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The Common Lot of Nature: The Stoic Concept of Death in the Writings of St. Ambrose

Nathan Michael Falls Hall
San Jose State University

THE COMMON LOT OF NATURE:
THE STOIC CONCEPT OF DEATH IN THE WRITINGS OF ST. AMBROSE

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Jonathan Roth, Ph.D.	Department of History
Mary Lynn Wilson, Ph.D.	Department of History
Thomas Leddy, Ph.D.	Department of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

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by Nathan Hall

The Common Lot of Nature is a comparative analysis which questions the completeness of St. Ambrose's Christian faith. The comparison focuses specifically on notions of death, and how one should deal with its presence in one's life. This emphasis was chosen because Ambrose was a Christian bishop who was heavily influenced by Stoicism, and these two worldviews held contrasting beliefs on how death fits into the lives of human beings. The paper begins with an outline of other research regarding Stoicism or its potential connections with Christianity. The following two sections discuss how Stoics and 4th century Christians conceptualized death by looking at how they talked about the subject to themselves or with their followers/students. After the clear distinctions between Stoic and Christian notions of mortality have been constructed, the paper moves directly to Ambrose's life and writings on the subject of death, showing how he sounds much more like a Stoic than a Christian. It concludes that when taking into consideration the context of Ambrose's rise to episcopal office, and his nearly complete departure from the common Christian conceptualization of mortality, he may not have been a Christian at all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

The evolution of Christianity in Roman society did not take place within a vacuum. Numerous philosophical schools, as well as intellectual and religious traditions, influenced the worldviews of educated citizens. As Christianity was introduced to the upper classes, these ancient ideas would have naturally filtered their perspectives on, or criticism of, Scripture. One of these philosophical schools was Stoicism, a tradition which taught the value of reason and virtue, and the ability to train one's mind against the struggles of life. These ideas could fit neatly into Christian concepts, when considering the religion's emphasis on obtaining purity, dealing with suffering, and fighting against the temptation of sin.[1] A precedent had already been set by the Jewish wisdom tradition as it relates to men like Jesus Ben Sira or philosophers such as Philo. Both of these individuals are examples of Judaism's attempt to answer the tough questions regarding life's routine antagonism towards decent people, as well as the importance of moderate living. Philo stands out in this tradition because he was heavily influenced by Stoic thought and wrote with the intent of fusing Hellenism with Judaism. In fact, he is one of the prime examples of Jewish and Greek intellectualism's slow convergence toward one another during the turn of the common era.[2]

Saint Ambrose is one instance of a Christian theologian who stepped into this path of convergence. He relied heavily on Stoicism when interpreting Scripture, and fittingly, argued that it was in fact the Old Testament Patriarchs who were the original source of

[1] Marcia Collish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Vol: II: Stoicism in Christian Latin Through the Sixth Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 53
[2] Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 2010), 86-87

this timeless wisdom. Some work has been done on the subject of this connection as it relates to Ambrose and other Christians.[3] However, the focus of these conversations is almost entirely on notions of virtue and ethics, along with how the "wise man"[4] is supposed to utilize these principles to better his life and the lives of others. Given the prominent place of ethics in both Stoicism and Christianity, the emphasis on morality is as unsurprising as it is necessary. Yet, Stoicism does contain a philosophical orientation towards one subject which does not fit in so nicely with Christianity, namely, its attitude towards death.

Any Christian who wished to integrate the Stoic notion of death into his or her own faith would face quite a challenge because it was useless, if not utterly silly, to view it as some grand misfortune. One was thus obligated to resign oneself to oblivion, and see one's passing away as merely a small aspect of a much larger process. Under such a system, grief experienced at the loss of a loved one is mitigated through the perspective of one's life in relation to other people, creatures, and the cosmos, generally. The Stoic man is implored to remember that all things must die, and that the Fates give no credence for the number of years lived, or the untimeliness of the death, itself. All of us will meet this end sooner or later, so we might as well get used to the idea.

Naturally, this position stands in sharp contrast to that taken by most Christians in the ancient world. Death, in their eyes, was a matter of the utmost concern because it could bestow the greatest blessing any human could wish to obtain. For upon death, Christians

[3] The applicable research will be fully discussed later in this section.
[4] The masculine noun is used purposefully due to the fact that Stoics generally believed only males possessed the mental capacity to live this philosophy. Musonius Rufus is one notable exception, but for the sake of consistency, the terms "men" and "man" will be used predominately.

believed that if they were saved, then ascension to Heaven and eternal bliss awaited them. Christian theologians often relied on this happy truth in order to mitigate the suffering of the bereaved, that is, with the exception of St. Ambrose. His Stoic sensibilities extend beyond mere practical ethics to his entire conceptualization of death, and it is this nearly complete departure from Christianity, more than anything else, which suggests that Ambrose was, in fact, a nominal Christian.

Even a surface level understanding of his early years as bishop imply this possibility. Ambrose was an imperial bureaucrat with no formal connection to the church or ascetic aspirations and was ultimately forced into ecclesiastical office after much resistance. His own treatise on the faith, *De Fide*, was only written at the behest of the emperor, Gratian, who was himself petitioned to ask for it by other bishops who doubted Ambrose's orthodoxy.[5] They too were unsure about the nature of his belief, and understandably so, given the series of events which forced his consecration. This context begs a question or two about the strictness of Ambrose's faith, thus looking at his notions of death could prove illuminating because he cannot hold true to Stoic ideas regarding mortality and be an orthodox Christian at the same time.

Secondary sources on the connections between Stoicism and Christianity, or the prevalence of Stoic concepts in Christian writings, are few in number. However, P.A. Brunt's *Studies in Stoicism*, Marcia Collish's *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, Runar Thorsteinsson's *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism*, Fredrick Clifton Grant's article "St. Paul and Stoicism," and Ralph Stob's article "Stoicism and

[5] Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35

Christianity" are examples of research which has focused, to a greater or lesser extent, on the connections (if any) between Stoicism, Christianity, or specific Christians. All five of these authors, either directly or indirectly, discuss the similarities between this ancient school of philosophy and the relative religious newcomer.

Brunt's contribution to the study of Stoicism is quite extensive. His essays and articles touch on the various subjects related to the philosophy, as well as its evolution through the centuries. As a result, Christianity plays a minor role in this dense anthology. However, Brunt does make some very significant observations related to the numerous similarities between Stoicism and Christianity. He argues that Stoicism directly influenced Christianity through the works of its paragons, pointing out that *De Continentia* by Martin of Bracara in the 6th century is very similar to Seneca's *De Officiis*. Additionally, Ambrose's *De Officiis Ministrorum* is clearly modeled on Cicero's *De Officiis*.[6] Brunt also claims that Christians borrowed their notions of charity from Stoics, along with ideas concerning the spiritual reformation of the individual; and that Ambrose echoes Cicero when he urges all ranking members of the church to conduct themselves with proper dress, speech, and gait, in addition to controlling the vices of fear, anger, and lust.[7] When it comes to concepts of the divine, Brunt presents the writings of Marcus Aurelius to prove that Stoics were not above the belief in a god who benevolently provides strength to endure the struggles of this life.[8]

[6] P.A. Brunt, *Studies in Stoicism* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2013), 109
[7] Brunt, *Studies in Stoicism*, 116-129
[8] Ibid, 376-387

Brunt's observations about Christianity extend to Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150 – 215) as well. This early Church Father believed that Jesus was physically ugly but made beautiful by the purity of his soul – an opinion which Seneca held regarding his idol, Socrates.[9] Along with this synchronicity of visualization, Clement was not immune from the desire to utilize the ancient wisdom of his age. Brunt observes that "Like Ambrose, [Clement] was bound to regard the authority of scripture as final in morals as in faith, but both were ready to supplement and interpret biblical text from secular wisdom."[10] His use of the word 'supplement' is well chosen. As was stated above, a clear dichotomy exists in the writings of Ambrose. He reads like an orthodox Christian at one point and a Stoic philosopher the next. The supplementation, on which Brunt touches briefly, will be seen more clearly in Section Three. Other Christians also relied on 'secular wisdom' when discussing the topic of morality and death.

Runar Thorsteinsson argues in support of the same basic observations made by Brunt. However, instead of dealing with these connections as they come, his primary goal is to seek these similarities out and illuminate them fully. Thorsteinsson focuses on the writings of first- century Stoics and Christians who would have received their education within the city of Rome. He claims that the works of Seneca, Musonius Rufus, and Epictetus call for the same moral regulations as those found in the letters of Paul, Clement of Rome, and Peter. Thorsteinsson's comparisons are extremely thorough and

[9] Ibid, 130
[10] Ibid, 109-110

well substantiated. He seeks to prove that when it comes to the treatment of human beings, there is little practical difference between the Christian and Stoic worldviews.

Thorsteinsson also makes an interesting criticism of the modern historical community's handling of Stoicism. He claims that two main issues have handcuffed the study of this philosophy over the last century and a half. First, a concentrated effort has been made by Christian theologians to co-opt Stoic ethics as their own, often arguing that Stoics were "natural Christian souls."[11] Second, Thorsteinsson believes that modern historians still do not fully engage the primary works of Stoic Philosophers, relying instead on "secondary works," such as, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius, *Epitome of Stoic Philosophy* by Arius Didymus, or *On the Ends of Goods and Evils* by Cicero.[12] This lack of primary Stoic works is a problem Thorsteinsson seeks to correct and does so quite well in his monograph, *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study.*

Dealing directly with the works of Seneca, Rufus, and Epictetus, Thorsteinsson discusses how these philosophers promoted a highly ethical and community-centered philosophy, marking a significant evolution for Stoicism in the first century A.D. Furthermore, this morality is not supported by traditional Aristotelian psychology, but by the belief in a universal humanity which is itself derived from the idea of a Cosmic Order.[13] He cites how all three of these Stoics claim that ethical behavior in this life is of the utmost importance, kinship with the divine helps make one virtuous, and that prayer

[11] Runar Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3-4
[12] Ibid, 4-6
[13] Ibid, 14-17

can be beneficial, if not necessary.[14] The inclusion of Stoic concepts concerning the connection between god(s) and men is important because Christians often criticized Stoics for self-deification. This condemnation is far from the mark in Thorsteinsson's view.

Dealing with the Christian perspective, Thorsteinsson shows how the same strict ethical standards are employed in Paul's Letter to the Romans, as well as in 1 Peter and in 1 Clement. In these letters, love for one another is hailed as the highest virtue, moderation is stressed in all facets of life, and the good of the community should always be the primary concern.[15] However, Thorsteinsson does make one further observation. He posits that there is a key distinction between the source of Christian and Stoic ethics. As was stated earlier, Stoics argued that their morals were derived from a universal humanity which descended from the divine. Thus, in the Stoic's estimation, no one could be excluded from fair treatment for any arbitrary reason. By contrast, early Christians made no such claims. They were bound to their ethical standards in so far as those standards related to other Christians. At best, everyone else need only be tolerated.[16]

Ralph Stob and F.C. Grant both argue that any relationship between Christianity and Stoicism is more apparent than real. Stob claims that these two schools of thought hold many ethical similarities on the surface, but one needs to dig deeper to the source of these ideas to see that their rationales descend from two very different places. His arguments focus on how Stoicism and Christianity deal with notions of God, mankind, and

[14] Ibid, 44-64
[15] Ibid, 97-125
[16] Ibid, 190-206

providence. As it pertains to the divine, Stob notes how the New Testament asserts that God is both the metaphysical "absolute," in addition to possessing personhood. This stands in contrast to the Stoic conception of God as the absolute but lacking any "spirituality" or personality.[17] When it comes to the nature of humans, Stob points out that in Christianity, mankind is inherently sinful and must therefore seek salvation from God, while Stoicism claims all human beings are inherently good due to their connection with the divine.[18]

Concerning God's relationship to the world, Stob emphasizes that from the Christian perspective, all people and events in the world are overseen and observed by God.[19] Again, he states that the Christian belief in God's purposeful engagement in the events and lives of mortals stands in opposition to the Stoics. Stob notes how Stoic philosophers claimed that God is unconcerned with the affairs of individual mortals but rather only cared about the 'bigger picture,' i.e. the Cosmic Order.[20]

In the vein of Thorsteinsson's criticism of Stoic scholarship, Grant admits that early Christians tried to tie Stoicism to earlier Biblical characters. Yet he also directly confronts the kind of relationships drawn by Thorsteinsson and earlier writers. For Grant, Paul's upbringing in Taursus and relatively late conversion to Christianity, compared to other apostles, do not necessitate Stoic infusion in his writings.[21] Paul was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee. He was also kicked out of the Areopagus for being, in

[17] Ralph Stob, "Stoicism and Christianity," *The Classical Journal* 30, no. 4 (1935): 217-218
[18] Ibid, 221
[19] Ibid, 222
[20] Ibid, 222
[21] Frederick Clifton Grant, "St. Paul and Stoicism," *The Biblical World* 45, No. 5 (May, 1915): 268

so many words, an amateur intellectual. Grant claims that this is hardly the life of a man influenced by Stoicism and condemns such ideas as nothing short of conjecture.[22] In addition, Grant correctly observes that Stoicism focuses on the inherent strengths of the individual and a pantheistic conception of the Deity which is largely unconcerned with theology or metaphysics. This, too, runs counter to the Christianity of St. Paul.[23]

Grant's further ruminations are of interest to the subject of this paper, for he argues that Stoicism was ubiquitous in the Mediterranean world in the first century, B.C. This means that Paul could have used Stoic language which had simply become common in the vernacular or used it unknowingly.[24] This problem of common language will be apparent in Section Three of this paper. When reading the works of educated Christian thinkers, this classical education must be taken into consideration. Common intellectual verbiage can sound like a particular school of philosophy, and it will appear in the writings of the subsequent Christians featured therein.

Marcia Collish's extensive two volume survey of Stoicism stands somewhere in the middle of these opposing views. Her book is impressive, for it maps the course of Stoic thought through both antiquity and the early medieval period. However, due to the sheer extent of the timeline she wishes to cover, truly in-depth comparisons are rare. This is not meant to be a criticism, but more a statement regarding the practical limitations of dealing with such a vast period of time. Collish's analysis includes a discussion of St. Ambrose, and she makes many prudent observations.

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[22] Especially when one considers Jews who were more obviously influenced by Stoicism, for example Philo.
[23] Ibid, 269-278
[24] Ibid, 276-279

For Collish, Ambrose is at his most Stoic when discussing the responsibilities of the clergy and in the funeral oration he made for his late brother.[25] In these writings, Ambrose promoted the cardinal virtues of Stoicism because these help one control passion and deal with obstacles.[26] Additionally, Collish writes about how the Christian bishop urges people to approach life in ways which were uniquely Stoic. She discusses Ambrose's belief that Christians know how to weather good and bad fortune and conduct themselves with a tranquility of mind, a temperate lifestyle (i.e. everything in moderation), and a calm acceptance of whatever challenges or blessings life bestows to them.[27] Moreover, he believes that all men are bound to the laws of nature and should thus work for one another's salvation.[28]

Collish also describes how Ambrose uses these ideas in ways which fit into a Christian worldview, which suggests a personal interpretation on his part. She argues that for Ambrose, "conformity to Nature" becomes "following the commandments;" and though Ambrose believed that suffering could be a positive force in an individual's life, it is God's grace which grants ultimate liberation instead of the human intellect.[29] Because in Ambrose's mind, no man is that strong.[30] Lastly, Collish suggests that Ambrose engages in the kind of justificatory rationale brought up by Grant and Thorsteinsson

[25] Collish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 49-52
[26] Ibid, 56-62
[27] Ibid, 54-65
[28] Ibid, 68
[29] Ibid, 53
[30] Ibid, 66

when claiming that these ideas track back to Biblical examples and, therefore, illustrate that the Judeo-Christian tradition is the true source of these virtues.[31]

All five of these works discuss valid issues pertaining to the connections between Christianity and Stoicism. Brunt's analyses are correct, but they merely scratch the surface of a much deeper subject. Thorsteinsson's research is one such example of the deeper analysis which could be done. His comparisons are thorough and well supported. Yet his research is confined to the first century only. The analysis offered by Collish also presents solid arguments pertaining to this topic, in addition to touching on the subject most relevant to this paper. Yet her lack of specific detail provides an opportunity for more substantial cross-comparisons; and more importantly, her discussion of Ambrose does not mention how his ruminations on death are a significant dividing line. It is true that he described the virtues of proper living in Stoic terms, but many of his contemporaries used similar language as well.

The topic of virtues alone suggests that the bishop was a Stoic Christian. One could point to his upper-class education to show that this language was common among Christian intellectuals, claim that Ambrose was simply more influenced than most, and then move on. Yet his discussion of mortality suggests something quite different, namely that he might not have been a Christian at all. Ambrose's discussion of death is substantially different from those of his contemporaries and deserves a measure of analysis. This paper can thus be seen as an extension of the work already done by these historians; but more importantly, a look into how much of a Christian Ambrose really

[31] Ibid, 63

was, by the standards of his time. A content analysis of the topic of death as it relates to Stoicism, Ambrose, and contemporary Christians, is one method of answering this question.

Stob and Grant represent an obvious objection to the claims made by the above historians. They can also be seen as examples of the kind of confusion brought up by Thorsteinsson, for Stob and Grant were both products of Theology departments. Thorsteinsson might see them as representing yet more attempts by Christians to blur the lines or construct artificial barriers in order to preserve the supposed uniqueness of Christianity. In *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study*, Thorsteinsson makes the following claim:

> It is often held that there is a major difference between Greco-Roman ethics and Christian ethics in terms of their theological basis and motivation, that is, that there is a distinctive religious motivation behind the latter that is more or less lacking in the ethics of the philosophical schools. As we have seen, especially in the discussion of Seneca and Epictetus, Stoic ethics have a strong theological foundation as it is largely based, not only on theories of God and God's presence in the world, but also on the theory of the divine origin of human-kind itself… The difference between Christianity and Stoicism in this respect may therefore be more apparent than real.[32]

Regardless of this possible objection, Stob and Grant do raise valid counterarguments to this claim of similitude. However, their rebuttals actually bring up a more pressing question: how are historians to define which similarities qualify as "merely the surface?" Are the most significant aspects of a worldview found only in its theological or metaphysical claims regarding cosmology, or are they found in the practical actions those theological or metaphysical views inspire? Yet, beyond all the interesting connections –

[32] Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism,* 140

and criticisms – made in these works, none of them discusses how claims about death are what truly separate a Christian Sage from a Stoic one.

If Christians and Stoics both believe that humans have certain moral obligations to each other, then regardless of which cosmology leads them to that conclusion, it should come as no surprise that their rhetoric on practical ethics often coincides. It is in the cases where their opinions generally diverge, that more interesting observations may or may not be made. Death is one such subject where the standard Christian and Stoic ideas are significantly different, thus finding a Christian who held similar beliefs to a Stoic on this topic would be quite interesting. Notions of death are what fundamentally distinguish Christianity from Stoicism, and Ambrose's Christian sensibilities, therefore, hinge on his statements concerning mortality because it is much harder for him to entertain these philosophical positions and preserve his faith unaltered. So if one wishes to determine how Christian Ambrose truly is, then one must go beyond conversations about ethics to those about death.

This paper will attempt such a comparative analysis by first looking at Stoic concepts of virtue, their connection with death, and how one perseveres through the suffering related to it. Stoic physics and logic will not be a part of this analysis because Ambrose's discussion of these topics is almost nonexistent, so any conversation about them would be, at best, a digression. Furthermore, ethics and death became the main focus of Stoicism in the centuries leading up to Ambrose's life, so much so that the philosophy's greatest paragons during that period rarely mention physics and logic. Older Stoics such as Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and Zeno will be absent from this study as well. Most of their

works exist only in fragments; and since much of the content that does survive focuses on unrelated topics like physics and logic, any analysis of their opinions on death and ethics would be too thin to bear inclusion. As a result, the philosophical works under discussion are Seneca's *Epistolae Morales ad Lucilium*, Epictetus' *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*, as well as Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.

Seneca's letters cover a broad range of subjects, from esoteric discussions on the "nature of being," to the consumption of alcohol, and which exercises are most appropriate for a moderate physique. However, the subject of proper living plays, unsurprisingly, a reoccurring role in these correspondences. Death is one such event where ideas about proper living can be supremely helpful; and since Seneca and Lucilius wrote to each other over many years, it was a sadly frequent topic of conversation.

Epictetus' *Enchiridion* focuses primarily on virtue, while his *Discourses* deals with a range of subjects, of which mortality is one. At several different points within his discussion, he argues for indifference towards death, and that this indifference leads the rational mind to specific conclusions which ultimately make death's presence in our lives generally positive. Although unlike Seneca's writings, Epictetus' lack the kind of intimacy and specific detail which make the former's letters so fascinating to read.

Marcus' *Meditations* are of a personal nature which breeds a deeper level of significance to his words, but its structure as a somewhat haphazard and repetitive diary makes the document somewhat tedious. The subjects of virtue and death come up routinely over the course of these private ruminations. Some have speculated that the frequent reoccurrence of this topic is the result of the emperor's campaigns against the

tribes of Southern Germany, namely that he was very conscious of the fact that he might die in battle or be forced to take his own life should the need arise. This is certainly a possibility; yet for our present purposes, it is enough to say that the emperor's ideas on death and its relationship to the ethical life, will connect quite nicely with the aforementioned philosophers.

After this foundation is laid, Section Three will dive into the writings of four Christians who were episcopal contemporaries of St. Ambrose. These Christians are St. Basil (A.D. 330 – 379), St. John Chrysostom (A.D. 349 – 407), St. Gregory Nazianzen (A.D. 329 – 390), and St. Jerome (A.D. 347 – 420). This section will analyze the many eulogies and letters of condolence written by these theologians. When reading their prose, one issue arises quite quickly: these four men were highly educated, so when discussing the life of the departed, common intellectual language is often used. At times, they venerated the deceased using philosophical rhetoric which at first glance seems similar to that of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. At certain points, these similarities are real, but one will see that the philosophical approach to death and perseverance through it are dealt with in a subtly different way than the Stoics. These Christians sought to comfort the family members of the loved-and-lost by reminding them of the promise of Christ's sacrifice. They will often say, echoing the words of St. Paul, to not be like "those who have no hope," and urge the bereaved to take solace in the life of the world to come. Because, like St. Paul, they felt that this truth should be universally comforting.[33]

[33] Alexander Jones, *The New Testament of the Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, New York: Double Day &

A discussion of the differences between Ambrose and his fellow theologians of the 4th century will begin, in Section Four of this paper, with an analysis of Ambrose's own writings. Out of the myriad sermons, letters, and treatises on the faith, four documents reveal themselves to be heavily Stoic: *De Officiis Ministrorum*; the Eulogy of his brother, Satyrus; *On the Belief in the Resurrection*; and his letter to the Christians at Vercellae (concerning the appointment of a new bishop). As many have observed, *De Officiis* is the most complete anthology of Ambrose's Stoicism as it pertains to ethics. In this text, he outlines the proper conduct of a Christian clergyman and which virtues in particular facilitate this lifestyle. The letter to the Vercellae congregation can basically be considered a synopsis of *De Officiis* since the subject of the two works is exactly the same. However, it is Ambrose's Eulogy to his brother and the discussion of the Resurrection which follows, that is of primary concern to this paper. One will find that the ideas expressed, and the rhetoric employed, in these two works share almost nothing of substance with those of the other 4th century theologians. In fact, if one read these two sources without knowing the identity of the writer, one might be shocked to learn that they were the words of a Christian, let alone a Christian bishop. Finally, the two funeral orations to Valentinian II and Theodosius the Great are examples of works by Ambrose which might contradict the claim that his view of death was entirely Stoic. An analysis will also be provided in Section Four which argues that this is likely not the case.

Section Five will conclude with an overall discussion of the works and ideas presented throughout this paper, in addition to tying up any unresolved subjects which

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Company, Inc., 1966), 1 Thessalonians 4 : 13-18

required a full analysis of the documents first. The section will also include a brief discussion regarding an interesting sub-point to the primary analysis. The frequent and exhaustive use of Stoic concepts in Ambrose's writings, along with their sporadic use in the works of his contemporaries, begs a question or two about the prevailing idea that Stoicism was dead by the 5th century. Many historians have written about the return of Neoplatonism and its ultimate usurpation by Christianity. Yet the documents referenced over the course of this essay show that the Old Schools of paganism were not completely supplanted as many have claimed.

Stoicism

Seneca and Virtue

Seneca is by far the most prolific of the three philosophers discussed in this paper. Writing in the first century A.D., he produced a considerable number of letters and essays on the topics of virtue and ethics. One substantial body of writing is the collection of letters addressed to his friend, Lucilius. The subject matter of these letters varies from the highly philosophical, to lighthearted critiques of a book published by Lucilius. Despite the wide spectrum of topics, nearly all these letters deal with virtue and/or vice at some point.

In his letters, Seneca repeatedly stresses the importance of obtaining virtue and avoiding vice. He beseeches Lucilius to refrain from cruelty and anger, and encourages him to never attend gladiatorial games because they do nothing but engender these vices by repaying murder with murder.[34] Seneca writes that a good man is content with himself, and is therefore immune to flattery, as well as envy. Along with the avoidance of jealousy, a virtuous soul shuns luxury in general, for only people who covet their neighbor's property, with no regard for what they have, are truly poor. In fact, wealth and luxury can be a hindrance, rather than a blessing.[35] Lastly, Seneca believes that it is reason which allows mankind to ascend to this level of virtue, and while doing so, we learn how to live in accordance with our own nature.[36]

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[34] Seneca, *Epistolae Morales Ad Lucilium, Vol. I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), II, VII, XLI

[35] Seneca, *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca: Essays and Letters*, translated by Moses Hadas (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968), 3 (sect. 4)

[36] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, XLI (pg. 277-279)

Seneca also believes that the ideal human conducts his or her life with a level of restraint. Such a person neither wears clothes which are too slovenly nor too fine. Nor is it prudent to live a life of extreme luxury or asceticism. Seneca writes that "Philosophy calls for moderation, not penance," for we can live both a minimalist life and be clean at the same time.[37] Beyond the ability to live a life of reasoned moderation, the Stoic sage is also capable of leading a life poised to take on the struggles of the world, and remains unfazed by them. He also understands that such struggles are a vital aspect of the attainment of virtue. For Seneca, a liberated soul lives always in the present, and thus neither hopes nor fears.[38] But when misfortunes ultimately arrive, the sage faces them with resolve. He claims that nothing bad ever happens to a good person because all obstacles are nothing more than exercise for the soul, and if met with courage, breed only virtue. Furthermore, Seneca believes that this willingness to face problems is paramount to the attainment of wisdom, and should thus be understood as an integral part of Nature's plan for the sage.[39] He writes that "for self-knowledge, testing is necessary… no man can discover what he can do except by trying".[40] Once this mindset is fully integrated into the life of a virtuous man, he reaches a state of inner happiness and contentment to the point where the vicissitudes of Fortune are weathered, not with ease, but resilience.[41]

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[37] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, V (pg. 21-23)
[38] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, XLI (pg. 275)
[39] Seneca, *Essays and Letters*, 30 (sect. 2)
[40] Ibid, 36 (sect. 4)
[41] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, IX (pg. 45-51)

When it comes to the sage's actions in the world, Seneca also states that enlightened individuals should actively work to improve the lot of others. In his mind, philosophy is meant to foster fellowship and humanity, and all those who use it as a means to appear different only show themselves to be hypocrites. Therefore, the sage does not seek a contrary standard of life as the Cynics did; i.e. he does not attempt to live in conscious opposition to a societal norm. Instead, the wise man seeks only a higher standard because if he appears too different, then the sage will push away the very people he is supposed to teach. The sage is thus obligated to make friends, for wisdom does no one any good if it is never passed on to anyone.[42]

Seneca and Death

Death is one of the most significant trials any human must face in relation to both his or her own life, and the lives of those whom they love. Seneca brings up the topic in several letters to his friend, and many common themes become apparent. Like all Stoics, he argues that death is an indifferent aspect of nature, and should never be a source of fear because once it arrives, it passes away.[43] He states that anyone who obsesses over death never truly learns how to enjoy life, claiming that: "most men ebb and flow in wretchedness between the fear of death, and the hardships of life; they are unwilling to live, and yet they do not know how to die." Seneca believes that accepting the

[42] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I,* V (pg. 21)
[43] Seneca, *Epistolae Morales ad Lucilium, Vol. II* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, MCMXXX [1960]), LXXXII (pg. 251)

inevitability of loss is paramount for any person who wishes to find happiness in this life.[44] If God deems it good to grant an extra day, then so be it.[45]

Seneca tells Lucilius that we must be prepared to meet death at all times,[46] and urges him to refrain from praying to the gods for assistance, stating: "how long are we going to ask the gods for help when we are capable of providing ourselves with so much?"[47] However, death need not be looked at in such a negative way. In fact, death should be seen as a positive aspect of life because it represents the end of suffering.[48] But even more importantly, the reality of death forces people to *live* life to the fullest. Seneca writes that people should focus their energies on living well, so that when the end comes, they may die well.[49]

The principle which helps one live this truth is virtue because it allows one to meet death with courage. The mind can never ascend to virtue if it sees mortality as an evil.[50] For Nature is the ultimate cause of all that happens, even death, and one must resign oneself to submit to its decrees.[51] Seneca states that cultivating virtue is what makes a life well-lived,[52] and allows one to see that it is not the length of the years which matter, but the quality.[53] Death, therefore, is nothing to complain about, and once wise

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[44] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, IV (pg. 15)
[45] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, XII (pg. 71)
[46] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, XXVI (pg. 191)
[47] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, LX (pg. 423)
[48] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, XII (pg. 69)
[49] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, LXI (pg. 425-427)
[50] Seneca, *Epist. Morales II*, LXVII, LXXXII
[51] Seneca, *Epistolae Morales ad Lucilium, Vol. III*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, MCMXXV [1955]), XCIII (pg. 3)
[52] Seneca, *Epist. Morales III*, XCIII (pg. 7)
[53] Seneca, *Epist. Morales II*, LXX (pg. 57-59)

individuals come to understand that it should not be feared, they learn that nothing is to be feared.[54]

Along with the subject of death, and how to deal with the reality of it in one's life, Seneca talks about how individuals should deal with the suffering caused when death visits someone else. Two letters, Epistle 63 and 99, show him as an active consoler. In Epistle 63, he writes directly to Lucilius regarding the death of Lucilius' close friend. In this correspondence, the same ideas discussed above are utilized to comfort his bereaved friend. Seneca writes in a very warm tone, for he knows that Lucilius is in a fragile state. However, Seneca explains that "their school" would have Lucilius come to acceptance sooner rather than later.

Seneca reminds his companion that all things must die, and this realization allows us to see that we all share a common fate. Yet, rather than being a source of utter anguish and hopelessness, death's inevitability forces people to appreciate the time they have with friends and family all the more strongly: "let us greedily enjoy our friends, because we do not know how long this privilege will be ours." Additionally, Seneca tells Lucilius that the memory of his friend, as well as the time spent with him, should moderate his sadness, and that Lucilius should in no way feel cheated because "Fortune has taken away what Fortune has given." Along with these words of wisdom, Seneca makes sure to remind his friend that too much grief can become a source of personal embarrassment. He tells Lucilius that a moderate amount of sadness is fine, but that excessive grief soon

[54] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, LXX (pg. 57-59), XXIV (pg. 173)

becomes repugnant, and is often mocked. Seneca also explains how overt displays of sorrow are often merely for show, and that such actions are utterly selfish.[55]

Epistle 99 contains advice of a similar character, but with far more sternness. In this letter, Seneca shares with Lucilius the words he sent to another friend after hearing that this individual was not taking the death of his infant son very well. By modern standards, the tone of this correspondence is quite severe, and at times borders on rudeness. For Seneca is consciously scolding this man in an attempt to jar him from his grief. Despite the seemingly harsh nature of this chastisement, Stoic themes abound.

Seneca tells his friend that it is wrong to complain about loss when it clearly happens to everyone, and beseeches him to think about all the people through the history of the world who have died.[56] He also tells him to have some perspective when it comes to all the people who are currently alive, stating:

> How many men at this very moment are making arrangement for funerals… how many are mourning, when you have finished mourning! As often as you reflect that your boy has ceased to be, reflect also upon man, who has no sure promise of anything, whom Fate does not inevitably escort to the confines of old age, but lets him go at whatever point she sees fit.[57]

Seneca explains that if one considers the unfathomable spans of time which lie between us and the beginning of the Cosmos, and between us and its end, then one sees that asking Nature for our existence to be lengthened is to ask for a pitiful trifle.[58]

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[55] Seneca, *Epist. Morales I*, LXIII (pg. 429-431)
[56] Seneca, *Epist. Morales III*, XCIX (pg. 133)
[57] Seneca, *Epist. Morales III*, XCIX (pg. 143)
[58] Seneca, *Epist. Morales III*, XCIX (pg. 135)

Epictetus and Virtue

Epictetus' writings fall in line with those of his predecessor. He tells his readers to desire only what is in accordance with nature, and what is under one's own control. This mindset can only be achieved through philosophical discipline. The sage should be unconcerned with gossip, the opinions of others, and in control of all desires, generally, along with being free from the need to brag about his achievements. When it comes to wealth, Epictetus writes that an enlightened mind knows that riches do not make one superior.[59] Finally, the Stoic philosopher highlights the importance of empathy. Though both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius see compassion as an important virtue, but Epictetus is the only one to go out of his way to explicitly mention its significance in human interaction. He states that the sage does not hesitate to sympathize with, and console, those who are suffering. Although, in typical Stoic fashion, he does state immediately after, that such sadness is caused by incorrect judgments about misfortune, and not the misfortune itself.[60]

Once the sage has inculcated this philosophical perspective into his worldview, he is able to live a life of modesty, humility, and resolve.[61] He sees clearly those things which are both within and beyond his ability to control, and thus acquires a strength of mind which allows him to be happy through good and bad fortune.[62] This mental fortitude also causes the enlightened mind to be unafraid of doing what is right, regardless of any

[59] Epictetus, *Handbook of Epictetus*, translated by Nichola P. White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 12-26
[60] Ibid, 15 : 15
[61] Ibid, 27 : 47
[62] Ibid, 11 : 1

pressure to do otherwise.[63] The sage becomes unperturbed by the prospect of death, and resigns himself to the reality that those whom he loves can be taken from him at any time.[64] Epictetus writes that these revelations show the enlightened person that all things happen in their appointed time, and wishing for them to happen differently is futile.[65] Ultimately, he claims that the sage ascends to one simple truth: in Nature's grand design, nothing ever goes wrong.[66]

Epictetus' discussion of the philosopher's responsibility to the community is fairly terse. He only gives two specific commands to the reader regarding brotherly obligations. Epictetus writes that the philosopher must honor women, as well as show them the value of self-respect and modesty, though the reasons for this are left unmentioned.[67] It is likely that this directive has something to do with the general position which most men – though not all[68] – held towards women during this period in history; specifically that women were incapable of living a philosophical life. Yet from these limited statements on the subject, it is difficult to discern on which side of the argument he falls. Concerning more general requirements, Epictetus deems it sufficient to say that the sage stands as an example to humanity through his actions and not his words.[69] Lastly, he does state that God *intends* all people to live in fellowship.[70]

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[63] Ibid, 24 : 35
[64] Ibid, 12 - 13 : 3, 5
[65] Ibid, 13 : 8
[66] Ibid, 19 : 27
[67] Ibid, 25 : 40
[68] See Musonius Rufus
[69] Ibid, 26 - 27 : 46
[70] Epictetus, "Discourses", http://www.classics.mit.edu/epictetus/discourses.1.one.html (accessed April, 2015), IV. i

Epictetus and Death

On the topic of death, Epictetus presents arguments very similar to those of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca. Like Seneca, he claims that death should never be feared because it awaits everyone, and those who think they have subverted an untimely death do not realize that it is just as close as it ever was.[71] He writes that "the poor body must be separated from the spirit either now or later, as it was separated before," and that in the face of this inevitability, "confidence then ought to be employed against death, and caution against the fear of [it]."[72]

In terms of the Divine, Epictetus states that God is the "Giver" of all things, so it can also take them away, and anyone who craves for as many years as possible is simply greedy.[73] This perspective allows the wise man to see his death as one event in the larger unfolding of the Cosmos. Epictetus claims that the Stoic sage is therefore willing to accept his own death because he knows that everything happens due to a "universal arrangement, and the whole is superior to the part."[74] As a consequence, the wise man understands that everything which happens according to nature is right. In the end, it is reason which allows a person to ascend to such truths, and once these insights are obtained, the sage is freed from all sorrow.[75]

[71] Epictetus, *Discourses* III. x
[72] Epictetus, *Discourses* II. i
[73] Epictetus, *Discourses* IV. i
[74] Epictetus, *Discourses* II. x
[75] Epictetus, *Discourses* I. xi-xii, II. i

Marcus Aurelius and Virtue

In his book, *Meditations*, the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121 - 180), presents a strict moral framework to his readers. He wrote nearly two hundred years before Ambrose, but like the Christian bishop, he did so in hopes of better informing the conduct of a Roman statesman, specifically, himself. Marcus stresses the importance of showing courtesy towards those with whom one interacts, along with keeping one's temper under control.[76] He claims that one of the greatest wrongs is to greet a fellow creature with malice. Marcus believes that courage, self-control, truth, and justice are the best this world can offer the individual. In order for a man to possess virtue and guard against vice, he must be guided by reason at all times and able to control all aspects of his mind. Humility and justice should permeate all his actions, in order to avoid frivolous pursuits.[77] Additionally, prudence ought to be applied to all situations carefully in order to reach the best possible conclusions.[78] These virtues are justified by the argument of conformity with nature. He states that to rebel against nature, of which all are a part, is the greatest sin, and therefore the height of injustice.[79] It is also important for people to see themselves as part of Nature's "Divine Plan," to which all belong, and must therefore act in accordance with it.[80]

This mindset breeds an attitude characterized by discipline, self-confidence, and humility. Marcus stresses that the Stoic sage must be immune from flattery, for if one

[76] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1964), I. 1
[77] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, II. 2 – IV. 24
[78] *Medit.* XI. 18
[79] *Medit.* IX. 1
[80] *Medit.* II. 9

can be manipulated by the words of others, then one's mind is not truly under one's own control. The emperor argues that it is important to show forgiveness whenever possible.[81] We must love even those who err, for they too are our brothers.[82] Also, people must show kindness even to those who wish them ill, and be prepared to extend forgiveness if it is genuinely sought, because all evil is simply done out of ignorance of what is truly good.[83] Furthermore, all actions taken by the virtuous person should be done with no thought of reward.[84] Marcus also holds the position that these virtues must be held even in the face of misfortune because reason has the power to turn all misfortune into something useful.[85]

When it comes to the general principle employed in the more routine aspects of life and politics, Marcus also focuses on the importance of moderation. A wise man is sparing in all his wants generally, but Marcus also makes a point of laying out some specifics. In terms of dress, the emperor also mentions the importance of a style which is free of ostentation.[86] When it comes to speech, one should use language which is "seemly" but not rhetorical.[87] In regards to attitude, one should not be pretentious or over-refined.[88] And though he was an exceedingly rich man, Marcus argues that wealth

[81] *Medit.* I. 7-16
[82] *Medit.* VII. 22
[83] *Medit.* II. 13
[84] *Medit.* IX. 12
[85] *Medit.* VIII. 35
[86] *Medit.* I. 7
[87] *Medit.* VIII. 30
[88] *Medit.* III. 5

itself should be approached with special detachment, for "the owner of so many goods has no room left to ease himself."[89]

Marcus believes that this orientation around virtue and justice will have a transformative effect on a leader and thus the community through his wise and just decrees. He argues that such a state is pivotal to the personal attainment of happiness, saying: "the quality of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts, therefore guard accordingly, and entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and a reasonable nature." This level of transcendence is also seen as everlasting, allowing no true pain to touch his soul again.[90] Despite this significant personal change which the Stoic sage undergoes, in the end it is the success of the community at large which must be the final goal, and he must always serve as its exemplar.[91] Marcus writes that rational beings are created to aid one another, and thus at all times the benefit of the community is the highest aspiration.[92]

Marcus Aurelius and Death

Marcus was very concerned with the subject of death, and returns to the topic several times over the course of his personal musings. He writes that death is an aspect of life which should be looked upon with indifference. The reason for this is two-fold, for death is an event which happens to both good and bad people alike, and must therefore be a natural process of the universe.[93] In Marcus' estimation, only the virtuous man can understand this reality clearly and thus free himself from the desire for death or the fear

[89] *Medit.* V. 12
[90] *Medit.* VII. 64
[91] *Medit.* I. 17
[92] *Medit.* V. 1
[93] *Medit.* II

of it. In fact, the omnipresence of death should force one to make the most out of life while one has the opportunity to do so.[94] He states that doing this requires one to be the best person one can at every moment.[95] Moreover, Marcus argues that all these claims are true regardless of whether or not there is an afterlife because both eternity with the gods and simple non-existence mean freedom from suffering.[96] In the final analysis, liberation from the fear of death allows one to enjoy the present moment.[97] Marcus tells himself that there is a huge expanse of time which preceded his existence, and another will follow after his death, so he should "pass through this little space of time conformably to nature, and end [his] journey [with contentment]."[98]

In Summation

Stoicism is a formidable philosophy. It teaches that human life is a constant struggle against suffering and unhappiness. The primary causes of this unhappiness are the passions of the flesh, such as pleasure, pain, general misfortune, and death. Furthermore, our constant anxiety about avoiding or obtaining these things only adds an additional level of mental anguish to the list of causes. The Stoics argue that the only way to free oneself from this constant torment is to train one's mind in the use of reason because it allows one to cast aside the illusion that control over life's events, whether good or evil, is within our power. Thus, the Stoic sage learns to "live in accordance with nature," i.e.

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[94] *Medit.* III
[95] *Medit.* IV
[96] *Medit.* III
[97] *Medit.* VII
[98] *Medit.* IV

to accept the ups and downs of life as nothing more than passing events issuing forth from the Divine Reason.

Achieving this liberation is not easy, however. It requires a specific attitude toward life, as well as living life by certain virtues. These virtues are prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. As these virtues are applied, they in turn produce an individual dedicated to courage, moderation, and the benefit of others. Lastly, this liberation is seen as bringing the sage closer to Divine Nature, Divine Reason, or simply put, God, and creates a state of almost unassailable peace and happiness.

When it comes to death, specifically, some very obvious similarities are apparent among these thinkers. All three of these philosophers state that death needs to be looked upon with indifference due to the fact that it awaits all people. As a result, perspective must always be employed when thinking about one's own death, or struggling through the death of a cherished companion. They believe that this allows the wise sage to understand that it is not the quantity of the years lived which matter, but the quality. Furthermore, this ever present piece of Nature's plan for the universe should never be the source of anxiety. Instead, death's nearness to all life is seen as a net positive to any individual who is thinking clearly because it forces people to live life to the fullest, and strive towards virtue at every possible moment. Lastly, these philosophers write that if this understanding is fully inculcated into a person's life, then he or she frees him or herself from all fear, and is capable of living a life of consummate peace.

It is easy to see why a Christian might want to find a way to rationalize (or synthesize) the highly ethical nature of this school of thought with his or her Christianity.

A philosophy such as Stoicism could only be ignored or condemned at great intellectual risk, given its highly ethical foundations and prominence in contemporary society. It was thus far more prudent, and intellectually honest, for a Christian to commend the philosophy, but with certain caveats. It therefore comes as no surprise that, as Thorsteinsson described, many Christians attempted to co-opt this school of philosophy by arguing that the Stoics were really Christians, despite themselves.

The one exception to these areas of similarity is the subject of death. Throughout the above analysis, appeals to hopes and wishes about what might await the soul after death are almost nowhere to be found, and in the rare cases where they do appear, the philosophers in question either admit that life after death could very easily not exist, or that to earnestly wish for it is an obsequious act. Additionally, when it comes to grieving over the passing of a loved one, the Stoics argue that reason should be employed for the purposes of maintaining personal virtue. A serious man is able to mourn, but only for a time. Perspective and discipline better grab hold of him soon, if he does not wish to look like anything less than a man.

Conceptualizations of death found within the consolatory writings of Christians will parallel Stoicism in so far as they align with the aforementioned ideas, i.e. whether or not they make a realistic appeal to personal fortitude and perspective reasoning, or something else. The following section will discuss the works of four Christian theologians who were contemporaries of St. Ambrose, and analyze their attempts to deal with the brutal realities of mortality. One will see subtle, yet quite significant differences between them and the Stoics.

Christians Contemporary to Ambrose

St. Gregory Nazianzen

Gregory Nazianzen was born in Cappadocia around 329 A.D. His father, the elder Gregory, was a converted Hypsistarian – a term possibly referring to God-Fearers or non-circumcised worshipers of the Jewish God – and bishop of Nazianzus. His mother, Nonna, is credited with the conversion of Gregory's father, and hailed as one of the great Christian matriarchs of the early Church. Both his mother and father were wealthy landowners, and Gregory thus received a first-class education. As he reached young adulthood, Gregory was sent with his brother Caesarius to Caesarea, Anatolia, for tutoring under the supervision of a man named Carterius. After receiving instruction from Carterius, the two boys moved on to the Palestinian Caesarea where they studied Rhetoric. Gregory followed his brother to Alexandria, but remained there only briefly. Feeling the call of Athens, he left on his own for Greece, where he lived and studied for ten years.[99]

While living in Athens, Gregory became close friends with another church father, Basil of Caesarea. The close friendship which these two men developed, and ultimately lost, is an interesting and tragic story, but it is Gregory's studies at Athens which are of significant importance to this paper, for philosophical language will meander through his Christian writings. This will be a recurring pattern among the four theologians under discussion in this section, but as will be seen in the next section, philosophical rhetoric

[99] Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Second Series) Vol. VII: St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Gregory Nazianzen* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), 187-191

does not necessarily mean Stoicism, though in the case of Gregory, it will sometimes be the case in terms of basic reasoning.

Gregory occupied various positions of ecclesiastical power in his later life. In 361 A.D., he was ordained as a priest against his will, an act of "tyranny" from which he never fully recovered.[100] As part of his cousin Basil's political maneuvering, he begrudgingly accepted an appointment to the bishopric of Sasima, a backwater town which Gregory detested. And towards the end of his life, he temporarily served as archbishop of Constantinople, though refused a permanent position due to exasperation over the continuous sectarianism within the church.[101] Over the course of his tumultuous career, Gregory wrote many works which earned him a position in the pantheon of Christian patriarchs. Three of these works dealt with the topic of death, those being the three funeral orations he gave after the death of his brother, sister, and father.

The oration on the death of Gregory's brother, Caesarius, contains some Stoic elements. In this eulogy, he refers to God as "Divine Nature," and states that it is the decree of this Nature that some individuals are to die too young, saying:

> Such, my brethren, is our existence [for those] who live this transient life, such [is] our pastime upon earth: we come into existence out of non-existence, and after existing, are dissolved. We are unsubstantial dreams, impalpable visions, like the flight of a passing bird, like a ship leaving no track upon the sea, a speck of dust, a vapor, an early dew, a flower that quickly blooms and quickly fades.[102]

On its own, this melancholy admission does not necessarily imply any particular philosophy or religion, though it does rule some out. Yet taken in combination with the

[100] Ibid, 193
[101] Ibid, 191-197
[102] Gregory Nazianzen, Oration VII. 18

characterization of God as "Divine Nature," one is well within one's right to suspect the presence of Stoicism. However, this connection is only mild at best, for Gregory does say that he should not weep for his brother because Caesarius now resides in Heaven.[103] This clearly Christian reasoning will show itself much more clearly in the following two orations.

In the eulogy for his sister, Gorgonia, Gregory's Christianity is far more apparent. Through the first several sections of the speech, he outlines which values made his sister a virtuous Christian woman. At the onset, some pagan ideas are discussed. Gregory claims that she conducted her life according to the reason and virtue blessed by God. Additionally, she was able to lead a moderate life, balancing the needs of her soul, as well as her family.[104] His writings on her role as the executive of domestic affairs contain the most dense collection of Gregory's non-Christian rhetoric, but its generally philosophical character makes any attribution to a specific school impossible. However, his discussion also focuses a great deal on aspects of her piety which can only be attributed to Christian asceticism.

Gregory states that Gorgonia derided laughter, and often quoted Scripture in response to it. She did not wear opulent clothes, jewelry, or, to paraphrase him, the devil's makeup.[105] He praised the fact that Gorgonia frequently knelt in prayer, so much so that her knees "had grown hard and almost taken root in the ground."[106] More important than all of this, however, is Gregory's attempt to assuage his grief and those of her closest

[103] Gregory, Oration VII. 20
[104] Gregory, Oration VIII. 7-9
[105] Gregory, Oration VIII. 8-10
[106] Gregory, Oration VIII. 13

relatives. This appeal will be echoed by every Christian discussed in this section, and it is an appeal to the rewards promised by the doctrines of Christianity. He tells the attendants that there were no tears at her death because they knew of her reward in the hereafter. In Gregory's estimation, it would have been "sacrilegious" to mourn.[107]

The final oration regarded the death of his father, but a large portion of the speech is dedicated to the virtues of his mother, Nonna. However, the discussion of his mother and father is a mixture of paganism and Christianity as well. Though, the discussion of his mother's religiosity contrasts sharply with the pagan elements of the eulogy, and to such an extent as to render the positive pagan language a little confusing. Gregory explains that his mother gave liberally to the poor, but with practical restraint.[108] She fasted on a regular basis and spent long hours in psalmody. In Gregory's own words, she also apparently "honored all kinds of philosophy."[109] What he means by this is unclear because in the next section he talks about how his mother refused to kiss pagan women, no matter how prestigious, look at pagan houses,[110] or listen to Greek plays or poetry.[111] It is possible that by philosophy, he meant "religion," since some Christian intellectuals commonly referred to their faith as "the true philosophy," and he is therefore talking about the various manifestations of orthodoxy, such as virginity, chastity, marriage, etc.[112] Yet by far the strangest thing Gregory says in the entirety of the discussed works

[107] Gregory, Oration VIII. 22
[108] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 1-8
[109] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 9
[110] Based on his wording, Gregory could have meant a house of prostitution, but since the theme of all the other things he mentioned was obviously pagan, this is unlikely. Though prostitution could also have been viewed as a 'pagan problem.'
[111] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 10
[112] Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Vol. IX: Saint*

is that his mother would gladly have sold herself, and her children, into slavery in order to feed the poor.[113]

Once the topic of conversation switches to his father, Gregory's more pagan influences begin to show themselves again. He extols his father's liberality and freedom from ambition, and elaborates on the elder Gregory's moderation when it came to dress and food.[114] Possible Stoic influence reveals itself in the discussion of his father's moderate eating habits. For Gregory claims that the late bishop refrained from overindulgence, but also refused to starve himself for the simple purpose of acquiring an ascetic reputation. Similarly, he states that his father was immune from flattery and never showed malice.[115] Some fairly striking language appears at the end of the eulogy. Gregory proclaims that it is one of the tests of holiness and "philosophy" to be patient through misfortunes.[116] This is as close as Gregory gets to Stoicism – and admittedly, this is quite close – because he also discusses how loss is common to all. Yet he finishes by declaring that Christians should not worry themselves about any of it, for heaven awaits.[117]

St. Jerome

Jerome was born in Striden, a town within the province of Pannonia, around the year 345 A.D. His father, Eusabius, and mother were moderately wealthy Christians. Jerome

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Chrysostom (Grand Rapids, MI: W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 9
[113] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 20-21
[114] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 23
[115] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 23-24
[116] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 28
[117] Gregory, Oration XVIII. 42-43

received an above average education in his youth, before embarking for Rome to study Rhetoric under the supervision of Aelius Donatus. It is believed by some that while in Rome, the future saint was baptized by Pope Liberius in 366 A.D. After this stint in the eternal city, Jerome spent three years in Aquileia, studying scripture with his childhood friend, Bonosus, and several other men destined for various levels of church bureaucracy. Due to the early stage of monasticism at this time, the group did not endeavor to form a monastery. In 373, this proto-cloister disbanded and its members headed out for different realms of the Empire, with Jerome and a few others landing in Antioch.[118]

It is in Antioch that Jerome came under the influence of the hermit, Malchus, and experienced the famous dream where God condemned him as a Ciceronian. During this period, Jerome also learned Hebrew and began his translation of the Bible. He ultimately grew weary of the desert, however, and returned to civilization in the service of the bishop Paulinus. In 380, both men went to Constantinople and studied under Gregory Nazianzen for a short time. After this brief period of instruction, Paulinus and Jerome left for Rome, and it is here that the events of this theologian's life become most applicable to the current discussion.[119]

Upon his return to the Western seat, Jerome was quickly recruited by Pope Damasus I (A.D. 305-384) as his personal secretary and Biblical scholar. While in the pontiff's employ, he came in contact with some of the wealthiest and most well connected families in the empire; but more importantly, the women of those families. Most relevant to this

[118] Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Second Series) Vol. VI: St. Jerome* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), xvi-xvii
[119] Ibid, xvi-xvii

paper is a group of high-class, ascetic women with whom he associated. All of Jerome's discussions on death come in the form of letters of condolence, and many of these letters are centered around the women of one family in particular. The matriarch of this family was Paula, who had forsaken the luxuries of her social rank, and several children, for a life of chastity and poverty. Jerome supervised her hermitage in Bethlehem, and maintained communication with her relatives in Rome over the course of many years. Two of Paula's daughters – Blaesilla and Eustochium – eventually came to join her in the Holy Land.

As the members of this pious trio began to die, Jerome was naturally moved to write these distant relations some comforting words. One will find that the content of these letters align with that of Gregory's quite clearly. For he mixes generic discussions of pagan virtue – at times specifically Stoic – in these consolatory letters. Jerome does use the same rationale regarding Heaven to calm the bereaved, and this separates him from Stoicism quite distinctly, yet his appreciation of pagan wisdom reveals itself on more than one occasion.

The first significant letter of condolence is addressed to Paula, concerning the death of Blaesilla, who had passed away as the result of ritual fasting. Jerome felt a fair share of anguish after the event because he loved the young woman both as a child of God whom he instructed, and a surrogate daughter. In this letter, he expresses doubts about God's existence which arose as the result of such a pointless death in the midst of a world where so much wickedness goes unpunished.[120] Despite the rather thoughtful nature of

[120] Jerome, Letter XXXIX. 2

the first part of the letter, it subtly transitions into criticism. He tells Paula that her grief – which was ample, and no doubt caused by the fact that she would have supported Blaesilla's fasting, only to have it kill her – invites nonbelievers to condemn Christianity as false.[121] Jerome is clearly worried about the state of Paula's faith, and his tone over the rest of the letter casts doubt as to whether his own apparent questioning was genuine or rhetorical. He cites the example of Job in hopes of reminding his companion that God is not beyond testing people, and explicitly states that this is one such instance where her holiness is being put through the crucible.[122] In the end, however, Paula is urged to take comfort in the thought that her daughter has entered into Paradise.[123]

The second major letter written by Jerome is addressed to Eustochium, and deals with the death of Paula. This letter is mostly written in praise of her life, and again shows that Jerome's conceptualization of death and virtue was Christian in orientation. In the early sections, Jerome commends Paula's willingness to leave her children in order to live an ascetic life, and acknowledges that, as a mother, this must have been extremely difficult. However, this difficulty only makes her choice all the more "glorious," and the life she lived thereafter cements her as the holiest woman in Bethlehem, and therefore the world.[124] He goes into detail regarding the nature of her monkish ways, and one will see that the virtues on display are uniquely Christian in their severity.

Jerome extolls the fact that she slept on the ground, rarely bathed, and humbled herself to such an extent that she dressed and walked like a beggar. Paula fasted often,

[121] Jerome, Let. XXXIX. 6
[122] Jerome, Let. XXXIX. 5
[123] Jerome, Let. XXXIX. 2
[124] Jerome, Let. CVIII. 1-6

and generally ate only plain, unseasoned food; no meat. Her commitment to the poor was also discussed, and in surprisingly candid detail. She donated all her possessions to the poor, and took out numerous loans in order to both provide necessary goods to the needy, as well as pay down the principal on earlier ones.[125] This rather foolhardy financial strategy left Paula with a mountain of debt, and Eustochium was left with the responsibility of paying it off.

Jerome was well aware of the monetary situation, and in a moment of blunt honesty, tells her that "only Christ's mercy could save her from [it]."[126] He admits that Paula went beyond what Jesus would have asked of her, and regrets that this holy matron did not show the same kindness to herself which she so readily gave to others. Jerome confesses that the philosophers were correct in their conclusion that "virtue was a mean, and excess, a vice." Despite his admission of this pagan truth, however, he ultimately claims that Paula's unbridled methods were the sign of a "faith more glowing than [his own]."[127]

The last letter of condolence Jerome wrote to this family was to Pammachius, a high ranking Roman senator, whose recently deceased wife, Paulina, was Paula's youngest daughter. Jerome cites the four Stoic virtues – though he does not characterize them as such – and states that he, his wife, his mother-in-law, and his sister-in-law, Eustochium, were exemplars of each.[128] Although he goes on to say that the wisdom of the

[125] Jerome, Let. CVIII. 15
[126] Jerome, Let. CVIII. 15
[127] Jerome, Let. CVIII. 15-21
[128] Jerome, Let. LXVI. 3

philosophers is a false goal, likening it to a "captive woman" and that Pammachius should "cut off her hair" and wash her "with the nitre of which the prophet speaks."[129]

Jerome's discussion of death in his other letters share the same 'back and forth' reasoning between pagan and Christian ideas. To Julian, regarding the passing of his wife and daughters, he writes that God challenges people to instill the virtues of chastity and poverty, and that even the Stoics understood that internal virtues are what truly matter. Jerome also uses rather Stoic reasoning when he cites the example of Job, suggesting that by relation, Julian should realize that his fate could have been far worse.[130] The nature of this content suggests that the previous two recipients were possibly non-Christian or nominal Christians. Yet, in other letters this pagan rationale disappears. To another wealthy Roman matron named Macella, he praises her friend, Lea, for wearing shabby clothes, eating the coarsest food, refusing to sleep in order to pray, and implores her to take comfort in the fact that Lea is in Heaven, while nonbelievers are doomed to Hell.[131]

This exact same reasoning is employed in the letters addressed to two aristocratic women, Theodora and Salvina, who both lost their husbands. Jerome tells Theodora that she must not mourn because Lucinius is now with Christ in Heaven.[132] And to Salvina, he writes similarly. Jerome says that despite knowing how much she grieves, she is also

[129] Jerome, Let. LXVI. 8
[130] Jerome, Let. LXVI. 1-5
[131] Jerome, Let. XXIII. 2-3
[132] Jerome, Let. LXXV. 1-2

comforted by the fact that her husband has not really died, but "gone before," and that "in Christ, he is with her."[133]

St. Basil

Basil's birth is shrouded in a little mystery. He was born in either Neocaesaria, Pontus, or Caesarea, Cappadocia, toward the end of the reign of Constantine. Basil's family owned property in both provinces, though most of the evidence suggests he was born in Caesarea. The bishop's father was a teacher of rhetoric and a very successful lawyer. Basil was brought up on the Catholic faith, and received his early education in Caesarea with his cousin, Gregory Nazianzen. He later moved on to Constantinople, where he studied rhetoric and philosophy. Some say he worked for a time in Antioch, under the Pagan, Libanius, although this is debated. In 351, Basil ventured to Athens where he met up with his cousin again, and their friendship blossomed. At this time, he also befriended the future emperor, Julian, and first felt the sense of foreboding which he claimed surrounded the man.[134]

Basil left Athens in 356, and returned to Caesarea to begin a successful career as a teacher of rhetoric. Again in his home town, he finally received baptism and devoted himself to an ascetic life. Around the year 364, Basil was more than likely forced into ecclesiastical office as a presbyter, and later on voted into the bishopric of Cappadocia, though without the explicit support of his friend, Gregory. His reign as the chief priest of

[133] Jerome, Let. LXXIX. 1
[134] Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Vol. VIII: St. Basil* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), xiii-xvi

central Anatolia was a tumultuous one, fraught with Arian controversies and collisions with Emperor Valens. Basil also successfully ruined the friendship he had with Gregory by putting his cousin up for episcopal election in a small town for purely political reasons.[135]

Like Jerome, Basil dealt with death exclusively in the form of letters to surviving relatives. However, Basil is by far the most interesting of the four Christians analyzed in this section. For his letters of condolence walk the line between Stoicism and Christianity. Basil uses the kind of reasoning in many of these letters which is often found in Stoic writings, though it is his rhetorical style and appeal to an afterlife which ultimately separates him from the aforementioned philosophers, along with his brother on the other side of the Mediterranean.

He wrote two separate letters to Nectorius and his wife, after the death of their son. It is fairly certain that this couple, too, was aristocratic because Basil refers to their family as a "noble house."[136] In the letter to Nectorius, he states that though this death is a sad event, one must always keep in mind that Christ's sacrifice is a message to all Christians that they need not grieve for those who have "fallen asleep" because the boy's life "is not destroyed; it is changed for the better. He whom we love is not hidden in the ground; he is received into Heaven. Let us wait a little while, and we shall be once more with him."[137] To Nectorius' wife, Basil writes in a way which foreshadows the Stoic ideas found in later letters, reminding her that death is common to all life in the universe.[138]

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[135] Ibid, xvi-xxvi
[136] Basil, Letter V. 1
[137] Basil, Let. V. 1-2
[138] Basil, Let. VI. 2

Such Stoic notions are found in the very next letter, addressed to persons unknown. Here, the saint writes that Christians are "brought to perfection by the trials of their temptations."[139] Therefore, they must learn to accept the events sent by God, as well as refuse to view them as "grievous," though they may appear that way at present. Basil tells the reader that God moves in ways we cannot understand, but those movings are always for a greater good. Yet, even after such Stoic words, he tells the reader that they cannot grieve like "them who have no hope."[140]

This sentiment is repeated in another consolatory letter to an anonymous widow. In this epistle, he urges the women in question to resist being "dejected" or "despondent" when it comes to death because loving God means there is no real death. When addressing another widow who lost her husband, the *Magister Peditum* Flavius Arinthaeus, Basil's Stoic influence is clearly visible again. He beseeches her to endure his death with moderation. Basil argues that losing a husband is "a lot she shares with other women," so she cannot complain that he has been taken from her. Instead, she should count herself lucky to have married such a noble husband who died in defense of the church. Despite this Stoic call for fortitude and perspective, Basil returns to Christian themes. In the last passage of the letter, he tells her that what is even more glorious than his death is the promise of eternal life, and the realization that she will meet him again should be a "supreme consolation." Basil concludes by asking her to be strong, in addition to keeping her eyes "fixed on the great reward" which awaits her in the future.[141]

[139] Basil, Let. CI
[140] Basil, Let. CI
[141] Basil, Let. CCLXIX. 1-2

The last in this collection of correspondences is a letter written to a bishop Elpidius regarding the passing of his grandson. As with many of the previous letters, this one also fluctuates between Stoicism and Christianity. In the beginning, Basil explains to his bereaved colleague that the quality of a person's soul is shown through adversity. Although before going too far, he changes his rhetoric yet again, stating that even though Elpidius must show fortitude, he must also show hope, for his grandson is in Heaven.[142]

St. John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom was born in Antioch in the year 347 A.D. His father was the *Magister Militum* of the prefecture *Per Oriens*, and died when John was very young. His mother, Anthusa, was widowed at 20, but focused on providing John with the best education available. His literary teacher was the famous Libanius, who had previously taught in both Athens and Constantinople. Under this pagan's watchful eye, John became intimately familiar with the Greek classics and the art of rhetoric which won him so much praise. After completion of his education, Chrysostom began a very successful law career which boasted of a large clientele. His exploits as a legal advocate were well received by Roman officials, who eventually promoted him to the positions of vice-prefect, prefect, and consul. At some point, John came under the influence of the bishop Meletius who persuaded him to join the class of catechumens; three years later, he was baptized. Meletius foresaw great potential in his new protégé, and started grooming John for ecclesiastical office. Eventually, he was asked to put his name up for episcopal

[142] Basil, Let. CCVI

election, along with his friend, Basil. It is here that Chrysostom executed the infamous betrayal of his friend, leaving Basil alone to accept a forced consecration.[143]

When John's mother died, he was finally freed from any remaining familial obligations, and left for the mountains south of Antioch to pursue an ascetic life. He spent six years in seclusion before falling ill due to complications related to persistent fasting and an improper diet. Returning to Antioch in 380, John was appointed deacon by Meletius and preached in the church erected by Constantine and his son, Constantius. Over the course of the next 16-17 years, he wrote the majority of his most famous works on the faith before being declared archbishop of Constantinople in 397; ironically, against Chrysostom's rather vehement remonstrations.[144]

Unlike the previous saints, John's writings on death are quite obviously Christian. His discussion of the topic is far from prolific, for he wrote only one homily on the martyrdom of St. Ignatius and one letter to an anonymous widow whose husband died from wounds sustained on the field of battle. J.B. Bury indicates that this young woman was of quite prominent standing. He suggests her name was Salvina (possibly the same woman to whom Jerome wrote), and that she was the wife of Nebridius, daughter of Gildo, and niece-in-law to Theodosius, himself.[145] This correspondence, however, is fairly substantial, and reveals John's opinions on the subject of death to be clearly removed from Stoicism, and thus his western counterpart across the Mediterranean.

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[143] Shaff and Wace, *St. Chrysostom*, 5-8
[144] Ibid, 9-12
[145] J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publishing INC, 1958), 141

Chrysostom begins by informing Salvina that even though God has taken her husband away, He will also heal her. This request for resignation, but also concentration on the needs of her own soul, will be a common theme. He tells her that if she wishes to see her husband again in Paradise, then she should focus on keeping her soul pure by staying a widow, writing: "keep thy bed, in his honor, sacred from the touch of any other man."[146] Moreover, John beseeches her to consider the positives as only an ancient Christian theologian could, stating that her husband's death has in fact freed her from the vices which could have endangered her soul, namely vainglory due to his position of authority.[147] He informs Salvina that if she is worried about the security of her person, or her property, then she should remember that these things are not what truly matter, and instead look to Heaven and the life of the world to come.[148]

Chrysostom does provide some reasoning which could be characterized as Stoic. He argues that the widow should also maintain a mature perspective toward her recent misfortunes. John asks her to think about every wife throughout history who has sent her man off to war, never to see him again, and reminds Salvina that she was able to sit by her husband's bedside and say goodbye.[149] However, this sentiment is as pagan as his rhetoric will be, because Chrysostom also tells her that she ought to be happy at the thought that her husband is in Heaven, and if she is lucky, she will be with him soon because "to depart and be with Christ is far better."[150]

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[146] Chrysostom, Letter to a Young Widow 3
[147] Chrysostom, Letter to a Young Widow 6
[148] Chrysostom, Letter to a Young Widow 7
[149] Chrysostom, Letter to a Young Widow 5
[150] Chrysostom, Letter to a Young Widow 3

The Homily of St. Ignatius concerns the martyrdom of the bishop Ignatius during his time in Rome, and it contains an opening section which describes his virtues. This discussion articulates aspects of Ignatius' character which at first glance might lead one to suspect the presence of Stoic influence. John states that the late bishop was not greedy, violent, or even quick to anger, but hospitable, temperate, and modest. Though these words sound very much like the kind of characteristics a Stoic Christian might utilize, the letters of St. Paul are used as the authority on this matter, and 1 Corinthians is cited at length.[151] John argues that in this letter, Paul paints a "portrait of virtue," and that Ignatius was "an accurate impression of the whole of it."[152]

Despite this brush with Stoicism, the homily continues on, and far more Christian rhetoric abounds. Chrysostom writes that the recent wars throughout the empire do not cause worry, but rejoicing, for the purest Christians know the reward of Heaven soon awaits.[153] This focus on the greatness of death as it pertains to the Christian cause will be alluded to twice more. In the first instance, he argues that there is no greater proof of Christ's power than his ability to make men – in this case Ignatius – shun this life so that they may reside with him in Heaven.[154] The second instance relates to how his listeners should handle the death of their beloved bishop. Chrysostom says that they must not weep, but exalt, for they have sent away their bishop, but in doing so received back the

[151] The debate surrounding any potential Stoic influence on Paul would complicate this emphasis on 1 Corinthians. However, this paper is arguing that Ambrose was likely not a Christian at all, thus making Stoic influence on Paul irrelevant.
[152] John Chrysostom, "Homily of Saint Ignatius," http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1905.html, (accessed November, 2015), 2
[153] Homily of St. Ignatius 3
[154] Hom. of St. Ignatius 4

bones of martyrdom.[155] Here again, one sees how Christian leaders used the hope of eternal life to soften the blow of untimely death.

In Summation

After observing the writings of these four Christians, some clear similarities arise, along with some areas of ambiguity. Obviously, the most pressing issue is that all four of these men received the best education available in the Eastern Mediterranean World, and arguably the whole of Roman Empire. This education reveals itself on many occasions throughout the documents put forth for analysis. At times, the presence of pagan academic thought is too general to attribute to any specific school of philosophy, and at others, Stoicism is the main suspect. Additionally, these theologians hailed from wealthy, if not exceedingly wealthy, families. In the ancient world, Stoicism was a rich man's philosophy, so this would also explain why Stoic concepts make their way into these documents from time to time.

When Stoic ideas do arise, the two most common occurrences come in the form of praise for moderate living, but more significantly, in the form of perspective reasoning, i.e. an appeal for the reader/listener to think of his or her suffering in the context of life's struggles and the struggles of others. The focus on moderation can clearly be linked to the writings of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. However, Stoicism was not the first, nor the only school of ancient philosophy to urge its followers to live a life free of extremes. Aristotle is just one example of another, and older philosopher, who taught his

[155] Hom. of St. Ignatius 5

students to live within the mean. Therefore, these four Christians, when praising moderation, could just have easily been drawing from their studies of Aristotle as from Zeno.

That being said, the presence of perspective reasoning clearly aligns with the Stoic philosophers discussed in the previous section. At some point, each one of these theologians asks his listeners – or readers – to remember their places within a larger circle of events. Understanding this larger system can provide much needed insight to the workings of life, and ultimately, catharsis.[156] In response to this appeal, the Stoics would have offered no objections.

Yet these Christians also present ideas which must be attributed to their religious beliefs. All four of them, to a greater or lesser extent, characterize the asceticism of the person in question as nothing but laudable. Even in the case of Jerome, who clearly understood that Paula's actions went far beyond what was required of her, still found himself unable to truly criticize them. Explaining that the severity her habit was the consequence of a faith which exceeded his own. In the case of Gregory, his willingness to admit that his own mother would have entertained no arguments against selling her children into slavery is a further example of Christian extremism. Even if there was a certain level of rhetorical flair attached to the claim, the simple fact that he was unafraid of the possibility that the statement would have made him look stupid in the eyes of his congregation, says much. Also, none of these theologians rely on 'Nature' as a linguistic

[156] The term 'catharsis' is used in this paper with reference to the common English definition, not its Greek meaning.

device to symbolize God, as the Stoics do on a persistent basis. The only exception to this is Gregory, but he uses the term just once over the course of three relatively long funeral orations.

The most important non-Stoic aspect of the documents in question is that all four of these bishops used eternal life to mitigate the suffering of the bereaved. No matter how pagan or Stoic their reasoning is on occasion, these theologians always return to the same basic idea that the prospect of Heaven is supposed to make everyone feel better. This wishful thinking distinctly contrasts with the statements provided by the above named Stoics, all of whom deal with the subject of mortality in brutally honest terms. They tell themselves, and others, to maintain the right perspective, and always remember that the individual is a minor player in the greater workings of Nature's course. More notably, though, these works never rely on the argument that death is a part of life which is meant to strengthen a person *while they live*. For the Stoics, grief is a natural part of life, but reason and discipline ultimately move a person through it; and death, itself, forces human beings to love every moment and every person for as long as they are allowed.

For Christians, this life is of little or no concern. Those who depart this world have actually moved on to a better place, and mourning their loss is unnecessary because they are now with God in heaven. Congregations are expected to find this state of affairs to be utterly satisfying, to the point where too much sadness can be a sign of a lack of *faith*, rather than, as the Stoics claim, a lack of *virtue*. It is clear that Jerome, Basil, Chrysostom, and Gregory Nazianzen are examples of Christians who were influenced by their pagan education. However, that is not the same as being a Christian whose

language and reasoning merge with the likes of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus in multiple and unambiguous ways. The use of Nature's Plan as the countervailing theological device, as well as the focus on perspective, but more importantly *virtue*, as the primary sources of catharsis, will be found in the works of Ambrose.

Saint Ambrose

Ambrose was the progeny of a very distinguished Roman family. His father was prefect of Gaul under Constantine but during the struggle for sole rulership which followed the sovereign's death, Ambrose's family was forced to flee the prefecture. During this conflict, Constantine II was killed, and being his subordinate, it is unclear if Ambrose's father survived. The rest of the family escaped to Rome, where Ambrose spent most of his early life and received all of his education. During the 4th century, education in the city was a rough experience for most children. The *ludus litterarius* was a kind of elementary school where adolescents learned reading and arithmetic. In the basic equivalent of high schools, students were taught proper speech and read the classics. They also provided recitations and analyses regarding them.[157] The instructors of these institutions were often harsh masters, and the rod was an ever-present, and regularly realized, threat.

Due to his family's extreme wealth, Ambrose was most likely tutored by a private instructor, probably pagan, and thus spared from the tough primary education of lower classes. From this teacher, Ambrose would have been exposed to Seneca, Cicero, Plato, as well as Homer, and his knowledge of Sophocles and Euripides seems to come from Philo. He finished this schooling around the age of fifteen or sixteen, and moved on to a secondary education as many young men did who had the financial means to support such efforts. In the city of Rome, one could not only learn rhetoric at a school, or from a private tutor, but also law. Ambrose assuredly studied one, and possibly both of these

[157] Angelo Paredi, *Saint Ambrose: His Life and Times* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 2-18

disciplines because in approximately 365, he left for Sirmium to be a lawyer in the praetorian prefecture of Pannonia.[158]

After several years in Sirmium, he was appointed *consularis* of Aemilia-Liguria. The seat of power for this province was the city of Milan, and its bishop was a man by the name of Auxentius. As chief judge in the region, Ambrose intervened in a dispute over the bishopric after Auxentius died. Catholic and Arian factions were determined to see a bishop elected who was sympathetic to their own cause. Knowing that such controversies could easily descend into anger, and sometimes violence, Ambrose implored his community to stay calm, and in such a way that moved the citizens, substantially. A young boy is claimed to have yelled out: "Ambrose, bishop!", a declaration received with almost unanimous approval. The governor was surprised by this sudden change, and immediately took actions to reverse their endorsement. He first tried torturing some prisoners to create an illusion of wrathfulness; this was unsuccessful. Next, Ambrose attempted a more subdued approach; he argued that retirement into a life of philosophy was his only wish. After his request for sympathy fell on deaf ears, he hired prostitutes to walk with him in the streets, hoping to create a façade of licentiousness; this too failed.[159]

Surrendering to the realization that the people of Milan would not be fooled by his trickery, Ambrose took to flight, but was caught before he could leave the city. Not to be denied, he attempted a second escape which was somewhat successful. Ambrose hid on

[158] Ibid, 14-49
[159] Boniface Ramsey, "Paulinus of Milan: The life of Saint Ambrose," *Ambrose*, (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1997), 6-7

the estate of a man named Leontius, though he was eventually discovered and forced to return, lest Leontius suffer violations to his liberty and property.[160] For at this point, Valentinian had announced his approval of the people's choice, so resignation was the only option Ambrose was allowed.[161] His career in the church led him to the position of *exarch* or metropolitan, one of the highest offices of regional church bureaucracy.[162] His rank, and location in Milan, the seat of the Western Empire, helped make Ambrose the most powerful bishop of his time.[163] As a result, a substantial number of sermons, letters, and theological treatises were produced and have survived. The presence of Stoicism in these works directly correlate with the topic of discussion. When dealing with most theological matters, such as the mystery of the Trinity, or more bureaucratic concerns like those discussed in imperial correspondence, Ambrose's Stoicism is difficult to find, if it can be found at all. When discovered, their generalized and sparse nature make any claim towards a Stoic connection nothing more than conjecture. However, when the subject matter turns to death, and practical ethics (duty), the content and rhetorical style of Ambrose's writings become almost entirely Stoic. Four works fall under this classification, those being: *De Officiis Ministrorum*, Letter 63, addressed to the Christians at Vercellae, and *On the Death of Satyrus*, which transitions to a sermon *On the Resurrection*.

Ambrose's eulogy for his brother and sermon on the Resurrection are of most interest to this paper, for the bishop's Stoicism will show itself clearly, and at many points. Yet

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[160] *The Life of Saint Ambrose* 8-9
[161] Paredi, 23
[162] Bury, 52
[163] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 96-112

before diving into these two documents, we shall look at two other eulogies which might appear, at first, to shed doubt on the claim that Ambrose's view of death was completely Stoic. In addition, this section will conclude with an analysis of Letter 63 in order to provide further context for the arguments presented at the end of this section.

On the Deaths of Valentinian II and Theodosius

Valentinian II died under very suspicious circumstances at the age of 20. The official story is that he committed suicide, but many – Ambrose included – believed that he was murdered by Theodosius' top military commander in the West, Arbogast. However, Ambrose possessed no means to prove this claim, and thus eulogized Valentinian as though he had actually killed himself. Unsurprisingly, in the aftermath of his death, there was a tremendous amount of anxiety for all involved. The state of Valentinian's soul was in question due to the purported nature of his passing, and the fact that he had not yet received baptism. Ambrose did his best to ease this burden, using both Stoic and Christian reason to console his audience.

His praise for the emperor's Christian virtues sounds similar to that of the theologians discussed previously. Ambrose declares how rare it is for a man of Valentinian's age to be so concerned with the state of his soul.[164] The young emperor fasted often and remained chaste.[165] His religious zeal also led Valentinian to acts of great piety, namely continuing the ban on public subsidies for pagan worship which his brother, Gratian, had

[164] Ambrose, "On the Death of Valentinian II" and "On the Death of Theodosues", http://www.archive.org/stream/fathersofthechur012812mbp/fathersofthechur012812mbp_djvu.txt, (accessed Oct, 2015), *On the Death of Valentinian II* 10-15
[165] *The Death of Valentinian II* 16-18

enacted.[166] In an attempt to reverse the seemingly damning nature of the young sovereign's expiration, Ambrose likens it to the crucifixion of Christ; claiming that Valentinian sacrificed his life to save others from the struggle over the Western Empire, just as Jesus sacrificed himself for the souls of mankind.[167]

The less religious aspects of the bishop's speech will foreshadow the clear Stoicism found in the eulogy of Ambrose's brother. In these passages, Ambrose extols the emperor's commitment to justice. He cites a legal proceeding which involved Valentinian's two sisters and an unknown private citizen. As there was an obvious conflict of interest, Valentinian recused himself from the final appeal, and left the decision to an unbiased magistrate.[168] The emperor's sisters were a subject of some discussion in this oration. Naturally, the sudden and tragic death of their brother was a severe blow, and Ambrose's more Stoic assertions are directed toward them.

He begins by reassuring the sisters that it is natural to mourn, and that tears themselves bring a measure of relief. The bishop informs the sisters that he and the rest of the world lament the loss of their protector.[169] However, despite his understanding that tears are a common stage of grief, Ambrose tells them that they must focus instead on the pleasant memories of their brother because of the comfort derived therein.

After these gentle words of empathy, Ambrose makes the most Christian statement of the three eulogies under analysis. He boldly asserts that Valentinian is in Heaven and asks his sisters not to act as those "who have no hope," for to depart and be with Christ is

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[166] *The Death of Val. II* 19-20
[167] *The Death of Val. II* 34-35
[168] *The Death of Val. II* 37
[169] *The Death of Val. II* 1-5

far better.[170] This passage might appear to contradict the claim that Ambrose used only Stoic arguments when thinking about death. However, there is good reason to suspect otherwise, and a complete explanation will be provided in the conclusion of this section, once a full context of Ambrose's writings on this topic can be constructed. For the time being, one would do well to keep in mind the passage which follows shortly after the above appeal to Paradise. In it, the bishop reminds Valentinian's sisters that all people die at some point, and that they must bear with patience a fate which they have in common with the saints. Ambrose says that the emperor "was born a man, he was subject to human frailty." This request to keep in mind the realities of life will become much more prevalent in the eulogy of Satyrus.

The oration regarding the death of Theodosius is more of a footnote in this discussion because it contains no sections which pertain directly to the topic of this paper. Ambrose does outline the virtues of his favorite emperor, stating that despite being prone to unstoic displays of wrath, Theodosius was not prideful and often showed clemency. However, he states that the emperor used these emotional outbursts to keep himself from seeking active retribution, and much preferred to be loved than feared.[171] Furthermore, Theodosius loathed flatterers and was contemptuous of the fact that his station necessitated the constant donning of overly luxurious clothes.[172]

The discussion of the emperor's Christian virtues is equally brief. Ambrose praises his willingness to perform public penance for sins – most likely referring to the

[170] *The Death of Val. II* 43-46
[171] *On the Death of Emperor Theodosius* 12-13
[172] *The Death of Theo.* 34

punishment Ambrose handed down to him after the massacre at Thessalonica – and commends Theodosius' own practice of abstaining from the sacraments after a military engagement.[173]

Even though Ambrose saw much to admire in the actions of this orthodox emperor, when it comes to the sorrow surrounding his death, genuine or otherwise, Ambrose does not use a reference to Heaven to lighten the sadness of his passing. The bishop mentions Theodosius' arrival in Heaven several times, but this is only done to indicate how the emperor's pious reign made him worthy of the most exalted entrance into Paradise:

> Thus freed from an uncertain struggle, Theodosius of august memory now enjoys perpetual light and lasting tranquility, and in return for what he did in this body he rejoices in the fruits of a divine reward. Therefore, because Theodosius of august memory loved the Lord his God, he has merited the companionship of the saints.[174]

Ambrose claims that Theodosius has ascended to rule in Heaven with Jesus.[175] Yet this fact is presented as the grand consequence of a pious life, and not as a consolatory truth.

On the Decease of his Brother Satyrus

Ambrose experienced one major tragedy in his life which devastated him quite significantly. While his brother, Satyrus, was returning from a trip overseas, his ship sank. Being a fairly able swimmer, Satyrus managed to find his way ashore, safely. Soon after returning home, he contracted a severe fever and nearly died. However, after experiencing a modest recovery, Satyrus suddenly succumbed to fever yet again, but this time he would not wake up. Ambrose's brother was his personal secretary and dearest

[173] *The Death of Theo.* 34
[174] *The Death of Theo.* 32
[175] *The Death of Theo.* 40

friend, and after dealing with such a sudden loss, the tenets of Stoicism found their way into the eulogy of his closest confidant, and to quite an extreme degree. For these tenets are precisely designed to come to the aid of those who suffer, thusly. In fact, in this work, Ambrose's Stoicism is found on its fullest display. As was stated in the introduction, if one read this speech without knowing the identity of the speaker, one would be shocked to learn that they were the words of a Christian theologian.

The eulogy begins with some very somber admissions from Ambrose which clearly correspond to Stoic concepts regarding fate and attachment to fortune. He tells his listeners that all things must die, and that we cannot stop what nature has given to all in common.[176] Ambrose states that God, who is the "Author" of nature, lends to all, and that one must understand that God can therefore take away those whom we love at any time. The bishop continues by saying that, instead of dwelling on the tragedy, he must try and be thankful for the years he did have with his brother.[177] Ambrose's Stoicism falters for a moment as he describes at length how difficult it is to live these truths. In his grief, he declares that life without his brother is almost unbearable.[178] Yet Ambrose regains his composure as he explains that this sadness can be overcome with the gratitude he mentioned earlier, stating: "the mark of a prudent man is to know himself, and, as it has been defined by the wise, to live in accordance with nature… what then is so much in

[176] Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Saint Ambrose* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), *The Decease of his Brother Satyrus* I. 4
[177] *The Decease of Satyrus* I. 3
[178] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 35

accordance with nature as to be grateful to the creator."[179] This is a profoundly Stoic position to take, and it is not the only example.

Ambrose moves on from the topic of his own spiritual struggle to that of his brother, and begins to outline all the characteristics which made Satyrus the most virtuous individual he ever knew. The bishop states that his brother was a man of moderate and sober mind, who rejected flattery, lust, and anger in order to embrace modesty. Additionally, wealth was a luxury which Satyrus apparently treated with more than the average detachment because Ambrose stays on the topic for several sections. He claims that this brother did not desire riches and did not trust those who held money above personal contentment.[180] Ambrose provides the example of how Satyrus would handle the entertainment of guests at his house. He says that when hosting a dinner, his brother would provide only what was "sufficient to nature," and never presented a feast which was meant to shock with superabundance or impress simply for pleasure's sake.[181] For Satyrus, real happiness comes when a rich man "neither delights in his riches, or a poor man view his wealth as scanty."[182] Ambrose says that his brother's indifference toward monetary concerns, and general pursuit of justice, is shown in Satyrus' many charitable donations, along with his belief that he had a duty to protect the interest of the poor.[183] Ultimately, the bishop states that his brother's life was an "exemplification of the cardinal virtues."[184]

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[179] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 45
[180] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 51-55
[181] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 56
[182] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 56
[183] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 60
[184] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 56

The eulogy concludes with a return to the overarching Stoic concepts Ambrose used in the introductory sections, specifically that of perspective. He admits that he did not – and *should not* – have prayed for God to spare the life of his brother, regardless of how much he wished Satyrus was still with him. He insists that there is a kind of hypocrisy in expecting outcomes from life which are daily denied to others.[185] As the final two sections come to a close, Ambrose tells his listeners that it is nature's way to bring things into being, and to take them away. One must not, therefore, mourn a "private sorrow" which is merely the "common lot of nature."[186]

On the Belief in the Resurrection

The eulogy of Satyrus transitions into a 'second book' which was recited at mass the following week. It outlines the theological doctrine of the resurrection after death. This work is the only example of substantial Stoic sentiment found in a theological treatise written by Ambrose. The Stoicism within this sermon will differ little in comparison to the ideas discussed in the above eulogy, although their application will obviously focus on theological, rather than practical claims.

Ambrose begins by restating an earlier observation, namely that one should not grieve for the dead, for it is the "common course of nature."[187] As a result of this commonality, it is not "hard" to die because death awaits everyone.[188] This truth is very important to Ambrose, so much so that he repeats the concluding idea of his brother's eulogy, stating

[185] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 65
[186] *The Dec. of Sat.* I. 66-67
[187] *On the Belief in the Resurrection* II. 3
[188] *On the Res.* II. 3

that people need not deem that which is the common lot of nature to be any kind of special misfortune. Instead, one must learn to accept the fellowship which nature has extended to all. The bishop asserts that God is the author of death just as much as he is the author of life, and that individuals should rely on wisdom and reason to console and moderate their suffering.[189] One must remember that those who die are freed from the cares of this world, and thus overt displays of sorrow are immoderate and unseemly.[190]

After these refresher sections relating to how his listeners are supposed to view death, Ambrose moves on to the Resurrection, its scriptural justification, and more importantly, its intellectual superiority. Due to the strictly theological nature of this section of the text, Stoic rhetoric in these passages ebbs and flows, along with his own intellectual consistency. This could be due to his own limitations as a theologian, or the natural conflict between the Stoic and Christian worldviews. Regardless of which is the efficient cause, one will find Ambrose at times to be, quite frankly, confusing and occasionally self-contradictory.

Ambrose transitions to a discussion of the Resurrection by criticizing pagan philosophers who think that death is nothing to be feared because it marks the end of suffering, is simply a law of nature, or that the soul is in fact immortal. Ambrose laments that if only these people were "consistent" and did not "transmit the wretched soul into a number of ludicrous monstrosities of the soul."[191] This line can only be described as utterly confounding, for Ambrose uses the first two claims, exactly, to curb his own grief,

[189] *On the Res.* II. 4-8
[190] *On the Res.* II. 11-12, 18
[191] *On the Res.* II. 50

and as a Christian, he also believes that the soul is immortal. Perhaps his bemoaning is due to the fact that pagans use only one or two of these arguments instead of all three, but Ambrose is in no way clear on this except for his discussion of the soul. He says that philosophers who claim the soul is *just* immortal are wrong because they do not take into consideration the need for justice or redemption; the fate of the sinner and the saint are the same.[192] Moreover, some philosophers argue that the soul is made immortal through reincarnation. Ambrose states that this, too, is in err because reincarnation is "contrary to nature," whose cycle of death and rebirth clearly suggests resurrection.[193] Ignoring the obvious problem that both reincarnation and resurrection logically coincide with a death-rebirth analogy, Ambrose does use a Stoic appeal, asking his audience to consider what seems to make the most "natural" sense. In keeping with this device, when describing who participates in the Resurrection, itself, Ambrose uses an appeal to nature yet again. He says that life after death is the "common lot" of all and that "the fruit of the divine mercy is common to all, but the order of merit differs."[194] In fact, for Ambrose, all people – believers and nonbelievers alike – will be resurrected because Jesus "wills not to reject, but to amend the foolish, and desires not to exclude the hard-hearted from the church, but to soften them." He cites Paul's Letter to the Corinthians as proof of this truth.[195]

[192] *On the Res.* II. 126
[193] *On the Res.* II. 130
[194] *On the Res.* II. 92
[195] *On the Res.* II. 92

Epistle LXIII
(To the Christians at Vercellae, Concerning their Empty Bishopric)

De Officiis is by far the densest of Ambrose's works when it comes to Stoic language regarding ethics, however, the letter to the Vercellae congregation is arguably the most interesting. This correspondence, written at nearly the end of Ambrose's life (A.D. 396), shows that his Stoic sensibilities were with him all the way to the end. The letter, itself, is quite long, and echoes all of the topics outlined in *De Officiis*. The length and substantive nature of the text is most likely due to the fact that Ambrose was aware of the two monks – Barbatianus and Sarmatio – who were vying for the empty seat, and, to put it bluntly, he was not impressed. Apparently, these two men believed that chastity, fasting, and poverty were not necessary for a good Christian life.[196] Ambrose, therefore, more than likely felt a pressing need to go into detail for the flock at Vercellae – his general tendency to force his opinion on others notwithstanding – to ensure they made an appropriate decision.[197] Barbatianus and Sarmatio are fascinating characters in their own right, but as far as history is concerned, they merely serve as a reason for Ambrose to show his Stoic colors once again.

After expressing his condolences regarding the loss of their shepherd, and the lengthy interregnum, Ambrose commends them for trying to seek a collective decision.[198] Yet, he does not mask his opinion of the two frontrunners with any type of rhetorical etiquette. Ambrose denounces Barbatianus and Sarmatio for their beliefs, stating: "… is there

[196] *Epistle LXIII* 7
[197] Avril Cameron, *The Late Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75
[198] *Epist. LXIII* 1-6

anything more reprobate as that which excites to luxury, to corruption, to wantonness, as the incentive to lust, the enticer to pleasure…" and then in typical Stoic fashion, he condemns them as "Epicureans."[199]

This choice of labeling may have been more than simple hyperbole because Ambrose continues the argument against them from the position of secular philosophy. He uses the example of other philosophical schools – though he mentions none, specifically – to show that such Epicurean ideas are looked upon disapprovingly by other philosophers. Ambrose states that many lovers of wisdom believe there is nothing sweeter in life than "sober discussion," and claims that "in other places they also say: it is not excessive banquettes, nor drinking which give rise to the enjoyment of pleasure, but a life of temperance[200] … and is temperance not agreeable to nature, and to the Divine Law?"[201] Given the content of these quotations, it is possible that Barbatianus and Sarmatio were in fact Epicureans of some degree. Though the thought of an 'Epicurean monk' seems silly on its face, followers of the school are not complete hedonists. The pursuit of pleasure is supposed to be controlled by reason. However, it is doubtful that Ambrose gave the appropriate amount of deference to such subtleties, considering Stoicism and Christianity's natural antagonism to the school. He may have been confused about what the two monks really believed, or simply attempted to make them look worse that they truly were. Either way, these are tangential concerns because Ambrose uses this

[199] *Epist. LXIII* 8
[200] *Epist. LXIII* 19
[201] *Epist. LXIII* 27

opportunity to elucidate the qualities of a proper bishop, and it is here that his Stoicism is on full display once more.

In response to the possibility that such beliefs could come to power in a diocese, he explains to the congregation at Vercellae that a true bishop has a strong mind which seeks virtue and moderates lust.[202] Furthermore, a leader of the church should be free from vanity, sloth, and gossip.[203] Instead, he must be empathetic, quick to forgive, and more importantly, a bishop should maintain complete control over his anger.[204] As has been discussed, wrath is a vice of particular disdain to the Stoics, and Ambrose's following comment on it reveals the true source of his revulsion. He admits that it is natural to become angry at times, but such passions must be restrained because "a wrathful man diggeth up sin… therefore, even though we are angry, let our passion admit only such emotion as is according to nature…"[205] For Ambrose, a man who rules other should be able to rule himself.[206]

The bishop moves this conversation about virtue to the subject of money. Here his rhetoric takes on both a Christian and Stoic style. He states that true Christians must not be concerned with coveting wealth because at some point they will be dead, and the only thing which will save them from God's judgment is a virtuous soul. "Do not trust in riches," Ambrose tells the reader, "for all such things are to be left here."[207] Yet this Christian mindset makes a hard pivot to Stoicism shortly after. For he also states that a

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[202] *Epist. LXIII* 32-39
[203] *Epist. LXIII* 43
[204] *Epist. LXIII* 59
[205] *Epist. LXIII* 60
[206] *Epist. LXIII* 60
[207] *Epist. LXIII* 86-87

church leader must be humble and prudent in the face of great wealth because "the law of nature is sufficiently rich for all, according to which, one may soon find what is more than enough… Poverty then is not in nature, but in our own feelings, and so to find oneself rich is easy for nature…"[208]

There is one final example of Stoic doctrine in the Vercellae letter, namely Ambrose's description of spiritual struggles and why they occur. He orients this explanation in a way similar to the style of Seneca, who often analogized gladiatorial combat to illustrate how individuals must look at life's challenges as opportunities to show their virtue. Ambrose writes that people who deal with frustrations in life are like spiritual athletes whom God tests with trials in order for them to learn how to triumph over wickedness.[209] He urges his readers not to wish for future graces as a reward for past accomplishments, but to work always in the present and seek not ease.[210] More importantly than all this, however, Ambrose argues that such adversity is a natural part of life, and should not be seen as a consequence of sin.[211]

Conclusions

The four theologians analyzed in Section Three wrote about the deaths of hermits, ecclesiastical peers, and aristocratic laymen. The Christian and pagan ideas mentioned within the documents came and went depending on who was listening, who was writing, and who died. However, the general focus on Christian ideas is obvious, and no more so

[208] *Epist. LXIII* 90
[209] *Epist. LXIII* 71
[210] *Epist. LXIII* 99
[211] *Epist. LXIII* 85

than the reliance on Heaven as recompense for the sufferings of this world, both for the deceased and those who yet remain.

Ambrose stands out in this group because such Christian language is absent from a sizable percentage of his writings. One could present an argument that even his final discussion of the Resurrection's universality possesses Stoic elements. After all, Stoicism is a very ecumenical philosophy: Nature's divine reason is present in all people, therefore everyone can obtain virtue and happiness. Despite this potential synthesis on the part of Ambrose, St. Paul also took this position, and even though individuals like Thorsteinsson, and others, have argued for the presence of Stoicism in Paul's writings, their discussion is limited only to ethics. The Christian writer, Origin, held the belief that the Resurrection was universal as well. Did Origin receive this idea from Paul, or was it due to some other factor? The web of possible intellectual connections begins to compound, rapidly, and thus any conclusion as to why Ambrose arrives at this position would be tenuous at best given the limitations of this paper. Be that as it may, Stoic rhetoric still abounds in the eulogy of his brother. Ambrose consistently rationalizes his ideas through the Stoic claim of "accordance to nature" and his discussion of the virtuous man – in this case Satyrus – echoes the Stoic virtues he outlines in *De Officiis*, as well as his letter to the congregation at Vercellae.

Yet more important than the verbiage used, is the perspective employed. In the eulogy of his brother, Ambrose sees death in very realistic terms, and this contrasts clearly with the ideas expressed by his contemporaries. He never tries to sidestep the issue of grief with an appeal to Heaven, even though as a Christian, Ambrose is supposed

to believe he will see his brother again. The bishop never tells his followers that their grief is almost unnecessary due to the Resurrection, or that too much sadness is a potential sign of a lack of faith. Rather, he treats his listeners as mature adults who must understand that death is a *natural* part of life, and that if one understands the process fully, then *wisdom* and *reason* will ultimately allow one to see that they are merely one part of a larger system. As a result, excessive grief merely becomes a sign of a lack of virtue and proper contextualization.

There is also no mention of the Christian asceticism discussed by the other theologians. One of the major concerns of Stoicism is living a life of moderation. Luxury, sloth, and over-indulgence, along with their opposites: voluntary poverty, as well as perpetual overexertion and fasting, were all viewed as unnecessary extremes which bred not virtue, but vice and an overdeveloped sense of one's own importance. Christians, on the other hand, were *encouraged* to live lives at one end of this spectrum. Fasting, chastity, penury, along with persistent toil and prayer were all seen as the greatest activities a human could undertake in this world. Yet it is the former Stoic virtues which Ambrose, the beatified Christian bishop, outlines as his brother's greatest attributes.

Though his fellows in the Eastern Empire mentioned the kinds of pagan virtues which could be linked to Stoicism, and at times admit that moderation is a more prudent road to follow, they all refuse to do anything but praise the actions of their fallen hermits, no matter how severe their style of religion. Meanwhile, Ambrose primarily talks about pagan virtues, their conformity with nature, and that these two things alone made Satyrus

the *most virtuous person* he had ever known. Here the bishop does more than simply state the importance of these principles; he places them above the quasi-masochism so vaunted by his contemporaries. Along with this focus on Stoic virtues, Ambrose also makes a quite shocking claim in the eulogy of his brother. He admits that he did not pray for God to save Satyrus' life, but more significantly, that he *should not* have prayed for such a miracle. The bishop states that it is a sign of immense childishness to beg God for preferential treatment when countless other worthy people are denied it, daily. This condemnation of such a common Christian practice is one of the most unchristian things a bishop could say during this period. Admittedly, in Ambrose eulogies of Valentinian II and Theodosius, it is clear that Stoicism is far less prevalent. However, when taking into consideration its repeated use in the eulogy to Satyrus, one should view these two other funeral orations with a careful eye. The notion that ascension into Heaven should ease the sadness of a loved-one's passing is stated, literally, only *one* time over the course of three lengthy eulogies. Some reasonable and simple explanations can be offered to explicate this issue. The deaths of Valentinian and Theodosius were public tragedies, and Valentinian's was extremely controversial. The laws of rhetoric and eloquence, as well as political necessity, could easily have demanded that Ambrose connect with his audience, even if that meant on a somewhat superficial level.

Valentinian's oration is the strongest potential counterpoint to the claim that Ambrose's conceptualization of death was strictly Stoic, for in that work he specifically mentions Heaven in an attempt to ease the pain of his listeners. However, the political realities, as well as the sordid nature of his sovereign's demise, make this circumstance

quite exceptional. Both the state, and surviving family, were under incredible stress; Valentinian's sisters despaired over the fate of his soul, while everyone else despaired over the possible fate of the empire. In the midst of this moment of stress and uncertainty, it was Ambrose's responsibility to bring some measure of relief. In light of this, the bishop's use of Heaven as a cathartic tool is unsurprising, especially when one considers that the emperor's sisters thought their brother may have been murdered – or worse; committed self-slaughter – before baptism. For all they knew, Valentinian was in Hell.

The argument that Ambrose was consciously trying to calm the darkest fears of the emperor's relations is bolstered by his claim that Valentinian was actually in Heaven. He stated that the young man had expressed a desire to be baptized, and Ambrose had agreed to perform the ceremony at Valentinian's earliest convenience. However, the bishop claims that because his sovereign passed away prematurely, the simple desire for baptism allowed Ambrose to retroactively purify his soul through holy fiat. Speaking of Valentinian, he says:

> You yourself sought of me the testimony of a glorious judgement. I was not able to present myself as a surety for you, as I was preparing to do. Yet, though absent, I declared my intention, and Christ heard me state that I was a surety in your behalf. My consent is binding in Heaven, even though it is not binding on earth.[212]

The bishop of Milan is, understandably, bending the rules, and asserting his authority; two things he was generally not averse to doing.[213]

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[212] *On the Death of Val. II* 63

[213] A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: 284-602 (Volume Two)* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 888

Theodosius' eulogy is also devoid of any substantive philosophical language due to the political realities of the period, and the circumstances of his death. In this instance, the passing of the emperor was far from unexpected, since he died at an old age and after a period of overexertion which left him physically weak. Ambrose and the empire were in yet another state of suspense because Theodosius' sons were relatively young – the oldest, Arcadius, was about as old as Valentinian II was on the day of his death – and his top military commanders were powerful and potentially ambitious. Taking into consideration the events of Valentinian's murder or suicide, it should be expected that Ambrose opened his funeral oration with an expatiation of how important it was for those who honored Theodosius to honor his sons.[214] And when he does mention the emperor's entrance into Paradise, the scene is never characterized in such a way as to imply that this state of affairs ought to stem the anguish of the audience.

The only counterargument left which holds some weight on this subject is the length of time which separates the death of Satyrus and the two emperors. Valentinian and Theodosius died two decades after the bishop's brother, leaving more than enough time for a reevaluation of principles. It is possible that Ambrose's Stoicism diminished over the course of his life. This is a reasonable position which admits of no easy answer due to the highly political nature of the two later eulogies. Plus, Ambrose's letter to the Vercellae congregation – written after the deaths of Valentinian and Theodosius – contains an extremely dense collection of Stoic rhetoric, proving that much of the philosophy was still with him in his final years. This casts much doubt on the counter

[214] *On the Death of Theo.* 1-8

argument that Ambrose's Stoicism faded. However, this correspondence deals primarily with the proper virtues of a Christian clergyman, and does not touch on notions of death and how to properly view its presence on one's life. So, in one respect, Stoicism was obviously still a part of Ambrose worldview in his twilight years, but it is unclear as to whether or not the Stoic conceptualization of mortality was a part of that perspective. One would not be irrational to assume that since the letter shows the bishop held strong to every other Stoic idea, Ambrose did so with the philosophy's notion of death as well.

These two later eulogies are, in some sense, the exceptions which prove the rule; not so much because they are outnumbered by examples in the affirmative, but because of the context in which they were written. The deaths of the two emperors were public misfortunes which held tremendous temporal, and in the case of Valentinian, spiritual consequences. Furthermore, both of these eulogies were intended for widespread circulation throughout the empire.[215] The death of Satyrus, meanwhile, was free of any tangential political realities which required careful navigation. It was, quite simply, a personal tragedy, and Ambrose had every opportunity to acknowledge Heaven as the salutary outcome of his brother's death; and his family, along with his flock, would have taken no exception to it. Yet, at this moment of tremendous personal sorrow, the words Ambrose employs to console *himself* are highly Stoic.

As much as he may have admired the orthodox sovereigns of his day, the death of Satyrus brings forth the most honest emotional writing of all three orations; largely devoid of forced grandiloquence. By comparison, the imperial eulogies seem, at times,

[215] *On the Death of Val.* (first footnote)

comprised of much rhetorical “filler” which adds yet another level of doubt that Ambrose was speaking completely form the heart.

Final Thoughts

The prevalence of Stoicism in the works of Ambrose, as well as the second-hand Stoicism which occasionally appears in his colleagues' writings, brings an interesting subpoint to the topic of this paper. The transitional nature of Late Antiquity creates a significant level of intellectual entanglement. Even though Christianity was slowly becoming the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, pagan philosophy still held considerable sway in the academic world. Christians who attended these prestigious schools came in contact with the prevailing philosophical fashions of the day. Many historians have commented that by the 3rd and early 4th centuries, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism had been supplanted as the main schools of pagan wisdom by the resurgence of Platonism. Edward Gibbon went so far as to say the old schools were abandoned for Neoplatonism, and the reason for this was that continual conflict with Christianity had kindled a new religious fervor in paganism that the distant and possibly non-existent God of the old schools could not fully satisfy.[216] This rise in pagan superstition has been discussed by A.H.M Jones, Peter Brown, Avril Cameron, and countless others.

Jones argues that even though most pagan philosophers were either pantheists or monotheists, this did not mean they were completely unmoved by the traditional customs of polytheism. Furthermore, their belief in a singular deity did not rule out the possibility that they could have seen the old gods as caretakers of the universe, or that the stories

[216] Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol: II (395 A.D. – 1185 A.D.)* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc.), 487

about them held some kind of metaphoric significance. The quasi-religious nature of this style of belief intersects neatly with Neoplatonism.[217] Cameron claims that Neoplatonism was the only serious challenger to Christianity.[218] She cites Julian's fascination with the school while under pagan influence in Nicomedia and Athens as signs of its dominating presence.[219] Moreover, its supernatural ideas about union with God and the need for ascetic living made it the main opposition to Christianity all the way up to the closing of the Academy in 529 A.D.[220] Brown speaks less of its success in the academy and more about the particulars which made it so inviting. He describes how the new Platonist movement stood as a rejection of the more dire notions of body and soul propagated by many Christian sects. For these philosophers, the physical world is not the source of evil, or some byproduct of malevolent forces, but a representation of the One Divinity which allows the soul to express itself.[221]

All of these historians admit that Neoplatonism was largely a philosophy for the well-educated. So it is reasonable to believe that if educated Christians relied on any kind of Pagan school of philosophy when talking to their well-educated friends, then Neoplatonic ideas would be normal, if not ever-present, in their correspondences. Yet, in all these letters, general philosophical language is used which sometimes borders on Stoicism, except in the case of Ambrose, whose writings substantially correspond to Stoic thought. Even though Cameron points to the Neoplatonist Maximus of Ephesus, as the main

[217] Jones, *The Later Roman Empire,* 957
[218] Cameron, *The Late Roman Empire,* 80
[219] Ibid, 89
[220] Ibid, 165
[221] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity,* 74

contributor to Julian's apostasy, Jones discusses how pagan ethics and Christian ethics were very similar;[222] and Gibbon writes about Julian's desire that all pagan priests read Stoic philosophy, along with the fact that the last pagan emperor referred to Marcus Aurelius as the greatest of Roman rulers precisely because of his philosophical character.[223] Some of Neoplatonism's influence may therefore be overstated because its focus was mainly on metaphysics and cosmology, whereas Stoicism was concerned about such topics only secondarily, focusing primarily on practical morality instead. These documents, especially those of Ambrose, stand as evidence against the claim since so much of the ethical conversations contained within suggest that the old schools had not been washed away by a flood of Neoplatonism. Jerome, Gregory, Basil, and Chrysostom, praise the asceticism promulgated by Christians and contemporary Platonists, but sometimes moderation also; their reasoning is mostly Christian, but sometimes generically pagan as well as Stoic. In Ambrose's works, Christianity often takes a back seat to pagan ideas which are in no way Neoplatonic. The truth may be that Epicureanism, Cynicism, and Stoicism were simply forced to make room for a popular new school of metaphysics.[224]

It is certainly possible to be a Neoplatonist when it comes to cosmology, and a Stoic when it comes to living well. Collish refers to Neoplatonism as a very eclectic philosophy.[225] The general rise in metaphysical superstition, especially in the educated

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[222] Jones, *The Later Roman Empire,* 970
[223] Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol: I (180 A.D. – 395 A.D.)* (New York, NY: Random House, Inc.), 770-799
[224] Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy,* 182
[225] Collish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages,* 144

classes, is certainly true. Men like Seneca or Marcus may well have looked at the theurgy and 'miracles' of Maximus as plebeian, if not utterly childish. Yet this still does not mean that the two schools were mutually exclusive. Julian is a singular example of this truth. He was heavily influenced by Platonic thinkers, but mandated that pagan priests read only a select range of philosophy, and Stoicism was placed within it. Furthermore, in Julian's work *The Caesars*, he proclaims the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius as the greatest of them all precisely because he sought to bring philosophy and humility to the office. Even as late as the 6th century, Boethius wrote about being visited by the goddess of Philosophy, whose dress was torn and tattered by the schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism. Both of which had grasped at her wisdom, though only managed to take pieces of it.[226] If Neoplatonism was the last gasp of pagan philosophy, why did this very educated Christian bureaucrat deem it unworthy of any mention? Why was it not, at the very least, included as one of the great, but flawed schools of pagan thought? Three hundred years after the supposed death of Epicureanism and Stoicism, and their usurpation by another, they were still considered the two standards of pagan wisdom. Now, this could be due to the possibility that Boethius was a closeted Neoplatonist, himself. A reading of the last chapter of *Consolations of Philosophy* suggests that this may be true, although most of the book reads like a Stoic manifesto. This is tangential to the issue, however, for he also lists the writings of Zeno as part of the education which made him a proper intellectual.[227] The simple fact that Stoicism bore

[226] Boethius, *Consolations of Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), I. iii
[227] *Consolation of Philosophy* I. i

mentioning long after its purported demise, and was still standard literature, does more to suggest that news of its death by the end of the 3rd century may be somewhat exaggerated.

As it relates to Late Antique Christians such as Ambrose, the sources under investigation in Section Two show that the Stoics were fixated on tempering the struggles of this life by living according to virtue and Nature's plan for the individual. This pantheistic conception of Nature as a deterministic force, though an indifferent one in some respects, led these philosophers to precise conclusions when meditating on humanity's unavoidable collision with oblivion. It was necessary for such a philosopher to understand that since Nature's will is supremely good in the aggregate, death must not be an evil. At worst, death is a trivial matter which must be approached with a certain level of haughtiness, since its entrance into one's life cannot be avoided, and its will is universally imposed on all. At best, however, death is a motivating force which provides an individual with the inspiration to live, to seek virtue as often as possible. For the Stoics, death is an absolutely necessary process which gives life purpose, and meeting it with courage is the final act of a virtuous and rational soul. Moreover, after the passing of a cherished companion, sorrow was mitigated by the understating that all things must die, and is thus the inevitable end of a life (hopefully) well lived.

From the Christian perspective, this life too was a struggle, although of a different kind. Christians were in a cosmic war for their souls, and any ethical mishap of sufficient severity could doom them to an eternity of torment, while a life of purity was rewarded with never-ending bliss. This type of spiritual position creates a dissimilar outlook on

life. In this belief system, death is either the absolute worst or best thing to ever happen to a person, depending, of course, on where one finds oneself on the other side. As Christian leaders confronted the sorrow felt by those dealing with loss, this difference in worldview makes itself apparent. When it comes to the death of a soul which is saved, sadness was seen as understandable, but ultimately unnecessary since Christ's gift now awaited it. Additionally, in the case of the damned, sadness was completely inappropriate for a sinner.

As the scholars in Section One have illustrated, there are important similarities between the ethical beliefs of Christians and Stoics. Both systems urge their followers to shun anger and excess, as well as gossip and hubris. This means that when any Christian speaks about proper moral conduct, he or she is going to sound like a Stoic at least some of the time. This connectivity makes an analysis of a given Christian's potential Stoic influences a singular challenge – as the debate over Paul's writings shows. Yet, when it comes to the philosophical ideas surrounding death, similarities between Christian and Stoic rhetoric *should* disappear. This is why Ambrose's Stoicism is so interesting, because though his thoughts on virtue are heavily imbued with Stoic concepts, this influence continues when Ambrose gave his most personal discussion of untimely death. This separates him quite distinctly from his episcopal contemporaries.

Ambrose also straddles these two positions in a way which makes him fairly exceptional. When looking at how fervently he resisted his appointment – and that many of his peers questioned the level of his orthodoxy early on – it is not shocking to read his Christian writings and find they are not always Christian. The man was a highly

educated bureaucrat who was shanghaied into the episcopate. Though it was very common for priests and new bishops to be forced into religious office, many of the other examples – some referenced in this paper – are of men who were already planning out a solitary and ascetic Christian life, only to have their fortunes changed forever by the will of the people. The lengths Ambrose took to avoid such a fate were extreme and very unusual. At a point of exasperation, he admitted to the Christians of Milan that he just wanted to retire to a life of philosophy, and attempted two separate flights from which he only returned due to threat of sanction against his concealer. Ambrose seems to have never wanted the job, and his clear acquiescence does more to suggest that his faith was not as complete as those men who wanted nothing more than to go out and live in the desert.[228] His intelligence was more than capable of allowing him to "play the part."

The fact that this bishop wielded so much influence while alive, and has remained relevant in Christian history, places him in a very unique position. At times, Ambrose's Stoic sympathies flirted with heresy, yet despite a few Arian confrontations, he sailed through his ecclesiastical career quite unmolested – all while successfully commanding an emperor to stay out of his church, and denying an empress authority over it. Quite a feat for a man who only accepted the responsibility with great reluctance and, ironically, at the command of an emperor.

[228] This is also because monasticism was still in its infant stages in the West.

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