In his early fourth-century treatise *De ira Dei*, the Christian apologist Lactantius defends the existence of God’s wrath, and in so doing he articulates an argument that runs contrary to long-held tenets of Greek philosophical discourse, including the immutability and impassibility of the *summus deus*. Unlike his Graecophone predecessors and contemporaries, Lactantius ostensibly rejects the option of allegorical reading employed by Plato (among others) and fashions his approach as one superior to those of the philosophers (among whom he targets primarily the Stoics and Epicureans). Lactantius comes at the question of divine wrath from a literal, rather than allegorical or figural, perspective because he was immersed in a Roman rhetorical tradition that stood, or at least saw itself as standing, in contrast and at times in opposition to the tenets of the Greek philosophical tradition broadly construed. The apologist’s move is, as an indicator of his education in law and rhetoric, reflexive, and, in light of the degree to which he draws his reader’s attention to his method, self-conscious. It is also problematic: setting aside, for the moment, the apparent novelty of his theological claim, Lactantius’ dismissal of Plato and the philosophers glosses over a long doxographic tradition in which Lactantius himself is implicated, most obviously by his dependence on Cicero, whose role in the transmission of Greek philosophical ideas to the world of Roman intellectual culture cannot be overlooked in the consideration of any later Latinate author.

In what follows, I explore the moments at which Lactantius appears to engage with Plato or the philosophical traditions he associated with Plato, including Socrates, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. The reason for this grouping is twofold: first, it follows the framing of philosophical doxography that Lactantius himself maintains. Second, it echoes the relationships between philosophers that we find in the treatise itself. That is to say, Lactantius’ lumping together of all philosophers from Socrates through Seneca is conceptual and pragmatic, but this way of thinking about philosophy is also mapped onto the structure of the text itself. We shall see, then, that Lactantius engages with Greek philosophy and philosophers in strategic ways: he selectively quotes and paraphrases specific philosophers and philosophical schools in an attempt to establish a philosophical consensus to underscore his own arguments, for example those concerning the existence of only one god and divine providence. He breaks from them, however, when he wants to distinguish his view from those of his predecessors (and, we might add, his contemporaries), most clearly when he argues in favor of divine emotions.

A few words about the content and design of the treatise will help to contextualize this discussion. The text, written in 316CE, is addressed to a certain Donatus and its stated purpose is to correct the philosophers’ error in thinking that the su-
preme god does not get angry.¹ As one would expect given Lactantius’ education in rhetoric and his professional activity as a rhetor, the organization of the text closely follows the standards articulated in Ciceronian treatises (e.g. De Oratore and the Topica) as well as other handbooks critical to classical and late antique Latin oratory (e.g. the Rhetorica ad Herennium).² After a quickly presented exordium, narratio, and divisio, Lactantius moves on to a lengthy confirmatio in which he both advances his own arguments and attacks the opinions of others. With elements of confutatio worked into the main body of the text, the treatise ends with a three-chapter long conclusio, termed a “peroration in the matter of Cicero,” which Lactantius uses to recapitulate his previous points, add the testimony of the Sibyls, and give a final warning about the necessity of worshipping God correctly.³

A close reading of the claims asserted in the main body of the text illustrate the degree to which Lactantius closely followed Cicero’s De natura deorum in constructing his arguments.⁴ Both texts take the Epicureans and the Stoics as their main tar-

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¹ Lactantius is explicit about the fact that he is providing Donatus ammunition with which to defeat the arguments of those who deny, at their own peril, that God has emotions in De ira Dei 22.1–2: Haec habuit quae de ira dicerem, Donate carissime, ut scires quaedammodum refelleres eos qui deum faciunt inmobilem. Restat ut more Ciceronis utamur epilogo ad perorandum. Sicut ille in Tusculanis de morte disserens fecit, ita nos in hoc opere testimonia divina quibus credi possit adhibere debemus, ut illorum persuasionem revincamus qui sine ira deum esse credentes dissolvant omnem religionem; sine qua, ut ostendimus, aut inmanitate belvis aut stultitia pecudibus adaequamur; in sola enim religione, id est in dei summi notione, sapientia est.

² The technical (and some of the non-technical) treatises of Cicero are particularly helpful for the earlier evidence of rhetoric and rhetorical theory; Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria (especially the earlier books on education) is likewise useful. Handbooks like the Rhetorica ad Herennium give a sense of the various kinds of considerations that students would have kept in mind, and our knowledge can be further supplemented by, for example, Augustine’s comments in his Confessions. The education of students and the work that took place in the Greek rhetorical schools have been subjects of recent scholarly inquiry, aided by the survival of books on declamation and the hermeneumata. For some general discussion (and helpful bibliography) see Cribiore 2001 and Cribiore 2007. Libanius in particular offers us a comparative way of understanding Lactantius’ world (although, again, not without a healthy recognition of the significant differences between the two). See also Watts 2006.

³ Structurally, the text runs as follows: exordium: address to Donatus, brief introduction (1); narratio: the philosophers do not think that God is moved by anger (2.1–8); divisio: God does have anger, as well as kindness (2.9–10); confirmatio and confutatio: various arguments, each given separate weight (3–22); conclusio: a “peroration in the manner of Cicero” (Restat ut more Ciceronis utamur epilogo ad perorandum, 22–24).

⁴ References to classical literature abound in De ira Dei; of the fifty quotations or paraphrases of Cicero in the treatise, thirty-six are from De natura deorum. For an overview of what he may or may not have read, see the somewhat pessimistic Ogilvie 1978 and Cicero-focused Bryce 1990. For his use of classical literature, broadly construed, see Pichon 1902 and Loi 1970. Loi 1965 focuses on Lactantius’ use of Roman ethical literature as source material. See also Stevenson 1957.
gets, for example, and both are fundamentally concerned with questions about the
divine nature, an umbrella idea under which one also finds discussions about divine
providence, divine administration of the world, that there can be only one god, and
that this god cares for humankind. At every turn, Lactantius seeks to disprove his
straw men philosophical opponents and to build an argument in favor of a legitimate
and necessary divine wrath. The relative singularity of his stance should not be over-
looked: in contrast to those who employed figural and allegorical readings to make
sense of texts in which the supreme god’s anger was articulated or referenced, Lac-
tantius goes to great lengths to prove that this anger was a veritable emotion, a view
which directly opposes the long-standing philosophical tenets of divine impassibility
and immutability.

I have thus far highlighted Lactantius’ affinity for Cicero and for Latin rhetorical
discourse more generally. To ignore these classical Roman underpinnings of the
fourth century text would be to miss facets of the text critical to its interpretation:
unlike his Graecophone counterparts, nearly all of whom were working within the
constraints of a hermeneutic initiated, at least most clearly, by Plato, Lactantius en-
gages in a literal reading and understanding of God’s wrath. Crucial elements of his
reading were drawn from Ciceronian models, the most influential of which, on this
text, was De natura deorum. This reliance complicates Lactantius’ text in two
ways. First, it calls into question the identity of the Stoics and Epicureans to
whom Lactantius responds in De ira Dei: these are unlikely to be the representatives
of those philosophical schools as they existed in the early fourth century, and it re-
mains doubtful that the Stoics and Epicureans of Cicero’s own text were accurate
spokesmen of the schools in their late first-century BCE iterations.

Second, Cicero himself was engaged in his own seemingly apologetic agenda,
namely to make palatable to a Roman audience of the late Republic the ideas, termi-
nology, and differences between the major philosophical schools. We might thus

5 De ira dei (hereafter ID) chapters nine through eleven; much of the support for this comes from
Cotta’s rebuttal of Velleius in De natura deorum book one and then Balbus’ explication of Stoic
theology in book two.

6 For example, Arnobius and Novatian took up the question in different ways in their treatises as
they tried to defend their faith against pagan critiques, attack the pagan mythology itself, and
negotiate the place of the representations of God in the Old Testament. Tertullian and Cyprian both
express a conviction that God’s wrath is present and palpable; while Tertullian gives space to pos-
sible philosophical objections, Cyprian focuses on past incidents from the Old Testament to instruct
and to correct his audience.

7 Throughout I will use “Plato” and “Platonism” as shorthand for what is a much older, much more
complex, and much more nuanced set of philosophical traditions. In so doing I hope to focus and
advance our discussion, but I do mean to suggest that this treatment addresses the intricacies of that
tradition, for which there is no space here.

8 See Glucker 1995. It is not nothing that explorations of Lactantius’ doxography are couched within
Ciceronian studies: see also Barnes 1989, Long 1995, and Powell 1995 for how Cicero negotiated his
own sources and the problem of dissecting the philosophical sects in scholarship ancient and
contemporary.
view Cicero as a model for Lactantius in yet another way: each sought to translate to his own audience (one Roman, the other Christian, or at least potentially so) the cultural precepts of another intellectual tradition in such a way as to make the adoption of those precepts acceptable and normative. Yet this transfer, or transmission, was complicated in each case by various factors. For Cicero, this included translation (and at times coinage of new words) from Greek to Latin, a conscious and theorized move on his part. For Lactantius, this included a perhaps less self-aware, or less easily evaluated, set of processes. This is particularly the case when one considers Plato, for we know that Cicero was reading and reacting to Plato and we know that Lactantius was reading and reacting to Cicero. At the risk of over-simplifying a complex, intricate, and quite lengthy doxographical history, we can say that Lactantius was reading (and in some cases agreeing with) Plato, in what was undoubtedly a diluted and muddied way, through his reading of Cicero.

Lactantius was not unaware of Plato’s influence on later philosophical thought: as we shall see below, in the ninth chapter of De ira Dei he describes the creation of and differentiation between the most popular philosophical schools as having “flowed forth from the school of Plato like rivulets into different directions.” It is perhaps because of the association that Lactantius constructs between Plato and, for all intents and purposes, every other philosopher and philosophical school of thought, that he tends to lump the major schools (again, for him, the Stoics and Epicureans) together with Plato in most of his discussions of philosophical consensus. Plato and Socrates are also often linked (the name Socrates appears with Plato’s in four out of five chapters in which the latter is mentioned), outstripped only by the invocation of “philosophers” more generally and the Stoics and Epicureans somewhat more specifically. The names of individual philosophers and the general term are sprinkled throughout the text, with one or the other appearing in seventeen of the twenty-three chapters. The way in which Lactantius mentions and engages with the philosophers, individually and collectively, varies by the area or chapter of the text in which they appear. We shall evaluate Lactantius’ concentrated treatment of Plato, Socrates, and others below (chapters nine through eleven of the text); my present concern is with the ways in which such notes and mentions are scattered throughout the treatise.

From the outset, Lactantius situates his text both within the long-standing philosophical conversation about the place of emotions in the supreme god and at the same time opposed to it. In the opening chapter, he tells Donatus, his addressee, that “some philosophers” have (wrongly) held the opinion that God does not get

9 For a succinct summation of Cicero’s project, see Ando 2010, especially his comments at 65.
10 ID 9.3: Post haec Socrates, et auditor eius Plato, et qui de schola Platonis, tanquam rivuli diversas in partes profluérunt; stoici et peripatetici, in eadem fuere sententia, qua priores.
11 Curiously, however, Lactantius never invokes the term “Epicurean(s),” preferring instead to shift blame towards their eponymous founder. Epicurus is singled out by name fourteen times in the treatise.
angry. He goes on to use the assertion of Socrates “as related by Plato” that there is no such thing as human wisdom—a compliment, on the face of it—only to underscore the philosophers’ folly in thinking that they can ascertain the divine will, and soon after to place them on the second of three “steps” by which an individual comes to know God. Epicurus is twice attacked, in chapters four and five, for his belief that the *summus deus* is aloof and unfeeling; similarly the Stoics were wrong, Lactantius says, to attribute only kindness (*gratia*) to God and not anger as well. This introduction leads Lactantius to his own formulation: it is unfathomable that God has no emotions; unfeasible for him to have anger alone; everyone believes that he has kindness; therefore he must also have anger—an idea that the apologist links to the need for a veritable fear of God as part of his worship.

Lactantius connects, however weakly, the strong statements of chapter six to longer, more robust chapters in the middle of the treatise. These sections are largely meant to establish a sort of philosophical consensus: everyone, he writes, agrees that humans are different than animals, and although some disagree on the questions of, *inter alia*, divine providence, those who are reasonable would support what Lactantius himself is arguing. He goes on to praise the Stoics for recognizing that all things were made for the benefit of mankind (unlike some other philosophical sects) and to criticize Epicurus for not understanding the difference between human and divine natures (and by extension, emotions). Thus far a tendency has emerged: Lactantius is often willing to follow the Stoics up to a point, but is ve-

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12 ID 1.1: Animaadverti saepe, Donate, plurimos id aestimare, quod etiam nonnulli philosophorum putaverunt, non irasci deum...

13 ID 2.1–7, but especially 2.5: De secundo vero gradu eos dicimus cadere, qui cum sentiant, unum esse summum Deum, idem tamen a philosophis inretiti, et falsis argumentationibus capti, aliter de unica illa maiestate sentiunt, quam veritas habet; qui aut figuram negant habere ullam Deum, aut nullo affectu commoveri putant, quia sit omnis affectus imbecillitatis, quae in Deo nulla est. Cf. Divinae Institutiones 2.5.4–6.2 and Epitome 21.1–5.

14 ID 4.1–3: Quod sequitur, de schola Epicuri est; sicut iram in Deo non esse, ita nec gratiam quidem. Nam cum putaret Epicurus, alienum esse a Deo malefacere atque nocere, quod ex affectu iracundiae plerumque nascitur, ademit ei etiam beneficentiam, quoniam videbat consequens esse, ut si habeat iram Deus, habeat et gratiam. Itaque ne illi vitium concederet, etiam virtutis fecit expertem. Ex hoc, inquit, beatus et incorruptus est, quia nihil curat, neque habet ipse negotium, neque alteri exhibet. Deusigitur non est, si nec movetur, quod est proprium viventis: nec facit aliuid impossibile homini, quod est proprium Dei, si omnino nullam habet voluntatem, nullum actum, nullam denique administrationem, quae Deo digna sit. Read with ID 5.2: Favorabilis admodum ac popularis oratio non cadere in deum hanc animi pusillitatem ut ab ullo se laesum putet, qui laedi non potest, ut quieta illa et sancta maiestas concitetur perturbetur insaniat, quod est terrenae fragilitatis; iram enim commotionem mentis esse ac perturbationem, quae sit a deo aliena.

15 ID 6.2: Nam neque honor ullus deberi potest deo, si nihil praestat colenti, nec ullus metus, si non irascitur non colenti. Cf. ID 8.7b: Quod enim non metuitur, contemnitur: quod contemnitur, utique non colitur. Ita fit, ut religio, et maiestas, et honor metu constet: metus autem non est, ubi nullus irascitur. Sive igitur gratiam Deo, sive iram, sive utrumque detraxeris, religionem tolli necesse est, sine qua vita hominum stultitia, scelerae, immanitate completur.

16 ID 13 and 15, passim.
hemently opposed to nearly all of the arguments put forth by Epicurus.\footnote{17 In this we again see the structure of De natura deorum at work, the arrangement of which into three books treating, in order, the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Academics, following conventional organization suggests that the earliest was thought to be the weakest argument, and the last the most persuasive.} A fuller consideration of the ways in which Lactantius relies upon previous philosophical argument and consensus as he seeks to support and strengthen his own claims will help to elucidate the nuances of his argument.

The philosophical voices of the past are marshaled by Lactantius in three key chapters of the text. It is in these chapters (namely nine, ten, and eleven), that the apologist strives to convince his audience that (1) there is one god, (2) this god created the world, and (3) there exists a divine providence whereby the world is regulated. Perhaps interestingly, Lactantius flips the order in which these are presented: he begins with divine providence, next discusses the creation and creator of the world, then moves on to a consideration of monotheism (although this does allow him to return to providence, his main concern).\footnote{18 This trio surfaces frequently in Lactantius’ corpus, as we find them expressed (in a slightly different way) throughout De opificio Dei, and given extensive treatment in Divinae Institutiones.} Often viewed as tangential, overly-long digressions from his central argument, these chapters are, I would suggest, critical to Lactantius’ overall purpose in the treatise. If we consider their relevance to the content of his argument alone, it is evident that they are imperative to understanding his view of the divine nature, a position which has definite implications for his framing of divine emotions—how one imagines the divine nature by necessity has bearing on whether or not, and how, one views the possibility of that divine nature possessing emotions. Beyond their importance to the line of argument, however, these three chapters are likewise key to how Lactantius formulates, defends, and structures his claims. At various moments in each chapter, Lactantius targets specific philosophers with whom he finds the multitude of philosophers to be in disagreement. The result is to create the effect of a triangulation: philosophers who held the “wrong” opinion are demonstrated to have done so by those who hold the “correct” opinion (in Lactantius’ estimation), and Lactantius provides himself with the opportunity of criticizing or supporting each view.

Epicurus is the principal target of Lactantius’ attack, and is identified as such in chapter eight, which we might consider a preamble to the subsequent three chapters (nine through eleven). Indeed, Lactantius’ vehement opposition to the views of Epicurus about the nature of religion link the material that follows this chapter with that which preceded it: we have learned thus far that the treatise is concerned with the refutation of the supreme god’s impassibility, here the necessity for divine emotions is couched in terms of their connection to religion. If Epicurus, writes Lactantius, thinks that the gods must be removed and withdrawn from humans and all pains, he removes all agency from them. Such a divine nature in turn renders human action without consequence, argues Lactantius, for there would be no point in offering sac-
rifice, building temples, and otherwise engaging in various types of religious, pious behavior if no one is paying any attention.⁹ Terrible consequences abound: if no god watches over and keeps tracks of (and, importantly, reacts to) human life, there is nothing to prevent people from breaking laws and religion itself is thoroughly destroyed.² In addition to outlining for us one of the ways in which religion is linked to the preservation of human order, Lactantius’ statements about religion highlight the degree to which he sees it as inseparable from divine emotions. He proceeds to lay out a series of connections that link religion to wisdom (which separates humans from animals) and to justice (which regulates public institutions), and to respond to the claims of those who challenge the existence of God.²¹

Lactantius’ first sentence sets the tone for the following three chapters: “philosophers of former times had agreed in their opinions... and there was no doubt...”²² By forcing his audience to think back to the distant past (as he understood it), Lactantius establishes a pattern wherein consensus existed, was challenged, but maintained its place as the dominant belief. In chapter nine, the challenge, Lactantius tells us, came from Protagoras, “in the times of Socrates,” and had as its object the question of the existence of any divinity.²³ To underscore the novelty and shock value of such claims, Lactantius rehearses the tradition of the Athenians burning Protagoras’ books and exiling him from the city and then dismisses him (because “there is no need to speak respecting his opinions, because he pronounced nothing certain”).²⁴ Socrates, Plato, the Stoics, and the Peripatetics are said to reinstate the firm belief in a divinity until the usual suspect, Epicurus, intervenes, and threatens the status quo. Here, as in chapter eight and elsewhere, Epicurus is an outsider: he agrees, Lactantius tells us, that there is a God (and so subscribes to the philosophical

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19 ID 8.2: Quae cum dicit, utrum aliquem cultum Deo putat esse tribuendum, an everit omnem religionem? Si enim Deus nihil cuiquam boni tribuit, si colentis obsequio nullam gratiam refert, quid tam vanum, tam stultum, quam templum aedificare, sacrificia facere, dona conferre, rem familiarem minuere, ut nihil assequamur?

20 ID 8.5: Quod si negotium deus nec habet nec exhibet, cur ego non delinquamus, quotiens hominum conscientiam fallere licebit ac lege publicas circumscribere? Ubicumque nobis latendi occasio adriserit, consulamus rei, auferamus aliena vel sine cruore vel etiam cum sanguine, si praeter leges nihil est amplius quod verendum sit!

21 The connection between chapters eight and nine is, however, tenuous. It is worth noting that Lactantius seems to find fault with those who think that religion was made up only to regulate behavior, but then endorses this view in his own argument about religion, and specifically the fear of punishment, as motivating correct actions.

22 ID 9.1: Cum sententiae philosophorum prioris temporibus de providentia consensissent, nec ulla esset dubitatio, quin mundus a Deo, et ratione esset instructus, et ratione regeretur...

23 ID 9.2a: primus omnium Protagoras exsit temporibus Soratis, qui sibi diceret non liquere, utrum esset aliqua divinitas, necne.

consensus), but he denies that there exists a divine providence. The removal of divine providence is equivalent to the removal of the divine altogether, and Lactantius requires the world to be one in which its divine ruler has knowledge of the past, present, and future.

Similarly, Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene are also singled out as philosophers who denied the existence of God, while Plato, Socrates, and those that maintained the tenets of their philosophical arguments are praised for their wisdom. If we are to believe Lactantius, it was these three philosophers (Epicurus, Diagoras, and Theodorus) who attacked the idea of divine providence and every other philosopher who defended it. A rhetorical series of questions at the end of chapter nine offers not merely Lactantius’ plan for moving ahead, but also a framework for understanding his own approach. Should we, he questions, argue against those “trifling and inactive philosophers by reason, or by the authority of distinguished men, or rather by both?” Here Lactantius reveals his own debt to and dependence on the Platonic philosophical tradition, and in so doing admits that his construal of his own perspective as existing in stark opposition to that of the philosophers is not entirely true: the “authority of distinguished men” does, in fact, carry some weight, and when that authority is useful to his argument he has no qualms about drawing our attention to that long-standing history, here providence, which “had been asserted and defended through so many ages by so many intellects.” Further, Lactantius’ overview of such debates, although admittedly brief and superficial, has the effect of suggesting his familiarity with the respective traditions and of aligning his perspective with the Platonic tradition: consensus is important here for the way in which it lends support to Lactantius himself.

25 ID 9.4: Postea vero Epicurus Deum quidem esse dixit, quia necesse sit esse aliquid in mundo praestans, et eximium, et beatum; providentiam tamen nullam: itaque mundum ipsum nec ratione ulla, nec arte, nec fabrica instructum, sed naturam rerum quibusdam minutis seminibus et insecabilibus conglobatam.

26 ID 9.5: Quo quid repugnantibus dici possit, non video. Etenim si est Deus, utique providens est, ut Deus; nec alter ei potest divinitas attribui, nisi et praeterita teneat, et praesentia sciat, et futura prospiciat. Cum igitur providentiam sustulit, etiam Deum negavit esse.

27 ID 9.6–7. Lactantius’ chronology and/or sense of philosophical doxography seems peculiar here, as he writes that Diagoras and Theodorus were advancing these opinions “when philosophy had now lost its vigor.”

28 ID 9.9: Quid ergo? utrumque minimos et inertes philosophos ratione, an vero auctoritate praestantium virorum refellemus? an potius utroque? Ratio is an important idea for Lactantius, as it drives (what he terms) his rhetorical argument and provides reason to a debate in which the philosophers have argued without sense, wisdom, or rationality.

29 ID 9.8: Il sunt, qui tot saeculis, tot ingenis assertam atque defensam providentiam calumniati sunt.

30 This is another moment at which it would be helpful to know more about whom and what Lactantius had access to and was reading. If we follow Glucker, “The best one can say so far is that Lactantius is erratic in his ascription of philosophical views; that sometimes he is accurate in ascribing a view to a philosopher or to a speaker in a Ciceronian dialogue, but often he ascribes whatever he has found in the Ciceronian work (or had copied into his commonplace book) to Cicero...
Although Lactantius himself eventually deviates from the philosophical consensus about divine wrath, he expresses an antagonism towards Straton, Leucippus, and others throughout the tenth chapter of the treatise because of their need to be different and break from the consensus. Despite his expressed concern that he might seem to rave for refuting such ludicrous ideas, he nonetheless devotes much of this chapter to a mockery-filled discussion concerning how theories about atoms as the constituent building blocks of creation can be nothing but nonsense.³¹ Lactantius’ defense of this claim rests predominantly upon his oft-repeated notion that the nature of the world and all things within it offer ample proof that their creation required design, reason, forethought, and intelligence.³² Here too, Lactantius summons the philosophical consensus of the past: whether they attributed it to nature or the supreme god, many agreed that the world itself was set in motion by some entity which possessed the ability to order and to fashion its creation. His strategy here, however, is not to mention individuals who helped to form the consensus (e.g. Plato and Socrates) as previously, but rather to attack Lucretius (or, perhaps, “Lucretius”) with an uninterrupted torrent of points to be disputed.

Lucretius’ theories about atoms strike Lactantius as particularly offensive and unbelievable. In addition to his consternation regarding the unimaginably small size of these atoms and their different shapes, Lactantius fixates on their invisibility and indivisibility, in each case referring to Lucretius as his source.³³ Although we might be tempted to gloss over his rebuttals to these ideas, many of which are framed as rhetorical questions, to do so would be to overlook two important elements underpinning Lactantius’ worldview and reasoning. His discomfort, for example, with the idea that everything is created by and made up of “invisible seeds” suggests that he roots his arguments in what can be seen and proven. Attention to this facet of his reasoning helps to explain his theories of nature, but can be even more valuable when considered as important to his understanding of the divine nature. Lactantius’ idea of the Christian God is located in experience and observation; just as he believes the created world to have necessitated the involvement of design and artifice, so too does he believe that such design and artifice can come from no other source but a divine being.

Lactantius culls support for the idea that nature itself is an insufficient creative force for the world by examining human nature; following a quotation from Chrysippus, he reasons that humans’ inability to make “heavenly things” demands that something greater exists.³⁴ Those who maintain that nature is the “mother of all himself, sometimes even conflating things said by different speakers in two very different works.” (1995, 69)

³¹ ID 10.5: et quidem vereor, ne non minus delirare videatur, qui haec putet refellenda.
³² This is mentioned throughout the treatise, but is woven throughout chapter ten in a focused way.
³³ ID 10, passim but especially concentrated arguments are at 10.13–18 and 10.27–31.
³⁴ ID 10.36–37: ‘Si quid est, inquit Chrysippus, quod efficiat ea; quae homo, licet ratione sit praeeditus, facere non possit, id profecto est maius, et fortius, et sapientius homine.’ Homo autem non potest facere
things” do so incorrectly because they fail to recognize that nature lacks mind (mens), thereby rendering it incapable of planning, “contriving,” or “effecting” anything. Such an absence of mind means too that the being in question (whether nature or something else) lacks the capacity to reflect, which according to Lactantius means that “there is neither motion nor efficacy.”

In advocating for an active divinity, Lactantius again mirrors the text of De natura deorum, and again relies on it as an articulation of philosophical agreement and argumentation. Further, humans themselves again are seen as evidence for the nature and effect of God; humans were given a portion of the divine wisdom and reason so that they too could create the things which they required.

Ciceronian echoes continue as Lactantius returns to the idea of divine providence and moves forward in his discussion of the links between the human and divine natures. Using a sort of etymologizing hermeneutic, Lactantius argues that humans—so named because of the ground, from which their bodies were made—have soul too only because it was given to them “from a wise nature.”

Here the apologist’s use of Cicero is clearly flagged, an unusual occurrence in this text. He names both the Tusculan Disputations and Consolation as his source text(s) and proceeds to quote a few sentences about the separation of the soul from the earthly elements, including also two statements that echo his preceding arguments about the nature of mind (and the interconnectedness of mind and reflection) as well as the adamant assertion that all such things must come to humans from God.

We have come full circle in this second to last paragraph, and again the “vain calumniators” are named: Diagoras, Theodorus, Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus are all abandoned by the majority in favor of the “authority” of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and others who agreed on the question of providence. The degree to which Lactantius has traversed hundreds of years of philosophical thought is notable, as is the way he has done so. Throughout, the opponents remained the same (the usual list of Epicureans, and a handful of supposed ancient atheists), but Lactantius has constructed and defended his own position by appealing to a generalized picture of what every-
one has said (he later adds Zeno and Aristotle to this list as well) with attributed quotations from Cicero’s philosophical treatises.

The endowment of both humans and the world itself with wisdom and intelligence is, for Lactantius, proof enough of God’s creation of the world, and with it, his providence over the world. In chapter eleven, he defends the idea that only one god can exist and govern the world and again both looks to earthly institutions as mirrors of the divine order and also relies on the cumulative voices of specific philosophers to demonstrate long-standing support of his claims. In a list of quick, simple statements, Lactantius rehearses centuries’ worth of argument; we might read his rather brief treatment of each item as a signal of the extent to which he viewed these philosophical tenets as shared and indisputable. To demonstrate that the divine power rests with only one divinity, he takes his reader through the chain of argument beginning with the idea of distribution. Should the “divine energy and power” be spread out among many gods, it by necessity must be lessened, and anything that is lessened must by necessity be mortal. Lest the reader miss the point, Lactantius reminds that the inverse is also true, namely that an immortal being can neither be lessened nor destroyed (here, “divided”). Terrestrial exempla round out the discussion: there can be only one ruler, one master, one helmsman of a ship, one leader, one queen bee, and further only one sun in the sky and one soul in the body. To disprove the possibility of multiple divinities even more clearly, Lactantius offers a quotation from Virgil, notes that one cannot describe in words or fully comprehend the supreme god with the senses, and questions whence the idea of polytheism even arose. He locates the idea of multiple deities in the remote past and endorses the view that all gods and goddesses were originally important men and women who were “invested with divine honors” after death, an explanation that he credits to the theologoi and then later Roman writers like Euhemerus and Ennius.

It is here that Lactantius makes a curious pivot. He moves from Euhemerus and Ennius and right on to Cicero who, he writes, followed this line of thought and therefore (now explicitly citing the text) in his third book of De natura deorum “destroyed the public religions.” Cicero is identified as the clearest example of the philoso-

40 Lactantius’ tendency to compress and gloss over some important ideas while devoting substantial space to treating others might indicate what he saw as the questions up for dispute; if so we might understand his approach as one that explicates what he believes to be the weaker areas of the argument, or at least those in need of defense.  
41 ID 11.2: Satis (ut opinor) ostendimus in nostris Institutionibus, deos multos esse non posse; quod divina vis ac potestas si distribuatur in plures, diminui eam necesse sit: quod autem minuitur, utique et mortale est; si vero mortalis non est, nec minui, nec dividi potest.  
42 ID 11.4.  
43 ID 11.5–6.  
44 ID 11.8–10.  
45 ID 11.12. It should be noted that the third book of De natura deorum is deficient in places, and that Lactantius preserves fragments which would otherwise be lost to us, namely ND 3.79 and 3.89 (= De
pher’s problem: he was truly wise, but nonetheless unable “to introduce the true one [religion], of which he was ignorant,” and so remained on the second of the three steps that Lactantius believes each person must ascend in order to come to the worship of the Christian God.⁴⁶ The effect is to create a tension between the public religions, as Lactantius calls them, most likely referring to the pluralistic polytheism of pagan antiquity, and the true religion, which is to say, Christianity. He again draws on Plato, this time citing the *Timaeus*, as evidence for the acknowledgement of one, supreme deity from an early date, and in so doing echoes his earlier assertion that Plato too thought the majesty of this god “so great, that it can neither be comprehended by the mind nor expressed by the tongue.”⁴⁷ We might add to this that the Ciceronian version of the Platonic idea—or, at least, Lactantius’ pairing of the two here—underscores the debt that Lactantius owes to Cicero, and Cicero to Plato. A litany of ancient testimony follows: Hermes Trismegistus (who, Lactantius takes pains to point out, was thought to be Egyptian by Cicero and was older than Plato, Pythagoras, and the seven wise men), Socrates (paraphrasing Xenophon), Plato (now with a direct quotation from the *Laws*), Pythagoras, Antisthenes (*Physics*), Aristotle and the Peripatetics, and Zeno and the Stoics.

Given Lactantius’ general tendency to lump all philosophers together and to rely on Ciceronian paraphrases to express opinions on which those philosophers agree, his listing here is striking. Although he writes that it would take too long to go through each individual example, he does flesh out three briefly. Lactantius tells his reader that Pythagoras, for example, admitted that there is one God, “saying

*De ira* 16.9 and 9.7; so too do we have portions of Seneca’s *De ira* because of Lactantius’ quotation thereof (e.g. Seneca 1.1.3 = *De ira* 5.3).

⁴⁶ *ID* 11.12b: *sed tamen veram, quam ignorabat, nec ipse, nec alius quidquam potuit inducere. Adeo et ipse testatus est, falsum quidem apparere, veritatem tamen latere.* These criticisms have parallels in the second book of the *Divine Institutes*, where Lactantius writes that Cicero is in the wrong because he did not try to dispel “bad” beliefs (2.3) but that he is useful for recounting what the Stoics think about the question of, for example, monotheism (2.5), and that the errors into which Cicero and other philosophers fell were not their own fault, but due to the blindness of each respective philosophical sect and the knowledge available to them at that time (2.9). Lactantius’ lament over Cicero’s deficiency is echoed by Jerome in his own lament over Lactantius’ apologetic deficiencies: Lactantius writes: *Utinam (inquit) tam facile vera invenire possem, quam falsa convincere!* (*ID* 11.13); Jerome *Epistle* 58.10: *utinam tam nostra adfirmare potuisse, quam facile aliena destructit.* Bowen and Garnsey (2003, 4–5) are likely correct to cast suspicion on Jerome’s assessment here. They note that it occurs in the same letter in which Jerome so eagerly praised Lactantius, that it appears in a discussion of Christian writers who wrote in Latin, and that the letter itself was written to Paulinus of Nola at a time in which Jerome and Augustine were vying for Paulinus’ approval. See also Doignon 1963 for the theory that Augustine, when he wrote *De Doctrina Christiana*, was responding to Jerome by praising the very apologists and theologians whom the latter criticized.

⁴⁷ *ID* 11.14: *Unus est igitur princeps, et origo rerum Deus, sicut Plato in Timaeo et sensit et docuit; cuius maiestatem tantam esse declarat, ut nec mente comprehendi, nec lingua exprimi possit.* Plato’s *Laws* are referenced a bit later at 11.16: …*et Plato in Legum libris: Quid omnino sit Deus, non esse quaerendum; quid nec inveniri possit, nec enarrari...
that there is an incorporeal mind, which, being diffused and stretched through all nature, gives vital perception to all living creatures,” but Antisthenes, however, wrote that “there was but one natural God,” despite the evidence of patron deities of individual peoples and cities.⁴⁸ Perhaps as a way to anticipate any objections based on the differences between each philosopher, Lactantius pauses to point out the key ways in which Pythagoras and Antisthenes were distinct from one another but nevertheless, and importantly, still agreed on the significant point that only one god exists. Indeed, near the end of the chapter Lactantius writes that all of these philosophers, and others, “although they used different names, nevertheless agreed in one power which governed the world,” thereby including divine providence as a matter about which there exists philosophical consensus.⁴⁹ This claim was the goal of the three chapters (nine through eleven) throughout which he took up the questions of the supreme god’s existence, his providence, and his singularity, and also served to cast Lactantius as holding the correct view based on the clout, diversity, and longevity of those who had come before him.

Yet the transition that Lactantius makes between these ideas and the closing sentiment of chapter eleven also casts him as the voice of dissent; he supports and endorses the philosophical consensus about the divine nature up to a point but makes a critical distinction between the philosophers on the one hand and Christian religion on the other hand. He writes, for example, that despite their keen perception of the divine nature, the philosophers (and poets!) “often acknowledge the supreme god, yet no one ever inquired into, no one discussed, the subject of his worship and honors,” and that “always believing him to be bounteous and incorruptible, they think that he is neither angry with anyone, nor stands in need of any worship.”⁵⁰ As we have seen, more often than not, Lactantius casts his vote in favor of the majority. On the face of it, this can be read as disingenuous: of course the author will draw upon the strength of a majority philosophical opinion when he wants to present himself as supported by those traditions. Yet, if we look to the argument of the treatise on a broad scale as well as his claims about religion and divine wrath more specifically, Lactantius has little difficulty breaking from that consensus when he wants to distinguish his own opinion from that of his predecessors and contemporaries. Plato, Socrates, the Stoics, and others are thus transformed from the wise, sage men of the past whose agreement on the questions of monotheism and divine providence were tantamount to Lactantius’ argument, and become instead the senseless and illogical philosophers, more broadly construed, against whom Lactantius directs his own assertions.

⁴⁸ ID 11.7.
⁴⁹ ID 11.17.
⁵⁰ ID 11.18: Sed tamen summum Deum, cum et philosophi, et poetae, et ipsi denique qui deos colunt, saepe fateantur; de cultu tamen et honoribus eius nemo unquam requisivit nemo disseruit; ea scilicet persuasione, qua semper beneficium incorruptumque credentes, nec irasci eum cuiquam, nec ullo cultu indigere arbitrantur.
In contrast to his preceding leniency towards the philosophers, when it comes to the definition and true understanding of divine wrath, Lactantius finds that all of the philosophical schools are mistaken: the Epicureans, with their belief in God’s atar-xia, remove all power from him, and the Stoics do not see the difference between “just and unjust anger.” Such distinctions force Lactantius to define anger, a process which he undertakes through a series of rejections:

Moreover it is apparent that the philosophers did not know the ratio of anger from their definitions, which Seneca enumerated in the books which he composed about anger. “Anger is,” he says, “the desire of avenging an injury.” Others, as Posidonius says, describe it as the desire of punishing him by whom you think that you have been unfairly injured. Some have defined it in this way: “Anger is an incitement of the mind to injure him who either has committed an injury, or who has wished to commit an injury.” The definition of Aristotle is not very far from ours; for he says that “anger is the desire of requiting pain.”

Even Cicero’s definition of anger is tossed aside, as Lactantius finds it to be too similar to those which he has already derided. His own definition seeks to reframe the philosophers’ misunderstanding and involves important shifts in vocabulary: for Lactantius, anger is “an emotion of the mind arousing itself for the restraining of faults.” De ira Dei culminates here, as Lactantius lays out the various definitions of the philosophers and then offers his own. The remainder of the treatise expands on this theme and offers various proof-texts to support the understanding of God’s wrath as correct and necessary. More to the point for this study, however, this chapter of the text also encapsulates Lactantius’ relationship to philosophy and philosophers: he frequently relies on them when seeking out an authoritative opinion, but just as frequently he incorporates specific philosophical viewpoints only to demonstrate their falsity.

The move from philosophical consensus about specific facets of the divine nature to a consideration of philosophers’ deficient understanding of anger helps to shift the debate away from divine wrath and to anger itself; we move from theology

51 ID 17.12: Sed Stoici non viderunt esse discriminem recti et pravi, esse iram iustum, esse et iniustam; et quia medellam rei non inveniebant, volverunt eam penitus excidere. Peripatetici vero non excidendam sed temperandam esse dixerunt; quibus in sexto libro Institutionem satis respondimus. (See also Divinae Institutiones 6.15.2 and 6.16.1.)

52 ID 17.13: Nescisse autem philosophos, quae ratio esset irae, apparret ex definitionibus eorum, quas Seneca enumeravit in libris, quos de Ira composita. ‘Ira est, inquit, cupiditas ulciscendae iniuriae. Alii, ut ait Posidonius, cupiditas puniendi eius, a quo te inique putas laesum.’ Quidam ita definierunt: ‘Ira est incitatio animi ad nocendum ei qui, aut nocuit, aut nocere voluit.’ Aristotelis definitio non multum a nostra abest. Ait enim iram esse cupiditatem doloris rependendi. Lactantius’ definition of anger carries within it not insignificant Aristotelian echoes: Aristotle believed that anger was crucial for maintaining social relationships, for justice, and for the preservation of one’s power, honor, and dignity; see Rhetoric 2.2 and Nicomachean Ethics 8.10. On ancient emotions see generally Konstan 2006 and Sokolon 2006.

53 ID 17.20: Ergo definire debuerunt: Ira est motus animi ad coercenda peccata insurgentis.
and musings about the divine, towards an examination of behavioral and ethical philosophical practice. In the immediately subsequent chapter (eighteen), Lactantius continues to discuss the various ways in which the philosophers failed to comprehend the true virtue and application of anger. They claim, he writes, that anger is a vice and must be absent from the punishment of faults; he asserts in response that anger is instead a virtue (or at least that it should be positively understood) and is in fact necessary for the punishment of offenses.⁵⁴ Archytas of Tarentum, that classical paradigm for the role of anger in the response to injustice, is then attacked by Lactantius for his failure to embrace the anger that he rightly felt upon returning home to find his land and property laid waste by his slaves.⁵⁵ Critical for Lactantius is that, in the case of Archytas, the action meriting a reaction supported by anger was committed by someone inferior to him; had the injustice been committed by an equal or a superior, Archytas would have behaved as he did rightly.⁵⁶ In Lactantius’ perspective, it is neither correct nor possible to restrain one’s anger when confronted by an offense undertaken by someone in a position (social or otherwise) below the person offended.

Lactantius leaves little room for interpretation, and closes this section with an extrapolation to the divine nature, here making his most significant break from the philosophical tradition. It is not without reason that the philosophers have been absent from chapters seventeen and eighteen. Despite invoking them as the representatives of opinions that he must refute, Lactantius at no point seeks to add clout to his arguments by drawing upon any previous philosophers or philosophical opinions. He returns at the end of chapter eighteen to a consideration of god’s soul (notably not his figura, lest it get him in trouble with the Stoics) as possessing those qualities which he had earlier demonstrated it to possess, and where

⁵⁴ ID 17.17: Ergo surgimus ad vindictam; non quia laesi sumus, sed ut disciplina servetur, mores corrigantur, licentia comprimatur.

⁵⁵ On Archytas’ moral character as represented in the literary sources, see Huffman 2005, 283–341 at 288–292 (with specific discussion of Lactantius’ reference to the anecdote at 289). Huffman fleshes out the testimonia he gives (283–288) by noting that the “basic point of this anecdote about Archytas and the similar ones about Plato is that one should never punish in anger (D.L. 8.20 has Pythagoras himself make the point). … Applied to the specific circumstances of punishing when controlled by anger, the point would be that, if we punish in anger, we will punish unjustly. This in turn could be judged morally problematic for two different reasons: (1) the person punished will suffer unjustly, (2) the person punishing will act unjustly and hence harm his own soul. … The startling fact that the slaves escape all punishment is precisely what makes this version so memorable.” (288) He goes on to discuss the account given by the “dour Lactantius.” See 283–288 for the testimonia for the Archytas version and cf. Ingremeau 1982, 341.

⁵⁶ ID 18.1–2, with Lactantius’ response at 18.12: esset igitur laudandus Archytas si, cum alicui civi et pari facienti sibi iniuriam fuisset iratus, repressisset se tamen et patientia furoris impetus mitigasset. Lactantius is not alone in thinking that anger has a specific and just use in certain contexts. Aristotle’s definition of anger in Rhetoric 2.2, for example, stresses the social aspect and utility of the emotion as one properly directed towards those whom we regard as below us in power and status. For an overview of the moral dimensions of anger in antiquity see Harris 2001 (and especially 201–228).
he found others to be in agreement with him. “It if belongs to God,” he writes, “to reflect, to be wise, to understand, to foresee, to excel,” then he by necessity must get angry.\(^{57}\) A contrast is drawn, however, between divine anger and human anger, while the one is controlled and appropriate, the other is likely to bleed too easily into uncontrolled fury and violence.\(^{58}\) By restructuring the definition of anger along the lines of virtue and vice, Lactantius attempts to make the idea more appealing to philosophers. Their inability to understand anger correctly was due, in this formulation, to their misunderstanding of its true nature, and if it is taken to be a good, virtuous thing when employed by a being about whose nature (as he has already shown) they can all agree, then surely the concept of divine wrath can be more palatable to his opponents.

It is in chapter eighteen, too, that we find the last reference to a named philosopher in the treatise (of which another five chapters remain).\(^{59}\) As has already been the case earlier in the text, the names of Plato, Socrates, and others are conspicuously absent when Lactantius is breaking from the traditions which he considered to have been founded by prominent philosophers of antiquity. The final chapters are also those in which Lactantius focuses more on the Christian God, ideas and beliefs related to that god, and the provision of evidence that supports his claims about divine wrath. Two types of such chapters exist, as there are those in which Lactantius’ seeming disengagement with the philosophical tradition is intended as a rebuke of philosophical tenets, and there are others in which his rhetorical strategy is to respond to that tradition in a more robust way. In the first case, most clearly observed in chapters nineteen through twenty-one, Lactantius is concerned with linking divine providence to the divine law and then an infraction of that law as deserving an angry response; second, with proving that God’s mercy is as important as his anger; and third, with further differentiating human and divine anger. At each turn, he seeks to anticipate his (imagined) opponents’ counter-arguments: what could provoke divine wrath? if God has anger, and the world is so full of faults, why has he not destroyed everything? and, finally, how can one ascribe to the supreme god an attribute as base and as vicious as anger?

Viewed in this way, the structure of the treatise reveals the rhetorical and philosophical craft deployed by Lactantius. Similarly, the final two chapters can be read as a response to a perceived need to offer evidence, specifically in the form of proof-texts. Once again, Lactantius shows himself to be concerned with a philosophically-minded audience. Rather than sprinkle these final chapters with verses culled from the scriptures of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, Lactantius provides

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57 ID 18.29: *Si Deo subiacet cogitare, sapere, intelligere, providere, praestare, ex omnibus autem animalibus homo solus haec habet...*

58 ID 18.30 and 21, passim.

59 Chapter eighteen is, at least, the last point at which we see Lactantius engaging with the philosophers in a concentrated way, although he mentions Cicero in chapter twenty-two, and “philosophers” in chapter twenty-three.
instead quotations plucked from the Sibylline books. His purpose in doing so is made explicit: although the testimony of the prophets is sufficient for Lactantius and those who share his beliefs, “it is not believed by those who make a display of wisdom by their hair and dress. Let us therefore seek those testimonies which they can either believe, or at any rate not oppose.” Various testimonies are given, from a handful of different Sibyls (each with its own brief history); similarly in the next and final chapter, Lactantius again draws attention to this method by writing that because most “learned men” agree that there have been many Sibyls, he will include evidence from multiple Sibyls. He proceeds to give evidence in the form of paraphrases and quotations of the Cumaean Sibyl as well as others. In each proof text, the quotation serves to support the idea that the one, supreme God does in fact get angry, and that his anger is instigated by human actions and behaviors. The Sibylline oracles are thus appropriated by Lactantius and reoriented to his purpose, and this refashioning of the prophetic texts positions them as links between, on the one hand, the philosophical consensus that Lactantius had worked so carefully to demonstrate and to endorse, and on the other hand, the more radical view that understood that supreme god as possessing the emotion of anger.

Lactantius’ piecemeal approach to classical philosophy is not entirely novel, at least in comparison to his Latinate contemporaries; across the corpus of apologists writing in Latin throughout the earliest centuries of the common era, we see various tenets of Platonic philosophy, in particular, adopted and upheld by Christian authors. Some, like Tertullian, are more vocal about the evils they see embedded in philosophical discourse (and committed by those who engage in such discourse), but are nonetheless making use of philosophical arguments in the middle of their protestations. Elsewhere I have argued that Lactantius privileges not necessarily the “Christian,” but rather the rhetorical, as both the structure and argument of the text, and that his own comments on this point are illustrative of the ways in which De ira Dei is grounded in classical Roman rhetorical practice and theory. By grounding his argument in rhetorical principles, Lactantius is able to claim that his ratio is stronger than that of the philosophers; indeed, he often returns to the need for wisdom and reason, together, to demarcate the appropriate perspective on divine wrath.

The influence of Cicero is pervasive and inescapable. We find the classical orator’s effect on Lactantius in the highly rhetorical nature of the treatise, and we see

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60 ID 22.5: Quorum testimonia nobis quidem satis sunt: verum iis quoniam non credunt isti, qui sapientiam capillis et habitu iactant, ratione quoque et argumentis fuerant a nobis refellendi...Ea igitur quaeramus testimonia, quibus illi possint aut credere aut certe non repugnare. On patristic authors’ use of these texts see Thompson 1952.
62 See generally Barnes 1971.
63 See Meinking 2013a.
64 Passim, but clear examples can be found throughout chapters nine through seventeen.
lengthy fragments of *De natura deorum* paraphrased and sometimes quoted fully at key moments. Lactantius’ reliance on Cicero is one of two facets of the text that make it both ordinary and unique as a product of intellectual culture in the early fourth century CE. On the one hand, the invocation of classical models is expected in a text of this period, it would only seem more curious if such models were absent. Yet on the other hand, Lactantius’ appropriation of two, quite varied, Ciceronian works brings to the fore a tension between the text as a piece of rhetorical showmanship, targeted against the philosophers, and its simultaneous regurgitation of philosophical principles as encapsulated by Cicero. Lactantius’ decision to channel his discussions of the Stoics and Epicureans through *De natura deorum* is itself informative and can only be read as intentional. If these philosophical schools were truly his intended targets, one wonders why he refrained from attacking them as they currently existed, and chose instead to recapitulate Cicero’s Stoics and Epicureans (remembering, too, that the philosophers of *De natura deorum* are unlikely to be accurate representations of those schools as they existed in Cicero’s own day).

Such a recasting of the classical debate not merely betrays Lactantius’ own indebtedness to intellectual traditions, but also helps to underscore the second way in which this treatise is both predictable and peculiar. Classical literature, whether in Greek or Latin, whether poetry or prose, was cited, quoted, and paraphrased by later writers to a sometimes dizzying degree—and used, in tandem, to demonstrate the veracity of an opinion. Quotation was not simply proof of erudition but also evidence of a point; to have the weight of antiquity on one’s side was to have excellent support for an argument. The invocation of model and method that we see in Lactantius has parallels in other writers, both Christian and non-Christian of this period, but the use of Cicero to prove a theological point is relatively rare. This is particularly so in comparison to Graecophone authors, who more clearly and consistently make use of Plato, or some iteration of Platonic philosophy, to support their theological claims about the Christian God. Plato is key to the exegetical tradition, for it is through careful allegorical and figural readings of their sacred texts that Christians of the second and third centuries justify and explain their supreme god despite the difficulties posed by the text themselves. The relationship is somewhat circular: the scriptures of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles represent the Judaeo-Christian God in anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms, and in order to defend that god against the criticisms of philosophers who view him as another god akin to those of the Greek and Roman pantheons, Christian exegetes (and others) must bring to

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those texts a hermeneutic that allows them to claim that this God can be aligned with the supreme god of that philosophical tradition.

Lactantius, as we have seen, has no qualms about adopting a series of such classical philosophical tenets, many of which he ascribes to Plato or the schools that developed out of and in response to Platonism. The areas to which he draws his reader’s attention are those which are fundamental to a beginning sketch of the divine nature, and through Lactantius’ discourse against atheists and those who, like Epicurus, deny that a divine providence governs the world, the similarities between the Christian God and the supreme god of the philosophers are brought to the fore: both exist, both are superior in every way, and both created and take care of the world and those who inhabit it. Interestingly, Lactantius glosses over some of the important facets of the divine nature relevant to this discussion. The immutability and impassibility of the supreme god are two such topics which one would expect to find explored here, not least because of their connection to his defense of divine anger. Lactantius’ conspicuous omission of any mention of either suggests not his ignorance but rather his intentional disregard of the philosophical consensus on these points. Here again, he is instead content to approach the question through a passage from De natura deorum; by countering the Stoic claim that God has neither form nor figure, Lactantius discreetly (at least insofar as he does not devote much time or space to discussion) yet pointedly breaks from the classical philosophical tradition.

De ira Dei is surprising then, not just for the relatively rare claim its author makes about the reality of divine wrath, but also for the ways in which he plays with individual representatives of and ideas maintained within classical philosophical thought. For Lactantius, God’s wrath does not involve an overturning of all previous philosophy (as one might expect), but rather the reorientation of ethical and practical philosophy based on a re-evaluation of the emotion of anger. Despite his dissatisfaction with philosophers generally and, especially, Epicurus, we find in Lactantius’ upholding of key philosophical tenets that Plato and the Platonic tradition survive here in muted and diffused ways. Whether he meant to or not, and although the degree to which he might have been aware of it remains questionable, Lactantius did engage with the traditions against which he positioned himself in the treatise. In this way, he merits consideration alongside other authors of the third and fourth centuries. The particular ways in which Platonism exists in this text and others of his corpus can illuminate, by way of contrast, how the majority of Graecophone authors, Christian and non-Christian, reacted to Platonic philosophy; similarly Lactantius’ and his Latinate contemporaries’ relationship to Cicero, by way of comparison, can help to elucidate shifts in intellectual culture and doxographic links between Apuleius and Augustine.