# Introduction

> The problem with being a historical theologian is that one always feels out of place. When I am with theologians I feel more like an historian and when I am with historians I feel more like a theologian.
>
> —A paraphrase of Hans Frei related to me by Bill Placher

This book is a project in historical theology that explores the evolution of the idea of moral greatness. From the eclectic period of Hellenistic thought at the end of Classical antiquity to the polemical period of cultural contest between Christianity and paganism called late antiquity, the language commonly employed to describe an individual possessed of supreme virtue was "the great-souled man."[1] Although not exactly false cognates, the modern English words "magnanimous" or "magnanimity" do not capture the full sense of their etymological origins. For, when contemporary English speakers describe someone as being "magnanimous" or possessing the quality of "magnanimity" they usually mean that the person is gracious, generous, and/or above pettiness. While great-souled men – and in the Classical and late antique mind they were almost exclusively *men* – might indeed be extremely gracious, even to an enemy, μεγαλοψυχία or *magnanimitas* denoted so much more: namely a preeminence of character that can only be expressed in terms of sheer "greatness." The closest expression of the ideal in American vernacular is when someone pays tribute to a man who has gone above and beyond the call of duty in being generous by saying "He is real prince." Here the egalitarian language of a democratic society is replaced for the moment at least with the archaic language of aristocracy and royalty, a prince – one who possesses a greatness, materially and morally, surpassing the common citizen. Such language is an unconscious reversion to the original sense of μεγαλοψυχία that Aristotle used to describe the quality of the warrior-princes who lead the Greek expedition against Troy narrated in Homer's epics. Yet, while the Homeric heroes conferred benefits on their homelands and their compatriots in arms by their martial prowess, "generosity" and "mercy" are not adjectives immediately associated with Achilles and Ajax or even Odysseus.

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[1] In Greek ὁ μεγαλόψυχος and in Latin *magnus animus* – whose quality of excellence was termed μεγαλοψυχία or either *magnitudo animi* or *magnanimitas* ("greatness of soul").

That "generosity" and "mercy" are the primary modern synonyms of "magnanimity" is evidence of a real cultural shift between Classical antiquity and the present understanding of "greatness." Indeed, our understanding of those whom we deem a real "prince" is likely to include not only a judgment about generosity but also about modesty or humility, whereas while the epic heroes may be generous, they certainly are not modest or humble. In whatever way such figures appear on the contemporary cultural radar – one thinks of Brad Pitt's performance as Achilles in the 2004 motion picture *Troy* or later military heroes who, to a greater or lesser degree, follow the archetype provided by Homer – there is often a softening or refining of the ideal. At some basic level, this book narrates the shift of meaning and the shift of cultural values that it represents. Not surprisingly, I locate that shift in the rise of Christianity and the re-formation of Latin culture in the late fourth and fifth centuries – that period, as R. A. Markus puts it, which witnessed the conversion, not only of the Roman religious culture, "but also [of] the framework of thought, imagination, and discourse within which it could be interpreted."[2]

That *magnanimitas* did not pass away with the cultural shift but has been retained, albeit with a transformed meaning, is also evidence that Christian moralists did not abandon the language of pagan virtue theory that was foundational in their own moral and intellectual formation as teachers of rhetoric or litigators in basilicas or magistrates in the imperial civil administration. As pastors and catechists, these early moral theologians recognized Jesus' indictment of the core ideals of pagan culture when he rebuked the disciples for discussing "who was the greatest [μείζων]" (Mk 9:34), saying, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over [κατακυριεύουσιν] them and their great

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[2] R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 15.

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men [οἱ μεγάλοι] exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you" (Mk 10:42–43).[3] At the same time, I want to demonstrate that the changing meaning of greatness and of the ideal of the great-souled man was not entirely the work of Christians, but rose out of a tension within Classical thought between the apologists and reformers of Homeric virtue, chiefly Aristotle, and the critics of the Homeric tradition, chiefly Plato. This book will trace the development of both the Classical ideal of the great-souled man among non-Christian philosophers from the fourth century BC to the early second century AD and the later appropriation, adaptation, and critique of the pagan ideal by two of Latin Christianity's most important moral theologians, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo. The thesis I will argue here is that Ambrose and Augustine retain the language of *magnanimitas* and *magnus animus* to speak of the noblest forms of Christian virtue – a life often different from the pagans in degree of emphasis rather than type. At the same time, their use of the terms carries an implicit, and at times explicit, rejection of the Classical ideal of greatness – a rejection similar to the Platonic critique of the Homeric and proleptically the Aristotelean ideal – by their inversion of human greatness within a theocentric account of greatness. Consequently, in Ambrose and Augustine's writings we see competing visions of virtue between the self-aggrandizing aspirations to *dignitas* and *gloria* among the Roman elite or would-be elite and the alternative Christian vision of virtue as the imitation of God's greatness in humility and compassion. Perhaps nowhere in patristic literature is the conflict between human pride with its delusions of grandeur and the true greatness of the Lord as starkly dramatized as in Augustine's *Confessions* that, not accidentally, opens with the words of Psalm 47:2 "Magnus es Domine" ("Great are you, Lord").

The classic study of *magnanimitas* was the work of the Dominican scholar R.-A. Gauthier, *Magnanimité: L'Idéal de la Grandeur dans la Philosophie Païenne et dans la Théologie Chrétienne* from 1951. The goal of Gauthier's project was to overcome the dichotomous views of the Classical ideal of greatness as either so thoroughly pagan as to be incompatible with Christianity or only capable of being incorporated into

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[3] Epiphanius, interpreting the Matthean parallel 18:1–5, takes Jesus' words as a restraining of worldly ambition. See *On the Interpretation of the Gospels* 27 (PLS3:866–867) as quoted in *The Church's Bible: Matthew*, trans. D. H. Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 354–355.

Christian thought through heroic efforts, such as those of Thomas Aquinas.[4] Instead he begins by recognizing the two forms of pagan greatness, either in the life of action that seeks glory through victories and conquests or the life of tranquility and introspection through philosophy, which patristic theologians then transposed and united in terms of the life of spiritual engagement with the world and the life of spiritual contemplation. In the latter case, the ideal of greatness is at one moment, Gauthier contends, shifted entirely to God who alone is truly great but then communicated to humanity in its smallness through the Incarnation of the great One. Yet it was the patristic adaptation of a Stoic form of μεγαλοψυχία and *magnanimitas* that was present in Christian theology through the twelfth century. As such Gauthier dispenses with a quest for either a purely pagan or a purely Christian notion of *magnanimité*, his ultimate concern being to explain how Aquinas integrates an *Aristotelian* conception of μεγαλοψυχία into Catholic theology. Indeed, by the time Thomas reconfigures the Catholic understanding of *magnanimitas*, whether the idea was pagan or Christian was not a question. This is because in the Septuagintal texts *nedhâbhâh*[5] was rendered μεγαλοψυχία and second-century Latin translations of the New Testament had already translated μακροθυμία[6] (commonly translated "longsuffering") as *magnanimitas* – a translation supported also because of the earlier patristic incorporation of μεγαλοψυχία and *magnanimitas* into moral discourse. Since Gauthier focuses on Thomas's use of *magnanimitas*, and medieval, rather than patristic, influences, he is not concerned with the same sort of cultural tension between paganism and Christianity that is present in patristic authors. Particularly interesting is that, although Gauthier explicitly credits Ambrose, together with Clement of Alexandria and Origen, for giving μεγαλοψυχία and *magnanimitas* currency in Christian moral theology,[7] Ambrose appears on fewer than a dozen scattered pages, and Augustine a little more than a dozen. In short, Gauthier's magisterial study, though it offers an extensive treatment of Platonic, Aristotelian,

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[4] R.-A. Gauthier, *Magnanimité: L'Idéal de la Grandeur dans la Philosophie Païenne et dans la Théologie Chrétienne* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1951), 489.

[5] E.g., Prov 19:6; Ps 54:8. See Gauthier, *Magnanimité*, 180–181.

[6] Rom 2:4, 9:22; 2 Cor 6:6; Gal 5:22; Eph 4:2; Col 1:11, 3:12; 1 Tim 1:16; 2 Tim 3:10, 4:2; Heb 6:12; Jas 5:10; 1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 8:15. See Gauthier, *Magnanimité*, 202–208.

[7] "[P]uis il y a pénétré au grand jour … grâce aux entreprises conscientes d'assimilation de la pensée grecque dont prirent l'initiative en Orient un Clément d'Alexandrie et un Origéne et en Occident un saint Ambroise" (Gauthier, *Magnanimité*, 491).

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Stoic, and medieval Christian sources, does not give a sustained analysis of Ambrose or Augustine.

Although the present book may, albeit indirectly, flesh out the Latin patristic uses of *magnanimitas* that may highlight continuities or discontinuities with the later Thomistic understanding, its chief object is not to place Ambrose and Augustine within a sweeping historical narrative of the idea of greatness and the ideal of the great-souled individual. Indeed, Ambrose and Augustine's ideal of *magnitudo animi* only partly lies on a trajectory that culminates in Aquinas. Augustine applies it to the courage of the martyrs as Aquinas does. However, whereas Aquinas separates *magnanimitas* from *philotimia* – the latter being a quality of the soul's desiring faculty (*in concupiscibili*) and the former to its spirited faculty (*in irascibili*) – for Ambrose and Augustine greatness of soul remains closely connected with the love of honor, often with its pejorative connotations.[8] My object is more modest than Gauthier's grand narrative. It simply examines how two of the most influential Latin patristic moral theologians took an ethical vocabulary loaded with Classical and Hellenistic associations that spoke to the highest ideals of the Greco-Roman world – ideals that stood in tension or even complete contradiction with Christian values – and deployed it to speak to the moral life of Christians, to the priests, monks, and parishioners under their care. It is a study of their appropriation (the transfer of an idea or vocabulary from one context to another with distinctly different values and assumptions about reality) and adaptation (the deployment of a term in ways reflecting the moral and religious commitments, intellectual assumptions, and social associations of the new context) of pagan philosophical language. For example, Thomas Jefferson's language in the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal," was *appropriated* by Abraham Lincoln – even though it was already part of the American canon – to speak to a political situation in 1863 that was very different than that which existed in 1776. In this appropriation, Lincoln *adapted* the language to articulate a decidedly different set of assumptions about the content of "men" and "equal" that was in the minds of the signers of the Declaration. While the language of greatness of soul had been present in Christian Scriptures and theological parlance for centuries, both Ambrose and Augustine were conscious of the pagan origins of the terminology and its persisting currency in late fourth- and fifth-century Latin culture, especially among pagan critics of Christianity. This is most obvious in Ambrose's engagement with and modification of the passages from the original *De Officiis*, where Cicero treats *magnitudo animi*. Similarly, in the description of Lucretia's suicide in *City of God* Book I, Augustine is not only aware of the Classical pagan values summed up by *magnus animus*, but he uses it with a touch of irony as an indictment of the Roman ideal of nobility transposing it into a synonym of pride. In both thinkers, we see how the ideal of the *magnus animus* functions within their respective apologetic projects that pit a Christian worldview and values against the *mos maiorum* lifted up by traditionalists as the source of Roman glory.

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[8] *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae.60.5.

In this respect, the project before you is one more voice in the ongoing conversation about the place of non-Christian intellectual traditions in the formation of a Christian Latin culture in late antiquity. Writing on non-canonical texts by authors who never claimed apostolic authority, I have the luxury of not bearing the burden of adjudicating questions debated by New Testament scholars (questions such as the extent to which the apostle Paul's household codes were indebted to Hellenistic moral philosophers, such as Dio Chrysostom or Musonius Rufus, or whether his teaching was a truly apocalyptic vision of the new life in a new creation inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit).[9] Mine is not only a scholarly luxury but a personal one as well in that I do not have to choose sides in these arguments between former, beloved teachers and current, treasured colleagues. The late fourth and early fifth centuries, after all, were decidedly different for

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[9] The modern conversation that grew out of Harnack's thesis about the Hellenization of Christianity has recently moved from the question of *what* Hellenistic sources influenced early Christianity, especially in matters of ethics – see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Stanley K. Stowers, *Rereading Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Emma Wasserman, *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7: Sin, Death, and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); and John T. Fitzgerald, ed., *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought* (London: Routledge, 2008) – to the question of *whether* meaningful comparisons between Christianity and the Hellenistic philosophical traditions can even be made; see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Stephen E. Fowl, "Could Horace Talk with the Hebrews? Translatability and Moral Disagreement in MacIntyre and Stout," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19 (1991): 1–20; Jeffrey Stout, "Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25 (1997): 23–56; and C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

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Christianity than the first or second centuries. Even amid ongoing disputes about how to describe the union of the divine Logos with a human nature in the person of Jesus, Christianity was far more stable in its character. The Donatists and the Catholics in north Africa, the Alexandrians and the Nestorians, and the Augustinians and the Pelagians, all confessed that one God created the material universe, that this Creator of the world is also its redeemer, that the God who spoke through his Spirit to the prophets of Israel is the same God who sent his consubstantial and coeternal Son to assume a real human nature in which he really suffered, died, and was raised from the dead, and that this same Spirit inspired the sacred documents that comprised their shared canon.

Of these shared confessions, the first two set essential boundaries between Christian theology and pagan cosmology. Although congregations of *gnostikoi* peppered the Mediterranean world, any contest between the hyper-Hellenized Christianity of these sects and the Great Church, to use Celsus' appellation, was long over. In whatever ways the material body remained a theological problem for Orthodox Christians of late antiquity, it was a point of dogma that the body was created by God and, despite any corruption due to sin, that it was intrinsically good and would be redeemed at the general resurrection.[10] Although Plato's *Timaeus* and Philo's *De Opificio Mundi* remained important intellectual resources, Nicene Christianity had a theological grammar that regulated how such texts should and should not be used; the ambiguities about Philo's demiurge – whether it had an eternal subsistence or was begotten only economically – were no longer ambiguities for a Catholic doctrine of the Logos. Yet within the bounds of the *regula fidei*, Christian theology retained an eclectic character consistent with the eclecticism that defined much of the philosophy after Antiochus of Ascalon and the rise of Middle Platonism. While theologians of the late fourth and early fifth centuries were predisposed more to one tradition rather than another, none had a dogmatic commitment to any single school. Rather their tendency was to draw upon elements from a variety of traditions as they served the theologian's homiletical and theological purposes. They could be appreciative of Plato or Cicero and yet recognize points of theological

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[10] Khaled Anatolios's point (*Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 16–17) is a helpful reminder when thinking about not only intra-Christian debate but also Christianity's cultural clash with pagan culture.

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incommensurability on certain dogmatic commitments between Christian orthodoxy and the teachings of the New Academy or Latin Stoicism.

Ambrose's relationship with non-Christian philosophy has been a contentious issue within Ambrosian scholarship. In his classic two-volume biography from 1935, F. Holmes Dudden places Ambrose's relationship with Neo-Platonism alongside his role in the fourth-century conflict between Christianity and paganism, which arose as much from their similarities as their differences. "Neoplatonism, in short, effected a rational unification of paganism," Dudden explains.

> These worships, in fact, were too attractive. Not only did they hinder men from adopting Christianity; they tempted those who were Christians ... There was, indeed, a real danger that, if Christianity did not succeed in ousting paganism, paganism would succeed in ousting Christianity. Hence we can see the fervent energy with which Ambrose threw himself into the Christian–pagan struggle ...[11]

Yet when Dudden turns to Ambrose's theology in the second volume, Plotinus is completely absent. Interestingly, however, when Dudden turns from Ambrose's relationship with Neo-Platonism to the influence of Stoicism, he does not uphold a rigid line between Christianity and pagan philosophy. While noting Ambrose's appreciation for Cicero's *De Officiis* as "a subtle and brilliant work of art," Dudden stresses Ambrose's intellectual independence. Ambrose "was a bishop, intent on the direction of souls; [Cicero] was a statesman amusing his leisure by composing a literary dissertation."[12] Nevertheless, when summing up Ambrose's ethics, Dudden concludes that Ambrose, though "in many respects, a Stoic himself, predisposed to think on Stoic lines," drew the structure of his thought, and thus larger context in which he must be read, from Christianity.[13]

The relationship between Ambrose and philosophy, especially Neo-Platonism, was reanimated by the discovery of significant passages of

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[11] F. Holmes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 255–256. Referring to the Altar of Victory controversy between Ambrose and Symmachus, Dudden concludes with a certain triumphalist declaration: "Thanks mainly to his spirited action, the definitive triumph of Christianity as the State religion of the Western Empire was assured ... Not [Pope] Damasus, but Ambrose, not Rome, but Milan, determined the issue of the Christian–pagan controversy" (269).

[12] Comparing them, Dudden writes that Ambrose and Cicero "were both men of affairs, both practical moralists and not philosophers, [but] teachers of a different type. One was a bishop, intent on the direction of souls; [Cicero] was a statesman amusing his leisure by composing a literary dissertation" (ibid., 502n2).

[13] Ibid., 551. "Ambrose is a Stoic now and then, but a Christian first and last and always" (ibid., 554).

Plotinus (*Enneads* 1.1, 1.7, and 1.8) as well as Porphyry's *De regress animae* in Ambrose's catechetical treatises *On Isaac* and its companion *On the Good of Death* by Pierre Hadot.[14] This opened the questions (which were pursued in depth by Pierre Courcelle and Goulven Madec) of Ambrose's role as a source for Augustine's knowledge of Neo-Platonism and of Plotinus' influence on Ambrose's theology.[15] My own position, which falls generally in line with these scholars, was developed in my earlier work, *Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue: The Theological Foundation for Ambrose's Ethics*. It is this: if one were to lay out a typology of early Christian theologians and the place of philosophical commitments in their theology – someone like Ignatius of Antioch on one extreme as having virtually none and Marius Victorinus on the other as working closely within his own brand of Neo-Platonism – Ambrose should be placed in the company of Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom rather than Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. While the latter pair had a deeply philosophical predilection, that is, a desire to engage pagan philosophical traditions and follow a line of philosophical inquiry wherever it might lead, the former used philosophy to serve their theological or rhetorical purpose but were not interested in working out the philosophical implications and complexities for themselves. Thus Ambrose's use of Plotinus, though there may be points of shared philosophical commitment, was largely to express a theological point in a vivid form that would be memorable and that was, for some of his audience, a familiar feature of their intellectual upbringing. In this respect, I am inclined to concur with Andrew Lenox-Conyngham's contention that Ambrose is largely following Origen on the value of philosophy, as a case of "plundering the Egyptians" – taking the goods from pagan culture and deploying them to serve the true God.[16]

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[14] Pierre Hadot, "Platon et Plotin dans trois sermons de Saint Ambroise," *Revue des études latines* 34 (1956): 202–220.

[15] Pierre Courcelle, "Plotin et saint Ambroise," *Revue de philology de littérature, et d'histoire anciennes* 76 (1950): 29–56, and *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Études Augustineinnes, 1973). Further explored in Goulven Madec, *Saint Ambroise et la Philosophie* (Paris: Études Augustineinnes, 1974). For a brief summary of Courcelle, Hadot, and Madec, see the preface to my *Christian Grace and Pagan Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xii–xiii.

[16] Andrew Lenox-Conyngham, "Ambrose and Philosophy," *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead*, ed. Lionel R. Wickham, Caroline P. Bammel, and Erica C. D. Hunter (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993).

Lenox-Conyngham's view of Ambrose's deeply antagonistic relationship with pagan thought stands in contrast with Marcia Colish's judgment that Ambrose's primary objective in his *De Officiis* is to use a Ciceronian concept of decorum to teach his priests how to carry themselves with "the *gravitas* of a Roman senator" without succumbing to the temptation to use church funds to form for themselves a network of clients to enhance their *dignitas*.[17] Ivor Davidson's two-volume introduction, translation, and commentary on *De Officiis* sees Ambrose's project as going well beyond soft apologetics that seeks to persuade pagans or Christian devotees of Cicero of the affinity of pagan and Christian thought. Rather Ambrose's is a strong apologetic that uses the similarities only to demonstrate Christianity's ultimate superiority. The scriptural wisdom revealed in the lives of Israel's men and women of faith is the source of the wisdom of the philosophers, which, it turns out, becomes distorted in their appropriation. Indeed, Ambrose's project is supersessionist. As Davidson concludes, "Ambrose wants his work to be read *instead of* the pagan – Cicero's – account of duties: he aspires to replace the celebrated Classical handbook with a guide that was inspired by and targeted at a changed world."[18] My own work is indebted to Colish and agrees with her presentation of Ambrose's adaptation of Classical thought to serve Christian purposes. Yet, as will be clear in the arguments of Chapters 4 and 5, I agree with Davidson's assessment of Ambrose's larger agenda. His purpose is polemical and its goal is to present Christianity as a competitor of Ciceronian Stoicism, offering an alternative vision of virtue that sets Christianity on a higher moral plane.

Augustine's ambivalent relationship with philosophy is well known. On the one hand, he openly acknowledges his profound debt to the books of the Platonists for teaching him the theologically vital concepts of

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[17] Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 155–156. Colish's work has been valuable in challenging views that Ambrose's thought was largely derivative and shows little originality. In her analysis of his catechetical homilies on Genesis and *De Officiis*, she demonstrates how he fashions a distinctive anthropology and ethic of moderation that stands in contrast to an ascetic ideal that was beyond the capacity or inclination of the "common man." Also see her treatment of Ambrose as the eclectic adaptor in *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, vol. 2, *Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 51. Although she resists Platonic readings of Ambrose in the patriarchal homilies, she argues that in *De Officiis* Ambrose integrates Platonic and Aristotelian elements that allow him more easily to adapt Cicero's Stoicism into a Christian vision of the moral life (*Stoic Tradition*, 2:69).

[18] Ivor Davidson, *Ambrose De Officiis*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 62.