alone I removed them, and my judgment did not fail: indeed each of them withdrew from the church, with the result that as much was revealed in their walk as was

¹⁵¹ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.72.

¹⁵² Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.72.

shown in their treachery of spirit. [...] The image of inconstancy shone forth in the gait of those men, that same appearance of wandering buffoons.¹⁵³

In both of these cases, Ambrose based his decision to remove these men from their leadership position exclusively on the unbecoming nature of their actions, and he justifies this rationale by pointing to the eventual abandonment of orthodox Christianity by both men. He describes both men as *levitatis*, or inconstant, and claims that this internal flaw was manifest in their external presentations of themselves. Ambrose wholeheartedly claims that unseemly personal comportment should disqualify otherwise suitable men from church office.

If proper etiquette and comportment are necessary qualifications for clergy, how should candidates for office acquire these skills? Ambrose suggests that people can arrive at modesty by following the lead of nature:

Nonne igitur ipsa natura est magistra verecundiae? Cuius exemplo modestia hominum, quam a modo scientiae quid deceret appellatam arbitror, id quod in hac nostri corporis fabrica abditum repperit, operuit et textit.

Is not nature itself, therefore, the teacher of modesty? By whose example the moderation of men, which I think is named from the “limit” of knowledge, as is fitting, covered and clothed that which it found hidden in the construction of our bodies.¹⁵⁴

If nature is the best teacher of modesty in comportment, then everyone should be able to achieve proper manners. By requiring his clergy to conform to his standards of etiquette, Ambrose asks them to follow the guidelines of nature. Even though this passage claims modesty as a natural trait, Ambrose’s personification of nature as a *magistra*, or teacher, hints that modesty must be learned.

¹⁵³ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.72.

¹⁵⁴ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.78.

Despite Ambrose's appeal to a natural education in modesty and comportment, the most common way that Roman young men learned to carry themselves well was through *paideia*. An elite Roman education in the fourth century used rhetoric as a tool to temper the imbalanced and inappropriate aspects of its students' personalities. Peter Brown writes, "The careful control of breathing and the avoidance of inappropriate stances and discordant gestures were designed to transform an educated person into a tranquil figure whose voice and poise radiated harmonious authority."¹⁵⁵ While *paideia* emphasizes the mastery of rhetoric and literature, the education it provides in character development and physical comportment are equally important in its raising up of elite Roman men. The type of tranquility and poise that Ambrose expects from his clergy are curricular features of an education in *paideia*.

Ambrose's requirement that church officers carry themselves with a modesty that is best learned through *paideia* is complicated when he expands the boundaries of his expectations. After mentioning that he is delighted, *delectavit*, to have offered such a long reflection on modesty, Ambrose makes it clear that he sees it as a universal virtue: *Quae cum sit omnibus aetatibus personis temporibus et locis apta, tamen adulescentes iuvenalesque annos maxime decet*, ("Although that thing is fitting for all ages, persons, times, and places, nevertheless it is most befitting to young men and youths")¹⁵⁶ By claiming that modesty and the learned etiquette that it entails are appropriate for everyone, regardless of status, Ambrose sets up conflicting expectations of his readers. Everyone should have modesty, but the most effective mode of acquiring it, *paideia*, is available only to elite Roman men. Ambrose's sentiments of Christian

¹⁵⁵ Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.81.

populism begin to break down when money and education become prerequisites for the acquisition of Christian virtue.

Ambrose drives home the connection between *paideia* and the qualifications for Christian leadership by emphasizing the importance of eloquent speech. If modesty can be argued for as a naturally occurring virtue, eloquence is clearly linked to education. In 1.226, Ambrose gives advice to clergy: *Accedat tamen suavis sermo, ut conciliet sibi adfectum audientium gratumque se vel familiaribus vel civibus vel, si fieri potest, omnibus praebeat.* (“Nevertheless add to these things smooth speech, so that each might gain for himself the goodwill of those listening and so that he might make himself agreeable either to his friends or to the citizens or, if it is able to be done, to all”).¹⁵⁷ Ambrose views *suavis sermo*, or smooth speech, as an important characteristic for men of the church to have. Eloquence is not important simply because it is pleasant to listen to, but because it is the means by which clergy can *consiliet*, or draw to themselves, their listeners. For Ambrose, skill in speaking is an evangelistic tool that has immense potential to influence non-Christians. While some people may be naturally talented speakers, the most straightforward way for a man to grow in smoothness of speech is to be inducted into *paideia*. Even though Ambrose never explicitly restricts church office to educated, and therefore elite, men, his insistence on the importance of the skills inculcated by *paideia* makes it clear that he envisions an ideal clergy made up of educated men.

Conclusion

Ambrose’s expression of “Christian populism” is not straightforward. He does not always communicate a clear understanding of the plight of the impoverished, nor does he seem to realize that he excludes lower socioeconomic classes from participation in the clergy. Is his presentation

¹⁵⁷ Ambrose, *De Officiis*, 1.226.

of himself as an egalitarian lover of the poor and disdainer of wealth just a front? While Peter Brown would likely argue that “Christian populism” in the fourth century primarily functions to bolster the already significant power of the Christian elite, to dismiss Ambrose as purely self-interested seems unfair. At several points throughout his *De Officiis* Ambrose successfully lifts up the poor as valuable members of Roman society and, more importantly, the kingdom of God. He seems sincere in his rejection of wealth and advocacy of charitable giving, yet moments later he seems out of touch with the realities of poverty.

I suggest that Ambrose’s populist self-presentation is so multivalent because it reflects the tension between his Christian and elite Roman identities. As a privileged, highly educated man with wealth, political power, and spiritual authority, it is inevitable that Ambrose would stumble as he works to apply the Christian ethic of care for the poor to his life and writing. It is easy for someone with plenty to suggest that poverty is a spiritual boon, even with the best of intentions.

The tension between Ambrose’s identities is most apparent in his requirement of modest comportment and eloquent speech among clergy. He couches these standards in claims that nature is the best teacher of these skills, but this analogy only highlights the connection between etiquette, eloquence, and *paideia*. As much as Ambrose seeks to elevate the poor in his *De Officiis*, he cannot put aside his own socioeconomic class and its guidelines for appropriate behavior. Nothing in his text suggests that the restriction of church office is intentionally targeting lower class men, but the result is the same either way, despite the fact that such discrimination violates the ethic of Christian populism that Ambrose has carefully laid out in his *De Officiis*. Ambrose is a powerful and elite member of Roman society, but he is also a bishop for the people of Milan. The complex ways that he expresses an attitude of Christian populism,

as with his interactions with Cicero's texts and the works of classical philosophers, reveal a tension between Ambrose's dual identity as powerful Roman and influential Christian.

Because Ambrose is caught between these two identities, his work is easily evaluated in a one-sided way. If he is a Roman intellectual, his writing style is simplistic and unimpressive. If he is a Christian first and foremost, he is easily caught up in Cicero and the pagan tradition that he represents. When both competing identities are considered, Ambrose appears to be striving to find balance in his life and work. Instead of being incapable of writing in a Ciceronian way, Ambrose seeks to express an attitude that welcomes a broad readership, and rather than relying too much on pagan culture, he uses *paideia* as a familiar point of reference from which he can build a new Christian system of ethics.

Ambrose is not alone in his navigation of both a Christian and social identity; each member of his congregation likewise grapples with what it means to be a Christian and a Roman citizen. All religion exists within a social context, and Ambrose's work expresses a larger reckoning between Christianity and culture that is ongoing today. As Ambrose reworks Cicero, constructs a system of ethics both built upon and superior to that of his classical predecessors, and presents himself as a champion of the people, he performs his dual identity as both philosopher and Christian. Throughout his *De Officiis*, Ambrose seeks to attain a cohesive identity as "a true philosopher of Christ."

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