Quaestiones Infinitae

PUBLICATIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

VOLUME LXIII

Copyright © 2010 by M.S.A. van Houte
All rights reserved
Cover design: I.M. Conradie
Cover photograph:

Above: Soft X-ray image of the Sun through the titanium-polyimide ("Ti_poly") filter from the Hinode X-Ray Telescope (XRT) obtained at: 2009/10/15 18:03 UT. Courtesy of SOHO/EIT consortium. SOHO is a project of international cooperation between ESA and NASA.

Below: "Praying boy". Bronze statue, from Rhodes, late 4th c. BC. Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Antikensammlung Sk 2. Photographer: I.M. Conradie.

Printed by Wöhrmann Printing Service, Zutphen
ISBN: 978 90 393 5453 7

Seneca's theology in its philosophical context

Seneca's theologie in haar filosofische context

(met een samenvatting in het nederlands)

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Utrecht
op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. J.C. Stoof,
ingevolge het besluit van het college voor promoties
in het openbaar te verdedigen
op vrijdag 12 november 2010 des middags te 12.45 uur

door

Maarten Stijn Adriaan van Houte

geboren op 13 mei 1979
te Reimerswaal

Promotor: Prof. dr. K.A. Algra
Co-promotor: Dr. T.L. Tieleman

Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 *Status quaestionis* and philosophical-historical background 5

1. Introduction 5
2. Status quaestionis 5
3. Stoic Theology 7
   - 3.1 Introduction 7
   - 3.2 The status of theology 8
   - 3.3 The nature of god 10
   - 3.4 God's existence and nature: Stoic arguments 15
   - 3.5 Stoic theology and traditional religion 18
4. The development of Platonic theology 21
   - 4.1 Plato's legacy 21
   - 4.2 The early Academy 23
   - 4.3 Antiochus and the return to dogmatism 24
   - 4.4 Pythagoreanism and Middle Platonism 29
5. Seneca on his philosophical allegiance 34

Chapter 2 The status of physics and theology 39

1. Introduction 39
2. The role of physics and theology 39
   - 2.1 The Stoic position 39
   - 2.2 Seneca's position 47
     - 2.2.1 Physics needed for ethics 47
     - 2.2.2 Physics as theology valuable in itself 52
     - 2.2.3 Ethics and physics both important 55
3. Concluding remarks 60

Chapter 3 God's nature 63

1. Introduction 63
2. Ontology and first principles 63
   - 2.1 The Stoic position 63
   - 2.2 Seneca's position 66
   - 2.3 The corporeality of god 72
3. God's location in and relation to the cosmos 78
   - 3.1 God's presence in the cosmos 78
   - 3.2 God's location in the cosmos 80
   - 3.3 The immanence of god 83
4. Conclusion 89

Chapter 4 Conflagration and deluge 91
1. Introduction 91
2. The Stoics and Seneca on the conflagration 91
3. The flood in Naturales Quaestiones 3 95
4. The juxtaposition of conflagration and deluge 97
5. Moral aspects of the deluge 99
6. The dramatic character of the account of the deluge 105
7. Conclusion 109
Chapter 5 God and man 111
1. Introduction 111
2. The nature of the human soul 112
3. The soul as inner demon 113
4. The origin and destination of the soul 119
4.1 Introduction 119
4.2 Death and the afterlife 120
4.2.1 The soul survives until the conflagration 122
4.2.2 Doubts about the survival of the soul 125
4.2.3 There is no survival of the soul 128
4.2.4 The reason for the multitude of viewpoints 129
4.2.5 Conclusion 130
4.3 The abode of the surviving soul and the return to its origin 130
4.4 The soul's return to its origin during life 136
5. Conclusion 144
Chapter 6 Theodicy 147
1. Introduction 147
2. The Stoic position 148
3. Seneca on evil 152
3.1 Seneca on moral evil 152
3.2 Seneca on cosmic evil 155
3.2.1 Hardships make us strong 155
3.2.2 God's power is limited 160
3.2.3 Suffering for the greater good 165
4. Conclusion 168
Chapter 7 Knowledge of god 169
1. Introduction 169
2. The Stoic position 170
3. Seneca's arguments for god's existence 170
4. Knowledge of god 173

4.1 Introduction ... 173
4.2 Knowledge of god is possible ... 174
4.3 Knowledge of god is difficult to achieve ... 178
4.4 The unknowability of god ... 179
4.5 The limits of the senses ... 183
4.6 The advancement of knowledge ... 187
4.7 Stoic hesitation ... 190
5. Conclusion ... 193
Chapter 8 Traditional religion and cult ... 195
1. Introduction ... 195
2. Divination ... 195
2.1 The Stoics on divination ... 195
2.2 Seneca on divination ... 199
3. Prayer ... 202
4. Etymology and allegory ... 214
5. Traditional religion: worship and cult ... 216
6. The right kind of worship ... 219
7. A comparison with Plutarch ... 221
8. Conclusion ... 226
Conclusion ... 229
Appendix 1: Epictetus ... 231
2. The status of theology and the human *telos* ... 231
3. God's nature ... 233
4. Conflagration ... 233
5. God and man ... 234
6. Theodicy ... 236
7. Knowledge of god ... 238
8. Traditional religion and cult ... 239
Appendix 2: Marcus Aurelius ... 243
2. The status of theology and the human *telos* ... 243
3. God's nature ... 245
4. Conflagration ... 245
5. God and man ... 246
6. Theodicy ... 248
7. Knowledge of god ... 250
8. Traditional religion and cult ... 251
Bibliography ... 252

Primary sources 252
Secondary sources 253
Abbreviations 269
Modern 269
Seneca 270
Ancient 270
Index Locorum Potiorum 273
Samenvatting 277
Acknowledgements 284
Curriculum Vitae 285

Introduction

The principal character of this study, Lucius Annaeus Seneca,[1] gained widespread fame as a tragedian, political adviser and philosopher. In all of these *métiers* his work has always met with both approval and criticism, both during his lifetime and posthumously: his tragedies were highly regarded by and of great influence on Elizabethan tragedians,[2] but also condemned as "beyond all description bombastic and frigid, utterly devoid of nature in character and action, full of the most revolting violations of propriety and [...] barren of all theatrical effect [...]."[3] As tutor and political advisor to Nero, he has been both praised for keeping the young emperor from spiralling into madness for as long as he did, and criticized for associating with such a corrupt and vicious regime.[4] As a philosopher, finally, his prolificacy and eloquence made him into an authority in moral philosophy, but many have seen his philosophical stature as overshadowed by his theoretical and pragmatic inconsistency of living a life of opulence in spite of his appeals for Stoic austerity.[5] His philosophical works, too, have met with different appraisal, ranging from being greatly popular and influential to being disregarded and neglected.[6]

This study is about another characteristic that has met with different judgements: his professed philosophical allegiance to Stoicism. While many scholars have averred that his works evince knowledge of and faithfulness to many basic Stoic principles, it has also often been suggested that Seneca is receptive to philosophical ideas of non-Stoic origin, and to Platonism in particular. This alleged influence is accounted for in roughly two different ways, both based on the reemergence of dogmatic Platonism in and around Seneca's time. The first account maintains that even before Seneca, viz. under the leadership of the so-called Middle Stoics Panaetius and Posidonius,[7] the Stoic school had become openly sympathetic to other schools and had abandoned Stoic for Platonic doctrine on several important issues; this eclectic attitude presumably carried over to later Stoics as well, Seneca included, especially since such later Stoics are thought to have been primarily interested in moral guidance, not doctrinal unity and coherence. The second account is not based on an alleged weakening of Stoic orthodoxy across the board, but argues that while Seneca predominantly espouses

---

[1] Seneca lived from somewhere between 4-1 B.C. to 65 A.D. For biographical details, see Griffin (1976).
[2] Eliot (1927), p. 65, McNeely (2004), p. 45ff., Miola (1992), esp. p. 1-10, Boyle (2008).
[3] Donaldson (1875), p. 462, translated from Schlegel's 8th lecture in the *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*. See Eliot (1927), p. 66f. for other critical opinions on Seneca's poetry. See also Watling (1966), p. 8-11.
[4] See Griffin (1976), p. 67-181, 428, for a discussion of Seneca's political activities. Cf. Conradie (2010), p. 10 for the differing estimations of Seneca's political role by Tacitus and Cassius Dio.
[5] John Milton famously criticized Seneca, "in his books a philosopher", of being a merciless loan shark. For this reference, and many others, including the verdicts of (near)-contemporaries of Seneca, cf. Motto (1966). See further Griffin (2008), esp. p. 54ff.
[6] For a short overview of the modern reception of Seneca, see Long (2009), p. 20ff.
[7] Panaetius lived from ca. 185-109 B.C., Posidonius from ca. 135-ca. 51 B.C.

orthodox Stoic theory, he occasionally adopts Middle Platonic views incompatible with Stoicism.

Both accounts have had their share of criticism in the last decades: the first for basing its judgement of Seneca primarily on how he is expected to fit in a hypothetical and artificially schematic view of the history of philosophy, the second for jumping to conclusions on the basis of a prejudiced interpretation of certain passages in Seneca. Recent scholarship further emphasizes that Seneca must be taken seriously as a philosopher and as a Stoic, and this has led to new appraisals of Seneca's allegiance concerning certain aspects of philosophy, often judging that he stays rather close to the Stoic position but allows himself the intellectual freedom to add to or adapt that position.[8] Further, the acknowledgement that Stoicism and Platonism have always shared much common ground means that a rhetorically skilled author like Seneca might, e.g., in a particular passage, use Platonic imagery or parlance in presenting a Stoic doctrine.

Even if Seneca has attracted more attention from historians of philosophy in recent years, large parts of his work are still surprisingly underused, and many aspects of it are in want of further study. One particular issue that stands in need of such a new appraisal is that of Seneca's theological views. Some work has been done already,[9] but there is no systematic examination of the relevant material in his works, and consequently no overall assessment of how his views on god and the divine relate to those of the earlier Stoics and the extent to which they may manifest non-Stoic doctrinal influences, particularly that of Platonism. Such an overview is needed, I believe, because of the crucial importance of theology for the Stoics: there is no aspect of their philosophy that does not ultimately rest on the assumption that god is the immanent, rational, beneficent and active principle in the cosmos. To ascertain Seneca's ideas on god, therefore, will also tell us much about his philosophical position in general.

This study aims to provide such an overview of Seneca's theology, and will do so against the backdrop of the views of other, earlier, Stoics. This backdrop is needed as a frame of reference in relation to which we may be able to decide how what we find in Seneca relates to the views of his Stoic predecessors. In order to present and interpret Seneca's theological ideas as unprejudiced as possible, the approach taken in this study will be mostly empirical: much room is given to what Seneca himself has to say on the different aspects of theology, and what he says will be analysed in the immediate context of where it is found, in regard to the aims of the particular treatise is found in, but also in a wider context of other passages on the same aspect. Using this method, we may hope to gain a better understanding of Seneca's opinions on various theological issues, such as the nature of god, the relation of god and man, the problem of evil, and the value and scope of the study of theology itself.

---

[8] The work of Brad Inwood has been of particular importance here; cf. Inwood (2005), (2007a). See also Wildberger (2006).

[9] Cf. Setaioli (2007) for a recent overview of Seneca's theological ideas.

The first chapter will begin with an historical overview of the various scholarly positions on Seneca's theological views *vis-à-vis* those of his own Stoic school and other philosophical traditions, notably Platonism. The remaining sections of the first chapter provide the philosophical background to the questions that this study hopes to answer. Firstly, the theology of the early Stoics, i.e. Zeno, Cleanthes and mainly Chrysippus, will be discussed in some detail (1.3): secondly, an overview will be given of the development of theological and metaphysical ideas in the history of Platonism, up to the time of Seneca (1.4); thirdly and finally, we will consider Seneca's own ideas about his philosophical allegiance (1.5). In the various chapters on Seneca, these different overviews will often be referred to as giving more detailed information on the topic of discussion.

The remaining chapters, i.e. 2 through 8, are each devoted to one aspect or topic of Seneca's theological views. These chapters roughly follow the same pattern: after a short introduction of a particular theological topic, the (earlier) Stoic views on that topic are given. This is followed by a close interpretation of all the relevant passages in Seneca, including a critical discussion of the secondary literature on those passages, if available. Our findings are then compared with what was established as the Stoic view.

In the overall conclusion of this study the findings of the different chapters will be summarized and drawn together to come to a better comprehensive understanding of Seneca's theological views and their relation to Stoic and Platonic ideas. Two appendices, finally, provide a wide selection of passages on theological issues from the work of two other important Stoics of the imperial period, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. These passages have been categorized so as to correspond to the chapters on Seneca's views, i.e. chapters 2 through 8, for easy reference, and to facilitate comparing and contrasting the opinions of these thinkers with those of Seneca.

Chapter 1
Status quaestionis and philosophical-historical background

1. Introduction

This first chapter will set the stage, so to say, for the in-depth study of Seneca's theological views carried out in the other chapters. Section 2, first, will provide an overview of scholarly opinions on Seneca's philosophical position, both in general and, more specifically, concerning theological issues. This overview will show that much of the scholarly discussion centres on the question how Seneca's views, especially concerning theology, relate to earlier Stoicism and Platonism. Since this question will be an important one in much of this study, the next three sections of this chapter intend to furnish the necessary background to answering it: section 3 gives an overview of the principal Stoic theological views, while section 4 describes the development of Platonic theology, from its beginnings in Plato up to and including the early imperial period. Section 5, finally, gives Seneca's own views as to his philosophical allegiance.

2. Status quaestionis

Interpretations of Seneca's philosophical ideas have often been given in conjunction with estimations of the philosophical tradition he is seen to be a part of. For a long time, it was widely accepted that Seneca, as a Stoic, belonged to a school that had long since become unorthodox and eclectic.[10] The origins of this unorthodoxy are supposed to lie with the so-called Middle Stoics Panaetius and Posidonius, heads of the Stoic school in the late 2nd century and first half of the 1st century B.C., who openly admired Plato and allegedly rejected many Stoic doctrines in favour of Platonic ones.[11] The imperial Stoics, including Seneca,[12] who followed the Platonizing Panaetius and Posidonius, no longer actively defended Stoic theory and were willing to leave theoretical philosophy to the resurgent dogmatic Platonism of that time.[13] They themselves merely promoted Stoic moral teachings, as witnessed by the predominance of ethics in the still extant works of these Stoics. Because of their moral pragmatic aim and their disinterest in philosophical theory, it is thought, these thinkers were happy to use an eclectic mix of both Stoic and Platonic doctrines as underpinnings of their moral ideas.

This viewpoint has been largely abandoned, however, for various reasons: modern studies have shown, e.g., that while the imperial Stoics did indeed emphasize the practical

---

[10] Rubin (1901), p. 18-9, Zeller (1909), Theiler (1930), Holler (1934), Bickel (1960), Rist (1989), p. 2010.
[11] In addition to the references in the previous note, see Dobson (1918), Pohlenz (1948), p. 224ff., Inwood (1993) – though he believes Seneca to be orthodox, Gourinat (1996), Bees (2004).
[12] The other most prominent imperial Stoics (called 'imperial' because they lived in the early centuries of the Roman empire) being Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.
[13] Zeller (1909), p. 720, Pohlenz (1948), p. 308, Lapidge (1978), Donini (1982), p. 160ff., Larson (1992), p. 55.

application of philosophy in everyday life,[14] Stoic theoretical philosophy is far from the "dead letter"[15] it is claimed by some to be.[16] Furthermore, recent scholarship indicates that there is much more continuity between the earlier Stoics on the one hand and Panaetius and Posidonius on the other,[17] but also that Stoicism was indebted to Platonism from its very beginnings and that we need not see any great difference on this point between earlier or later Stoics.[18] These developments have made the idea that Seneca was somehow receptive to the influence of Platonism via the 'Platonizing' Middle Stoics less plausible.

Others have argued, however, that there was a more direct influence of developments within dogmatic Platonism on Seneca, especially insofar as his ideas about god and his relation to the cosmos are concerned. One of the developments of this so-called Middle Platonism[19] was an increasingly hierarchized view of the cosmos that puts a transcendent supreme principle above the fundamental division of reality into an active and a passive principle.[20] Certain scholars hold that Seneca occasionally turns away from Stoic immanentism and towards such a Middle Platonic hierarchization of the cosmos.[21] According to this interpretation, Seneca sometimes replaces Stoic pantheism and the idea of the immanence of god in the world with a Platonic view in which god is seen as an incorporeal being transcending the world he has created. As an incorporeal and transcendent being, god is no longer perceptible by the senses, but only by the mind,[22] or might even be beyond our epistemological capabilities in an absolute sense.[23] In effect, on this view Seneca's notion of god is no longer Stoic, but Middle Platonic in kind.

It has also been argued that in those passages where Seneca subscribes to this hierarchization of the cosmos, his conception of the goal for man (*telos*) is no longer Stoic.[24] For the Stoics, the perfection of our virtue and rationality is what we must strive for. By making god transcendent to the world and thus removing the divine aspect from that world, however, Seneca no longer sees the morally perfect life as the ultimate goal of mankind. The

---

[14] For Seneca, see Hadot (1969), Hadot (1986) and Hadot (1995).

[15] Lapidge (1978), p. 184.

[16] Seneca's own *Naturales Quaestiones* is a good example, as is Cleomedes' *Caelestia*. See further Algra (2000), Algra (2009c), Donini (1988), p. 25, Todd (1989), Frede (1999), p. 779-81. Cf. Barnes (1997) and (2009) on logic and dialectic in the imperial Stoics.

[17] Cf. Tieleman (2003), p. 198-287, who proposes to do away with the term 'Middle Stoa' altogether. See further Lee (2002), Gill (2003), Sedley (2003), Wildberger (2006), Tieleman (2007b).

[18] For the influence of Plato (particularly through the *Timaeus*) and Platonism of the early Stoa see Reydams-Schils (1999), Betegh (2003), Sedley (2007), chapter VII.

[19] Further discussed below in section 4.4.

[20] These aspects of Platonist theology are further explained and discussed in section 4 below.

[21] Stahl 1960 and 1964, Donini 1979 and 1982, Gersh (1986), Natali 1992, Gauly 2004. Seneca's supposed turn to Platonism is usually not assumed to be present throughout Seneca's works, but rather in certain passages of the *Naturales Quaestiones* and in *EM* 58 and 65, letters in which Seneca deals with elements of Platonic philosophy.

[22] Stahl (1964), p. 437, Donini (1979), p. 210ff., Gauly (2004), p. 165, 175.

[23] Runia (2002); cf. Norden (1956).

[24] Cf. Donini (1982), p. 191ff., Natali (1994).

perfection of virtue is now no more than a purification of ourselves which is preparatory to what is truly man's highest activity, viz. speculative physics and the contemplation of god. In short, it is thought that in these passages in Seneca the Platonic *telos* replaces the Stoic one.

Many others have, in considering the same passages on which Donini *et al.* base this interpretation of Seneca, concluded that while Seneca's theological ideas sometimes approach the borders of Stoic orthodoxy, they never actually cross them,[25] and the interpretation of Seneca as tending towards Platonism has accordingly met with substantial criticism.[26] This interpretation is, accordingly, not very popular today, but there is still much left to clarify about what Seneca's theological views actually are, and the philosophical context of these views. To aid this undertaking, which will commence in chapter 2, we will now first take a closer look at Stoic and Platonist theology and at Seneca's own perception of his philosophical position as regards the different schools.

3. Stoic Theology

3.1 Introduction

Stoic theology examines the notion of god insofar as he can be characterized as the immanent, rational, beneficent and active principle that pervades, steers and, in a sense, *is* the cosmos that we live in. As such, theology was important for all parts of Stoic philosophy, physics, logic and

[25] Cf. Bonhöffer (1894), p. 247-9, Burton (1909), p. 364: "There is no room in Seneca's conception for the notion of transcendence." Pohlenz (1948), p. 320: "Was Seneca über das Wesen Gottes aussagt, hält sich zunächst ganz im Rahmen der Stoischen Theologie." Scarpat (1970), p. 138-69 also thinks that dualism is compatible with Stoic immanentism; cf. Scarpat (1977), p. 31. Chaumartin 1993 and 1996 argue that while there are Platonic elements in Seneca, he tries to integrate them into a Stoic world view. Zeller (1909), p. 729, recognizes that Seneca, more than other Stoics, distinguishes god from the world as its creative, planning and caring mind, but explicitly warns against the conclusions drawn later by Donini and others: "Viel zu weit jedoch geht es, wenn behauptet worden ist, Seneca habe die stoische Gottesidee verlassen und dadurch auch der Moral eine neue Richtung gegeben: während für den echten Stoicismus Gott und die Materie dem Wesen nach eins seien, erscheinen sie bei Seneca wesentlich verschieden, Gott sei ihm das unkörperliche Wesen, das durch seinen freien Willen die Welt gebildet habe, es sei nicht mehr der stoische, sondern der platonische Gott, den er habe." Inwood (2002), p. 125f. argues that the fact that certain things are merely intelligible is a perfectly Stoic opinion and is in itself no indication of Platonism. On the alleged change of the human *telos* from Stoic moral virtue to Platonic speculative physics, Algra (2009c), p. 157-8, argues that "pourtant la psychologie et la (méta)physique sous-jacentes restent stoïciennes, tandis que l'élément de contemplation a aussi un cachet de stoïcisme orthodoxe." Many other scholars also state that Seneca basically was an orthodox Stoic: Hadot (1969), Fuhrer (2000), p. 95, Cooper 2004, Inwood (2005), p. 2-3.

[26] Cf. Inwood (2005), p. 2: "The evidence of his works also show, I think, that Seneca's intellectual engagement with Platonism, Aristotelianism, and even with Epicureanism was shaped by a wide range of substantial philosophical interests and concerns, and not by a dubious project of philosophical harmonization, as has often been assumed." Cf. Tieleman (2007), p. 133: "Too often the question of his relation to Platonism has been approached on the basis of preconceptions as to how he will have fitted into a larger schema of historical development, involving the eclectic temper of the philosophy of his day and the gradual return of Platonic transcendence." See further Setaioli (1988), Mazzoli (1989), Inwood (2002), p. 125, Algra (2003a), p. 167f., Wildberger (2006), Limburg (2007), especially p. 377ff.

ethics: for physics, since we cannot have a proper understanding of the cosmos without recognizing god as the formative principle of and in it; for logic (or rather, epistemology), because our epistemological capabilities, i.e. our rationality, derive from god; for ethics, because it is our duty to live according to nature, understood as the divine and rational character of both the cosmos without and our own soul within.

Since god plays so many roles within the Stoic system, we will find that the Stoics could take different approaches to him, depending on the context. As a consequence, it is impossible to give a simple definition or categorization of Stoic theology; it is multi-faceted to the same extent that god has different aspects: it is pantheistic when god is said to be the immanent and formative principle in the world, monistic when he is described as being the cosmos, and dualistic when he is seen as one of the two principles of the cosmos, viz. as its soul. When he is revered as the guardian of the world and the human race, Stoic theology uses theistic parlance, and it is even polytheistic insofar as god is said to embody many gods of the Greek pantheon. In this paragraph we will look at these different aspects of the Stoic conception of god and the arguments with which the Stoics defended this concept.[27]

In section 3.2 the status of Stoic theology within the whole Stoic curriculum will be determined; in section 3.3 we will examine the various characteristics that the Stoics ascribed to their god and how they defended their conception of god against criticism by their philosophical opponents. Section 3.4 discusses the various arguments employed by the Stoics to prove his existence and his rational, beneficent and provident nature. In section 3.5, finally, we will examine the Stoic attitude towards traditional religion and cult.

3.2 The status of theology

Theology was a part of physics, but a part that warranted separate or even special treatment: Cleanthes put it after the more general study of physics in the Stoic curriculum[28] and wrote a separate work *On the Gods*, as did Chrysippus, who also wrote works on fate, providence and divination. Later Stoics, such as Antipater, Panaetius and Posidonius continued to write works on some of these issues and the imperial Stoics dealt with them as well. There are several 'specialized' works from this period, notably Seneca's *De Providentia*[29] and Cornutus' *Theologiae* Graecae Compendium, and we will see theological issues appearing in Seneca's ethical works as well. All this goes to prove that theology remained a topic of major interest throughout the history of the Stoic school. The importance of theology is further emphasized by several fragments of Cleanthes and Chrysippus in which theology is said to be not just the final part of the study of physics, but the apogee or culmination of it, being almost like the

[27] The most recent survey is Algra (2003). Pohlenz (1959) also provides a useful, if somewhat dated, overview of Stoic theology. Mansfeld (1999) discusses Stoic theology within the context of philosophical debate between Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics.

[28] D.L. 7.41 (*SVF* 1.482).

[29] Further discussed in chapter 6.

study of arcane knowledge, to which we must be initiated.[30] However, the exact status of theology within the curriculum as a whole seems to be less clear, since the position of physics itself within this curriculum is an issue on which we have seemingly contradictory evidence, and opponents criticized the Stoics for this apparent inconsistency.[31] Diogenes Laertius reports several similes wherein philosophy is portrayed as a living creature and as an egg, with physics as the soul of the creature and the yolk of the egg, respectively,[32] and Sextus Empiricus also claims that the Stoics think physics should come last, since it is the most divine and therefore difficult part of philosophy.[33] At the same time, however, the Stoics were also convinced that a proper understanding of physics was needed for living a good life. Diogenes Laertius, e.g., also reports a simile in which ethics is likened to the fruit of the orchard that is philosophy, and Sextus gives the same two similes mentioned above but reverses the roles of ethics and physics: ethics is now the soul of the creature and the yolk of the egg. Plutarch says that while Chrysippus said that theology should come last in the curriculum, he also maintains in his On the Gods that theology is needed for all other studies:

> "It is not possible to discover any other beginning of justice or any source for it other than that from Zeus and from the universal nature, for thence everything of the kind must have its beginning if we are going to have anything to say about good and evil."[34]

Plutarch presents these different valuations of physics and theology as a glaring inconsistency in the Stoic system, but a more moderate and impartial interpretation suggests that while the Stoics thought that certain theological issues and problems should only be tackled by advanced students of Stoicism, they also believed that a basically correct view of the world as a divine and provident whole was needed for an effective study of ethics.[35] Whether Seneca's position on

---

[30] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1035A-B (*SVF* 2.42, see also *SVF* 2.1008), for Cleanthes see Epiph. *Adv. Her.* 3.2.9.

[31] See e.g. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1035B-F.

[32] D.L. 7.40 (*SVF* 2.38).

[33] Sextus Emp. *M* 7.22-3 (*SVF* 2.44).

[34] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1035C (*SVF* 3.68): οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν εὑρεῖν τῆς δικαιοσύνης ἄλλην γένεσιν ἢ τὴν ἐκ τοῦ Διὸς καὶ τὴν ἐκ τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως· ἐντεῦθεν γὰρ δεῖ πᾶν τὸ τοιοῦτον τὴν ἀρχὴν ἔχειν, εἰ μέλλομέν τι ἐρεῖν περὶ ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν. Plutarch gives two further quotes from Chrysippus' *Physical Propositions* (Φυσικαὶ θέσεις) that bear out the same idea, in 1035C: "For there is no other or more suitable way of approaching the theory of good and evil or the virtue or happiness than from the universal nature (ἀπὸ τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως) and from the dispensation of the universe (ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου διοικήσεως)," and 1035D: "For the theory of good and evil must be connected with these, since good and evil have no better beginning or point of reference and physical speculation (τῆς φυσικῆς θεωρίας) is to be undertaken for no other purpose than for the discrimination of good and evil."

[35] Cf. Algra (2003), p. 153-5, Algra (2009c), p. 152, Betegh (2003). See further chapter 2, especially section 2.1. To give an example of what might qualify as an advanced topic: Plut. *St. Rep.* 1052A (*SVF* 2.1049) reports Chrysippus as saying in the third book of his *On the gods* that certain technical theological issues, such as the destructibility of gods, should rather be discussed when dealing with physics proper. Cf. Algra (2008), p. 54, n. 74.

this issue is compatible with the general Stoic view given here has been a matter of debate, which we will turn to in chapter 2.

3.3 The nature of god

As said in the introduction, the Stoics believed god to be the principle and constituent cause of all things, as well as the providentially steering force of and in the cosmos. As this all-pervading and guiding principle, god is "called by many descriptions according to his powers."[36] We will now take a closer look at these descriptions.

Stoic ontology posits two constitutive principles: that which acts and that which is acted upon. That which is acted upon can also be called matter or substrate, and it is wholly passive and pliable. That which acts is also called reason or god, and it is the active cause working on matter.[37] The basic division of what there is in an active and a passive part was not new: Plato recognized the same two principles, or at least was thought to do so by the Academic and Peripatetic interpreters of the *Timaeus*.[38] What was new, however, was that the Stoics held the principles to be bodies, since only bodies can act or be acted upon.[39] God himself, then, is a body that pervades matter, forming the four elements (fire, air, water, earth), out of which all other things are constituted.[40] This means that on a basic level, all things consist of matter and god, and that the whole cosmos is, in a way, god's body.[41] This identification of the cosmos with god meant that the outward shape of the Stoic god was a rotating sphere.[42] Outside this sphere, there is nothing but void, so there is basically nothing *but* our cosmos. From an aetiological point of view, Stoic cosmology is monistic, since there is only one cause, which works in the one cosmos, whereas from an ontological perspective it may be said to be dualistic, whereby the active cause, god, is always bound up with matter.

God in his role as formative cause in matter was also seen as an intelligent, creative fire that manifests itself in the world as the force that holds things together and gives them their peculiar characteristics.[43] The association of creativity and vitality with fire probably derived from Heraclitus, who was seen as an important forerunner of the Stoics.[44] In place of this fire Chrysippus put *pneuma* (breath), which by his time was regarded by many philosophers and doctors as what is constitutive of or relevant to the vital principle supposedly present in living beings. This active *pneuma* consisted of fire and air,[45] while water and earth

---

[36] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021).
[37] D.L. 7.134 (*SVF* 1.85, 1.493), Sextus Emp. *M* 9.75-6.
[38] Cf. Reydams-Schils (1999), Hahm (1977).
[39] Cic. *Acad.* 1.39, Sextus Emp. *M* 8.263. D.L. 7.134 also reports that the principles are *sômata* (bodies), while a parallel text in the Suda has *asômatous*: see Frede (2005) for a discussion of this problem; also Lapidge (1973), p. 263-4, Reydams-Schils (1999), p. 56ff., Wildberger (2006), p. 5-7.
[40] D.L. 7.136 (*SVF* 1.102 [2]), 7.142 (*SVF* 1.102 [3]), *SVF* 2.413.
[41] D.L. 7.137, Cic. *ND* 1.39.
[42] Cic. *ND* 2.46, Sen. *EM* 113.22, further discussed in chapter 3.
[43] Aetius 1.7.33, D.L. 7.136 (*SVF* 1.102 [2]). Cf. Aug. *Civ. Dei* 8.5 (*SVF* 2.423); *SVF* 1.157.
[44] Cf. Long (1976).
[45] Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1085C-D (*SVF* 2.444), Galen *Plen*. 7.525, 9-14 (*SVF* 2.439), *PHP* 5.3.8 (*SVF* 2.841).

formed the passive matter on which *pneuma* acted by pervading and shaping it.[46] The exact interaction between, or 'tension' (*tonos*), of fire and air within the *pneuma* of a particular thing gives that thing its individual character: it gives a stone its solidity, a plant its growth and humans their rationality.[47]

The divine *pneuma* pervades the whole cosmos and all things within it, but it does not give the same *tonos* to every single thing: the *tonos* of a rock is different from that of a human being, which accounts for the fact that we are intelligent and a rock is not. Likewise, certain parts of the cosmos are more 'divine' than other parts, because of a differnet manner of pervasion by creative *pneuma*, i.e. god. As such, the air is more divine than the earth on which we live, and the region of the heavenly bodies even more so.[48] The heavenly bodies themselves, consisting of *aether* (not a fifth element as in Aristotle, but the purest form of fire),[49] were also called gods.[50] These divine regions and heavenly bodies were not to be seen as separate gods, but as manifestations or aspects of the one god: hence the Stoics could use both 'god' and 'the gods', the choice for either term depending on the context at hand. God can thus be said to reside mainly in the 'higher' parts of our cosmos, such as the heavenly bodies, but the Stoics always maintained that god remained a part of our world and did not transcend it. In the third chapter we will discuss various suggestions by modern scholars that we find this perspective more in Seneca than in 'mainstream' Stoicism, allegedly under the influence of Platonism.

The 'designing fire' or *pneuma* that god is when he is mixed through and through with matter is thus the formative cause in matter, but at the same time it uses up this matter just as an ordinary fire would. The Stoics distinguished the creative fire, with its formative and live-giving attributes, from 'ordinary' fire, i.e. the fire that is "a destructive agency, consuming everything"[51] But both creative and destructive fire need fuel to keep going, since "no fire could continue to exist without sustenance of some sort."[52] Accordingly, the Stoics believed that the differentiated cosmos (*diakosmêsis*) we live in would not exist in the same way forever, but would one day be wholly consumed by fire. During this so-called conflagration (*ekpurôsis*) god uses all matter for himself and there is nothing but divine fire.[53] Eventually, god will re-create the cosmos anew, in the exact image of the last one, and this new cosmos will eventually also be

---

[46] The Stoics devised a special theory of mixture (*krasis*) to explain how this pervading of passive elements by active ones could take place. Cf. Alex. Aphr. *Mixt*. 216.14-218.6 (*SVF* 2.473). See Lapidge (1973) for a discussion of the Stoic ideas on principles and elements.

[47] D.L. 7.138-9, Orig. *Princ.* 3.1.2-3 (*SVF* 2.988), Philo *Leg. Alleg.* 2.22-3 (*SVF* 2.458), *Deus Imm.* 35-6 (*SVF* 2.458). See Sedley (1999), 387-90, Furley (1999), p. 440-1, Long (1999), p. 563f.

[48] D.L. 7.138-139 (*SVF* 2.634).

[49] D.L. 7.137 (*SVF* 2.580), Stobaeus 1.213, 15-21.

[50] Cic. *ND* 1.36, 2.39-43.

[51] Cic. *ND* 2.41 (*SVF* 1.504): *confector [...] et consumptor omnium.* Cf. Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 213, 17-27 (*SVF* 1.120).

[52] Cic. *ND* 2.40: *nullus ignis sine pastu aliquo posset permanere*. The heavenly bodies, consisting of *aether*, the purest form of fire, were said to be 'nourished' by the moist exhalations from the lands and seas beneath them; cf. Cic. *ND* 2.118; 3.37.

[53] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1052C-D (*SVF* 2.604), Alex. Lycopolis 19, 2-4, D.L. 7.141, Eusebius *Pr. Ev.* 15.18.2 (*SVF* 2.596), Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1075D, Philo *Aet. Mundi* 90, Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.13.4-7, MA 5.13, 10.7.

destroyed by fire.[54] There is a never-ending cycle of creation and destruction, and the only persisting thing throughout these cycles is the combination of god and matter. Their opponents criticized the Stoics for this idea on the grounds that the destruction of the cosmos could not be reconciled with god's beneficence, but the Stoics believed that the cosmic cycle was a necessary concomitant of god's fiery nature.[55]

In his role as active and formative principle of the cosmos that resides in its upper regions, the Stoics also called god the 'commanding faculty' (*hêgemonikon*) of the world,[56] or world soul.[57] This intelligent world soul pervades the cosmos and gives it its rational character:[58] as the intelligent, rational being *par excellence* god can be called reason (*logos*).[59] At the same time, as we have seen, the way in which the world soul pervades the cosmos and gives *tonos* to each thing determines the characteristics of that thing. Put differently, god as soul of the world is said to be 'nature', both as 'what sustains the world' and that 'what makes things on the earth grow: [it] completes and sustains its products in accordance with seminal principles[.]'[60] For the Stoics, nature is both descriptive and normative: what a certain thing essentially *is,* also determines what it *should do*. Human beings, e.g., are rational beings because their individual portion of formative *pneuma*, i.e. their soul, is a part of this world soul, with the kind of *tonos* that manifests itself as rationality.[61] Our soul is thus part of the world-soul, or rather, god has put a part of himself in us as our soul,[62] and this means that we have to perfect our rationality so as to bring it in conformity with that of the whole divine cosmos.[63]

The characterizations we have so far discussed show that the Stoics had a pantheistic view of god, i.e., they believed god to be 'in' every part the cosmos, even when he was not everywhere in the same manner. But the Stoics also recognized several aspects of god that indicate a more theistic approach. As the formative and creative principle of the world, e.g., god is also seen as a 'craftsman' (*dêmiourgos*)[64] and as creator of mankind he can be called 'father' as well.[65] Moreover, since god is perfectly intelligent, rational, and also beneficent towards that which he

---

[54] Aristocles *ap*. Eusebius *Pr. Ev*. 15.14.2 (*SVF* 1.98), D.L. 7.137 (*SVF* 2.526).
[55] Though certain Stoics, like Panaetius, are said to have questioned or even rejected the idea of a cosmic cycle in favour of an eternal world-order. Cf. Philo, *Aet. Mundi* 76-7, Cic. *ND* 2.118 (*SVF* 2.593). See Mansfeld (1979) and Long (2006) for the proposal and rejection, respectively, of the idea that the Stoics considered the conflagration to be not merely a necessary part of the natural process that is the cosmos, but in fact the best possible state of the cosmos. See further chapter 4.
[56] D.L. 7.138 (*SVF* 2.634), Cic. *ND* 1.39.
[57] Cic. *ND* 1.37 (*SVF* 1.530), cf. *SVF* 1.532, 2.532 [2].
[58] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.75.
[59] D.L. 7.138 (*SVF* 2.634).
[60] D.L. 7.148 (*SVF* 2.1132).
[61] D.L. 7.139 (*SVF* 2.634), Cic. *ND* 2.58.
[62] D.L. 7.87-89 (*SVF* 3.4), 7.143.
[63] D.L. 7.87 (*SVF* 3.4).
[64] D.L. 7.137 (*SVF* 2.526), Cic. *ND* 2.58.
[65] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021), *SVF* 1.537 (Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*).

creates,[66] the Stoics also named him 'providence.'[67] God is especially caring towards men, since they share his rationality, and he has created this world as a dwelling for himself and us. God's special care for humans is evidenced by his the fact that all things are created with a view to our needs: we can grow food, use animals for their labour, meat and other products, and have been given our rationality so we might live a morally good life and be observers of god's beautiful cosmos.[68]

As the determining cause of all that happens, god is also called 'fate';[69] everything that happens in the cosmos is ultimately a part of the unified process that is that cosmos and thus a part of the process that is god himself. Since god is rational, he has chosen the best way for this process to unfold and he will not, or rather cannot, deviate from this path.[70] As such, all that was, is, and will be, is part of an unchanging causal chain that stretches from cosmic cycle to cosmic cycle, forever. There appears to have been disagreement within the Stoic school on whether providence and fate were identical: apparently, Chrysippus said they were, while his predecessor Cleanthes claimed that certain things that are fated are not part of providence.[71] The identification of fate and providence presented a problem for the Stoics: if god is beneficent, and he is also the unalterable cause of all things, why is there evil in the world? Crimes are being committed every day, wars are fought all the time, people die from sickness and starvation and cities are leveled by natural disasters: how could a good god allow this to happen? Specifically, the Stoics had to explain both moral evil (the viciousness of human beings) and cosmic evil (all the bad things that befall us, such as disease and war). The Stoic explanation of the existence of moral evil is that it is not attributable to god, but to us.[72] Considering the fact that fate could also be said to determine human action and thus our decision to do evil, it is still a matter of controversy whether this was a successful defence.[73]

But even if it is, that still leaves so-called cosmic evil to be explained.[74] The Stoics, and especially Chrysippus, came up with various solutions: (1) good and evil are ontologically interdependent, i.e. the one cannot exist without the other,[75] (2) individuals might suffer for

---

[66] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021), Cic. *ND* 1.39.
[67] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021), Cic. *ND* 2.75.
[68] See Cic. *ND* 2.98-168 for a long list of examples.
[69] D.L. 7.135 (*SVF* 1.102 [2]), Cic. *ND* 1.39. See Bobzien (1998) for the Stoic theory of fate.
[70] Aetius 1.28.4, Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.2.3, Cic. *Div.* 1.125-126 (*SVF* 2.921), Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* 192.28.
[71] Calc. *In Tim.* 144. Seneca also sees fate and providence as valid names for god. Cf. *NQ* 2.45.1-3. See further chapters 3 and 8.
[72] In his *Hymn to Zeus*, Cleanthes says that all things happen with god's permission, "except what bad men do in their folly." (Stob. *Ecl.* 1.1.12 (*SVF* 1.537))
[73] See e.g. Frede (2003).
[74] According to the Stoics, only moral evil is true evil. Stob. *Ecl.* 2.57, 19 (*SVF* 3.70), Sextus Emp. *M* 11.90. Everything that falls under the header of cosmic evil is, strictly speaking, indifferent. That does not mean, however, that the Stoics did not feel obliged to explain why god did not prevent us from experiencing disease, pain, famine and the like. Cf. Long (1968), esp. p. 331 and 333.
[75] Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.2-6 (*SVF* 2.1169), Plut. *St. Rep.* 1050F (*SVF* 2.1177), *Comm. Not.* 1065A-B. Cf. *St. Rep.* 1051A.

the greater good,[76] (3) apparent evils are actually for the good,[77] (4) there are certain unintended but necessary consequences to the way god's providence works.[78] Plutarch also mentions oversight and the influence of malevolent demons as possible explanations given by Chrysippus, but the formulation (as a question) leaves it unclear as to whether he considered these to be serious options.[79] Taking these arguments together, we might say that the Stoics explained cosmic evil by saying that god is *not* omnipotent and that there are certain limits to what he can do. This reminds us of the limitations the Platonic Demiurge and his helpers have to take into account when creating the world; Chrysippus even used an example from Plato *Tim*. 75a-c: the fragility of the human skull was unavoidable in the light of god's design decisions.[80] Plato attributed the cause for these limitations to the influence of matter, which is called the 'errant cause', frustrating god's plans. The Stoics, however, rejected this idea,[81] since they believed matter to be utterly inert and thus incapable of hindering god in any way,[82] and imputed the limitations to god's having to obey certain physical and logical laws, since he works as (and is) a physical force.[83] As we shall see in the second chapter, Seneca concurs that there are certain limits to what god can do,[84] and he also employs the other explanations of cosmic evil mentioned above, while also believing that moral evil should be blamed on men themselves.

We now turn to another aspect of Stoic theology: polytheism. We have already seen that the Stoics considered the heavenly bodies to be gods and could thus speak about god in the plural. When doing so, the Stoics could also avail themselves of the names of the traditional Olympian gods, but only in qualified sense. The Stoics rejected the anthropomorphism of the Greek pantheon, in both its physical and behavioural characteristics: gods did not look like men and did not indulge in any jealousies, intrigues and other all too human misdemeanours that Homer ascribed to them; but the traditional gods could be 'Stoically' reinterpreted as embodying different aspects of the one god: one might call god Zeus to refer to his supreme power, or Athena when highlighting his intelligence.[85]

[76] Cic. *ND* 2.167, 3.86, 90 and 93, Plut. *St. Rep.* 1049A-B.
[77] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1044D (*SVF* 2.1163), Porph. *De Abst.* 3.20 (*SVF* 2.1152).
[78] Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.* 7.1.7-13 (*SVF* 2.1170), Plut. *St. Rep.* 1050E (*SVF* 2.1176), 1051C (*SVF* 2.1178).
[79] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1051C (*SVF* 2.1178). See Algra (2009b).
[80] The example as used by Chrysippus is found in Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.10-11 (*SVF* 2.1170), further discussed in chapter 6, section 2.
[81] *Pace* Pohlenz (1970), p. 100.
[82] Cf. Cic. *ND* 3.92.
[83] Cic. *ND* 2.86-87, Epict. *Diss.* 1.1.7-13 and 2.5.27. See Sedley (2002) for the idea that the early Academics, especially Polemo, already rejected matter as a hindering influence on creation.
[84] Cf. *Ben.* 2.29.1-6, *Prov.* 5.9, 6.6.
[85] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021), Phld. *De Piet.* cols. 4.12-8.13, Cic. *ND* 2.60-72, esp. 71. In section 3.5 below, we will look more closely at the Stoic attitude towards traditional religion.

The Stoic conception of god, we may conclude, is multi-faceted. This is caused by the different roles that the Stoics ascribe to their god on the basis of their metaphysical system: as the principle of all things, he is not merely a final cause, like Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, or an effective cause such as the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*: he is both of these, but he also embodies the formative cause (Forms or Ideas in Aristotle and Plato). The Stoics put all these aspects and more into their conception of god, who in turn becomes a god who cannot be defined *simpliciter*, but is 'called by many descriptions according to his powers'.[86]

3.4 God's existence and nature: Stoic arguments

The Stoics formulated many arguments to support their view of god. According to one of our major sources on Stoic theology, Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, these arguments were divided into four main types: the first proving the existence of the gods, the second their nature, the third their providence and the fourth their special care for mankind. It is important to understand, firstly, that these types were not exclusive and that, e.g., certain arguments for the existence of god also put forward or presuppose certain characteristics of god. In other words, the Stoics try to show not merely that God exists, but that he exists just in the way they say he does, viz. as an all-pervading, provident being.[87] Secondly, we should also note that the Stoics assumed that there was widespread consensus among men about the existence of gods and that they tried to embed their own ideas within this so-called consensus view. Cleanthes sums up four reasons for the widely shared belief in the gods.

> "He put first the argument of which I spoke just now, the one arising from our foreknowledge of future events; second, the one drawn from the magnitude of the benefits which we derive from our temperate climate, from the earth's fertility, and from a vast abundance of other blessings; third, the awe inspired by lightning, storms, rain, snow, hail, floods, pestilences, earthquakes and occasionally subterranean rumblings [...] all of which alarming portents have suggested to mankind the idea of the existence of some celestial and divine power. And the fourth and most potent cause of the belief he said was the uniform motion and revolution of the heavens, and the varied groupings and ordered beauty of the sun, moon and stars, the very sight of which was in itself enough to prove that these things are not the mere effect of chance."[88]

---

[86] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021). Cf. Stobaeus 1.79, 1-12 (*SVF* 2.913), where Chrysippus is said to use 'truth', 'nature', and 'necessity' as substitute terms for *logos*.

[87] See Algra (2003), p. 160 and Schofield (1980) p. 302.

[88] Cic. *ND* 2.13-15 (*SVF* 1.528): *Primam posuit eam, de qua modo dixi, quae orta esset ex praesensione rerum futurarum; alteram, quam ceperimus ex magnitudine commodorum, quae percipiuntur caeli temperatione, fecunditate terrarum aliarumque commoditatum complurium copia; tertiam quae terreret animos fulminibus, tempestatibus, nimbis, nivibus, grandinibus, vastitate, pestilentia, terrae motibus et saepe fremitibus [...] quibus exterriti homines vim quandam esse caelestem et divinam suspicati sunt;*

The Stoics accept most of these reasons as a valid basis for our beliefs about the gods and their existence: the Stoics used divination, the "magnitude of benefits" we derive from the earth, and the orderly motion of the heavenly bodies as proper arguments for the existence of the gods as well. The Stoics also had no problems with awe-inspiring natural phenomena giving men the (correct) idea that there are divine powers. These same natural phenomena, however, were also traditionally seen as the doings of gods who have little regard for humans, or even as divine punishment. Though the Stoics held the idea that god punishes the wicked,[89] they firmly rejected both the view that the gods are actively pursuing those who do wrong and the view that they have no regard for us at all: god, after all, is provident and cares for mankind. This rejection shows that the Stoics tried to 'correct' these traditional views as well. The justification for these corrections lay in the so-called preconception (*prolêpsis*) of god:[90] according to the Stoics, all human beings naturally develop a general conception of god (which they also used as a separate argument for his existence),[91] including both his existence and nature, simply by living in our well-ordered and beautiful world. That does not mean that everyone automatically has the right ideas about god, but it does mean that, on a basic level, we all agree that god exists and that he is beneficent:[92]

> "[The Stoics] say god is preconceived and thought of not only as immortal and blessed but also as benevolent, caring and beneficent."[93]

The Stoics argued that these basic ideas about god's nature needed further elucidation and articulation.[94] Their own arguments concerning god's existence and nature were meant to

---

quartam causam esse eamque vel maximam aequabilitatem motus conversionumque caeli, solis lunae siderumque omnium distinctionem, utilitatem, pulchritudinem, ordinem, quarum rerum aspectus ipse satis indicaret non esse ea fortuita.

[89] See chapter 4.

[90] In D.L. 7.54 a preconception is described as 'a naturally formed concept of what is general'; i.e. a preconception includes the general characteristics of the thing it is a preconception of, but not the precise details. Preconceptions do not cover all that we may come to know about that which they are a preconception of, but are a dependable starting point for further investigation. Cf. Cic. *Acad.* 2.30: "When thereto (*prolêpseis*) there has been added reason and logical proof and an innumerable multitude of facts, then comes the clear perception of all these things, and also this same reason having been by these stages made complete finally attains to wisdom." See Striker (1974) for a discussion of *prolêpsis* as a criterion for truth.

[91] Cic. *ND* 2.12: "Hence the main issue is agreed among all men of all nations, inasmuch as all have engraved in their minds an innate belief that the gods exist." As we will see in chapter 7, Seneca uses this argument as well – cf. Sen. *EM* 117.6: "For instance, we infer that the gods exist, for this reason, among others – that there is implanted in everyone an idea concerning deity, and there is no people so far beyond the reach of laws and customs that it does not believe at least in gods of some sort."

[92] 'Preconception' as a technical term for a naturally developed and common concept originates in Epicurus. The Stoics 'borrowed' the term from him and tried to use it against him, by claiming that a naturally developed concept of god includes his benevolence, something which Epicurus vehemently denied.

[93] Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1075E (*SVF* 2.1126), also *St. Rep.* 1051E (*SVF* 2.1115).

[94] Cf. Aug. *Civ. Dei* 8.7, Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1059B-C.

provide this articulation and rational foundation, and were also used to justify a firm rejection of certain unnatural accretions to the common conception of the gods, such as their spitefulness or jealousy. We will now take a closer look at these arguments.[95]

As said, the Stoics used the widely accepted view that there are gods as an argument for their existence. Divination, too, being a widely used and trusted practice, was in itself seen as a valid argument by the Stoics:[96] it showed that they were right in saying that all things are part of the causal chain that is fate.[97] The existence of the gods, then, can be argued for on the basis of widely shared beliefs and actions.

Zeno also used several syllogisms to prove that the gods exist and that the cosmos is a rational and sentient being.[98] Many of these work by drawing an analogy between the cosmos and its parts: if these parts are sentient and rational, then the cosmos surely is sentient and rational as well. Similar conclusions are reached in several syllogisms that show that, since the cosmos is better than anything else, it must also be rational, intelligent and animate. From these conclusions it followed that the world was god, since what is best must be god.[99] Cleanthes and Chrysippus also availed themselves of analogy-type arguments to show that the world is rational and thus god, but they did not put them in the form of syllogisms, maybe in view of the apparent vulnerability of this type of argumentation.[100]

We have seen that the Stoics considered providence and beneficence to be essential aspects of the preconception of god. They also used a more formal argument for the beneficent nature of god, the so-called ‘argument from design’, which is also presented as being in line with the general beliefs about the gods and the world. Balbus, the Stoic spokesman in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*, gives a version of this argument:[101]

> “Suppose someone were to bring to Scythia or Britain the armillary sphere recently built by our friend Posidonius, which revolution by revolution brings about in the sun, the moon and the five planets effects identical to those brought about day by day and night by night in the heavens. Who in those foreign lands would doubt that

[95] See Dragona-Monachou (1973) for a comprehensive overview of the Stoic arguments for the existence and providence of the gods.
[96] Cic. *ND* 2.7ff., 2.162f., 2.166, and especially Cicero’s *De Divinatione*, further discussed in chapter 8, section 2.1.
[97] Cic. *Div.* 1.18. Sen. *NQ* 2.32.4ff., further discussed in chapter 8, section 2.2.
[98] See Mansfeld (1999) , p. 457-461, for an overview of these syllogisms.
[99] Cic. *ND* 2.21 (*SVF* 1.111).
[100] In *ND* 2.20, Cicero lets Balbus remark in his exposition of Stoic theology: “When one expounds these doctrines in a fuller and more flowing style, as I propose to do, it is easier for them to evade the captious objections of the Academy; but when they are reduced to brief syllogistic form, as was the practice of Zeno, they lie more open to criticism.” Cf. Schofield (1983) for a discussion of Zeno’s syllogisms and the suggestion that they were not meant to persuade by themselves, but to function as focal points or starting points in a dialectical context.
[101] See Sedley (2005) and (2007) for the Socratic/Platonic origin of the Argument from Design and other Stoic arguments for god’s rationality and beneficence.

> that sphere was a product of reason? And yet these people hesitate as to whether the world, from which all things come into being, is itself the product of some kind of accident or necessity or of a divine mind's reason."[102]

The argument thus amount to the following: anyone presented with a complex artifact like an orrery, would agree that that artifact did not come into being by accident, but is the product of a rational designer and creator. Likewise, anyone witnessing the extravagant and intricate edifice that is our cosmos, should have no doubts that it, too, is a product of a supreme rational being, i.e. god.[103] The argument shows at once that god exists and that he is active and rational.

In several passages in *De Natura Deorum* it is said that one (erroneously, the Stoics hold) might think not god or the gods to be responsible for the coherence and order in the cosmos and its processes, but simply nature as an inanimate and mechanical force, a Peripatetic view which Cicero (*ND* 2.35) ascribes to Strato.[104] To combat this alternative explanation, the Stoics came up with countless examples of order, structure, beauty and providence in the cosmos. These examples show that, even if one does not agree with some of the theoretical arguments for divine providence, the sheer mass of evidence should be enough to convince anyone that this world exhibits, in all its details, the provident hand of god: e.g., the variety in both landscapes and living species of our world, the beauty and orderly movement of the heavenly bodies and the constellations, and the fact that all species are perfectly adapted to their living conditions and are equipped with adequate means of self-defence and sustenance. Above all stands the special care for us humans that god shows by creating all things with a view to our needs.[105]

3.5 Stoic theology and traditional religion

As Keimpe Algra has argued, the Stoic attitude towards traditional religion and cult was an interesting mixture of conservatism, criticism, and adaptation.[106] Starting with the first, there are several passages that suggest that the Stoics thought philosophical conviction and traditional religion could 'peacefully co-exist': worshipping and rites in ancient rites in ancient Greece and Rome were more of a social than a personal thing, and philosophers in general held that, regardless of the truth about the divine, it was generally advisable to uphold the ancient customs.

> "But it is always appropriate to make libations, and sacrifices, and to give of the firstfruits after the manner of our fathers, and to do all this with purity, and not in a

[102] Cic. *ND* 2.88.
[103] Cic. *ND* 2.16 (*SVF* 2.1012); cf. Sen. *NQ* 1.Praef.14-15, further discussed in chapter 7.
[104] Cf. *ND* 2.43, 76, 115 (*SVF* 2.449); 3.27-28.
[105] See section 3.3 *supra*.
[106] In this section, I will broadly follow the argumentation in Algra (2007).

> slovenly or careless fashion, not, indeed, in a niggardly way, nor yet beyond our means."[107]

In Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* the Stoic spokesman Balbus, likewise says that "it is our duty to revere and worship these gods under the names which custom has bestowed upon them."[108] In his reply to Balbus, the Sceptic Cotta, despite his criticism of the Stoic position, agrees on this point with Balbus when he says that while being a Sceptic, he can at the same time be a religious man, wholeheartedly believing in the traditional gods and partaking in rites and offerings.[109] For the most part, then, philosophy and religious practice seem to be separate realms. But the Stoic acceptance of custom was not unconditional: a Stoic might very well partake in traditional practice, but from a theoretical point of view he could criticize certain elements of tradition or accept them only under a Stoic reinterpretation. This critical adaptation of traditional religion had the same justification as the 'correction' of the common theological view: the naturally developed preconception (*prolêpsis*) of god that was shared by all men. This basic preconception was, as we have seen,[110] in need of further elucidation and articulation, in order to provide a firmer epistemological foundation of the concept of god and to be able to reject unwarranted 'accretions' to this concept. It is this same preconception, the Stoics argue, that formed the basis of traditional myths, poetry and customs. Moreover, in the same way that most people's conception of the divine contains elements of truth, because it is based on the natural preconception, there are also kernels of truth to be found in the stories of e.g. Homer and Hesiod. These kernels, the Stoics believed, could be 'extracted' or laid bare by such methods as allegorical interpretation of myths and the etymologization of divine names. Zeno, e.g., tried to interpret various passages in Hesiod's *Theogonia* as rudimentary versions of certain elements of Stoic cosmology[111] and the Stoic Cornutus (1st century A.D.) produced an exhaustive etymologizing overview of the Greek pantheon. The extent to which the Stoics believed our ancestors or the poets to have had a correct view of the divine is unclear and the topic of debate among modern scholars,[112] but it is likely that they believed that the truth kernels in myth, poetry and cult were not remnants of a complete understanding of the divine, but separate and non-articulated, but nevertheless true, insights that had to be incorporated into the comprehensive philosophical system that was Stoicism. Other aspects of traditional religion were criticized rather than adapted or reinterpreted; the basic preconception of the divine, after all, had been contaminated with all kinds of misguided attributes (see section 3.4) and these errors were reflected in certain reprehensible features of contemporary religious belief and custom. The multifaceted attitude of the Stoics towards traditional religion is

---

[107] Epict. *Ench.* 31.5.
[108] Cic. *ND* 2.71 (*SVF* 2.1080).
[109] Cic. *ND* 3.5.
[110] See section 3.4 above.
[111] See Algra (2001).
[112] See Algra (2007), p. 26-9, Sijl (2010).

perfectly illustrated by the passage immediately preceding Balbus' declaration of his commitment to the ancient customs (Cic. *ND* 2.71, as quoted above):

> "Do you see therefore how from a true and valuable philosophy of nature has been evolved this imaginary and fanciful pantheon? The perversion has been a fruitful source of false beliefs, crazy errors and superstitions hardly above the level of old wives' tales."[113]

The guiding principle in the differing valuations of the various elements of traditional religion seems to have been the extent to which a certain element could be used to support Stoic philosophy. In the same way that the Stoic formulation of the basic preconception of the divine as containing beneficence and providence should be seen in the context of their polemic with the Epicureans, the Stoic treatment of tradition religion can best be seen as appropriating those elements it could use, rejecting those it could not and leaving the rest in place.

The same *modus operandi* can be seen in how the Stoics thought about cult practices such as rites and offerings. Chrysippus might criticize the their anthropomorphic depiction of the gods in images and statues, but the Stoics held that even these might contain or express a certain true aspect of god: Chrysippus famously 'interpreted' a picture of Zeus and Hera having sex as representing the way in which the divine *logos* suffuses matter, and Epictetus puts Pheidias' well-known statue of Zeus to Stoic use by claiming its facial expression conveys the unperturbed and confident attitude that is the goal of every aspiring Stoic.[114] The Stoics, then, could justify their acceptance of anthropomorphic images of Zeus by pointing to the rationality that he shares with humans (see section 3.3). Another cult practice, divination, was accepted *in toto* by the Stoics: not because it may give us a peek into the state of mind of a capricious god, but because it can give insight in the overall plan for the cosmos that god is unfolding.[115] By reference to another aspect of god, viz. his beneficence and care for human beings, the Stoics may have allowed a form of prayer as well. Strictly speaking, the identification of god with fate and providence seems to preclude the usefulness of petitionary prayer: god as fate has already determined everything that will happen and, as providence, in fact, everything will also happen for the best. We also find a more accommodating attitude, however: in his *Hymn to Zeus*, e.g., Cleanthes asks god to be his guide and to save mankind from its own incompetence,[116] and Marcus Aurelius adhorts himself to pray, since:

> "Who has told you that the gods are not also helping us with regard to that which is in our power? So begin to pray for these things and you will see what happens. The man over there prays 'how can I manage to sleep with her?' - you pray: 'how can I

[113] Cic. *ND* 2.70.
[114] Epict. *Diss.* 2.8, 25-7. See Algra (2007), p. 37-41.
[115] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.132.
[116] *SVF* 1.537.

> stop wanting to sleep with her?’ […] Put your prayers, quite generally, in this form, and see what happens.”[117]

What Cleanthes and Marcus ask for are not the usual things asked for in prayer, like health, prosperity, or amorous escapades: instead, they seem to ask for wisdom or the proper attitude towards things. Cleanthes and Marcus, then, may have made a concession to a traditional practice, while trying to fit it in with the Stoic system. There are also indications that this kind of ‘Stoic prayer’ may not have been meant as asking god to do something for us, but as a kind of self-adhortation: Cleanthes and Marcus are encouraging themselves to live according to their divine nature.[118]

4. The development of Platonic theology

4.1 Plato’s legacy

Plato bequeathed a large and varied corpus to his philosophical heirs, in the form of his published dialogues. Besides that, it is likely that many important tenets were orally transmitted and taught, thus forming the so-called ‘unwritten doctrine’ of Plato. To what extent this ‘unwritten doctrine’ was a fully developed theory on its own is not the subject of this overview, but there are indications that Plato believed that the written word, unaided by oral exegesis and instruction by the author, had its limitations as a medium for doing philosophy,[119] and it is reasonable to assume that the Academy was the scene of much debate and discussion that went beyond the direct content of the extant dialogues. In such a dialectical environment there must have been “a healthy degree of dissent,” as David Sedley notes,[120] and John Dillon suggests that it was not Plato’s purpose “to leave his successors a fixed body of doctrine which they were to defend against all comers.”[121] Nevertheless, Dillon believes, there is a “body of doctrine” that we can attribute to Plato,[122] based on a critical reading of what Aristotle ascribes to his former master and the admittedly scarce evidence we possess on the endeavours of Plato’s immediate successors, i.e. Speusippus and Xenocrates.[123]

It is generally agreed upon that Plato’s work, influenced by Pythagoreanism,[124] shows a growing interest in the ‘mathematization’ of the cosmos. This interest appears to be a late

---

[117] MA 9.40.

[118] See Algra 2003 and 2007b for this hypothesis and the relevant passages. Seneca’s views on the various aspects of traditional religion and cult are discussed in chapter 8.

[119] See the disparaging remarks on written philosophy in Plato’s seventh letter (341B-D) and especially *Phaedrus* (274e-276) where philosophical dialogue in itself is said to be philosophically rewarding, whereas the writing down of ideas is just a mnemonic tool or even merely a pastime.

[120] Sedley (1989), p. 99.

[121] Dillon (2003), p. 16.

[122] Dillon (2003), p. 17. Dillon (1988) p. 118 more hesitatingly calls them “a series of guiding ideas, replete with loose ends and even contradictions, which required interpretation.”

[123] The following outline of Plato’s legacy broadly follows the account in Dillon (2003).

[124] Cf. Kahn (2001), chapters IV and V.

development in Plato's thought: in the *Republic*, Plato values mathematics merely for its intelligible aspects and does not even consider that it could provide a model of our cosmos. Mathematical astronomy does not have the sensible heavenly bodies as subject, but merely their mathematical aspects (since the movement of the heavenly bodies is not perfect).[125] In the *Timaeus* Plato appears to change his mind, as shown by the geometrization of matter,[126] and Plato's "cursory discussion of the question of planetary motion gestures towards the possibility of some kind of fuller geometrical modelling."[127] In consequence, it is hard to determine exactly to what extent Plato himself believed mathematics to be useful (apart from its being propaedeutic to dialectics), but it is reasonable to assume that he came to recognize the philosophically interesting possibilities that mathematical cosmology offered, and that his successors could justify their development of it by referring to Plato's own work.

Basic to this mathematization was the postulation, also of Pythagorean origin, of two ontological principles: the One and the Indefinite Dyad. As the active principle, the One limits and defines the unlimitedness and indefiniteness of the Dyad. This continuous operation accounts for the existence of the phenomena in our world, all of which are constantly in greater or lesser need of being limited or defined.[128] The parallel with the *Timaeus* is obvious: the One gives limit and definition to the Dyad in much the same way the Forms in the *Timaeus* are said to give shape and individuality to the Receptacle – or matter, as it is commonly interpreted.[129] The Dyad and matter are thus the substrate of the physical world and the "excess and defect" within this world caused by the Dyad[130] is similar to the hindering influence of matter on the creative process as described in the *Timaeus*. Aristotle claims that Plato also followed Pythagoras in making numbers the product of the One's acting on the Dyad. These numbers are supposedly generated from the Dyad "by a natural process, as from a mould",[131] a term which, as Dillon notes, is also used to describe how matter in the *Timaeus* takes shape. This mould, apparently, consists of the four numbers of the Pythagorean Decad, which are themselves the elements of all the other numbers. These generated numbers are identified with the Platonic Forms and can, as such, be seen as giving a mathematical structure to the sensible world. The four numbers of the Decad also stood for geometrical shapes: point, line, plane and the most basic two-dimensional entity, the triangle. These basic triangles form the building blocks of the four elements Fire, Air, Water and Earth, which in turn are what all sensible bodies are composed of. According to Dillon, in this way "an uncompromisingly

---

[125] *Rep.* 530b6-c1.
[126] That is, the idea that the Demiurge forms matter into basic geometrical shapes, viz. triangles, pyramids etc.; cf. *Tim.* 53c ff.
[127] Algra (forthcoming). On these developments in Plato see Gregory (2000).
[128] Ari. *Metaph.* 1.6 (987b1ff.). Cf. Dillon (2003), p. 18.
[129] See Algra (1995), p. 72-120, Reydams-Schils (1999), p. 29, Dillon (2003), p. 25, n. 50.
[130] Dillon (2003), p. 18.
[131] Ari. *Metaph.* 1.6 (987b35 transl. Dillon (2003)).

mathematical model for the universe is laid down, which set the tone for all subsequent cosmological speculation within the Academy."[132]

Turning to another element of Plato's legacy, his successors believed that he thought the World Soul to be the entity responsible for actually moulding matter, giving it the mathematical structure that it has.[133] The World Soul plays an important role in the *Timaeus*, being the "mediator between the intelligible and the physical realms."[134] From Aristotle's testimonies and Plato's own words we can gather that he posited the World Soul as an intermediate between the intelligible realm of the Forms and the sensible world, somehow creating the entities in the latter by "receiving influences from the intelligible realm and passing them on in modified form".[135]

Both elements, the issue of mathematization and the role of the World Soul, show a similar parallel between what is ascribed to Plato in other sources (such as Aristotle) and what we find in the *Timaeus*. Dillon notes that the *Timaeus* was central to the further development of the early Academy, and Plato's successors within this early Academy (Speusippus, Xenocrates and Polemo) interpreted and developed the ideas put forward in the *Timaeus* or in discussions about problems similar to those tackled in the *Timaeus*.[136]

4.2 The early Academy

The picture that Dillon paints of the early Academy looks like this: Plato's successors were engaged in developing Plato's ideas as sketched above, based on non-literal interpretations of the *Timaeus*. Common to these interpretations was the two-principle system of a pliable substrate and an active cause (alternately named as Multiplicity or Dyad and One or Monad, respectively) working on this substrate. Speusippus and Xenocrates also agree with Plato that the creation of the physical world is somehow mathematically structured, the model for this structure being identical with the Forms (Xenocrates) or primary to them (Speusippus).[137] Another common aspect is the "tendency discernible, within the Academy, even if not within the thinking of Plato himself, to identify the supreme divinity as no more nor less than a rational World Soul."[138] This rather generalizing statement is in need of some qualification: Speusippus places the One (the active principle) and the system of numbers and geometrical figures in an intelligible realm ontologically prior to and above the World Soul. The traditional Platonic Forms no longer belong to this intelligible realm, but are, in their paradigmatic and creative role, made part of the World Soul, which, because of this, gets a much more active and

---

[132] Dillon (2003), p. 22.
[133] Though Plato does not explicitly say so, this is how it was interpreted by later Platonists. Cf. Dillon (2003), p. 22-3.
[134] Dillon (2003), p. 23.
[135] Dillon (2003), p. 24.
[136] Cf. Reydams-Schils (1999), p. 34.
[137] 'Primary' meaning that matter is first structured by numbers (according to the geometrization of matter as described by Plato in *Tim.* 53c ff.) before it is further shaped according to the Forms.
[138] Dillon (2003), p. 166.

important role than in the *Timaeus*. Xenocrates also posits his first principle above the World Soul, but he does not make the separation between the intelligible numbers and paradigmatic Forms that Speusippus makes. For Xenocrates, the first principle is an intellect that has the Forms, which are both mathematical entities and paradigms, as the content of his continuous thinking activity. These Forms are projected, through the World Soul, onto the physical plane. So, while Dillon is right in claiming that Plato's successors assigned a more important role to the World Soul in the creative process than Plato himself did, it seems somewhat excessive to say that they made the World Soul the prime locus of divine power.

Dillon's focus on the alleged tendency towards a creative and supreme ruling World Soul is prompted by his supposition that the early Academy was tending towards a position that was very similar to what is usually associated with Zenonian Stoicism. In fact, Dillon goes along with David Sedley's suggestion that Zeno's system is in fact no more than a version of the system of Polemo,[139] which, in its turn, is the culmination of a trend within the Academy towards the following interpretation of Plato's intellectual legacy: "an active principle, which may be regarded either as a cosmic intellect, or even as a rational World Soul, imposing order upon a passive, material substratum, such an active principle not being regarded as transcendent, but rather as immanent in the cosmos, with its proper seat in the outer rim of the heavens."[140]

Dillon's supposition partly relies on an interpretation of Xenocrates which sees him as developing Academic philosophy towards that culmination, i.e. Polemo's eventual position, because of the increased importance he gives to the World Soul, as described above, and the idea that for Xenocrates the intelligible realm is "probably to be identified with the outer rim of the universe, rather than with any totally transcendent level of being"[141], thus anticipating the immanence of the Stoic god. But Dillon's assumption ultimately rests on his ideas about the role of Polemo, and, as said, he goes along with Sedley's theory that Polemo devised a philosophical system that was more or less integrally adopted by Zeno. Dillon and Sedley both admit that there is little direct evidence for this theory, since we know almost nothing about Polemo; instead, they base their conjectures on a new evaluation of the historical relevance of Antiochus of Ascalon.

4.3 Antiochus and the return to dogmatism

Antiochus is well known, of course, for being the Academic who turned back to dogmatism (in the first half of the 1st century B.C.), after the school had turned sceptic under the leadership of Arcesilaus (around 270 B.C.).[142] During that sceptical phase, the Academy was heavily engaged

[139] Cf. Sedley (2002).
[140] Dillon (2003), p. 235.
[141] Dillon (2003), p. 132, n. 124.
[142] For general discussions of Antiochus' life and philosophical views and relevance see Glucker (1978), Barnes (1989), Tarrant (2007).

in combatting Stoic epistemological claims. The Stoics held that knowledge is guaranteed by so-called 'cognitive impressions' (*phantasiai katalêptikai*);[143] such an impression is one that

> "comes from what is the case (1), agrees with what is the case (2), and has been stamped, imprinted and pressed seal-fashion on the soul, as it would not be if it came from what is not the case (3)."[144]

The Academic Sceptics vehemently attacked what is signalled in the passage cited as criterion (3); they held that no matter how convincing an impression might be, we can never eliminate the possibility that it came from something else than we thought it did, i.e. that it came 'from what is not the case':

> "They [the Academics] say that they reject this one element: that something true can appear in such a way that what is false could not appear in the same way."[145]

Since the third criterion can thus never be fulfilled, secure knowledge is impossible.[146] Some sceptics concluded that we should therefore withhold judgement in all cases in a similar way,[147] but under the scholarchate of Carneades (from around 160 B.C.) this scepticism was mitigated in the sense that, although these sceptics maintained that nothing can be known, they did allow for some impressions to be more persuasive or probable than others. This probabilism, as Cicero puts it, "provides them with a canon of judgement both in the conduct of life and in philosophical investigation and discussion."[148] Philo of Larissa, who became scholarch in 110/9 B.C.,[149] and who had Antiochus as a student, went further than that. At first, he defended Academic scepticism just as one would expect from an Academic scholarch. Then, for some reason,[150] Philo changed his mind and became dogmatic.[151] He did maintain that the third criterion of the Stoic definition of knowledge could never be fulfilled, but he now held that this

---

[143] See Frede (1999), p. 300-16.

[144] D.L. 7.50: νοεῖται δὲ φαντασία ἡ ἀπὸ ὑπάρχοντος κατὰ τὸ ὑπάρχον ἐναπομεμαγμένη καὶ ἐναποτετυπωμένη καὶ ἐναπεσφραγισμένη, οἵα οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο ἀπὸ μὴ ὑπάρχοντος. (transl. Loeb) Cf. Cic. *Acad.* 2.18 and 2.77 (*SVF* 1.59), Sextus Emp. *PH* 2.4, *M* 7.248.

[145] Cic. *Acad.* 2.33: *[...] dicunt hoc se unum tollere ut quicquam possit ita videri ut non eodem modo falsum etiam possit videri [...].*

[146] Cf. Frede (1999), p. 338.

[147] Cic. *Acad.* 2.32, cf. Barnes (1989), p. 75.

[148] Cic. *Acad*. 2.32: *ea se uti regula et in agenda vita et in quarendo ac disserendo.*

[149] See Brittain (2001) for a recent comprehensive study; cf. Brittain's entry on Philo of Larissa in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for further references.

[150] Barnes (1989), p. 74, n.84 refers to Numenius (fr. 28 Des Places = Eus. *Pr. Ev.* 14.9.4) who appears to claim that Philo, as Barnes puts it on p. 77, "felt himself gradually drawn towards a form of dogmatism." Cf. Cic. *Acad.* 2.18.

[151] This change came about around 87 B.C., when Philo was in Rome (Cic. *Acad.* 2.11-12), hence the name 'Roman books' that is normally given to the work in which Philo set out his new teachings. Cf. Brittain (2001), p. 3.

third criterion is *not needed* for knowledge.[152] When we correctly believe that something is *x*, Philo holds, then the fact that *y* (which is different from *x*) *could have* appeared in the same way as the *x* we are perceiving, does not mean that we have no knowledge of *x*.[153] Knowledge, in other words, is fallible.

Philo further claimed the unity of the Academy on this point in that all Academics were supposed to have held this very same idea: Plato himself, his first successors (Speusippus, Xenocrates, Polemo etc.), and even sceptic Academics such as Arcesilaus and Carneades. These last appear to argue against the possibility of knowledge, but are in fact only concerned with combating the Stoic third criterion, not knowledge itself.[154] The whole of the Academy, then, had always argued that knowledge is possible, with the proviso that our knowledge can be incorrect, which means that epistemic caution is advised.[155]

Antiochus now, who had formerly been a student of Philo in his sceptic phase, had broken away from Philo and scepticism and turned dogmatic himself somewhere between 95 and 90 B.C., i.e. before Philo did so.[156] When the latter had posited his new views in his Roman books, viz. (1) that knowledge, and thus philosophical dogmatism, does not need the third Stoic criterion and (2) that this had been the view of the Academy since Plato, Antiochus fiercely criticized him for falsifying what he believed to be the true history of the Academy and its opinion on the possibility of knowledge. Against the first point of Philo, Antiochus claimed that the third criterion *is* in fact necessary for knowledge;[157] as for the second point, he posited that the Old Academy (from Plato to Polemo) had been dogmatic in the sense that it held that the third criterion could be satisfied, while the New Academy (from Arcesilaus onwards) had been sceptic, believing that knowledge is impossible. Antiochus thus rejected the unity of the Academy in the sense that in his view, this sceptic phase did not belong to the true Platonic Academy, which had always been dogmatic.

Antiochus went even further by claiming that the Stoic criterion was in fact not originally Stoic but adopted by them "from the old tradition of the Academy and the Peripatos:"[158] in the first book of Cicero's *Academics* Varro, a follower of Antiochus, gives the latter's account of the original dogmatic teachings of the Academy. According to this account,

---

[152] Sextus Emp. *PH* 1.235: "The Philonians assert that objects are inapprehensible as far as concerns the Stoic criterion, that is to say 'cognitive impression', but are apprehensible so far as concerns the real nature of the objects themselves."

[153] Barnes (1989), p. 71-4, Brittain (2001), p. 146ff.

[154] Brittain (2001), p. 167: "Philo [...] identified the dogmatic or over-confident assertion of theoretical principles as the proper object of Academic opposition [...]." Cf. Barnes (1989), p. 74.

[155] Brittain (2001), p. 166-8.

[156] Barnes (1989), p. 77. The reasons for doing so, as in the case of Philo, are unclear. Cic. *Acad.* 2.70 suggests that *mihi autem magis videtur non potuisse sustinere concursum omnium philosophorum (etenim de ceteris sunt inter illos non nulla communia, haec Academicorum est una sententia quam reliquorum philosophorum nemo probet).* As Barnes (1989), p. 68 n. 72 remarks, this is similar to what Cicero in *Acad.* 2.18 suggests as Philo's reason for *his* change of mind, and remarks (p. 68) that "Cicero did not really know why Antiochus converted: neither, then, shall we."

[157] Cic. *Acad*. 2. 18 and *passim*.

[158] Barnes (1989), p. 75.

the Peripatetics and the Stoics have taken their views on epistemology and physics, in their entirety, from the Old Academy: there is, as such, little difference whatsoever between the philosophy of the true (i.e. dogmatic) Academy and that of the Stoics.[159] The fact that the exposition of this philosophy is couched in what appears to be Stoic terminology is commonly interpreted as evidence that Antiochus is not in fact describing the original Academic position, but is retrojecting the philosophy of the Stoics back onto the Peripatetics and Academics.[160]

Sedley (2002) does not agree with this analysis: he argues that the Antiochean account in *Acad.* 1.24-9 is in fact not a retrojection at all, since he cannot believe that Antiochus would dare to posit so blatant a falsification. Instead, he thinks it is an accurate description of the philosophy of Polemo, the last important scholarch before the Academic turn to Scepticism. Zeno, having been a student of Polemo, simply borrowed his physics from his former master when he set up his own school.[161] Keimpe Algra criticizes Sedley for needlessly restricting the interpretative options to either "an illegitimate retrojection, or [...] the system of one particular Academic."[162] Dillon, as said, largely agrees with Sedley, but is somewhat more cautious: he does not rule out that Antiochus' account contains a degree of "retrojection of Stoic doctrine and formulations", but if so, this retrojection is tacked "onto an already existent base" (of similarity between the Polemonian-Academic system and Stoicism).[163] Dillon also, unlike Sedley, stresses that this system developed within the whole Academy, rather than in the works of Polemo (or the "Polemonian Academics")[164] himself: "It is a two-principle system very similar to that of the Stoics, certainly, but also to that which we have seen Theophrastus attributing to Plato himself [...], and what emerged as the logical result of a non-literal exegesis of the *Timaeus*, such as we may attribute to Xenocrates."[165]

It is not possible to delve further into this matter here, but suffice it to say that the position shared by Dillon and Sedley is not without its problems. They both come up with a lot of supportive indirect evidence, but the fact of the matter is that we have not a single source claiming that Polemo is the originator of Stoic physics. It may well be, however, that many elements of Stoic physics were anticipated by the Academics, and that Antiochus is neither a fraud nor a faithful reporter on Polemo's physics, but someone trying to give a "historical

---

[159] According to the account in Cic. *Acad.*1, Zeno changed the following in physics: he denied that there was a fifth element and claimed that the mind (*animus*) of the cosmos, i.e. god, was corporeal (1.39); in ethics, he denied that there was anything good besides virtue (1.35ff.) and claimed that all emotions should be extirpated rather than moderated (1.38-9); in epistemology, he believed that some impressions gave indubitable knowledge (the cognitive impressions) and that we could get these from the senses (1.40ff). Antiochus (1.43) did not see Zeno's views as belonging to a different philosophy, but as mere corrections of the Old Academic views: *Antiocho nostro familiari placebat, corectionem veteris Academiae potius quam novam aliquam disciplinam putandam.*
[160] Barnes (1989).
[161] Sedley (2002), p. 77.
[162] Algra (2003b), p. 78.
[163] Dillon (2003), p. 161, n. 18.
[164] Sedley (2002). p. 82.
[165] Dillon (2003), p. 169. Cf. Dillon (2008), p. 224.

reconstruction of the common ground between Academics, Peripatetics and Stoics", as Algra suggests.[166] The reason for putting this reconstruction into what is mainly Stoic terminology might well have been the following:

> "In Antiochus' days Academic and Peripatetic physics and metaphysics were no longer the latest thing. The Academy had turned sceptic, the Peripatos was no longer a force to be reckoned with. Stoicism had taken over the torch and was now the chief representative of what Antiochus wanted to present as the broad anti-Epicurean tradition. [...] He may [...] well have chosen to use the main tenets and terminology of Stoic physics, as in his days the most modern and most fully worked-out representative of the tradition he wanted to promote."[167]

Whatever the truth about this issue, it is shortly after Polemo's death (and the death of his immediate successor Crates, around 270 B.C.) that the Academy turned sceptic, under the leadership of Arcesilaus. Dillon suggests that the emergence of the Stoic school played a major role in effecting this turn: "Everything Polemonian Platonism could do, it would seem, Zeno could do better. For a Platonist, it was a case of either throwing in the towel, and admitting that Stoicism was the logical development and true intellectual heir of Platonism [...], or of going back to the drawing board, returning to the roots of one's tradition, and launching a radical attack on the whole concept of dogmatic certainty."[168] We do not, in fact, know Arcesilaus' reasons, and while Dillon's suggestion is not implausible in itself, it is not well-supported by Dillon's own view that the physics of Zeno consists of mere "developments and formalizations of contemporary Platonism",[169] and that "only in the matter of the *materiality* of the first principle [...] do the Stoics differ from Xenocrates (and presumably from Polemo)."[170] Why would the Academics relinquish their dogmatic position to the Stoics, if those Stoics were in fact in near-total agreement with this position? A scenario whereby the Stoics, in developing their ideas, went further beyond the Academic position than Sedley and Dillon believe they did, better explains why Arcesilaus might have felt Plato's legacy to have been well and truly appropriated by another school, leaving him no option but to change (or reverse) course. Also,

---

[166] Algra (2003b), p. 78.

[167] Algra (2003b), p. 78. Cf. Barnes (1989), p. 81: "In short, in the early part of the first century B.C. Antiochus' syncretism will have seemed both true and illuminating. In logic, the struggle of the time was between scepticism and science; in physics, the tussle concerned a mechanistic atomism on the one side and teleology and a material continuum on the other; in ethics, there was a duel between virtue and pleasure. In each of these great battles the Old Academics and the Peripatetics stood shoulder to shoulder with the Stoics: Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno formed a philosophical triumvirate defending the republic of knowledge and virtue against the barbarian attacks of sceptics and voluptuaries." Cf. Cic. *Leg.* 1.37-8.

[168] Dillon (2003), p. 236.

[169] Dillon (2003), p. 235.

[170] Dillon (2003), p. 148-9. Dillon suggests that the materiality of the first principle may already be hinted at in Plato and his successors as well, but, for lack of evidence, does not explicitly ascribe it to the Academy – cf. p. 131, n. 120; p. 214, n. 98.

there are strong indications that Arcesilaus may have simply believed that the Stoics, and especially Zeno, went too far in their epistemological claims and disputed these claims by referring to the authority that Plato was:

> "Arcesilaus was the first who from various of Plato's books and from Socratic discourse seized with the greatest force the moral; nothing which the mind or the senses can grasp is certain."[171]

It is difficult, however, to come to definite conclusions here, as there are various other proposals in our sources as to why and how Arcesilaus came to hold the sceptic position that he did,[172] although it seems very likely that the emergence of Zeno's Stoicism was at least a significant factor.

4.4 Pythagoreanism and Middle Platonism

The Academy remained sceptic for about 200 years, and it was not until the aforementioned Antiochus of Ascalon rose to prominence that it, at least in part, returned to dogmatism. It is debatable to what extent Antiochus can be said to have been head of the Academy as a philosophical institution, since there may not have *been* an actual physical Academy to teach in, but he was at least a leading Academic in his time.[173] As discussed above, it is a matter of debate whether this return to dogmatism was a return to an originally Academic position, a turn to Stoicism, or an attempted reconstruction of the common ground between the dogmatic schools (Academy, Lyceum and Porch), couched in Stoic terms, or a combination of these. Whatever the truth about this issue, there is little doubt that Stoicism was at least of some influence on the history of Platonism from Antiochus onward.[174] It is widely held, however, that the most important developments in the theology and metaphysics of so-called Middle Platonism[175] cannot have been derived from Stoicism or Antiochus' philosophy.[176]

---

[171] Cic. *De Orat.* 3.67 (transl. Schofield (1999)): *Arcesilaus primum [...] ex variis Platonis libris sermonibusque Socraticis hoc maxime arripuit, nihil esse certi quod aut sensibus aut animo percipi possit.*
[172] Cf. Schofield (1999), p. 327-31 for a discussion of the various sources on Arcesilaus' epistemological position.
[173] Cf. Scarpat (1970), p. 100, Dillon (1977), p. 60, Glucker (1978), p. p. 90-7, Barnes (1989), p. 51-62.
[174] As Keimpe Algra (forthcoming), notes: "[T]here had been Platonists who believed that when the high metaphysics of the early Academy had disappeared and sceptical tendencies had become dominant, Stoicism was the closest one could get to Platonism – think of the way in which Antiochus of Ascalon was able to present Stoic cosmology as basically Platonico-Aristotelian in character."
[175] While the term 'Middle Platonism' is useful to mark off the return to dogmatism (even though, as some have suggested, there are Academic tendencies in Middle Platonism as well – cf. Opsomer (1998)), it is now often assumed that Middle and Neo-Platonism should only be distinguished chronologically, not essentially. Cf. Zambon (2006).
[176] Bonazzi (2007), p. 373, Brittain (2007), p. 300, Trapp (2007), p. 350, Barnes (1989), p. 52, 57, 82, 89. Dillon (1977), p. 81-8 argues that Antiochus may have been of significant influence on Middle Platonism; Dillon (2008) accepts Sedley's suggestion on the origin of Antiochus' ideas (discussed above) and Dillon now holds that the influence of Antiochus on Middle Platonism lies in his transmission of the ideas of the early Academy. Tarrant (2007) suggests that Antiochus, after his dogmatic turn, had originally preached a

What remains basic to the Middle Platonists is the fundamental division of reality into two principles: an indefinite or unlimited passive principle (Dyad) that is acted upon and limited by an active, singular cause (Monad). The early Academics, as we have seen above, already regarded this dualistic view of reality as Plato's own view,[177] based on a non-literal interpretation of the *Timaeus*.[178] The theories of these early Academics, notably Speusippus and Xenocrates, may well have been instrumental to the development of Middle Platonism.[179] It might seem somewhat odd, then, that many Middle Platonists presented such ideas as Pythagorean. This was not new, however: Plato had often acknowledged his indebtedness to Pythagoras and the early Academics had accentuated the Pythagorean elements in Plato (e.g. the mathematization of the cosmos).[180] For the Middle Platonists, who wanted to "restore Platonism as a positive system", this association with Pythagoras allowed them to distinguish their Platonism from that of the Academic Sceptics.[181] Therefore, Michael Trapp argues:

> "The revolution that Platonism needed came – or, at least, its most effective and lastingly influential version came – from thinkers firmly in the mould of Speusippus and Xenocrates: that is to say, from thinkers whose concern for Plato was combined with an equally intense concern for Pythagoras, and whose sense of Platonic doctrine accentuated its Pythagorean aspects just as their sense of Pythagoras was filtered through Plato."[182]

The enigmatic character of Pythagoras and the lack of a written corpus,[183] however, brought it about that "during the fourth century B.C. ancient Pythagoreanism was progressively assimilated into the Academy."[184] Similarly, an early Middle Platonist like Eudorus could, as Bonazzi argues, present the following as "a genuine account of ancient Pythagoreanism, but it is neither genuine nor ancient:"[185]

> "Then I say that the followers of Pythagoras leave the One as the principle of all things, but in another way they introduce two ultimate elements. [...] So as principle

---

moderate or cautious dogmatism and was only forced to his extreme, i.e. 'Stoic' position, when Philo expounded his new views on the history of the Academy. This later Antiocheanism, Tarrant holds, was indeed disregarded by Middle Platonists as being too Stoic, but his ideas *before* the so-called Sosus-affair *were* of influence on later Platonism.

[177] Aristotle, too, ascribes this dualistic view to Plato (*Metaph.* 1.6 (988a7-14)), as does Theophrastus (Theophr. *ap.* Simpl. *In Phys.* 1.2 (184b15f., transl. Fortenbaugh)).

[178] For the Middle Platonists the *Timaeus* remained Plato's most important work, as it had been for the early Academics. Cf. Dillon (1977), p. 8, Zambon (2006), p. 565.

[179] Bonazzi (2007), p. 368, Mansfeld (1988), p. 107.

[180] See section 4.2 *supra*. See Trapp (2007), p. 347.

[181] Frede (1987b), p. 1043.

[182] Trapp (2007), p. 350.

[183] Cf. Kahn (2001) for a recent overview of Pythagoras' life and his philosophical relevance.

[184] Bonazzi (2007), p. 368, Kahn (2001), chapter IV and V.

[185] Bonazzi (2007), p. 368. Cf. Dillon (1977), p. 119f.

> there is the one, and as elements there are the One and the indefinite Dyad, both Ones being in turn principles. And it is clear that the One that is principle of all things is distinct from the One opposed to the Dyad, which they also call Monad."[186]

The characterization of the second element as the "indefinite Dyad" and the succession of Ones-as-principle indicate, Bonazzi holds, that this is in fact not Pythagorean, but early Academic theory that is adopted here by Eudorus.[187] There is another element here, however, that does not appear to be present in Pythagoras or in the early Academics: the introduction of a principle, the One, above the basic division of Monad and Dyad.[188]

The emergence of this principle features in many of the different theories of Middle Platonism we know of,[189] and basically fulfills the same role in all of them: it is a divine principle that is hierarchically primary to the ontological division into Monad and Dyad and as such, it is beyond such epithets as active or passive, limit or limitlessness.[190] This divine principle or supreme god may well have been thought to be "transcending all attributes whatever",[191] giving rise to so-called 'negative theology':[192] the idea that the divine principle can only be described in terms of what it is *not* and is essentially beyond our epistemological capabilities altogether.[193]

---

[186] Eudorus *ap.* Simpl. *In Ar. Phys.* 181.22-30 (transl. Bonazzi): φημὶ τοίνυν τοὺς περὶ τὸν Πυθαγόραν τὸ μὲν ἓν πάντων ἀρχὴν ἀπολιπεῖν, κατ' ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον δύο τὰ ἀνωτάτω στοιχεῖα παρεισάγειν. καλεῖν δὲ τὰ δύο ταῦτα στοιχεῖα πολλαῖς προσηγορίαις· τὸ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν ὀνομάζεσθαι τεταγμένον ὡρισμένον γνωστὸν ἄρρεν περιττὸν δεξιὸν φῶς, τὸ δὲ ἐναντίον τούτῳ ἄτακτον ἀόριστον ἄγνωστον θῆλυ ἀριστερὸν ἄρτιον σκότος, ὥστε ὡς μὲν ἀρχὴ τὸ ἕν, ὡς δὲ στοιχεῖα τὸ ἓν καὶ ἡ ἀόριστος δυάς, ἀρχαὶ ἄμφω ἓν ὄντα πάλιν. καὶ δῆλον ὅτι ἄλλο μέν ἐστιν ἓν ἡ ἀρχὴ τῶν πάντων, ἄλλο δὲ ἓν τὸ τῇ δυάδι ἀντικείμενον, ὃ καὶ μονάδα καλοῦσιν.

[187] Bonazzi (2007), p. 368. Also Trapp (2007), p. 351-2: "As an account of first principles, it has some affinity with the pre-Platonic, fifth-century Pythagorean doctrine that we know of from Aristotle, with its concern for tables of opposites [...] However, in identifying the 'One' (or the 'Monad') and the 'indefinite Dyad' as basic principles, it takes us straight to Platonism: to Plato's unwritten doctrines, and to the metaphysics of the early Academy, in which it was precisely these two principles that were put forward as primary to an account of reality." Cf. Kahn (2001), chapter VIII.

[188] See Dillon (1977), p. 127. There is no trace of such a supreme principle in Antiochus either; cf. Bonazzi (2007), p. 373.

[189] But not in all: it does not, e.g., appear in Plutarch.

[190] The specific aspects of this divine principle vary in the different Middle Platonic theories, but as Bonazzi (2008), p. 237 puts it, most agree on "the separateness and superiority of the first divine principle."

[191] Dillon (1977), p. 128.

[192] Cf. Bonazzi (2008), p. 239-41, Zambon (2006), p. 570. Cf. Whittaker (1973), p. 80: "The conception of the essential otherness of the supreme deity may be considered symptomatic of the tendency to transcendentalism which dominates the thinking of Philo and his contemporaries." Philo here is Philo of Alexandria, a 1st century A.D. Jewish philosopher not to be confused with Philo of Larissa; see further below.

[193] Philo of Alexandria first explicitly states this incomprehensibility of god, and Scarpat (1970), p. 101, sees Philo as the initiator of this development. Dillon (1977), p. 155, suggests that Eudorus may have already drawn this conclusion from the aloofness of his supreme god. Bonazzi (2008) argues that it may be a development in Platonism of which Philo is a witness (borrowing this term from Runia (1991)) and to which he *may* have contributed in a sense.

The origins of this transcendent principle are unclear: some argue that it could have been taken from Plato's works themselves, or from the interpretation of these in conjunction with the so-called 'unwritten doctrines' (discussed above);[194] Bonazzi agrees insofar that he thinks it may follow from a certain interpretation of the *Timaeus*, but insists that other influences must be assumed to have prompted this specific interpretation.[195] He argues that the renewed interest in Aristotle may have played a significant role,[196] referring to Aristotle's postulation of the Unmoved Mover as the ultimate and transcendent cause of all things.[197] This idea may well have been of great influence on the development of a transcendent first principle in Middle Platonism, but the fact that Aristotle was a student of Plato and could not be presented as improving upon his master[198] meant that instead of explicit acknowledgements of him, we rather find a "concern to appropriate Aristotle within a Pythagorean framework".[199]

Whatever the exact origin or origins of the increasingly transcendent status of the divine principle, its development is "also reflected in the field of ethics, particularly with reference to the problem of the *telos*, the goal of human existence."[200] In Middle Platonism, this ideal is defined as "assimilation to god" (*homoiôsis theôi*);[201] this formula is not new with Middle Platonism, as Plato already used it often.[202] For Plato it means, roughly speaking, that god is the moral paradigm; i.e., in order for us to live the good life as embodied beings, we must become as just and holy and wise as god.[203] In Middle Platonism, however, the gradual transcendence of god means that the ideal to which we must assimilate ourselves becomes more and more detached from the cosmos we live in. Bonazzi compares the Middle Platonist *telos* with the Stoic goal that tells us to 'live in accordance with nature (*phusis*)':

> "Compared with Stoicism, the difference of the Platonist formula is in the separateness of God, who is no longer simply compared with *phusis*, but is other than it. The novelty lies in this detachment between *phusis* and *theos*."[204]

---

[194] Dillon (1977), p. 127 suggests the *Philebus* as source; Trapp (2007), p. 352 concurs, but adds that "more generally, it can be seen as the result of reflection on the problem of bringing together diverging tendencies in Plato's work: the sense of a single supreme principle that informs the heart of the *Republic* with the dyadic system of the unwritten doctrines."

[195] Bonazzi (2007), p. 369-71.

[196] Bonazzi also favourably refers to Mansfeld's suggestion that Eudorus may have been influenced by Aristotle's discussion of Xenophanes in *Metaph.* 1.5; cf. Mansfeld (1988), p. 103ff.

[197] Bonazzi (2005), p. 139ff., Bonazzi (2007), p. 373ff. Cf. Brenk (2005), p. 39, Thesleff (1961), p. 48, Sharples (2002), p. 15-6.

[198] Cf. Zambon (2006), p. 564: "All Platonists of the Imperial Age agree that Plato brought philosophy to perfection [...].

[199] Bonazzi (2007), p. 377. There was much dissent within Platonism about the use of Aristotle's doctrine for interpreting Plato: cf. Zambon (2006), p. 568.

[200] Bonazzi (2008), p. 246.

[201] Stob. *Ecl.* 2.49, 8 - 50, 10.

[202] Cf. Sedley (1999) for references and discussion.

[203] Plato *Theaet.* 176a5-c3, *Tim.* 90b-d.

[204] Bonazzi (2008), p. 247.

Raising oneself to this divine level is envisioned as the attainment of knowledge of the divine through contemplation and study,[205] for which moral goodness is merely a precondition and no longer a goal in itself. The consequence of this increasing emphasis on purely intellectual activity was a commensurate disregard for the body, which came to be seen more and more as a hindrance to the attainment of that knowledge.[206] For this development of the views on the human *telos*, too, Plato's own work has been proposed as an important influence, but Aristotle should be taken into consideration as well.[207]

The transcendence and incomprehensibility of god remain important aspects of Middle Platonism, as is shown by Alcinous' *Didaskalikos* or handbook of Platonism, dating from the second century A.D., in which the supreme god, who is placed above a demiurgic World Soul, is said to be "unutterable" (*arrhêtos*).[208] The removal of the highest god from direct dealings with his creation led to the increased importance of a demiurgic god within the cosmos. This development, Dillon argues, was necessitated by "the progressive transcendentalisation of the supreme principle, from at least the time of Eudorus of Alexandria on."[209]

These are some of the tendencies recognizable in the development of Platonism in the period from the return to dogmatism to around the end of the second century A.D. It is impossible to deal with more than these general tendencies here. There were many different personalities who are regarded as belonging to Middle Platonism, and they all saw themselves as explicating and developing the ideas of Plato, even when their theories are often idiosyncratic and mutually conflicting.[210] It is not even possible to posit the tenets of a 'mainstream' or school-Platonism in this period, since Platonism was taught and studied in many different places, of which Athens and Alexandria were merely the most important.

Even the tendencies described above are just that, tendencies: to claim that they are definite and well-understood developments taking place in all of the different Platonist theories of this period is to go beyond the extant evidence. Philo, e.g., while being the best-transmitted 'Platonist' of the first century A.D., is at the same time suspect as a source for this same Platonism, being "a Jew loyal to the traditions of his people, who spends most of his creative energy commenting on the holy books of Moses. This specific religious background cannot but exert its influence, certainly in the area of theology."[211] To give an example: we have seen above that the incomprehensibility of god can be seen as an emerging aspect of Middle

---

[205] Zambon (2006), p. 569.
[206] Cf. Bonazzi (2008), p. 247-9.
[207] Betegh (2006), p. 633: "In their search for the best human life, Plato and Aristotle claimed [...] that a life of pure intellectual activity, and nothing but intellectual activity, is not a possibility for a human being – but it is the only life worthy of a god." Cf. Ari. *EN* 10.7-9, *Metaph.* 12.9.
[208] An epithet also used by Philo. Cf. Dillon (1977), p. 155, 283.
[209] Dillon (2002), p. 228, cf. Bonazzi (2008), 241ff.
[210] Cf. Zambon (2006), p. 561: "[E]ven though the Platonists of that era shared some common views, the positions they held are so varied and irreconcilable as to make it difficult to identify what doctrinal elements can properly be called "Middle Platonic.""
[211] Runia (2002), p. 286.

Platonism and that Philo is the first to explicitly state it. We do not know, however, whether Philo took this idea from earlier Platonists, such as Eudorus,[212] or got it from somewhere else; we also do not know whether Philo played any significant role in the dissemination of this idea throughout Middle Platonism.[213] Similarly, Plutarch often shows hesitation concerning the possibility of our knowledge of the divine.[214] It is not certain, however, whether Plutarch's doubts reflect the same tendency discussed above: Jan Opsomer has argued that there are strands of Academic Scepticism recognizable in Plutarch's work, and in other Middle Platonists as well.[215] There may thus well have been different motives in Middle Platonism for what may seem to be the same phenomenon, i.e. hesitance about our knowledge of the divine.

Such examples show that there is no *one* history of Platonism and that after the disappearance of the Academy as an institution, the definition of what it meant to be an Academic branched off in various directions. Some of these branches are closer to one another than others, others may even grow in entirely different directions, but ultimately they all have their origin in the trunk that is Plato.

5. Seneca on his philosophical allegiance

Undertaking any study of possible extra-Stoic influences on Seneca's ideas, it should go without saying, must take into account his own views on his philosophical allegiance. Doing so can tell us much about how we should interpret the occurrence of non-Stoic elements in his works. In this section we will take a brief look at how he styles himself a Stoic philosopher and also consider his attitude towards other philosophers and their ideas.

There is no doubt that Seneca sees himself as a Stoic. He standardly includes himself in the Stoic ranks by using 'us' (*nos*) and 'our people' (*nostri*) to refer to them.[216] Also, he often explicitly agrees with the Stoic position and considers its moral teachings to be honourable and more concerned with the good of man than other schools' teachings.[217] When referring to a philosopher from those other schools he may label such a thinker as a stranger or outsider

---

212 Suggested by Dillon (1977), p. 155, as noted above, and, somewhat more hesitantly, Runia (2002), p. 309.

213 Dillon (1977) thinks he did not, cf. p. 155.

214 Cf. Zambon (2006), p. 567: "Plutarch [...] held a position consistent with skepticism, emphasizing the limits of human knowledge with regard to the reality of the divine and the order of the cosmos. Cf. Opsomer (1998).

215 See Opsomer (1998), and his response to criticism in Opsomer (2005).

216 See Wildberger (2006), p. 25 n. 157 for a list of occurrences of *nostri.*

217 Cf. *EM* 22.11, 99.27, *Clem.* 2.5.2-3.

(*alienus*),[218] and he often defends the Stoic position against that of other schools,[219] or is critical of the teachings of these others schools.[220]

As Seneca himself makes clear, however, this allegiance to the Stoic school does not mean that he has to agree with everything his Stoic predecessors have said, or that his intellectual freedom is bound by his allegiance. Seneca reserves the right to think for himself[221] and claims that his acceptance of any Stoic doctrine is due to his own well-deliberated agreement with that doctrine and not any uncritical adoption of it.[222] Doing philosophy is not a matter of rehashing old dogmas, but of actively seeking to improve and expand upon what our philosophical ancestors have discovered.[223]

In his attempts to do so, Seneca is often critical of earlier Stoics: he ridicules several syllogisms of Zeno as ineffectual,[224] censures Chrysippus' etymologizations of divine names as "puerilities" (*ineptiis*),[225] and disagrees with Posidonius on the relation between philosophy and the liberal arts,[226] and explicitly rejects the Stoic theory on the nature of comets,[227] and argues against the Stoics that 'being wise' is just as much a good as 'wisdom' is.[228] He does not see such disagreement or criticism as atypical of a Stoic, as he notes in one of his letters, referring to a disagreement between Cleanthes and Chrysippus on the physical account of the act of walking.[229] In another letter, he argues that the strength of the Stoic school is due to the fact that the Stoics, unlike the Epicureans, do not refer all their doctrines to their founder, but actively develop and contribute to those doctrines:

---

[218] Especially in the case of Epicurus, cf. *EM* 2.5, 4.10, 12.11, 14.17. See further below on Seneca's use of Epicurus.
[219] See e.g. *EM* 99.25ff. (against the Epicurean Metrodorus), 117.11-12 (against the Peripatetics). Another case, *EM* 65, where Seneca defends the Stoic theory of causes against those of Plato and Aristotle, is further discussed in chapter 3, section 2.2.
[220] Cf. his criticism of Pyrrhonian and Academic scepticism at *EM* 88.44-5. Cf. Grimal (1989), p. 1965: "Sénèque se réclame du stoïcisme, et ne pense pas lui-même comme un éclectique. Il a le sentiment de se situer dans cette grande tradition philosophique, qui remonte à Zénon [...]."
[221] Cf. *EM* 45.4, 117.6, *Vita* 3.2.
[222] *Otio* 3.1.
[223] *EM* 33.7-11, 45.4, 74.23, 80.1, *Otio* 1.4-5.
[224] In *EM* 82.9, where the syllogism is about why death is not an evil, and in 83.9ff., where it is about why the good man should not be drunk. In *EM* 83.10-12, he also criticizes Posidonius' attempts to defend Zeno's syllogism.
[225] *Ben.* 1.3.8-4.6.
[226] *EM* 90.
[227] *NQ* 7.21.1: *Ego nostris non assentior.* Note that despite his disagreement, he stills refers to the Stoics as *nostris*.
[228] *EM* 117. This letter is further discussed in chapter 3, section 2.3.
[229] *EM* 113.23.

> "To whom shall we credit them? To Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Panaetius, or Posidonius? We Stoics are not subjects of a despot: each of us lays claim to his own freedom."[230]

While each of these contributed his own individual ideas, they are all of them working together on a "masterpiece (*ingenii opus*), from which nothing can be taken away without injury to the whole."[231] When Seneca is critical of other Stoics, then, it is only insofar as he believes that these Stoics are not contributing anything to this masterpiece, the Stoic view on what the good life for man consists in.[232] Good examples are Seneca's criticisms of Zeno's syllogisms and Chrysippus' etymologizations referred to above. Stoic philosophy states that death is not to be feared, and a Stoic should therefore try and convince others of this tenet: Zeno's syllogisms, Seneca believes, do *not* convince anyone and should therefore be dispensed with. Similarly, in *De Beneficiis* he argues that Chrysippus' etymologizations of the Graces[233] are not of any practical use to anyone who wants to know how to learn about the proper way to receive and bestow benefits. Seneca also often seems critical of dialectic, the part of logic that deals with correct reasoning and argumentation,[234] for merely distracting us from what is really important and wasting our mind on intricate but useless exercises.[235] As Jonathan Barnes has shown, Seneca does not want to do away with logic (or specifically, dialectic) as an important part of philosophy, but he does want to get rid of sophistry and fruitless quibbling over fatuous points.[236]

More in general, he denounces all efforts spent on topics that do not contribute to the goal of philosophy, i.e. helping us live the good life, and always tries to find the philosophical applicability in everything he discusses: "I try to extract and render useful some element from every field of thought, no matter how far removed it may be from philosophy."[237] This passage is found after a lengthy account of what Seneca presents as Platonic ontology[238] and he answers

---

[230] *EM* 33.4: *Cui illas adsignabimus? Zenoni an Cleanthi an Chrysippo an Panaetio an Posidonio? Non sumus sub rege; sibi quisque se vindicat.* Cf. *Otio* 1.4ff. See Tieleman (2007), p. 137f.

[231] *EM* 33.5. Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 3.74, where Stoic ethics is similarly presented as a unified whole that suffers not even small changes.

[232] Cf. *EM* 108.35: "My advice is this: that all study of philosophy and all reading should be applied to the idea of living the happy life (*beatae vitae*) [...]." See chapter 2 for the views of the Stoics and Seneca on what this good life consists in.

[233] In Greek and Roman mythology, the Graces (*Gratiae* in Latin) were goddesses of beauty, charm, and the like, who could bestow these qualities on human beings.

[234] D.L. 7.43, 47 (*SVF* 2.130).

[235] *EM* 45.5-13, *EM* 48, 49.6-9, 71.6, 82.19-24, 102.20, 108.12, 109.17, 111, *Brev.* 10.1. Cf. Trillitzsch (1962), p. 8-12, Scarpat (1970), p. 171-91 Barnes (1997), Cooper (2004), Wildberger (2006), p. 141ff., Inwood (2009), p. 221.

[236] Barnes (1997), Wildberger (2006): "In einer weiteren Gruppe von Briefen wird klar, daß man Ethik und Logik nicht wirklich trennen und somit ohne Dialektik keine wissenschaftliche Ethik treiben kann."

[237] *EM* 58.26.

[238] There is an abundance of secondary literature on the origins of the 'Platonic' account in *EM* 58 (and 65): see e.g. Theiler (1930), Bickel (1960), Hadot (1968), p. 156-63, Scarpat (1970), Whittaker (1975),

his own question of how Plato's Forms could make him a better man by saying that Plato's characterization of the things around us as mere images, temporary and unstable, might help us consider these things to be indifferent to our well-being, which is what the Stoics believe as well.[239]

This is just one example of how Seneca tries to find something philosophically valuable in the ideas of non-Stoic philosophers. Most conspicuous in this regard is his use of dozens of sayings and maxims of Epicurus.[240] This use does not signal any hesitation on Seneca's part as regards his loyalties, since he explicitly rejects hedonism as an unworthy philosophy.[241] As he himself claims, however, many of the things Epicurus has said are true or useful in themselves, and accordingly are not Epicurean but common property. A Stoic might thus use them as well, as long as they agree with his own teachings, in the same way he might use certain lines from poetry that fit his ideas.[242] Plato's ideas, too, can be used to make a Stoic point, as we have seen in the example from *EM* 58; in *De Ira* he cites from Plato's *Republic* and justifies doing so by saying:

> "And I may adduce here the argument of Plato - for what harm is there in using the arguments of others, so far as they are our own?"[243]

As in a few other passages where he draws directly on Plato's works,[244] Seneca does not mention where he got the citation from, nor does he ever do so when he cites Epicurus. Teun Tieleman has argued that this practice, along with other onomastic references to philosophers throughout his works, shows that Seneca wants to present these philosophers as *exempla*, men who lead by example and are role models to us all.[245] He includes Stoics in this group,[246] but many others as well:

Dillon (1977), p. 135-9, Gersh (1986), p. 181-95, Mansfeld (1992), p. 84-107, Chaumartin (1993), Sedley (2005), Inwood (2007a), p. 107-54, Inwood (2007b).

[239] *EM* 58.26-7. For another example, see *EM* 65.15ff., where he tries to show how his theoretical discussion of various theories on causes (already referred to above) can be of benefit to us.

[240] Most citations are in the first 30 letters of the *Epistulae Morales*. For Seneca's use of Epicurus see Freise (1989), Hachmann (1995), p. 220-37, Hachmann (1996).

[241] *Ben.* 4.2.

[242] *EM* 8.8ff. Cf. *EM* 12.11, 14.17, 21.9, 33.2. In *Vita* 13.1-3, Seneca even defends Epicurus against the typical accusations of being a slothful swine. Like the Stoics, he says, Epicurus actually promoted an austere lifestyle, and those who believe that he encouraged decadence are mistaken; cf. *Vita* 12.4.

[243] *Ira* 1.6.5: *Et Platonis argumentum adferam – quid enim nocet alienis uti ex parte qua nostra sunt?* The citation, "the good man does no injury" is from *Rep.* 1.335d.

[244] See Tieleman (2007), p. 138-42.

[245] Tieleman (2007), p. 134f., 147f.

[246] *Otio* 6.5, Zeno and Chrysippus are praised for benefitting others through their lifestyle.

> "We may argue with Socrates, we may doubt with Carneades, find peace with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, exceed it with the Cynics."[247]

All philosophy can be useful, Seneca believes, not just Stoicism. Whether we believe in chance, as the Epicureans do, or in the divine government of the world, "philosophy ought to be our defence."[248] This sympathetic attitude towards other schools, however, should not mislead us into thinking that Seneca does not take his philosophical allegiance serious. As seen, he only regards the Stoic school as his own and sees others as *alienus*. Also, in several cases, such as in the discussion of causes in *EM* 65, he explicitly sides with the Stoics against the theories of other schools, and claims that since he is not a sage, he has "take refuge in the camp of others – of those, clearly, who can easily defend themselves and their followers."[249] It is to the Stoics, then, that he belongs, and it is Stoic philosophy that can help us live the good life.

---

[247] *Brev.* 14.2. Cf. *EM* 64.9-10, where Seneca says he honours, among others, Socrates, Plato, Zeno and Cleanthes. Cf. *EM* 44.2-3, where he says that philosophy has made Socrates, Plato and Cleanthes noble men: they can be our ancestors if we are of worthy behaviour. In *Ben.* 7.8.2 he praises Socrates, Chrysippus and Zeno. In *EM* 108.38, Plato, Zeno, Chrysippus, Posidonius and "a whole host of Stoics (*nostrorum*) as numerous as excellent" are said to have agreed on several points.
[248] *EM* 16.5: *[...] philosophia nos tueri debet.*
[249] *Helv.* 5.2: *[...] in aliena castra confugi, eorum scilicet, qui facile se ac suos tuentur.*

Chapter 2
The status of physics and theology

1. Introduction

In the first chapter we have briefly discussed the status of theology within the Stoic philosophical curriculum.[250] The provisional outcome was that, although such critics as Plutarch would have us believe that the Stoics were inconsistent, we are able to reconstruct, with reasonable confidence, the main Stoic position on this topic as both consistent and uniform. On the one hand, theology is a very difficult subject and a full understanding of the divine is an intrinsically valuable pursuit that is the culmination of the last part of the Stoic curriculum, physics; on the other hand, a rudimentary understanding of our cosmos as a divine and providentially steered whole of which we are an integral part is required in order for us to live the good life. A basic knowledge of the divine is thus instrumental to ethics, while a more advanced knowledge, which is both more difficult to acquire and inherently rewarding, forms the completion of philosophy.

In Seneca, too, we find these two different perspectives on the role of physics and theology. Sometimes he appears to value physics only insofar as it has a moral application, while in other passages he deems it to be the highest activity we can engage in. Some have assumed that such passages, where Seneca seems to regard ethics as merely preliminary to the more exalted study of god and the cosmos, evince a position that is no longer Stoic but rather Middle Platonic in kind. Others have been critical of this assumption and believe Seneca to hold to the Stoic priority of ethics. The aim of this chapter is to show that the critics are right in claiming that what we find in Seneca is not significantly different from what the early Stoics had held; it will be argued, however, that this shared position does not simply posit ethics as the highest activity as opposed to a Middle Platonic emphasis on speculative physics or contemplation. For both Seneca and the earlier Stoics, *theôria* and *praxis* are two sides of the same coin, this coin being the rational and virtuous life. In section 2.1 the details of the Stoic position will be further explicated, while in section 2.2 Seneca's views are examined and compared to this Stoic position.

2. The role of physics and theology

2.1 The Stoic position

The Stoics, as most other ancient philosophers, held that the ultimate goal (*telos*) of man is happiness.[251] We do all other things for the sake of this goal, and it is itself the only thing we pursue for its own sake.[252] According to a well-known Stoic formula, the way to achieve this

---

[250] Chapter 1, section 3.2.
[251] Stob. *Ecl.* 2.77, 16-17 (*SVF* 3.16); cf. *SVF* 3.17.
[252] Stob. *Ecl.* 2.77, 16-27. (first lines of *SVF* 3.16), cf. *SVF* 3.2, 3.3.

goal is to 'live in agreement (or accordance) with nature'. Different Stoics put forward many different formulations of this formula,[253] but they all subscribed to the basic idea that "the nature with which one is to live in agreement is both one's own rational constitution as a person, and the rationality of universal nature or god."[254] Since we are rational beings, then, living in a cosmos that is rationally steered by god, we must live rationally to achieve happiness. The Stoics equated this living according to our rational nature with the virtuous, i.e. morally good condition of our soul.[255] They further held that virtue is sufficient for happiness and thus the only thing that really is good;[256] things like health and wealth may be preferable to sickness or poverty, but they are irrelevant to the moral condition of the soul and thus to happiness.[257]

In order for us to live this virtuous life, i.e. the life that is in accordance with our rational nature, it seems reasonable to assume that we need to know what that nature exactly consists in.[258] Physics, understood in the broad sense as the study of nature, might then reasonably be said to be needed for ethics.[259] Both White (1985) and Inwood (2009) are doubtful, however, that the Stoics did indeed take this line of argumentation. Nicholas White argues that the happiness of the Stoic sage, which can be expressed as the ideal state of his mind, is best explained as consisting in the right *attitude* towards what happens to him. In order for the sage to have this attitude, he has to understand the cosmos as a providently run place in which all things happen for the greater good. This kind of understanding, White holds, "does not automatically require views about how [the universe] is put together"[260] and as such it is not readily intelligible, "why the early Stoics thought that detailed physical and cosmological theory would be required by their notion of the ideal human condition as exemplified by the Sage, or in general, I would say, why it would be required by their ethics."[261]

---

[253] D.L. 7.87-9 (partly in *SVF* 3.4), Stob. *Ecl.* 2.75, 7-76, 15; Cic. *Fin.* 3.31 (*SVF* 3.15), 4.14f. (*SVF* 3.13).
[254] LS vol. 1, p. 400.
[255] Cic. *Fin.* 2.34, D.L. 7.87-9, Stob. *Ecl.* 2.78, 1-6.
[256] The Stoics took this point from Socrates; cf. Long (1988) for the influence of Socrates on Hellenistic philosophy in general and Long (2002) for his influence on Stoicism, and especially on Epictetus.
[257] In this they differed from, most notably, Aristotle, who had held that certain bodily and external goods are needed for us to attain happiness.
[258] Boeri (2009), p. 174: "Being a Stoic follower of nature involves a serious effort to know the way the cosmos works and to enquire into the probable place that one, as a privileged part of cosmic nature, should occupy in it."
[259] White (1985), p. 58: "[F]or all or almost all Stoics, ethical doctrine included the proposition that the end or *telos* is to live "in agreement with nature", and by "physics" we mean here [...] the study of nature in general; so it would appear that an adherent of Stoic ethical doctrine would have to take physics to be required for an explanation of this specification of the *telos*." Inwood (2009), p. 202: "Stoics, we read in many sources, hold that happiness is a matter of following nature. If physics is the study of nature, then unless we want to go wandering about aimlessly we need to know what it is we are following. So physics would, on this naïve view, be of great value *at least* in an instrumental sort of way. We study it because otherwise we just won't know what we are doing when we pursue the happy life – which is what we are really after."
[260] White (1985), p. 70-1.
[261] White (1985), p. 72.

Brad Inwood agrees: "Few people, ancient or modern, think it sound or plausible to hold that learning cosmology will actually help us deal with personal grief – even if that were held to be the point of doing philosophy. So if that's the reason for a Stoic to commit to the study of physics it will be a pretty poor show all around."[262]

Both authors also contend that there is actually little evidence that suggests that the Stoics explicitly claimed the study of physics to be instrumental in prompting us to take up the right attitude towards all that happens to us.[263] Inwood does say that in Cicero's *De Finibus* 3.73 the study of certain parts of physics is seen as required for ethics and thus subservient to the ethical goal of living according to nature; he also argues, however, that according to other passages in Cicero the Stoics held the study of physics to be worthwhile in and for itself, because humans, as rational beings, have a natural drive for knowledge and understanding.[264] Faced with these apparently conflicting accounts, Inwood says he agrees with Julia Annas[265] that "a narrow insistence on recovering *the* Stoic position on the topic might be a mistake" and uses Aristo of Chios as an example to show that one could even deny physics any role whatsoever while still seeing oneself as a Stoic.[266]

Regardless of the matter of the use of physics for ethics, however, Aristo's views really should be seen as dissident and idiosyncratic, since the Stoics define philosophy as consisting of logic, physics and ethics. Aristo's claim that physics plays no role whatsoever, then, does not in any way mean that something like a general or common Stoic view cannot be established.[267] Many scholars have argued for the relevance of physics and cosmology for ethics in the Stoic system,[268] often referring to the following passage in Plutarch's *De Stoicorum Repugnantiis*:

> "[Plutarch cites Chrysippus:] It is not possible to discover any other beginning of justice or any source for it other than that from Zeus and from universal nature, for thence everything of the kind must have its beginning if we are going to have anything to say about good and evil. [...] For there is no other or more suitable way

---

[262] Inwood (2009), p. 203. Inwood may be overstating his point here: Epicurus, e.g., claimed explicitly that physics (including cosmology) had a direct moral purpose: cf. D.L. 10.37.
[263] White (1985), p. 72, Inwood (2009), p. 203.
[264] Inwood (2009), p. 204-5; he refers to Cic. *Fin.* 3.17-8 and *Off.* 1.11-3. These passages will be discussed *infra*, as will be the Aristotelian background of the idea of the naturalness of our pursuit of knowledge.
[265] Annas (2007) argues that the widely held opinion that the Stoics had a foundationalist view of the relation of ethics and physics is wrong. According to her, the evidence does not support the opinion that the Stoics held physics to be primary and instrumental to ethics, but rather indicates that there was "a plurality of equally legitimate ways of presenting Stoic ethics, none being *the*, or *the authoritative* way to do it." (p. 85) Different Stoics, in a variety of contexts and audiences, might describe the relations of physics and ethics (and logic, for that matter) in different ways, but "ultimately the ambitious goal is to unite the understanding of the different parts in a synoptic grasp of the big picture." (p. 85) Annas' views will be discussed *infra*.
[266] Inwood (2009), p. 205-6. For Aristo's view that only ethics has any value, because physics is beyond our powers and logic is irrelevant see D.L. 7.160 (1.351) and further *SVF* 1.352-357.
[267] As Inwood himself acknowledges, p. 207, n.15.
[268] Most recently Betegh (2003) and Boeri (2009). See Betegh (2003), p. 274, n. 3 and Boeri (2009), p. 174, n. 2 and Annas (2007) for further references.

> of approaching the theory of good and evil or the virtues or happiness than from the universal nature and from the dispensation of the cosmos. [...] For the theory of good and evil must be connected with these, since good and evil have no better beginning or point of reference and physical speculation is to be undertaken for no other purpose than for the discrimination of good and evil."[269]

Julia Annas, as noted above, has repeatedly argued that the Stoics did not believe physics to be the basis for ethics.[270] She rather thinks of Stoic philosophy as a holistic system, i.e. a system in which "physics and ethics are items that contribute to a unitary whole."[271] Since the Stoics aimed at a goal of "integrated philosophical understanding"[272] it is wrong to suppose that they made one of these fundamental or primary to the other. She grants that appealing to the providence and rational order of the cosmos might help us to accept certain ethical truths,[273] but holds that these truths in themselves do not need to be grounded in physics.[274] To strengthen her case, Annas denies that the passage from Plutarch cited above, which appears to explicitly state that Chrysippus did in fact hold physics to be needed for ethics, is in fact trustworthy evidence. Plutarch, she argues, is trying to show that Chrysippus is confused and inconsistent about the relation of physics and ethics by contrasting the Chrysippean passages with others where physics is said to be the last part of philosophy to be studied. As said, Annas believes the Stoic view to have been that they are both part of the single unified understanding that is philosophy; what Plutarch presents as contradictory statements on the part of Chrysippus, is in fact no more than a difference in a specific pedagogical order. For other purposes or other audiences Chrysippus might well have believed another such order to be preferable, as is in fact suggested by the contrasting passages Plutarch gives, in which Chrysippus says that physics comes last, after logic and ethics.[275]

---

[269] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1035C (*SVF* 3.68, part, transl. Loeb, with minor changes): οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν εὑρεῖν τῆς δικαιοσύνης ἄλλην ἀρχὴν οὐδ' ἄλλην γένεσιν ἢ τὴν ἐκ τοῦ Διὸς καὶ τὴν ἐκ τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως· ἐντεῦθεν γὰρ δεῖ πᾶν τὸ τοιοῦτον τὴν ἀρχὴν ἔχειν, εἰ μέλλομεν ὀρθῶς τι ἐρεῖν περὶ ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν. [...] οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἄλλως οὐδ' οἰκειότερον ἐπελθεῖν ἐπὶ τὸν τῶν ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν λόγον οὐδ' ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρετὰς οὐδ' ἐπ' εὐδαιμονίαν, ἀλλ' ἢ ἀπὸ τῆς κοινῆς φύσεως καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου διοικήσεως. [...] δεῖ γὰρ τούτοις συνάψαι τὸν περὶ ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν λόγον, οὐκ οὔσης ἄλλης ἀρχῆς αὐτῶν ἀμείνονος οὐδ' ἀναφορᾶς, οὐδ' ἄλλου τινὸς ἕνεκεν τῆς φυσικῆς θεωρίας παραληπτῆς οὔσης ἢ πρὸς τὴν περὶ ἀγαθῶν ἢ κακῶν διάστασιν. To prevent misunderstanding, the three citations (separated by square brackets) from Chrysippus given by Plutarch do not form a continuous discourse. The first is from *On the Gods*, the others are from the *Physical Propositions*.

[270] Annas (1993) and (2007). Cf. Engberg-Pedersen (1986).

[271] Annas (2007), p. 61. She refers to Ierodiakonou (1993), who argues that while the Stoics believed that the three parts of philosophical discourse (logic, physics, ethics) each had their own peculiar topics and approach, they also held that all of them were needed for the full understanding of a certain topic in any of them.

[272] Annas (2007), p. 85.

[273] Cf. Long (1996), p. 201, Cooper (1995).

[274] Annas (2007), p. 69-72.

[275] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1035A-B (*SVF*2.42): εἶτα τούτων δεῖν τάττεσθαι πρῶτα μὲν τὰ λογικὰ δεύτερα δὲ τὰ ἠθικὰ τρίτα δὲ τὰ φυσικά· Cf. Barnes (1997), p. 22.

It is undoubtedly true that Plutarch is presenting Chrysippus' position as unfavourably as possible and it is also very likely that Chrysippus (and other Stoics) did not have one fixed order in which logic, physics and ethics should be studied.[276] Annas' view may be criticized, however, for relying solely on the passages in Plutarch, which are about the place of the various parts of philosophy in the Stoic curriculum: this exclusive focus obscures the fact that these parts may also be relevant to each other apart from the educational context. First of all, as Boeri already notices, she ignores a passage from Cicero's *De Finibus*, which explicitly states the need of physics for ethics:[277]

> "[Cato in his exposition of Stoic ethics:] He who is to live in accordance with nature must base his principles upon the system and government of the entire world. Nor again can anyone judge truly of things good and evil, save by a knowledge of the whole plan of nature and also the life of the gods, and of the answer to the question whether the nature of man is or is not in harmony with that of the universe."[278]

This passage is reminiscent of another one in Diogenes Laertius:

> "Again, living virtuously is equivalent to living in accordance with experience of what happens by nature, as Chrysippus says in his treatise *On Ends*; for our individual natures are parts of the nature of the whole. And this is why the end may be defined as life in accordance with nature, or, in other words, in accordance with our own human nature as well as that of the universe, a life in which we refrain from every action forbidden by the law common to all things, that is to say, the right reason which pervades all things, and is identical with Zeus, lord and ruler of all that is."[279]

Both these passages appear to say that at least some basic understanding of how the cosmos is providentially and divinely run is needed for us to live virtuously. Annas contends that this is

---

[276] Though Boeri (2009), p. 185, remarks that "even admitting with Annas that the presentation of Stoic ethics based on physics *is just one way* of presenting ethics, one should take for granted that for the Stoics it is a very reasonable way of presenting it [...].

[277] Boeri (2009), p. 186 and 190. Annas (2007) does mention the passage, but as evidence for her claim that "Stoic philosophy consists of all three parts [logic, ethics, physics - MvH] strongly unified into a whole" (p. 60-1). This claim in itself is uncontroversial, but this passage does not support it.

[278] Cic. *Fin*. 3.73 (*SVF* 3.282, transl. Loeb): *[...] qui convenienter naturae victurus sit ei proficiscendum est ab omni mundo atque ab eius procuratione. Nec vero potest quisquam de bonis et malis vere iudicare nisi omni cognita ratione naturae et vitae etiam deorum, et utrum conveniat necne natura hominis cum universa.*

[279] D.L. 7.87-8 (*SVF* 3.4, transl. Loeb): πάλιν δ' ἴσον ἐστὶ τὸ κατ' ἀρετὴν ζῆν τῷ κατ' ἐμπειρίαν τῶν φύσει συμβαινόντων ζῆν, ὥς φησι Χρύσιππος ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ Περὶ τελῶν· μέρη γάρ εἰσιν αἱ ἡμέτεραι φύσεις τῆς τοῦ ὅλου. διόπερ τέλος γίνεται τὸ ἀκολούθως τῇ φύσει ζῆν, ὅπερ ἐστὶ κατά τε τὴν αὑτοῦ καὶ κατὰ τὴν τῶν ὅλων, οὐδὲν ἐνεργοῦντας ὧν ἀπαγορεύειν εἴωθεν ὁ νόμος ὁ κοινός, ὅσπερ ἐστὶν ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος, διὰ πάντων ἐρχόμενος, ὁ αὐτὸς ὢν τῷ Διί, καθηγεμόνι τούτῳ τῆς τῶν ὄντων διοικήσεως ὄντι·

not the case, because "living in accordance with nature is explicitly [...] said to be equivalent to or the same thing as living in accordance with virtue. A foundation can hardly be the same thing as or equivalent to what it is a foundation for."[280]

This last claim is true, of course, but the obvious rejoinder is that it is not 'living in accordance with nature' that is foundational to the virtuous life, but knowing what this nature is. As Gabor Betegh puts it, "Chrysippus' contention of the *telos* would not make any sense had he not given at least a preliminary account of cosmic nature, and its relation to human nature, and what he means by 'what happens by nature' (*ta phusei sumbainonta*)."[281] Betegh further argues that according to the Stoics "a clear grasp on the fundamental causal structure of the cosmos, and thus a fair degree of physics and cosmology, is certainly indispensable for the understanding of the goodness and teleology of the world,"[282] although he agrees with White that it is not clear how detailed our knowledge of physics and cosmology ought to be.[283] The true ethical value of understanding the cosmos, however, does not lie in providing us with a panacea for misfortune, but in making us regard positively *everything* that happens, not just what happens to us, as part of the same divine providential plan. Living virtuously is impossible without the knowledge that consists in, as Betegh puts it, "the awareness of the rationality, teleology, and providentiality of cosmic divine rationality as it manifests itself in the constitution and functioning of terrestrial living beings, and, further, the understanding of how human rational action can be in accordance with, mirror, and promote this cosmic rationality."[284]

This last sentence refers to another important role that the Stoics gave to physics: as rational beings, we have the privileged position of being able to understand and contemplate the beautiful cosmos we live in. Contemplating god's providence and rationality is not just helpful for ethics, but is a worthwhile activity in its own right, as the following passage from Cicero's *De Finibus* clearly shows:

> "Besides these benefits [physics helps in banishing superstition and fear of death], the study of the heavenly phenomena bestows a power of self-control that arises from the perception of the consummate restraint and order that obtain even among the gods; also loftiness of mind is inspired by contemplating the creations and actions of the gods, and justice by realizing the will, design and purpose of the supreme lord and ruler to whose nature we are told by philosophers that the true reason and supreme law are conformed. The study of natural philosophy also affords the inexhaustible pleasure of acquiring knowledge, the sole pursuit of which

---

[280] Annas (2007), p. 75-6.
[281] Betegh (2003), p. 276.
[282] Betegh (2003), p. 298.
[283] Like White (1985), p. 70-2, Betegh thinks that a later Stoic like Marcus Aurelius would probably set a lower standard than Chrysippus. Posidonius, e.g., considering his extensive work in the natural sciences, we may presume to have argued for the need of a more extensive knowledge of physics.
[284] Betegh (2003), p. 299.

can afford an honourable and elevated occupation for the hours of leisure left when business has been finished."[285]

In Cicero's *De Officiis*, which largely follows Stoic theory,[286] the same idea is borne out:

> "Above all, the search after truth and its eager pursuit are peculiar to man. And so, when we have leisure from the demands of business cares, we are eager to see, to hear, to learn something new, and we esteem a desire to know obscure or wondrous things as indispensable to a happy life."[287]

According to Inwood, as noted above, this passage claims that knowledge of our cosmos is worthwhile in itself rather than as valuable in being 'merely' instrumental to ethics.[288] There is no doubt that the pursuit of knowledge of the cosmos here is valued in its own right; the passages in *De Officiis* where this view is apparently severely mitigated or even contradicted by insisting on the moral application of theoretical knowledge reflect, as he himself remarks, Cicero's own concerns.[289] Nevertheless, the view of theoretical knowledge as intrinsically valuable is perfectly compatible with the idea that it also serves as a basis for ethics. That this is in fact what the Stoics had in mind is confirmed by Chrysippus' statement that "man came into existence for the purpose of contemplating *and* imitating the world."[290] That is to say, neither ethics nor physics is to be regarded as the most important pursuit - both are elemental to the good life for us. In this regard Annas' claim, viz. that the Stoics did not envision a strict sequential order of 'first physics, then ethics' but rather advocated the development of a unified philosophical perspective, is very convincing and other recent authors have argued for the unity of Stoic philosophy as well.[291] Even so, that does not preclude the Stoics from holding

---

[285] Cic. *Fin.* 4.11-12 (transl. Loeb): *Sed etiam modestiam quandam cognitio rerum caelestium affert iis qui videant quanta sit etiam apud deos moderatio, quantus ordo, et magnitudinem animi deorum opera et facta cernentibus, iustitiam etiam, cum cognitum habeas quod sit summi rectoris ac domini numen, quod consilium, quae voluntas; cuius ad naturam apta ratio vera illa et summa lex a philosophis dicitur. Inest in eadem explicatione naturae insatiabilis quaedam e cognoscendis rebus voluptas, in qua una, confectis rebus necessariis, vacui negotiis honeste ac liberaliter possimus vivere.*

[286] As Cicero himself notes (1.6). For this theory he is drawing on Panaetius' *On Duty* (Περὶ Καθήκοντος), as he says in 3.7. Though we must be careful to ascribe individual passages in Cicero to the Stoics, we may draw some confidence from Cicero's own explicit remarks on where and how he goes beyond or disagrees with the Stoic ideas he presents. Cf. *Off.* 1.19, 1.153-8, discussed below.

[287] Cic. *Off.* 1.13 (transl. Loeb with minor changes): *In primisque hominis est propria veri inquisitio atque investigatio. Itaque cum sumus necessariis negotiis curisque vacui, tum avemus aliquid videre, audire, addiscere cognitionemque rerum aut occultarum aut admirabilium ad beate vivendum necessariam ducimus.* Cf. 1.18.

[288] Inwood (2009), p. 205.

[289] Notably in *Off.* 1.153-8, cf. 1.19. Cf. Inwood (2009), p. 204, n. 7

[290] Cic. *ND* 2.37 (*SVF* 2.1153, my italics): *homo ortus est ad mundum contemplandum et imitandum.* Cf. D.L. 7.126, 7.130 (*SVF* 3.687).

[291] Cf. Algra (2009c), p. 152-3. Algra argues that the Stoics, unlike e.g. Aristotle, did not treat the various parts of philosophy as more or less self-contained areas of knowledge and expertise, but rather as the

that some parts of philosophy are related to others in specific ways: e.g., the evidence suggests that an understanding of the cosmos as providential and rational, at least, is needed for ethics. Annas claims that there are no texts in which a Stoic actually derives ethical concepts such as virtue, impulse and emotion from Stoic physics, such as their theory of *pneuma*.[292] This is not surprising, however, when it is acknowledged that the knowledge of physics needed for ethics is only of a general and elementary character.[293] The positioning of physics-as-theology as the culmination of Stoic philosophy, meanwhile, probably presupposes a more or less full moral development.[294]

The human *telos* as formulated by the Stoics, then, is not a narrowly ethical one,[295] but the ideal of a fully developed rational nature, which manifests itself in both morally good behaviour and a profound understanding of the cosmos we live in. On the one hand, a basic view of the cosmos as a rational and provident whole of which we are an integral part is needed for the morally good life. On the other hand, however, this life is only part of what it means to be a human being and an equally important part consists in the study and contemplation of the cosmos and the divine, the inherent difficulty and exalted subject-matter of which makes this activity into a crowning achievement. The good life as envisioned by the Stoics, then, i.e. the rational life, is that "dans laquelle nous savons et faisons tout parfaitement".[296] There may have been differences between individual Stoics, e.g. on how much 'basic' physics they held to be needed for the morally good life, or in their attention to or development of the different parts of philosophy.[297] Nevertheless, nearly all the Stoics,[298] up to Seneca, held that the three parts of

---

generic names of the varying ways in which our rationality manifests itself. Algra points out that as applications of the same rational activity "la logique, la physique et l'éthique étaient considérées comme des vertus indissociablement liées: on ne peut pas avoir l'une sans avoir les autres." Cf. D.L. 7.40 (*SVF* 2.41), Plut. *St. Rep.* 1035E (*SVF* 2.50).

[292] Annas (2007), p. 67.

[293] A good indication for the elementariness of this knowledge is found in Plutarch. In *St. Rep.* 1035C (also cited *supra*) he quotes Chrysippus as saying in *On Gods* that "it is not possible to discover any other beginning of justice or any source for it other than that from Zeus and from the universal nature." But 1052A, where Plutarch again cites from Chrysippus' *On Gods*, shows that Chrysippus did not see this work as giving a full treatment of the gods; speaking about the generation and destruction of gods, he says that "an exposition of this from the beginning is rather a topic for physics proper." We may assume then, that *On the Gods* contained some basic doctrines on 'Zeus' and 'the universal nature', but left other, presumably more difficult topics as 'the generation and destruction of gods' to be discussed in dedicated physical works.

[294] Cf. the criticism by the Stoic Cleomedes (1st or 2nd century A.D.) at *Cael.* 2.1.406-14 that Epicurus' moral depravity caused him to be a bad natural philosopher as well. Cf. Algra (2009c), p. 152.

[295] As will become clear in the discussion of Seneca's position below, this wrong assumption has led to wrong or exaggerated conclusions as to his agreement with the Stoic position.

[296] Algra (2009c), p. 153, paraphrasing Galen *PHP* 7.2 (*SVF* 3.256).

[297] Chrysippus' physics and logic, e.g, were most probably better developed than those of Zeno; cf. Cic. *Fin.* 4.9.

[298] Insofar as we may regard a dissident like Aristo to be a real Stoic.

philosophy (logic, physics and ethics) were integral to our goal of becoming fully rational living beings. The emphasis might shift, but the basic idea does not change.

2.2 Seneca's position

Like the early Stoics, Seneca considered theology to be a part of physics, as is confirmed by the following passage from *EM* 89, in which Seneca discusses the various parts of philosophy:

> "The natural part of philosophy is twofold: bodily and non-bodily. Each is divided into its own grades of importance, so to speak. The topic concerning bodies deals, first, with those things which create and those which are created from them; and the created things are the elements."[299]

With "those things which create" (*ea quae faciunt*) Seneca refers to god and matter;[300] both are said to belong to physics, viz. to that part that deals with bodies. But what are his opinions about the role of the study of physics and theology in philosophy and the philosophical life that he promotes? The evidence is extensive and certain scholars have issued strong doubts on whether Seneca had a coherent position on this topic, or even on whether his position is properly Stoic. In the examination of the relevant passages it will become apparent that these doubts are unwarranted, since Seneca's views are essentially in accordance with the main Stoic (Chrysippean) position that we have just discussed.

2.2.1 Physics needed for ethics

In *EM* 94 and 95 Seneca discusses the relative ethical value of precepts (*praecepta*) and doctrines (*decreta*),[301] precepts being moral regulatory rules concerning specific actions that we should follow in order to become virtuous,[302] and doctrines being general philosophical principles.[303] First, in *EM* 94, he disagrees with Aristo,[304] who holds that precepts are worthless because they add nothing to moral improvement gained from philosophical doctrines.[305] Seneca believes that precepts may be relevant to our moral progress,[306] as long as they are

---

[299] *EM* 89.16: *Naturalis pars philosophiae in duo scinditur: corporalia et incorporalia. Utraque dividuntur in suos, ut ita dicam, gradus. Corporum locus in hos primum, in ea quae faciunt et quae ex his gignuntur; gignuntur autem elementa.*

[300] See chapter 3, section 2.2.

[301] See Roskam (2005), p. 87ff., Tieleman (2007b), p. 132.

[302] Examples given by Seneca include: how to live with your family (94.5, 94.15), how to properly use money, deal with danger (94.6), walk, eat (94.8), how to deal with friends, fellow citizens and associates (94.11); this list is not exhaustive.

[303] To give a few examples: money is neither good nor bad, but indifferent (94.7); the happy life is the life according to nature, not pleasure (94.8).

[304] The dissident Stoic discussed above, see section 2.1.

[305] Aristo's arguments are set out in *EM* 94.2-3, 5-18. Seneca's reply and exposition of his own views are given in 94.18-74.

[306] Seneca proposes many different roles for precepts: mnemonic devices (94.21, 25), tools to categorize various aspects of a general principle (94.21, 33), focal points of attention and exhortations of the mind

derived from, and complementary to, general philosophical doctrines.[307] The real difference between the two is that doctrines give advice in general, and precepts on particular actions or situations.[308] The same idea is expressed in *EM* 95, where Seneca considers the question whether precepts alone are enough for moral progress[309] and argues that they are not:

> "Precepts by themselves are weak and, so to speak, rootless if they be assigned to the parts and not to the whole. It is the doctrines which will strengthen and support us in peace and calm, which will include simultaneously the whole of life and the universe in its completeness. There is the same difference between philosophical doctrines and precepts as there is between elements and members; the latter depend upon the former, while the former are the source both of the latter and of all things."[310]

These necessary doctrines are probably not just the ethical doctrines Aristo envisioned as sufficient for moral virtue,[311] but also physical doctrines, as they include not merely "the whole of life" (*totam vitam*) but also "the universe in its completeness" (*totamque rerum naturam*). In other passages, too, Seneca affirms that we need doctrines from the whole of philosophy in order to live virtuously:

> "And besides this, in order that virtue may be perfect, there should be an even temperament and a scheme of life that is consistent with itself throughout; and this

(94.25-6), fortification of our mind by giving it new perspectives (94.30), practical application of theoretical rules (94.47), counterweights to the many examples of vice around us (94.55ff.) Precepts are always useful, Seneca believes, because they appeal to our inherently rational nature: as long as someone is able, in principle, to become fully rational and virtuous, precepts are not wasted on him or her; cf. 94.29, 43-4. Furthermore, he argues, precepts benefit us in the same way as witnessing the examplary good behaviour of wise men benefits us: these so-called *exempla* are the embodiment of moral precepts. Cf. *EM* 94.40-42, 55, 72ff., 95.66-72. Cf. *EM* 6.5ff, 11.8ff., 25.5ff, 52.7ff, 104.21f.

[307] See *EM* 94.21 and 31. In this he follows other Stoics: in *EM* 94.4 this idea is ascribed explicitly to Cleanthes; see further Cic. *Off.* 1.3.7ff., which, as said earlier (section 2.1) probably derives from Panaetius. See Galen *PHP* 5.324, 18-23 (Fr. 31 EK) for Posidonius' affirmation of the use of *decreta* and *EM* 95.65 for that of *praecepta.* Cf. Roskam (2005), p. 87: "Seneca [...] opts, in perfect conformity with the orthodox point of view, for a harmonious combination of precepts and doctrines."

[308] *EM* 94.31: *Quid enim interest inter decreta philosophiae et praecepta, nisi quod illa generalia praecepta sunt, haec specialia? Utraque res praecipit, sed altera in totum, particulatim altera.*

[309] *EM* 95.4.

[310] *EM* 95.12: *Inbecilla sunt per se et, ut ita dicam, sine radice, quae partibus dantur. Decreta sunt, quae muniant, quae securitatem nostram tranquillitatemque tueantur, quae totam vitam totamque rerum naturam simul contineant. Hoc interest inter decreta philosophiae et praecepta, quod inter elementa et membra; haec ex illis dependent, illa et horum causae sunt et omnium.* Cf. 95.34f.

[311] *EM* 94.2; Aristo denied, of course, any role to physics and logic, see section 2.1.

> result cannot be attained without knowledge of things, and without the art which enables us to understand things human and things divine."[312]

There are those who believe that they can control themselves without the aid of philosophy[313] – they are wrong, Seneca argues, because they lack the resilience that is required for enduring such hardships as torture and imminent death. This resilience, he repeats, can only be gained by understanding:

> "This strength of heart, however, will come from constant study, provided that you practise, not with the tongue but with the soul, and provided that you prepare yourself to meet death."[314]

It is clear, then, that Seneca believes that philosophy as a whole is needed for our moral development. Philosophical doctrines serve as a firm foundation for our behavioural dispositions: we are much less likely to go wrong when we know *why* it is that certain precepts should be followed.[315]

Philosophy consists of three parts, Seneca believes, and both logic and physics are necessary for our doing well on the ethical level.[316] On many occasions, Seneca firmly expresses his conviction that the study of nature (i.e. doing physics) is conducive to our moral development.[317] That is to say, doing the right thing depends on us understanding both ourselves and the world we live in:

> "For how are you to know what character is desirable, unless you have discovered what is best suited to man? Or unless you have studied nature? You can find out

---

[312] *EM* 31.8-10: *ut perfecta virtus sit, aequalitas ac tenor vitae per omnia consonans sibi, quod non potest esse, nisi rerum scientia contingit et ars, per quam humana ac divina noscantur.* Cf. *EM* 94.4: "Cleanthes holds that this department of wisdom is indeed useful, but that it is a feeble thing unless it is derived from general principles – that is, unless it is based upon a knowledge of the actual dogmas of philosophy and its meanings." Cf. *EM* 95.37: "[...] the weaker spirits will be assisted and freed from their evil opinions if we entrust to them the accepted principles of philosophy [...]."

[313] *EM* 82.7.

[314] *EM* 82.8: *Faciet autem illud firmum adsidua meditatio, si non verba exercueris, sed animum, si contra mortem te praeparaveris.*

[315] The evidence adduced here suggests that Cooper (2004) is too extreme in concluding (p. 334) that "writing in the ancient tradition of the spiritual adviser, Seneca loses sight of what he officially recognizes as the goal of moral improvement: an improved mind, an improved understanding, on the basis of which then to conduct one's life." Cf. the criticism of Cooper by Inwood (2009), p. 221.

[316] In *EM* 89.13 Seneca explicitly rejects the views of Aristo, who rejected physics and logic as being too difficult and useless; see above, and section 2.1.

[317] The importance that Seneca allots to logic falls outside the scope of this study; cf. Barnes (1998), p. 12-21, for an overview and discussion.

> what you should do and what you should avoid, only when you have learned what you owe to your own nature."[318]

Only through understanding the *condition humaine* can we avoid being swept away by our emotions:

> "Let us then recoil from her [fortune] as far as we are able. This will be possible for us only through knowledge of self and of the world of nature. The soul should know where it is going and whence it came, what is good for it and what is evil, what it seeks and what it avoids, and what is that reason which distinguishes between the desirable and the undesirable, and thereby tames the madness of our desires and calms the violence of our fears."[319]

In practice, this means that through studying the how and why of, say, an earthquake or any other natural disaster, we stop fearing its occurrence, since "the cause of fear is ignorance".[320] Physics thus appears to have an instrumental value, because it takes away our fears.[321] More in general, Seneca holds, we should engage in physics simply because we need it to become morally good.[322] In *De Beneficiis* Seneca warns that doing more than what is required for ethical purposes is a wasted effort:

> "Truth lurks in deep hiding and is wrapped in mystery. Nor can we complain that nature is grudgingly disposed towards us, for there is nothing that is hard to discover except that which, when discovered, brings no other reward than the fact of discovery; all that tends to make us better and happier has been placed either in plain sight or nearby."[323]

---

[318] *EM* 121.3: *Quomodo enim scies, qui habendi sint, nisi quid homini sit optimum, inveneris, nisi naturam eius inspexeris? Tunc demum intelleges, quid faciendum tibi, quid vitandum sit, cum didiceris, quid naturae tuae debeas.*

[319] *EM* 82.6: *Itaque quantum possumus, ab illa resiliamus; quod sola praestabit sui naturaeque cognitio. Sciat, quo iturus sit, unde ortus, quod illi bonum, quod malum sit, quid petat, quid evitet, quae sit illa ratio, quae adpetenda ac fugienda discernat, qua cupiditatum mansuescit insania, timorum saevitia conpescitur.*

[320] *NQ* 6.3.4: *timendi sit causa nescire [...].* For Epicurus, the removal of fear was the *raison d'être* of physical studies. See, e.g., *KD* 11 and 12.

[321] Cf. *NQ* 7.28.2, where Seneca argues that comets are a part of the divine plan and thus not be feared.

[322] Various scholars suggest that the need of physics for ethics was put forward less and less stronger by later Stoics; cf. White (1985), p. 70-2, Betegh (2003), p. 299. The various passages in Seneca cited here show that for him, at least, this conclusion is unwarranted.

[323] *Ben.* 7.1.6: *Involuta veritas in alto latet. Nec de malignitate naturae queri possumus, quia nullius rei difficilis inventio est, nisi cuius hic unus onventae fructus est invenisse; quidquid nos meliores beatosque facturum est, aut in aperto aut in proximo posuit.* There follows a list of things we can come to know without much difficulty, such as that we do not need to fear death and that we are part of greater whole – things that the early Stoics would also consider to be part of the 'basic physics' needed for our moral and philosophical development.

Physical study, then, has no other purpose than a moral one, Seneca appears to believe: when he engages himself in a particular topic of physics, he often justifies his doing so by explicating its moral application. In *EM* 58, e.g., he discusses Platonic ontology. Having done so, he admits that Lucilius is right in wondering how he could benefit from this discussion:

> "Now what could be less likely to reform character than the subjects which we have been discussing? And how can I be made a better man by the Ideas of Plato? What can I draw from them that will put a check on my appetites? Perhaps the very thought, that all these things which minister to our senses, which arouse and excite us, are by Plato denied a place among the things that really exist."[324]

The idea that there is moral value in physical studies, at least to some extent, is also expressed in a passage from the *Naturales Quaestiones* that follows on a detailed discussion of lighting:

> "I know what you have wanted for a long time, and what you keenly ask. You say, 'I should rather I did not fear lightning than know about it. So, teach others how lightning bolts occur. I want to shake off the fear of them, not have their nature explained to me.' I follow your call. Some moral ought to be mixed in all things and all conversation."[325]

And again in book 6 of the *NQ*:

> "So much for these explanations, Lucilius, my good friend, concerning the causes of earthquakes; now to those things which pertain to the reassurance of the mind. It is more important for us to be brave than to be learned. But the one does not occur without the other, for strength comes to the mind only from the good arts and the study of nature."[326]

---

[324] *EM* 58.26: *Quid istis, quae modo tractavimus, remotius a reformatione morum? Quomodo meliorem me facere ideae Platonicae possunt? Quid ex istis traham, quod cupiditates meas conprimat? Vel hoc ipsum, quod omnia ista, quae sensibus serviunt, quae nos accendunt et inritant, negat Plato ex his esse, quae vere sint.* Seneca's use of Platonic philosophy for Stoic purposes need not come as a surprise: Chrysippus explicitly condones the use of other schools' opinions for the purpose of moral instruction (*SVF* 3.474). See Tieleman (2007), p. 141 and Tieleman (2003), p. 166-9 for further discussion. See also chapter 1, section 5.

[325] *NQ* 2.59.1-2: *Intellego quid dudum desideres, quid efflagites. Malo, inquis, fulmina non timere quam nosse; itaque alios doce quemadmodum fiant; ego mihi metum illorum excuti volo, non naturam indicari. Sequor quo vocas. Omnibus enim rebus omnibusque sermonibus aliquid salutare miscendum est.*

[326] *NQ* 6.32.1: *Haec, Lucili, virorum optime, quantum ad ipsas causas; illa nunc quae ad confirmationem animorum pertinent. Quos magis refert nostra fortiores fieri quam doctiores. Sed alterum sine altero non fit; non enim aliunde animo venit robur quam a bonis artibus, quam a contemplatione naturae.* The Loeb-translation has 'liberal arts' for *bonis artibus*, but Seneca's denial that these contribute anything to the good life (cf. *EM* 88.2) suggests that he is thinking about philosophical activity: in *EM* 95.8 Seneca call philosophy *quae artem vitae professa est.*

In these passages, then, Seneca considers the study of physics to be useful insofar as it contributes to ethics. He has no doubt that it *does* contribute and that it is something we cannot do without, but he does not appear to value its study for its own sake.

2.2.2 Physics as theology valuable in itself

At other times, however, Seneca seems to believe that doing physics is not merely instrumental to ethics, but a worthwhile activity in its own right. In *NQ* 6.3.4, e.g., after having said that we need to understand earthquakes in order not to fear them,[327] he advises us to fully commit ourselves to this task: "for nothing can be found worthier than a subject to which the mind not only lends itself but spends itself."[328] Seneca then lists various aspects of earthquakes that we should investigate, such as the different ways in which they affect the earth or are accompanied by phenomena such as volcanic eruptions or the appearance of new rivers. Having done so, he once again considers the value of carrying out these investigations:

> "What causes these things [the various effects of earthquakes - MvH] to happen is a subject worth investigating. What, you ask, will make it all worthwhile? To know nature - no reward is greater than this. Although the subject has many features which will be useful, the study of this material has nothing more beautiful in itself than that it involves men in its magnificence and is cultivated not for profit but for its marvellousness."[329]

Here, it seems, the usefulness of the study of earthquakes is secondary to the intrinsic value that "the knowledge of nature" (*nosse naturam*) has. In other words, physics may be instrumental to ethics, but the primary reason for engaging in it is not its practical use, but its exalted character. At the beginning of the first book of the *NQ*, Seneca distinguishes two parts of philosophy, viz. "that part which deals with man and that which deals with the gods."[330] The latter part is, of course, physics (or at least the theological part of physics) and it is contrasted favourably with ethics, i.e. "the part which deals with man", because it is "loftier and more intellectual."[331] Seneca continues as follows:

> "In short, between the two branches of philosophy there is as much difference as there is between man and god. One teaches us what ought to be done on earth; the other what is done in heaven. One dispels our errors and furnishes a light for us to

[327] *NQ* 6.3.4: *Et cum timendi sit causa nescire, non est tanti scire, ne timeas?* This passage is also referred to above.

[328] *NQ* 6.3.4: *Neque enim illo quicquam inveniri dignius potest cui se non tantum commodet, sed impendat.*

[329] *NQ* 6.4.1-2: *Haec ex quibus causis accidant, digna res excuti. Quod, inquis, erit pretium operae? Quo nullum maius est, nosse naturam. Neque enim quicquam habet in se huius materiae tractatio pulchrius, cum multa habeat futura usui, quam quod hominem magnificentia sui detinet nec mercede sed miraculo colitur.*

[330] *NQ* 1.Praef.1: *illam partem quae ad homines et hanc quae ad deos pertinet.*

[331] *NQ* 1.Praef.1: *altior est haec et animosior[.]*

> see through the uncertainties of life; the other rises far above this fog in which we wallow, and, rescuing us from darkness, leads us to the place whence the light shines."[332]

Certain scholars have proposed, on the basis of such passages, that Seneca employs two different models concerning the relative value of ethics and physics and, consequently, the goal or *telos* of man as well.[333] Pierluigi Donini argues that in the majority of his works Seneca sticks to the Stoic doctrine that a man's goal in life, i.e. the highest good he can achieve, is having a fully rational soul that is free from all passions. Donini calls this the 'modello moralistico', and contrasts it with the 'modello teoretico' that he ascribes to Aristotelianizing Middle-Platonists contemporary with Seneca.[334] According to this model, human freedom and unperturbedness do not lie in the extirpation of the passions, but in the "pura attività speculativa, che, dimenticando dietro di sé il corpo, il mondo esterno, le passioni, solleva l'anima in una sfera molto più alta e totalmente estranea a quella della moralità e della prassi."[335]

The theoretical model, Donini thinks, is "assolutamente antistoica", because it implies a "svalutazione della virtù e della moralità", these being merely subordinate "all'accesso all'attività speculativa."[336] Donini believes that in *EM* 58 Seneca introduces this model without affirming it: in 58 Seneca discusses Platonic ontology and however high he values occupying our minds with these enthralling matters, he still considers it as subservient to the (Stoic) goal of moral perfection. In *EM* 65, however, or so Donini argues, this is no longer the case. After Seneca has discussed the Stoic, Peripatetic and Platonic opinion on how many causes there are,[337] he imagines that Lucilius will wonder what good such discussions will do him:

> "What pleasure do you get from wasting your time on these problems, which relieve you of none of your emotions, rout none of your desires?"[338]

Seneca's justification here, Donini argues, is no longer Stoic, but Platonic in kind, since he argues that these topics "elevate and lighten the soul" and that the soul "is in bondage, unless philosophy has come to its assistance and has bid it take fresh courage by contemplating the universe, and has turned it from things earthly to things divine." Our soul, then, "seeks the

---

[332] *NQ* 1.Praef.2: *Denique inter duas interest quantum inter deum et hominem. Altera docet quid in terris agendum sit, altera quid agatur in caelo. Altera errores nostros discutit et lumen admovet quo discernantur ambigua vitae; altera multum supra hanc in qua volutamur caliginem excedit et e tenebris ereptos perducit illo unde lucet.*
[333] Donini (1979), p. 151-242, (1982), p. 190-6.
[334] The terms 'modello moralistico' and 'modello teoretico' are used on p. 199 of Donini (1979); they will from now on be referred to as 'moral model' resp. 'theoretical model'. Similarly Natali (1994), p. 431. See further chapter 1, section 4.4, for an overview of Platonist ideas on the human *telos*.
[335] Donini (1982), p. 191. Cf. Natali (1994), p. 428.
[336] Donini (1982), p. 192. Cf. Natali (1994), p. 433.
[337] See chapter 3, section 2.2 for a discussion of this part of the letter.
[338] *EM* 65.15: *Quid te [...] delectat tempus inter ista conterere, quae tibi nullum affectum eripiunt, nullam cupiditatem abigunt?*

open sky whenever it can, and in the contemplation of the universe finds rest."[339] The sage will dutifully carry out his orders, i.e. live his mortal life as well as possible, but Seneca thinks that there is so much more he can do:

> "Do you forbid me to contemplate the universe? Do you compel me to withdraw from the whole and restrict me to a part? May I not ask what are the beginnings of all things, who moulded the universe, who took the confused and conglomerate mass of sluggish matter, and separated it into its parts? May I not inquire who is the craftsman of this universe, how the mighty bulk was brought under the control of law and order, who gathered the disordered elements and assigned an outward form to elements that lay in one vast shapelessness? Or whence came all the expanse of light? And whether it is fire, or something even brighter than fire?"[340]

Not dealing with these questions is like living "with my head bowed down," Seneca believes, and he thinks he was meant to be more than just "a slave to my body."[341] Occupying himself with, and elevating himself to the level of, such physical and theological issues as he just enumerated is the only way to gain true freedom. As said, Donini supposes the "ideale della *theoria*" that is sketched here by Seneca to be Middle Platonic in kind.[342] He associates it with the *praefatio* of the first book of the *NQ*, which he considers to be the "sviluppo e il compimento del programma enunciato nella lettera 65".[343]

We have already seen that in this *praefatio* Seneca does indeed think highly of the study of physics. In fact, he says that "if I had not been admitted to these [studies of nature] it would not have been worth while to have been born."[344] As in *EM* 65, he states that we should not focus too much on our life as an embodied being that strives for moral perfection:

> "After all, man is a contemptible thing unless he rises above his human concerns. But what greatness do we achieve as long as we struggle with our passions? [...] You have escaped the illnesses of the soul, Lucilius. [...] As yet you have attained nothing. You have escaped many ills, but you have not yet escaped yourself. That special virtue which we seek is magnificent, not because to be free of evil is in itself so

---

[339] *EM* 65.16-17: *atollunt et levant animum [...] in vinclis est, nisi accessit philosophia et illum respirare rerum naturae spectaculo iussit et a terrenis ad divina dimisit [...] quotiens potest, apertum petit et in rerum naturae contemplatione requiescit.*

[340] *EM* 65.19: *Interdicis mihi inspectione rerum naturae, a toto abductum redigis in partem? Ego non quaeram, quae sint initia universorum? Quis rerum formator? Quis omnia in uno mersa et materia inerti convoluta discreverit? Non quaeram, quis sit istius artifex mundi? Qua ratione tanta magnitudo in legem et ordinem venerit? Quis sparsa collegerit, confusa distinxerit, in una deformitate iacentibus faciem diviserit? Unde lux tanta fundatur? Ignis sit, an aliquid igne lucidius?*

[341] *EM* 65.20-21: *capite demisso [...] mancipium [...] mei corporis[.]*

[342] See chapter 1, section 4.4, for the Middle Platonic view on the human *telos* as consisting in intellectual activity and contemplation of the divine.

[343] Donini (1982), p. 193. Cf. Natali (1994), p 433ff.

[344] *NQ* 1.Praef.4: *Nisi ad haec admitterer, non [tanti] fuerat nasci.*

> marvellous but because it unchains the mind, prepares it for the knowledge of heavenly things, and makes it worthy to enter into an association with god."[345]

In short, Donini believes that in *EM* 65 and the *NQ* Seneca no longer holds to the Stoic idea that ethics is the most important part of philosophy and that the perfection of our rationality and the extirpation of the passions is the highest good, but prefers the Middle Platonic idea that ethics is merely a first step towards a worthier life that consists in the withdrawal from earthly affairs, such as the struggle to become morally good, by the engagement in speculative physics and contemplation.[346]

2.2.3 Ethics and physics both important

Donini's proposal has found some support, but many scholars have been critical.[347] In this section, it will be shown that when we take a closer look at the evidence and take the Stoic view as discussed in section 2.1 into account, there is no need to assume that Seneca abandoned that Stoic view for a Middle Platonic one. In chapter 5 we will see that Seneca's depiction of the 'elevation' of the mind by studying or contemplating the universe does have Platonic overtones, but that he uses these to emphasize that we should live according to our divine nature, which is a perfectly Stoic point. It has also been noted that the idea of the study of nature as an elevating and inherently worthwhile pursuit is a philosophical commonplace:[348] Aristotle, of course, famously says at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* that man has a natural craving for knowledge[349] and he also claims that the study of nature gives us "amazing pleasure" (*amêchanous hêdonas*);[350] Cicero, too, even though he is defending Academic scepticism, claims that studying nature is beneficial, and does so in terms that are remarkably similar to those of Seneca:

> "For the study and observation of nature affords a sort of natural pasturage for the spirit and intellect; we are uplifted, we seem to become more exalted, we look down on what is human, and while reflecting upon things above and in the heavens we

---

345 *NQ* 1.Praef.5-6: *O quam contempta res est homo, nisi supra humana surrexerit! Quamdiu cum affectibus colluctamur, quid magnifici facimus? [...] Effugisti vitia animi; [...] nihil adhuc consecutus es; multa effugisti, te nondum. Virtus enim ista quam affectamus magnifica est, non quia per se beatum est malo caruisse, sed quia animum laxat et praeparat ad cognitionem caelestium dignumque efficit qui in consortium deo veniat.*

346 Cf. Natali (1994), p. 435: "Il senso della vita dell'uomo è dunque tutto nelle ricerche teoriche, nella seculazione fisica e metafisica; l'esaltazione della dimensione teoretica della filosofia non potrebbe essere più netta: il *theorein*, il conoscere come puro atteggiamento contemplativo del vero, è il fine, l'unico fine dell'uomo."

347 Natali (1994) and Gauly (2004) support Donini's main thesis; cf. p. 164-190. Setaioli (1988) (p. 505ff.), Mazzoli (1989), p. 1870-1, Chaumartin 1996, p. 189 and Maurach (1981) are critical, as is Limburg (2007).

348 Wlosok (1960), p. 34-40, Limburg (2007), p. 396.

349 Ari. *Metaph.* 1.1, 980a22ff.

350 Ari. *Part. An.* 1.5645a9-10.

> despise this world of our own as small and even tiny. There is delight in the mere investigation of matters at once of supreme magnitude and also of supreme obscurity; while if a notion comes to us that appears to bear a likeness to the truth, the mind is filled with the most humanizing kind of pleasure."[351]

Epicurus in his letter to Herodotus, too, claims that "continuous engagement with science (*phusiologia*) is the main source of my life's tranquillity",[352] and that knowledge is not merely necessary for pleasure, but that gaining knowledge and feeling pleasure go hand in hand.[353] To suspect a specific Middle Platonist influence here, then, seems needlessly restrictive.

Furthermore, Donini's conclusion that there is a major difference in how Seneca values ethics and physics in *EM* 65 and the *NQ* on the one hand, and the rest of his philosophical works on the other, is demonstrably wrong. First, while the *NQ* indeed contain various passages that are indicative of the importance that Seneca attributes to the uninhibited study of physics and theology, they also express the idea that this study is useful for ethics. In the *NQ* 1.Praef.7-8, e.g., Seneca clearly argues that by revelling in the marvellousness of the whole cosmos, we come to see indifferents for what they really are. In two other passages that were already discussed, Seneca defends his dealings with physics by claiming explicitly that understanding natural phenomena benefits our moral well-being.[354] The preface of book 3 of the *NQ* conveys the same view:

> "On this point it will help us to study nature. In the first place we will get away from sordid matters. Second, we will free the mind - and we need one that is sound and great - from the body. Third, the subtlety of thought exercised on the mysteries of nature will be no less successful in dealing with plain problems."[355]

Another passage in the *NQ*, one wherein Seneca defends his lengthy discussion of the peculiarities of hail and snow, also expresses this idea:

> "'Why,' you say, 'do you so laboriously pursue these trivialities by which any person is made more cultured, not more virtuous? You describe how snow is formed when

---

[351] Cic. *Acad.* 2.127: *Est enim animorum ingeniorumque naturale quoddam quasi pabulum consideratio contemplatioque naturae; erigimur, altiores fieri videmur, humana despicimus, cogitantesque supera atque caelestia haec nostra ut exigua et minima contemnimus. Indagatio ipsa rerum cum maximarum tum etiam occutissimarum habet oblectationem; si vero aliquid occurrit quod veri simile videatur, humanissima completur animus voluptate.*

[352] D.L. 10.37, as cited in Long (1997), p. 127. Cf. *KD* 12: "[...] without the study of nature there is no enjoyment of pure pleasure." Cf. Lucr. *DRN* 3.16f., 3.28ff. See Hadot (1995), p. 88, esp. n. 69.

[353] *Gnom. Vat.* 27. Cf. Erler (2002), p. 169.

[354] *NQ* 6.32.1 and 2.59.1-2 see section 2.2.1. Donini (1982), p. 195-6, acknowledges the latter passage as being in accordance with the Stoic moral goal.

[355] *NQ* 3.Praef.18: *Ad hoc proderit nobis inspicere rerum naturam. Primo discedemus a sordidis. Deinde animum ipsum, quo sano magnoque opus est, seducemus a corpore. Deinde in occultis exercitata subtilitas non erit in aperta deterior [...].*

> it matters much more to us to be told by you why snow should not be bought.' [...] What then? Do you judge that this examination of nature contributes nothing to the objective you want? When we investigate how snow is formed and we say that it has properties similar to frost, that there is more air than water in it, do you not think that this is a reproach to people who, while it is a disgrace to buy water, do not even get water for their money but mostly air?"[356]

Throughout the *NQ*, Seneca is concerned to find moral applications for the physical investigations that he is conducting. A recurring idea in the *NQ* is that by gaining a greater understanding of natural phenomena we will become aware of and thus less susceptible to the abuse of these for unnatural and perverted purposes.[357] In *EM* 65, too, such discussions as the one about causes are regarded as topics "by which the mind is calmed," even when they also are worth studying on their own merits.

What emerges from these considerations, however, and this is the second point against the conclusion of Donini *c.s.*, is not merely that Seneca never loses sight of the importance of ethics, but that the contrast between a Stoic moral goal and high valuation of ethics on the one hand, and a Platonic contemplative goal and the primacy of physics on the other, is needlessly restrictive. We have seen that the Stoics do not actually hold to a simple 'ethics over physics' (or *vice versa*) model of philosophy: becoming virtuous involves both the attainment of moral perfection *and* an extensive and deep understanding of ourselves and the cosmos we live in. As we shall see, the same idea can be found in Seneca as well.

There is no doubt that ethics is Seneca's main concern: he is very explicit about it and, as described above, he often tries to justify his discussion of non-ethical topics by pointing out that these topics *do* have a certain moral application. But it would be incorrect to say that he only values these non-ethical topics positively insofar as they have such a moral application. There are many passages indicative of Seneca's firm conviction that the morally good life and the understanding of our cosmos go hand in hand. In *De Otio*, e.g., Seneca explains the traditional Stoic formula of the human *telos*, i.e. to live in accordance with nature,[358] in precisely this sense:

---

[356] *NQ* 4B.13.1-2: *Quid istas, inquis, ineptias, quibus litteratior est quisque, non melior, tam operose persequeris? Quomodo fiant nives dicis, cum multo magis ad nos dici a te pertineatquare emendae non sint nives. [...] Quid porro? Hanc ipsam inspectionem naturae nihil iudicas ad id quod vis conferre? Cum quaerimus quomodo nix fiat et dicimus illam pruinae similem habere naturam, plus illi spiritus quam aquae inesse, non putas exprobari illis, cum emere aquam turpe sit, si ne aquam quidem emunt?*

[357] See e.g. the abuse of mirrors for sexual gratification by one Hostius Quadra, as lambasted by Seneca in *NQ* 1.16.

[358] For this formula in Seneca, cf. *EM* 5.4, 41.9, 45.9, 98.14, 122.19, *Otio* 5.1. 5.8, *Ben.* 4.25.1, *Vita* 8.2.

"We [the Stoics] are fond of saying that the highest good is to live according to nature. Nature has begotten us for both purposes - for contemplation and for action."[359]

This passage is followed by a lengthy digression on the inquisitive nature of man, and his role as a spectator of god's beautiful creation. The digression is similar in tone to the passages in the *NQ* which Donini regards as Platonic in nature; our mind is said to "burst through the ramparts of the sky"[360] and Seneca said that man "was born for inquiring into such matters as these",[361] i.e. such questions as those concerning the nature of matter and the elements. All the same, Seneca concludes the digression by claiming, once again, that *both* ethics and physics are important:

"Consequently I live according to nature if I surrender myself entirely to her, if I become her admirer and worshipper. But nature intended me to do both - to be active and to have leisure for contemplation. And really I do both, since even the contemplative life is not devoid of action."[362]

The same idea is expressed in Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* as well:

"Virtue is divided into two parts – into contemplation of truth, and conduct. Training teaches contemplation, and admonition teaches conduct. [...] Virtue depends partly upon training and partly upon practice; you must learn first, and then strengthen your learning by action. If this be true, not only do the doctrines of wisdom help us, but the precepts also, which check and banish our emotions by a sort of official decree. It is said: 'Philosophy is divided into knowledge and state of

---

[359] *Otio* 5.1: *Solemus dicere summum bonum esse secundum naturam vivere. Natura nos ad utrumque genuit, et contemplationi rerum et actioni.* Cf. Chrysippus' statement in Cic. *ND* 2.37 (cited *supra*, section 2.1) that "man came into existence for the purpose of contemplating and imitating the world." *homo ortus est ad mundum contemplandum et imitandum.* Cf. Inwood (2002), p. 140, who also draws this parallel. In Cic. *Leg.* 1.60-1, too, both moral virtue and contemplation are described as being part of the rational life.

[360] *Otio* 5.6: *Cogitatio nostra caeli munimenta perrumpit[.]* This is not Platonic parlance *per se*: cf. Lucr. *DRN* 1.70-4, where Epicurus is said to "shatter the confining bars of nature's gates (*natura portarum claustra*). Therefore the lively power of his mind prevailed, and forth he marched beyond the flaming walls of the heavens (*flammantia moenia mundi*), as he traversed the immeasurable universe in thought and imagination (*menta animoque*). Cf. 2.1044. See Hadot (1995), p. 243.

[361] *Otio* 5.7: *Ad haec quarerenda natus [...].*

[362] *Otio* 5.8: *Ergo secundum naturam vivo, si totum me illi dedi, si iliius admirator cultorque sum. Natura autem utrumque facere me voluit, et agere et contemplationi vacare. Utrumque facio, quoniam ne contemplatio quidem sine actione est.* Cf. *EM* 41.8-9, where man's purpose in life is described as to live in accordance with nature, which is equated with the perfection of rationality – not in a specifically ethical or contemplative sense, but in general: "Do you ask what this [peculiar property of man] is? It is soul, and reason brought to perfection in the soul. For man is a reasoning animal. Therefore, man's highest good is attained, if he has fulfilled the good for which nature designed him at birth. And what is it which this reason demands of him? The easiest thing in the world: to live in accordance with his own nature."

> mind. For one who has learned and understood what he should do and avoid, is not a wise man until his mind is metamorphosed into the shape of that which he has learned.'"[363]

In *EM* 110, Seneca argues that a lack of knowledge is the cause of fear. Investigating human nature and the cosmos we live in will help us in this matter, but there is more to this investigation than the instrumental value:

> "The light, however, may begin to shine, provided we are willing. But such a result can come about only in one way - if we acquire by knowledge this familiarity with things divine and human, if we not only flood ourselves but steep ourselves therein, if a man reviews the same principles even though he understands them and applies them again and again to himself, if he has investigated what is good, what is evil, and what has falsely been so entitled; and, finally, if he has investigated honour and baseness, and providence. The range of the human intelligence is not confined within these limits; it may also explore outside the universe - its destination and its source, and the ruin towards which all nature hastens so rapidly."[364]

What Seneca expresses here is the idea that moral progress and a better understanding of the cosmos are two aspects of one and the same development within a human being.[365] To demand

---

[363] *EM* 94.45; 47-8ff.: *In duas partes virtus dividitur, in contemplationem veri et actionem. Contemplationem institutio tradit, actionem admonitio. [...] Pars virtutis disciplina constat, pars exercitatione; et discas oportet et quod didicisti agendo confirmes. Quod si est, non tantum scita sapeientiae prosunt, sed etiam praecepta, quae adfectus nostros velut edicto coercent et ablegant. Philosophia, inquit, dividitur in haec, scientiam et habitum animi. Nam qui didicit et facienda ac vitanda percepit, nondum sapiens est, nisi in ea, quae didicit, animus eius transfiguratus est.*

[364] *EM* 110.8-9: *Sed lucescere, si velimus, potest. Uno autem modo potest, si quis hanc humanorum divinorumque notitiam scientia acceperit, si illa se non perfuderit, sed infecerit, si eadem, quamvis sciat, retractaverit et ad se saepe rettulerit, si quaesierit, quae sint bona, quae mala, quibus hoc falso sit nomen adscriptum, si quaesierit de honestis et turpibus, de providentia. Nec intra haec humani ingenii sagacitas sistitur; prospicere et ultra mundum libet, quo feratur, unde surrexerit, in quam exitum tanta rerum velocitas properet.* Seneca calls the study of such topics *contemplatio divina* (110.9).

[365] Cf. *EM* 117.19, where the same idea is expressed: "Even though one takes a fancy to roam, wisdom has large and spacious retreats: we may investigate the nature of the gods, the nourishment of the stars, or all the varied courses of the stars, whether the impulse to motion comes from thence into the minds and bodies of all, and whether even these events which we call fortuitous are fettered by strict laws and nothing in this universe is unforeseen or unregulated in its revolutions. Such topics have nowadays been withdrawn from instruction in morals, but they uplift the mind and raise it to the dimensions of the subject which it discusses." Cf. also *Brev*. 19.1-2: "Do you retire to these quieter, safer, greater things! Think you that it is just the same whether you are concerned in having corn from oversea poured into the granaries, unhurt either by the dishonesty or the neglect of those who transport it, in seeing that it does not become heated and spoiled by collecting moisture and tallies in weight and measure, or whether you enter upon these sacred and lofty studies with the purpose of discovering what substance, what pleasure, what mode of life, what shape god has; what fate awaits your soul; where nature lays us to rest when we are freed from the body; what the principle is that upholds all the heaviest matter in the centre of this world, suspends the light on high, carries fire to the topmost part, summons the stars to their proper

that Seneca must choose between either the (Stoic) instrumental value or the (Middle Platonic) intrinsic value of theoretical investigations is to present him with a false choice. Even in the preface of book 1 of the *NQ,* one of Donini's prime sources for the supposition of the Platonic theoretical model in the *NQ*, Seneca emphasizes how moral and intellectual virtue are two sides of the same coin:

> "The mind possesses the full and complete benefit of its human existence only when it spurns all evil, seeks the lofty and the deep, and enters the innermost secrets of nature."[366]

In the preface of book 3 it is also stated that the most important thing for us humans to achieve is "to have seen the universe in your mind and, no victory is greater than this, to have subdued your vices."[367] There is sufficient evidence, then, that the early Stoics and Seneca agree that that ethics and physics, including theology, are both integral to the full development of human rationality.[368]

3. Concluding remarks

The claims of certain scholars that Seneca sometimes deviates from the Stoic viewpoint on the status of theology and physics have been shown to rest on the mistaken assumptions that (1) the Stoics saw physics as merely subservient to ethics and (2) that Seneca occasionally sees physics as superior to ethics. Proving these assumptions to be wrong has led to a better understanding of Seneca's views, viz. one that does not posit the presence of conflicting models of the human *telos* in his works. Why then, we may ask, are there so many passages that appear to state the primacy of either the one or the other – i.e. why is it that scholars such as Donini think we can discern different valuations of the relative importance of ethics in physics in Seneca's works? The answer to this question is twofold.

First, there is the matter of context: we should not be surprised that in his letters, which have an explicitly stated moral purpose, Seneca emphasizes the importance of the moral part of the perfection of human rationality at the expense of the physical or contemplative part; but even in the letters he is explicit in his claims that ethical *praecepta* need to rest ultimately

---

changes - and other matters, in turn, full of mighty wonders? You really must leave the ground and turn your mind's eye upon these things! Now while the blood is hot, we must enter with brisk step upon the better course. In this kind of life there awaits much that is good to know - the love and practice of the virtues, forgetfulness of the passions, knowledge of living and dying, and a life of deep repose." Cf. *EM* 95.10 and 124.11.

[366] *NQ* 1.Praef.7: *Tunc consummatum habet plenumque bonum sortis humanae cum calcato omni malo petit altum et in interiorem naturae sinum venit.*

[367] *NQ* 3.Praef.10: *animo omne vidisse et, qua maior nulla victoria est, vitia domuisse.*

[368] Cf. Stahl (1964), p. 431: "Die [...] Disziplinen der Philosophie, Physik und Ethik, bewertet [Seneca] in seinem Gesamtwerk prinzipiell gleich, so auch in den N.Qu.: Erkenntnisse der Naturforschung bilden die Grundlage für moralische Anforderungen an den Menschen. Andererseits führt den Menschen hohes sittlichen Verhalten erst zu einer Erkenntnis des Kosmos und damit Gottes[.]"

on theoretical *decreta*. Likewise, his dealings with natural phenomena in the *NQ* naturally bring him to focus more on the intrinsic value of studying these phenomena than on their instrumental value, but he does not ignore or deny the moral utility of such physical and theological inquiries. When such important contextual influences are not sufficiently taken into account, one is in danger of erroneously assuming that Seneca in some works gives preference to a *modello teoretico* and a *modello moralistico* in others. Close study of these works shows that, in all these works, Seneca thinks both contemplation and moral action are indispensable: all that differs is the emphasis.

Secondly, we have to take the subject matter of the theological part of physics into consideration. Like the early Stoics, as we have seen, Seneca believes that while a certain amount of knowledge about the cosmos is needed for and concomitant to our moral development, he also thinks that certain physical topics, such as 'advanced' theology, are only meant for those who have progressed far in their comprehension of Stoic philosophy:

> "And as only the initiated know the more hallowed portion of the rites, so in philosophy the hidden truths are revealed only to those who are members and have been admitted to the sacred rites. But precepts and other such matters are familiar even to the uninitiated."[369]

The characterization of higher physics and theology as mysteries to which one must be initiated is a clear echo of Chrysippus' own views on these topics.[370] For Seneca, as for the early Stoics, it is the object of study that determines the valuation of the study, and the divine object of theology allows for the characterization of it as something sacred or holy.[371] It is easy to mistake this for a judgement that such a study is in fact the one that surpasses all others in importance, but as the evidence shows, Seneca believes it to be one aspect of what it means to become a virtuous and rational being.[372]

---

[369] *EM* 95.64: *Sicut sanctiora sacrorum tantum initiati sciunt, ita in philosophia arcana illa admissis receptisque in sacra ostenduntur; at praecepta et alia eiusmodi profanis quoque nota sunt.* Cf. *NQ* 1.Praef.3: "I, for one, am very grateful to nature, not just when I view it in that aspect which is obvious to everybody but when I have penetrated is mysteries, when I learn what the matter of the universe is, who its author or custodian is, what god is [...]", followed by list of theological questions.
[370] Cf. Plut. *Stoic. Rep.* 1035A-B, reporting that according to Chrysippus, doing theology is like studying arcane knowledge, to which we must be initiated; see also Etym. Magn. s.v. *teletê* (*SVF* 2.1008), and Epiph. *Adv. Her.* 3.2.9. (*SVF* 1.538) for a similar idea of Cleanthes.
[371] See Barnes (1997), p. 22: "One study is nobler than another if it addresses a nobler object; and the object of physics is divine."
[372] Cf. Barnes (1997), p. 22: "studying physics is a part of what it is to be good and happy; doing physics is itself a form of virtuous and felicitous activity – it is part of the repertoire of the Good Man, of the Sage."

Chapter 3
God's nature

1. Introduction

Having established that Seneca believes a proper understanding of god and the cosmos to be indispensable for the good life, but also a worthwhile pursuit in itself, we must now determine what exactly his ideas about god's nature are. In part 2.1 it is shown that for the early Stoics, the most basic fact about god is that he is the active principle that, together with the passive principle matter, constitutes all other things. Positing an active principle operating on matter was not a particularly novel idea, as Plato and Aristotle had preceded the Stoics in doing so.[373] What was new, however, was that the Stoics claimed both these principles to be corporeal. God, they held, is the one corporeal cause that affects matter, thereby creating the cosmos and everything in it.

Seneca, too, as we will see in 2.2, posits these two principles as constitutive of everything else, and emphasizes that of these two, only god is a cause; matter is merely the passive recipient of god's creative and provident working. Plato and Aristotle, he holds, were wrong in positing multiple causes as instrumental to the coming to be of the cosmos, as all these so-called causes are mere aspects of the one true cause, i.e. god. Certain scholars hold that the dualism of god and matter as posited by Seneca is so strong as to be unstoic, and some also argue that Seneca tends to see god as incorporeal. As will become clear, however, there is not much evidence for these two claims (the second of which is discussed in a separate section, 2.3) and much evidence to the contrary, viz. that Seneca subscribes to the Stoic position.

In section 3, we will discuss several other aspects of god: in 3.1 his presence in the cosmos as creative *pneuma* and in 3.2 his being located in the cosmos as primarily in the heavenly bodies and the outer regions of the cosmos. In 3.3, finally, we will discuss the claims of scholars who feel that Seneca often envisions god as transcending the cosmos in a Platonic sense. After an examination of the relevant passages it will be concluded that these claims should be dismissed and that Seneca thinks god to be immanent in the cosmos.

2. Ontology and first principles

2.1 The Stoic position

As was set out earlier,[374] the Stoics posited two principles of which all other things are constituted: that which acts and that which is acted upon. That which is acted upon, also called matter, is wholly passive and tractable, allowing the active principle, which the Stoics identified

---

[373] Cf. Reydams-Schils (1999), p. 41ff. for the Stoic indebtedness to Plato and the Platonist tradition on this point.

[374] See chapter 1, section 3.3.

with god, to interpenetrate it and shape it into definite forms.[375] The Stoics held that only bodies can act or be acted upon,[376] and accordingly they asserted the corporeality of both the active and the passive principle, i.e. god and matter.[377] These two corporeal principles, then, are the ontological basis of all that exists. Since matter is wholly passive and god acts on it, god is also described as the cause in matter.[378] Matter cannot be a cause, the Stoics held, because of its passivity: in order for any body to be a cause, i.e. 'that because of which',[379] it has to *do* something, i.e. to affect another body.[380] In this sense, the Stoics were more strict in their adjudication of something as a cause than Plato and Aristotle, as Hankinson has argued.[381] They did not deny or ignore the fact that, e.g., something is done with a certain goal or purpose, but:

> "for something to be a cause, an *aition*, now implies more than merely that it is an irreducible feature of a complete account or explanation of something, as it was for Aristotle."[382]

Hankinson refers to a passage in Sextus, where it is said that "in general it would appear that in [the dogmatists'] view a cause is that because of whose action an effect comes about."[383] This change in general definition of a cause from 'because of which' (*di ho*)[384] to 'because of whose action' (*di ho energoun*), Michael Frede believes, may well have been engendered by the Stoics' interest in responsibility.[385] As was noted earlier, they sought to explain how the determination

---

[375] D.L. 7.134 (*SVF* 1.85 and 2.300), Sextus Emp. *M* 9.11 (*SVF* 2.301), 9.75-6 (*SVF* 2.311), Alexander *Mixt.* 225, 1-2 (*SVF* 2.310). Cf. *SVF* 2.323a, 2.1108. See Hahm (1977), chapter 2.

[376] Sextus Emp. *PH* 3.38, *M* 9.366.

[377] Cic. *Acad.* 1.39 (*SVF* 1.90), Sextus Emp. *M* 8.263 (*SVF* 2.363), D.L. 7.134 (*SVF* 2.299), Eusebius *Pr. Ev.* 15.14.1 (*SVF* 1.98). On this point the Stoics notably disagreed with Plato and Aristotle, who held matter to be corporeal but the Demiurge and Ideas, or God and the Forms, to be incorporeal.

[378] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.76 (*SVF* 2.311), MA 9.37. Cf. *SVF* 2.306, 308.

[379] Stob. *Ecl.* 1.138, 14 (*SVF* 1.89) and 1.138, 23 (*SVF* 2.336) where this is attributed to Zeno and Chrysippus, respectively. Cf. Aetius 1.11.5 (*SVF* 2.340).

[380] Cf. Frede (2003), p. 189: "The term 'cause' applies only to a body that is actively engaged in some process or responsible for some state." Cf. LS, p. 340: "for the Stoics a cause is a thing which, by its activity, brings about an effect" and Frede (1987), p. 127: "In general it is the Stoics who insist that causes are active, and so it seems to be their influence which has brought about the change in question." Cf. the passage in Sextus *M* 9.75 referred to *supra*, in which god is called "the cause which moves it [matter] and shapes it into various forms." Cf. Stob. *Ecl.* 1.139, 12 (*SVF* 2.338): "The Stoics hold that the first cause is moving (*kinêton*)."

[381] Hankinson (1999), p. 479: "Plato had defined *aition* ('cause') quite generally as 'that because of which' (δι' ὅ) something comes to be' (*Crat.* 413a); and Aristotle's four 'causes' (*aitia*: *Phys.*II.3) include the material from which something is made, its structure, and its purpose, as well as whatever it is which made it." Cf. Sedley (2007), p. 209-10.

[382] Hankinson (1999), p. 479.

[383] Sextus Emp. *PH* 3.14: δόξαι δ' ἂν αἴτιον εἶναι κοινότερον κατ' αὐτοὺς δι' ὃ ἐνεργοῦν γίνεται τὸ ἀποτέλεσμα. Cf. Frede (1987), p. 126.

[384] Which is how Plato defined *aition* at *Crat.* 413a; cf. Hankinson (1999), p. 479f.

[385] Frede (1987), p. 130ff.

of all things by fate could be reconciled with moral responsibility, i.e., how we may rightfully be held responsible for our actions despite the fact that we are fated to perform them.[386] Now, as Frede argues, "for the notion of responsibility to have any content at all that which is responsible must in some sense or other have done something and thus become responsible."[387] It is because of this emphasis on the active role of something in bringing about a certain effect, Frede holds, that the Stoics held that causes must be active.

Despite this additional requirement of being active in order for something to count as a cause, and the subsequent rejection of certain circumstances or aspects of a specific event as causes, the Stoics nevertheless distinguished several kinds of causes to classify different causal relations. Most of these need not be discussed here;[388] what is important here is their determination of the perfect (*autotelês*) or containing (*sunektikon*) cause as what properly or strictly is an active cause.[389] A sustaining cause is responsible for both the existence and the specific nature of something.

> "However, it is above all necessary to remember how we said we were speaking of the 'sustaining cause' – not in its strict sense, but using the appellative loosely. For no one before the Stoics either spoke of or admitted the existence of the 'sustaining cause' in the strict sense. And what have even before our time been spoken of as 'sustaining' have been causes of something's coming about, not of existence."[390]

The most basic causal operation, according to the Stoics, is that of the active principle god on the passive principle matter, which is productive of the four elements.[391] As we have seen, the Stoics also identified god with *pneuma*, the mixture of the active elements, fire and air, that operates on the passive elements, earth and water. [392] This *pneuma* "pervades every object, holds its parts together, and thus provides it with unity and form and becomes the cause of the being of the thing."[393]

As the active principle that operates on matter, then, and as the active *pneuma* that gives each thing its existence and individual characteristics, god may be said to be the perfect

[386] See chapter 1, section 3.3. Cf. Bobzien (1998).
[387] Frede (1987), p. 131.
[388] See Hankinson (1998a), p. 238-67, Hankinson (1999), p. 483-94, Frede (2003), p. 186-92, Frede (1987), p. 138ff., Görler (1987).
[389] Frede (1987), p. 128.
[390] Galen *Syn. Puls.* 9.458, 8-14 (*SVF* 2.356): μεμνῆσθαι μέντοι χρὴ πρὸ πάντων ὅπως ἔφαμεν ὀνομάζειν ἐνίοτε συνεκτικὸν αἴτιον, ὅτι μὴ κυρίως, ἀλλὰ καταχρώμενοι τῇ προσηγορίᾳ. τὸ μὲν γὰρ κυρίως λεγόμενον αἴτιον συνεκτικὸν οὔτ' ὠνόμασέ τις ἄλλος πρὸ τῶν Στωϊκῶν οὔτ' εἶναι συνεχώρησε· τὰ δὲ καὶ πρὸ ἡμῶν οἷον συνεκτικὰ λεγόμενα γενέσεώς τινος, οὐχ ὑπάρξεως αἴτια. (transl. LS).
[391] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.75-6 (*SVF* 2.311). Cf. LS p. 340-1, Frede (2003), p. 183.
[392] See chapter 1, section 3.3.
[393] Frede (1987), p. 145. Cf. Aetius 1.11.5 (*SVF* 2.340).

and containing cause of the whole cosmos,[394] and it is likely that this is what the Stoics have in mind when they say that there is only matter and cause. [395] This conception of god as the cause incorporates the various causes distinguished by Aristotle: in his active role as *pneuma* god is at the same time the moving and the formal cause in all that he creates, but since he is also to be identified with providence,[396] he also embodies the final cause.[397] We now turn to Seneca's views on the principles and the nature of god, and we will find that he explicitly defends this idea, viz. that god is the one active cause which creates and forms the cosmos.

2.2 Seneca's position

When investigating Seneca's conception of the first principles, we find that the topic does not seem to occupy Seneca a great deal, since he hardly ever addresses it as a subject in itself. The only time he does so explicitly is in *EM* 65, where he discusses Stoic, Aristotelian and Platonic aetiology.[398] Seneca here confidently sketches the Stoic position as follows:

> "Our Stoic philosophers, as you know, declare that there are two things in the universe from which all things come into being - namely, cause and matter. Matter lies sluggish, a substance ready for any use, but sure to remain unemployed if no one sets it in motion. Cause, however, by which we mean reason, moulds matter and turns it in whatever direction it will, producing thereby various concrete results."[399]

The context of this passage is a contest that Seneca has made Lucilius the referee of: whose account on the number of causes has the greatest semblance of truth – the Stoic, the Aristotelian, or the Platonic one? The way in which Seneca presents the different accounts has

---

[394] Stob. *Ecl.* 1.31, 13-4 (*SVF* 2.1062), where the Stoics are said to hold that god "cause of all things and that all things are due to him (*di auton panta*)." Similarly, at D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021) it is said that "all things are due to him (*di hon ta panta*); cf. *SVF* 1.85 [2] and [3], 2.1063.

[395] See above; cf. MA 9.37, Epict. *Diss.* 1.14. Cf. Sedley (2007), p. 210: "[T]he underlying causal structure of the Stoic world lies in an entirely passive, causally inert stuff called "matter," imbued by a single, immanent, active, intelligent cause called "god" [...]."

[396] Cic. *ND* 2.58 (*SVF* 1.172), 3.92 (*SVF* 2.1107), cf. *SVF* 1. 1532 = 2.1029, 2.1108.

[397] See Hahm (1977), p. 44: "Obviously, what the Stoics have done is [...] to distribute his four causes between two entities, assigning the material cause to one entity, and the motive, formal and final cause to the other. The Stoic *archai* are these entities, one of which (the active) is more than a simple Aristotelian cause or *archê* and embraces three causes in itself." Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.73-4, where the Stoic spokesman Balbus explains that the Stoics, *pace* the Epicurean criticism in *ND* 1.18, did not see providence as a separate cause, but as a description of god's creative activity. Cf. Sedley (2007), p. 210: "Plato's teleological causal theory is reduced by the Stoics to the action of god on matter."

[398] See Sedley (2005) for a recent discussion of the aetiological accounts in letter 65. See Inwood (2007a) and Scarpat (1970) for a commentary on the whole letter and Inwood (2007b) for a discussion of the sources of the letter.

[399] *EM* 65.2: *Dicunt, ut scis, Stoici nostri duo esse in rerum natura, ex quibus omnia fiant, causam et materiam. Materia iacet iners, res ad omnia parata, cessatura, si nemo moveat. Causa autem, id est ratio, materiam format et quocumque vult versat, ex illa varia opera producit.*

been the subject of much scholarly debate, and I will give a brief summary of the relevant parts of the letter before discussing the various positions that have been defended in modern commentaries on the letter.

Having sketched the Stoic position, Seneca says that the same scheme holds for artefacts, i.e. man-made objects, since "all art is but imitation of nature."[400] A statue, e.g., has bronze as matter and the workman (*opifex*) as cause, and Seneca emphasizes that the Stoics recognize only one *cause*, even though all things consist of two principles.[401] Seneca then introduces Aristotle's account by saying that Aristotle applied the term 'cause' to three factors involved in the creation of an artefact: the matter or material, the workman, and the form which is given to the material. He then adds that Aristotle also recognized a fourth cause, the "purpose of the work as a whole."[402] Seneca then explains that one might accept all these as causes, because they are necessary for the coming to be of an artefact. He then claims that Plato added a fifth cause to the four of Aristotle: the pattern (*exemplar*), i.e. the well-known Platonic Idea or Form.[403] Seneca does not know whether these "patterns of all things" (*exemplaria rerum omnium*)[404] are supposed to exist apart from god or within him,[405] but in any case, they are the imperishable shapes (*figurae*) used by god in creating individual entities. After identifying each of the five causes in both the example of the produced statue and the world as created by god, Seneca asks Lucilius to judge which of the three accounts "seems to you to say

---

[400] *EM* 65.3: *Omnis ars naturae imitatio est.* Cf. Cic. *Leg.* 1.26 (*SVF* 2.1162), MA 11.10.

[401] The similarity to the account in Sextus. Emp. *M* 9.75 is striking. Both use the example of a bronze statue as an illustration of how all things are constituted of passive matter put into shape by an active cause. *EM* 65.3: "A statue has afforded matter which was to undergo treatment at the hands of the artist, and has had an artist who was to give form to the matter. Hence, in the case of the statue, the material was bronze, the cause was the workman (*causa opifex*). And so it goes with all things: they consist of that which is made (*quod fit*), and of the maker (*quod facit*). Sextus Emp. *M* 9.75: "And on account of this just as, when we behold some very beautiful piece of bronze-work, we are anxious to know who the craftsman is, since the material is of itself motionless, so also when we behold the matter of the universe (*tôn holôn hulên*) moving and existing in definite shape and orderly arrangement we shall naturally look for the cause which moves it and shapes it into various forms." The statue-example is also often used by Aristotle – cf. Inwood (2007a), p. 139. The statue-example is further discussed *infra*.

[402] *EM* 65.4. This explicit addition of the final cause to the other three is curious; Inwood (2007a), p. 140, suggests that Seneca might be trying to "create an epistolary atmosphere", but also allows that Seneca is setting the final cause apart as being distinctively Aristotelian, a point first argued by Guida (1981).

[403] Putting Plato *after* Aristotle and having him add a cause to Aristotle's four is, of course, odd. Hankinson (1998a), p. 337, describes it as 'cheerful anachronism". Inwood (2007a), p. 140, claims that the order of presentation is not meant to be historical and that "Plato's doctrines are alleged to include Aristotle's". The integration of Aristotle's ideas into Plato was typical of a certain form of Middle Platonism; see chapter 1, section 4.4; cf. Zambon (2006) p. 568.

[404] *EM* 65.7.

[405] Similar to the the incorporation of Aristotle into Plato, another development of Middle Platonism was that the Ideas (which in the *Timaeus* are external to god) were considered by some Platonists to exist in god's mind. Cf. Inwood (2007a), p. 142, Dillon (1977), p. 158-9, 254-5, 410. See further Bonazzi (2008), p. 244f., Dillon (2008), p. 231 and Sedley (2005), p. 135 n. 45.

what is truest, and not who says what is absolutely true. For to do that is as far beyond our ken as truth itself."[406]

Seneca does not rest his case here, however, but continues by explaining why the accounts of Aristotle and Plato are wrong. He criticizes Aristotle and Plato for not distinguishing between causes and necessary conditions:[407] form, pattern and purpose surely are necessary conditions for the existence of individual entities, but so are time, place and motion,[408] all of which are *not* recognized as causes by Aristotle and Plato.[409] So in this sense they allow too few causes; in another, they allow too many, since all of these factors are merely accessory causes, while "what we are discussing is the general cause."[410] This general cause must be simple (*simplex*),[411] Seneca argues, "inasmuch as matter, too, is simple".[412] Seneca here refers to the idea that if matter were to exist on its own, *per impossibile*,[413] it would be without any qualification or individuality and as such, it would be *simplex*. The cause working on this matter is "creative reason, in other words, god".[414] All the ancillary causes are simply aspects of god:[415] he is the efficient cause who also decides how to form each individual thing and to what purpose[416] – in other words, god is the "simple cause" (*causa simplex*) that Seneca is looking for, since god operates on matter as *one* force, despite the fact that in his doing so one might

---

[406] *EM* 65.10: *[...] quis tibi videatur verissumum dicere, non quis verissimum dicat. Id enim tam supra nos est quam ipsa veritas.* Seneca's views on our epistemological capabilities will be discussed in chapter 7.

[407] Seneca's argument is, perhaps consciously, a reply to Plato's anti-materialistic distinction between cause and necessary condition in *Phaed.* 99a-b (transl. Jowett): "It may be said, indeed, that without bones and muscles and the other parts of the body I cannot execute my purposes. But to say that I do as I do because of them, and that this is the way in which mind acts, and not from the choice of the best, is a very careless and idle mode of speaking. I wonder that they cannot distinguish the cause from the condition, which the many, feeling about in the dark, are always mistaking and misnaming."

[408] See Frede (2003), p. 190: " [...] the Stoics themselves would not have recognized as causes mere contributing factors or necessary conditions, such as time and place."

[409] *EM* 65.11. This joint criticism of the Aristotelian-Platonic position shows that Seneca sees them as one theory that is to be refuted. This might also explain the non-historicity of the accounts that was noted earlier. Cf. Sedley (2005), p. 136, Inwood (2007a), p. 145.

[410] *EM* 65.14: *nos de causa generali quaerimus.* Cf. *NQ* 2.45.2, where god, as fate, is called *causa causarum*, and *Ben.* 4.7.2, where he is called "the first of all the causes on which the others depend." (*prima omnium causa, ex qua ceterae pendent*) Cf. *EM* 88.31f., where Seneca also claims that a *sine qua non* is not by definition a real cause; e.g., we cannot become virtuous if we do not sustain our bodies with food, but food itself does not help us to become virtuous.

[411] Inwood (2007a), p. 145f., correctly observes that "it is clear that behind their notion of cause as something because of which and through whose activity something else occurs, the Stoics also developed a rich and complex theory of causal factors which left them open to the rejoinder that they too posited too many causes. But here Seneca focusses on the central Stoic insight about causation (that a single *active* cause does the work)."

[412] *EM* 65.12.

[413] The Stoics hold that matter is always permeated and shaped in some form by god: the two principles never exist on their own. Cf. Calc. *In Tim.* 294 (*SVF* 1.87 [4]) and 292 (*SVF* 1.88), cf. *SVF* 2.308.

[414] *EM* 65.12: *Ratio [...] faciens, id est deus.*

[415] Except for matter, of course: it has no causative power and it is not part or aspect of god.

[416] Cf. Scarpat (1970), p. 140 and 157. Cf. Hahm (1977), p. 44, also cited above in 2.1, who says that the Stoic active cause incorporated the moving, formal, and final cause of Aristotle.

distinguish his formative power from, say, his purposive action.[417] Seneca ends his argumentation by saying that Plato and Aristotle were also wrong in saying that "the entire cosmos, i.e. the finished work, is a cause",[418] because "there is a great difference between a work and the cause of a work."[419] Seneca concludes the letter with a lengthy justification of the topic he has just discussed. In the chapter on the status of theology we have seen that the study of physics can be useful for ethics, in this case by showing, more or less, that mind rules over matter. Though our soul is trapped in our body, this does not prevent us from living freely and autonomously, or, as Seneca puts it:

> "This freedom will be greatly helped by the contemplation of which we were just speaking. All things are made up of matter and of god; god controls matter, which encompasses him and follows him as its guide and leader. And that which creates, in other words, god, is more powerful and precious than matter, which is acted upon by god. God's place in the universe corresponds to the soul's relation to man. World-matter corresponds to our mortal body; therefore let the lower serve the higher."[420]

Certain scholars have assumed that the explicit assertion of a dualistic ontology in *EM* 65, as illustrated by the passage quoted above, belongs to Platonism rather than Stoicism, and that Seneca abandons Stoic monism, or at least puts the Stoic position into Platonic parlance.[421]

---

[417] As did the early Stoics, see section 2.1.

[418] *EM* 65.14: *[...] totum mundum et consummatum opus causam esse.*

[419] *EM* 65.14: *Multum enim interest inter opus et causam operis.* Cf. Sedley (2005), p. 136 n. 49, and Inwood (2007a), p. 147f. Cf. Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1074C: " [...] nor is the sum of things (*to pan*) cause of anything else or of itself (*hautou*) either, for to produce is not in its nature and production is implied in the conception of cause."

[420] *EM* 65.23-4: *[...] huic libertati multum conferet et illa, de qua modo loquebatur, inspectio. Nempe universa ex materia et ex deo constant. Deus ista temperat, quae circumfusa rectorem secuntur et ducem. Potentius autem ets ac pretiosius, quod facit, quod est deus, quam materia patiens dei. Quem in hoc mundo locum deus obtinet, hunc in homine animus. Quod est illic materia, id in nobis corpus est; serviant ergo deteriora melioribus.*

[421] According to Pohlenz (1948), p. 320f., Seneca emphasizes the contrast between god and matter more than the early Stoics did, but still adheres to Stoic monism. Scarpat (1970), p. 154, also believes Seneca sticks to the "monismo panteistico tradizionale alla Stoa", because the dualism expressed in *EM* 65 is "di tipo stoico" which is explicitly contrasted with Platonic dualism. Wildberger's remark in Wildberger (2006), p. 4, that Scarpat sees "dualismo di tipo stoico" as "einen platonisierenden Dualismus", is unfounded. Stahl (1964), p. 437f., thinks that what Seneca does amounts to a "Übergang von monistischem zu dualistischem Denken" constituting an "Annäherung des römischen Stoikers an Platonische Denkformen." Donini (1979), p. 158, says that in *EM* 65 Seneca has little regard for the fact that the Stoics saw matter and god as *aspects* of a "unica *ousia* originaria" and instead focusses on the differences between them. Natali (1992), p. 505, agrees with Donini. Cf. Donini (1982), p. 191, where he says that in *EM* 65, Seneca's interpretation of Stoic dualism is so "risolutamente dualistica" that "Seneca reinterpreta tale dottrina proiettando su di essa proprio la scissione fondamentale ammessa dai platonici e dagli aristotelici, quella fra sensibile e l'intelligibile: con ciò stesso la fisica stoica è svuotata di ogni senso, e Seneca può prepararsi a fare dell' ironia su tesi classiche collegate dalla scuola appunto a quella

This assumption is unwarranted, however, since the Stoics have always affirmed a basic dualism in the cosmos, as is clear from the following passage in Diogenes Laertius:[422]

> "They [the Stoics] think that there are two principles of the universe, that which acts and that which is acted upon. That which is acted upon is unqualified substance, i.e. matter; that which acts is the reason in it, i.e. god."[423]

God, the active principle, suffuses or interpenetrates matter, which is utterly inert, thereby creating individually existing things like a rock, a horse, or a man. Ontologically speaking, then, the Stoics are dualists. From an aetiological perspective, however, the Stoic world-view can be said to be monistic: there is one cosmos which, in every aspect of its being, is the result of a single active cause, viz. god, and which can even be identified with god.[424]

Seneca is actually well aware of this variety in perspectives that characterize the Stoic position. He argues that the Stoics, while saying that all individually existing things are made up of matter and god, do not take matter to be a cause. In the passage quoted earlier,[425] the two principles are in fact said to be matter and *cause* – a clear indication that Seneca wants to withhold any active role from matter.[426] He explicitly contrasts the Stoic position with that of Aristotle (and Plato), for whom matter *is* a cause:

---

fisica – p. es. la corporeità del bene e l'idea che le virtù siano esseri animati [...]." Zeller (1909), p. 730 n.2, believes that Seneca's distinction of god and matter is perfectly Stoic.

[422] This point was already addressed above in 2.1.

[423] D.L. 7.134 (*SVF* 2.300): δοκεῖ δ' αὐτοῖς ἀρχὰς εἶναι τῶν ὅλων δύο, τὸ ποιοῦν καὶ τὸ πάσχον. τὸ μὲν οὖν πάσχον εἶναι τὴν ἄποιον οὐσίαν τὴν ὕλην, τὸ δὲ ποιοῦν τὸν ἐν αὐτῇ λόγον τὸν θεόν· Cf. Sextus Emp. *M* 9.11, Simpl. *In Ar. Phys.* 25, 15 (*SVF* 2.312).

[424] Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 4-5 for a similar explanation. Cf. D.L. 7.137, Aristocles *ap*. Eusebius *Pr. Ev.* 15.15, p. 817.6 (*SVF* 3.528), Cic. *ND* 1.37, 1.39, Ps.-Philo *De Incorr. Mundi* 222.2 (*SVF* 2.620): See chapter 1, section 3.2.

[425] *EM* 65.2.

[426] Stahl (1964), p. 435, claims that Seneca sees god as the "Schöpfer, der aus sich selbst geschaffen hat, also Hervorbringer, Former und Beleber der Materie [...] der *materiam ipse sibi* erzeugt und gestaltet hat. Er benutzte also keine bereits gegebene Materie und existierte daher früher als diese oder zumindest zu gleicher Zeit mit ihr." Stahl's claim is unconvincing: *NQ* 2.45.2-3 and *NQ* 1.Praef.16, which she cites as support, do not in fact say that god created matter itself. The first passage is about god as the origin of all that lives and about him being identical with the cosmos, and not about matter at all. The second passage (*materiam ipse sibi formet*) is from a list of topics that Seneca considers worthwhile to investigate: one of these is "Does he [god] form matter for himself or does he merely make use of what is already there?" – *materiam ipse sibi formet an data utatur?* This question is not answered, however, and what Seneca says in *EM* 65.2 clearly states that the correct answer is not that god creates matter for himself but that he uses what is there. Cf. Pohlenz (1948), p. 320: "Daß der Geist [die Materie] als Stoff braucht, um die Welt zu gestalten, und sie nicht etwa von sich aus herschafft steht für Seneca wie für seine Schule fest." Cf. D.L. 7.134 (*SVF* 2.299), Stob. *Ecl.* 1.133, 6 (*SVF* 2.317); see Hahm (1977), p. 32, for more references.

> "The Stoics believe in one cause only, - the maker; but Aristotle thinks that the word 'cause' can be used in three ways: 'The first cause', he says, 'is the actual matter, without which nothing can be created.'"[427]

In *EM* 65, then, we can see Seneca doing his best to defend the Stoic position, discussed above (2.1), that in order for something to be a cause, it has to be active, it has to *do* something. Matter, purpose, time, place and so forth: they all might be necessary circumstances for the coming to be of something, but they are *not* real causes, because they are not actively bringing about an effect. Because of his conviction that the Stoics are right on this point, he argues that Plato and Aristotle were wrong in positing causes separate from the efficient cause that is god.

While there is thus no reason to doubt that the Stoic position as described by Seneca fits in with established Stoicism, many scholars have noted that Seneca's terminology and argumentation used in *EM* 65 are probably not of Stoic origin.[428] Wildberger notes that the various terms used to distinguish the ancillary causes from the general cause were put together "*ad hoc*" by Seneca himself, though she does not rule out the possibility of Posidonian influence.[429] She supports this idea by referring to the "logischen Brüche" in Seneca's argumentation, caused by his not distinguishing sharply between "der generellen, abstrakten Ursachen-Lehre, die sämtliche Phänomene und alles Geschehen im Kosmos erklären soll, und der kausalen Analyse eines konkreten, empirisch beobachteten Einzelfalls, des Anfertigens einer Statue." The statue-example, Wildberger argues, is not very useful from the Stoic point of view. The example introduces the notion of a model after which the statue is sculpted, and as a Stoic, Seneca must deny that, on the cosmological level, there are such things as models such as the Platonic Ideas.[430] The introduction of the statue-example does work rather well to illustrate the four Aristotelian causes (and the Platonic 'fifth cause'):[431] it is therefore likely, Wildberger suggests, that Seneca used a non-Stoic source for this letter for his Aristotelian and Platonic

---

[427] *EM* 65.4: *Stoicis placet unam causam esse, id, quod facit. Aristoteles putat causam tribus modis dici: 'Prima', inquit, 'causa est ipsa materia, sine qua nihil potest effici;'*

[428] The Platonic account of the five causes, e.g., is explicated in 65.8 in a list of prepositions: "the material, the agent, the make-up, the model, and the end in view (*id ex quo, id a quo, id in quo, id ad quod, id propter quod*)". This list, says Inwood (2007a), p. 144 "is familiar from doxographical or scholastic texts" and he refers to Dörrie-Baltes (1996), p. 419 for a list of parallels. See also Theiler (1930), p. 15-34, Hankinson (1998b), p. 15, esp. n.68 and Mansfeld (2002), p. 384-92.

[429] Wildberger (2006), p. 40. *EM* 87.31-3 shows that Seneca knew of Posidonius' distinction between a *causa efficiens* and a *causa praecedens*; other terms used by Seneca, such as *causa superveniens*, *pars causae* and *causa adiuvans* cannot be traced back to Posidonius, however, so Wildberger rightly suspends judgement on this issue.

[430] Wildberger (2006), p. 41.

[431] As Todd (1976) shows, the statue-example appears in Aristotle on various occasions, though never to illustrate all four causes. It is used as such in Alexander of Aphrodisias (*De Fato* 167.2-12) and Clement (*Strom.* 8.9.26.2-3), however, and Todd (p. 320) suggests "its origins can perhaps be best understood if we assume that it was originally employed by Peripatetics."

accounts. Wildberger's argument is not very convincing, however: even though the statue-example is a favourite of Aristotle, it is also attributed to the Stoics themselves.[432]

Even so, the curious presentation of the accounts (with Plato 'adding' a fifth cause to Aristotle's four, e.g.) has led to many different suggestions as to the exact source of the Aristotelian and Platonic accounts in *EM* 65: Posidonius,[433] Antiochus,[434] Eudorus,[435] original works by Aristotle and/or Plato,[436] Peripatetic or Academic handbooks or doxographies,[437] or even the Aristotelians and Platonists Seneca claims he discussed the subject of the causes with.[438] The safest supposition would probably be to note with David Sedley that "what we are witnessing is surely the Platonism of the first century AD,"[439] without further trying to pinpoint any single source, as that appears to be a moot point. The relevant point for our discussion here is that Seneca rejects the related Aristotelian and Platonic accounts and explicitly endorses the Stoic one.

2.3 The corporeality of god

The evidence we have found so far suggests that in *EM* 65, Seneca defends an aetiological monism that is fully compatible with the Stoic position. We have also seen that the ontological dualism expressed by Seneca is not in principle foreign to Stoicism either. There have been suggestions, however, that Seneca's dualism is not Stoic, but Platonic in kind. Stoic dualism differs from its Platonic counterpart in various ways, the most important of which arguably is the corporeality of the formative principle, i.e. god.[440] According to Stoic theory,[441] both principles constitutive of this dualistic ontology have to be corporeal, in order for god to be able to interpenetrate and form matter. Seneca does not address this issue in much detail, and a passage from the *De Consolatione ad Helviam* has given rise to the idea that he may sometimes see god as an incorporeal force working on matter:[442]

---

[432] Cf. Sextus Emp. *M* 9.75-6 (*SVF* 2.311), cited above.
[433] Cf. Bickel (1960), Heinemann (1921-8), Norden (1912). See Scarpat (1970), p. 96ff., for criticism on too readily attributing certain passages to Posidonian influence. See also chapter 1, section 1.
[434] Cf. Theiler (1964), p. 37ff., Donini (1979), appendix A, and Gersh (1986), p. 188, though Gersh thinks a handbook is even more likely to be the source.
[435] Dillon (1977), p. 135-7.
[436] Inwood (2007b), p. 165.
[437] Gersh (1986) suggests a handbook like that by Arius Didymus. Rist (1989), p. 2010-11 also opts for Arius.
[438] Inwood (2007b), p. 166. Bickel (1960) suggests that the learned *amicus* who is mentioned in *EM* 58.8 is a liberated slave of Seneca's. As Inwood (2007a) notes on p. 108, this suggestion has found little support, though Scarpat (1970), p. 100, thinks it is a serious possibility.
[439] Sedley (2005), p. 135.
[440] This has in fact been the subject of much discussion in recent literature. See Wildberger (2006), p. 5-7 for a good overview.
[441] See chapter 1, section 3.3.
[442] Cf. Stahl (1964), p. 440: "Der Autor schwankt [...] zwischen einer stofflich-visuellen und einer rein geistigen Auffassung der Gottheit." Donini (1979), p. 158: "Seneca dimentica costantemente un particolare importante, e cioè la corporeità dello stesso principio attivo[.]"

> "Believe me, this was the intention of the great creator of the universe, whoever he may be, whether an omnipotent god, or *incorporeal reason* contriving vast works, or divine spirit pervading all things from the smallest to the greatest with uniform energy, or fate and an unalterable sequence of causes clinging one to the other - this, I say, was his intention, that only the most worthless of our possessions should fall under the control of another."[443]

What is noticeable about the expression *incorporalis ratio* is that it is embedded in a list of possibilities concerning god's exact nature. The context of this list is very important for determining its philosophical importance: Seneca is saying that we can lose nothing that is truly worthwhile, whatever the exact nature of the "great creator of the universe". In other words, the focus of the passage is clearly on comforting his mother, not on propagating or even explaining Seneca's own view of god's nature. Accordingly, it would be unreasonable to infer from this passage that Seneca is supportive of the view that god is incorporeal:[444] it is merely part of a list of possibilities, without any commitment to any of these.[445]

There are no passages where Seneca explicitly confirms god's corporeality.[446] There are several passages, however, that imply that he believes god to be corporeal. In *EM* 89 he discusses the parts of philosophy, and he briefly discusses physics as follows:

> "The natural part of philosophy is twofold: bodily and non-bodily. Each is divided into its own grades of importance, so to speak. The topic concerning bodies deals,

---

[443] *Helv.* 8.3 (my italics): *Id actum est, mihi crede, ab illo, quisquis formator universi fuit, sive ille deus est potens omnium, sive incorporalis ratio ingentium operum artifex, sive divinus spiritus per omnia maxima ac minima aequali intentione diffusus, sive fatum et immutabilis causarum inter se cohaerentium series – id, inquam, actum est, ut in alienum arbitrium nisi vilissima quaeque non caderent.* The first option, an omnipotent god, is too general to ascribe to any particular school; the *incorporalis ratio* that is an *artifex* gives the Middle Platonic view (and probably that of Antiochus, cf. Cic. *Acad.* 1.24-9 and 1.39); the latter two probably reflect two Stoic perspectives on god, viz. as the pneumatic force that suffuses all things and as the cause that determines all that happens.

[444] Bonhöffer (1894), p. 248 n.1, and Hijmans (1973), p. 41-48 already argued convincingly that *incorporalis ratio* does not reflect Seneca's opinion. Dragona-Monachou (1976), p. 184, is thus mistaken in claiming that "[Seneca] also calls God *incorporalem rationem* [...] which is unstoic." Natali (1992), p. 504, exaggerates by claiming that the passage indicates Seneca's doubts as to the immanence of god. Gersh (1986), p. 174, also errs when he says that "[Seneca] comes close to [an eclectic usage of the notion incorporeality] by speaking of God as an incorporeal 'power' or 'reason' operating in the cosmos." With 'power' Gersh refers to *NQ* 7.25.2, where he believes god is called an *incorporalem potentiam*. This passage is not about god, however, but about the soul: incidentally, it does *not* state incorporeality either, but like the passage from *Helv.* 8.3, gives it as a possibility.

[445] Gersh (1986), p. 174, n. 61, also cites Fr. 66 Vottero ("Should I turn to Plato or the Peripatetic Strato, of which the one makes god to be without a body, the other without a mind (*animo*)?" as an "apparent reference to incorporeality"; the incorporeality of god is indeed mentioned, but the context shows that this question is part of a confused man's list of questions of what on earth he should believe to be true. Seneca's point is that he shall prefer neither Plato nor Strato, since god has both body and *and* soul.

[446] See, however, *Brev.* 19.1, where Seneca say that we should study many aspects of god, including "what substance god has" (*quae materia sit dei*), suggesting that god *is* indeed corporeal in nature.

> first, with these two grades: the creative and the created; and the created things are the elements. Now this very topic of the elements, as some writers hold, is integral; as others hold, it is divided into matter, the cause which moves all things, and the elements."[447]

God, then, since he clearly is "the cause which moves all things", belongs to that part of physics that deals with bodies. Similar indirect evidence is found in *EM* 90, in which Seneca traces the origins of philosophy and the arts. He does not agree with Posidonius who believed that the arts were discovered and devised by the sages (*EM* 90.20-33). Wisdom, which is the goal of philosophy, instructs us in more worthy subjects, among which the nature of the gods. After enumerating various other topics wisdom sheds light upon, Seneca says: "Finally, she [wisdom] has turned her attention from the corporeal to the incorporeal", clearly indicating that all of wisdom's subjects mentioned up to this point, including the gods,[448] belong to the corporeal realm.

Further indirect evidence can be found in two letters wherein Seneca discusses various tenets of Stoic philosophy. In *EM* 106 he answers Lucilius' question "whether the good is corporeal" (*bonum an corpus sit*).[449] Seneca says that this is indeed the case:

> "Now the good is active: for it is beneficial; and what is active is corporeal. The good stimulates the mind and, in a way, moulds and embraces that which is essential to the body. The goods of the body are bodily; so therefore must be the goods of the soul. For the soul, too, is corporeal."[450]

Seneca here clearly adheres to the Stoic tenet that only bodies can act or be acted upon, and some lines later he does so explicitly (even though he turns to Lucretius for support):

> "Have you any doubt that whatever can touch is corporeal? 'Nothing but body can touch or be touched, as Lucretius says.' [...] Only a body can control or forcefully affect another body."[451]

---

[447] *EM* 89.16: *Naturalis pars philosophiae in duo scinditur: corporalia et incorporalia. Utraque dividuntur in suos, ut ita dicam, gradus. Corporum locus in hos primum, in ea quae faciunt et quae ex his gignuntur; gignuntur autem elementa. Ipse de elementis locus, ut quidam putant, simplex est, ut quidam, in materiam et causam omnia moventem et elementa dividitur.*
[448] And the soul as well, which answers the question as to the soul's corporeality put forward in *EM* 88.34.
[449] *EM* 106.3.
[450] *EM* 106.4: *Bonum facit: prodest enim. Quod facit, corpus est. Bonum agitat animm et quodammodo format et continet, quae propria sunt corporis. Quae corporis bona sunt, corpora sunt; ergo et quae animi sunt. Nam et hoc corpus est.*
[451] *EM* 106.7-8, 10: *Numquid est dubium, an id, quo quid tangi potest, corpus sit? Tangere enim et tangi nisi corpus nulla potest res, ut ait Lucretius. [...] Quod imperat corpori, corpus est, quod vim corpori adfert, corpus.* See Lucr. *DRN* 1.304. See Inwood (2007), p. 261-72 for an extensive commentary on *EM* 106 and especially Seneca's arguments for the corporeality of the good.

This claim is repeated in *EM* 117, where Seneca deals with the Stoic claim that though a virtue like wisdom is a good, 'being wise' is not. As Seneca explains:

> "The people of our school believe that the good is corporeal, because the good is active, and whatever is active is corporeal. That which is good, is helpful. But, in order to be helpful, it must be active; so, if it is active, it is corporeal. They [the Stoics] declare that wisdom is a good; it therefore follows that one must also call wisdom corporeal. But they do not think that 'being wise' can be rated on the same basis. For it is incorporeal and accessory to something else, in other words, wisdom; hence it is in no respect active or helpful."[452]

Seneca here refers to the Stoic idea of incorporeals. We have seen that the Stoics grant existence to bodies only, since only bodies can act or be acted upon.[453] There are, however, certain other things that on account of their incorporeality cannot be said to exist, but which are nevertheless part of Stoic reality. These so-called incorporeals are divided into four classes: the sayable, void, place, and time.[454] For our present discussion, we will only concern ourselves with the sayable or *lekton*. When someone utters a proposition, we may distinguish between the physical utterance (the vocal sound produced by the speaker) and the meaning or sense of that utterance. According to the Stoics, utterances themselves are corporeal:

> "Also, according to the Stoics, utterance is a body [...] for everything that acts is a body; and utterance acts when it travels from those who utter it to those who hear it."[455]

The meaning or state of affairs conveyed by an utterance, i.e. the sayable, is not itself a body, but something said *about* a body, as Seneca explains:

> "He [a Stoic] says, 'There are bodily natures, such as this human being is, this horse is; they are then accompanied by motions of the mind which express the bodies. These motions have something about them which is distinctive and is abstracted from the bodies. For example, I see Cato walking; sense perception showed this and the mind believed it. What I see is a body and I directed my eyes and my mind to the body. Then I say: "Cato walks."' He says. 'What I am now saying is not a body but something expressible about the body and some people call this an *effatum*,

[452] *EM* 117.2f.: *[..]placet nostris, quod bonum est, corpus esse, quia quod bonum est, facit; quidquid facit, corpus est. Quod bonum est, prodest. Faciat autem aliquid oportet, ut prosit; si facit, corpus est. Sapientiam bonum esse dicunt; sequitur, ut necesse sit illam corporalem quoque dicere. At sapere non putant eiusdem condicionis esse. Incorporale est et accidens alteri, id est sapientiae; itaque nec facit quidquam nec prodest.*
[453] See chapter 1, section 3.3.
[454] Sextus Emp. *M* 10.218.
[455] D.L. 7.55-6: καὶ σῶμα δ᾽ἐστὶν ἡ φωνὴ κατὰ τοὺς Στωικούς, [...] πᾶν γὰρ τὸ ποιοῦν σῶμα ἐστι· ποιεῖ δὲ ἡ φωνὴ προσιοῦσα τοῖς ἀκούουσιν ἀπὸ τῶν φωνούντων. (transl. LS)

> others call it an *enuntiatum*, still others call it a *dictum*. Thus when we say "wisdom" we understand something which is bodily; when we say "is wise" we are talking *about* a body. It makes an enormous difference whether you mention the person or talk *about* the person."[456]

According to the Stoics, then, wisdom is a good because wisdom is a body, i.e., a certain soul being in a certain state. 'Being wise', however, is not a body but something said *about* a body,[457] and therefore cannot be a good. At the beginning of the letter Seneca has already declared that Lucilius' question whether or not Seneca agrees with this view puts Seneca in a difficult position, because "I can neither disagree with my own school without jeopardizing my good relations nor agree with them in clear conscience."[458] Before giving his own opinion on the matter, Seneca gives us an objection to the Stoic view, and the Stoic reply:

> "Furthermore, my school also faces this objection: 'you want to be wise; therefore being wise is something worth choosing; if it is a thing worth choosing, it is a good thing.' My school is forced to twist words and to insert an extra syllable into 'choose', which our language does not recognize. If you permit, I will add it. They say, 'what is good is worth choosing, and what we get when we have achieved the good is choiceworthy. It is not pursued as being good, but it is an adjunct of the good pursued."[459]

With "to twist words and to insert an extra syllable" ('*verba torquere et unam syllabam [...] interponere*') Seneca refers to what is recorded in Stobaeus' anthology:

> "They [the Stoics] say that there is a difference between what is worth choosing and the choiceworthy. All that is good is worth choosing, while all that is beneficial is choiceworthy, insofar as it has (possesses) the good."[460]

---

[456] *EM* 117.13: *Sunt, inquit, naturae corporum, tamquam hic homo est, hic equus. Has deinde sequuntur motus animorum enuntiativi corporum. Hi habent proprium quiddam et a corporibus seductum, tamquam video Catonem ambulantem. Hoc sensus ostendit, animus credidit. Corpus est, quod video, cui et oculos intendi et animum. Dico deinde: Cato ambulat. Non corpus, inquit, est, quod nunc loquor, sed enuntiativum quiddam de corpore, quod alii effatum vocant, alii enuntiatum, alii dictum. Sic cum dicimus sapientiam, coporporale quiddam intellegimus; cum ducimus sapit, de corpore loquimur. Plurimum autem interest, utrum illum dicas an de illo.* (transl. Inwood (2007a))

[457] Cf. *SVF* 1.89.

[458] *EM* 117.1: *ego nec dissentire a nostris salva gratia nec consentire salva conscientia possum.*

[459] *EM* 117.5: *Etiamnunc nostris illud quoque opponitur: Vultis sapere. Ergo expetenda res est sapere. si expetenda res est, bona est. Coguntur nostri verba torquere et unam syllabam expetendo interponere, quam sermo noster inseri non sinit. Ego illam, si pateris, adiungam. Expetendum est, inquiunt, quod bonum est: expetibile, quod nobis contingit, cum bonum consecuti sumus. Non petitur tamquam bonum, sed petito bono accedit.* (transl. Inwood (2007))

[460] Stobaeus *Ecl.* 2.78, 7 (*SVF* 3.89): διαφέρειν δὲ λέγουσι τὸ αἱρετὸν καὶ τὸ αἱρετέον. αἱρετὸν μὲν εἶναι ἀγαθὸν πᾶν, αἱρετέον δὲ ὠφέλημα πᾶν, ὃ θεωρεῖται παρὰ τὸ ἔχειν τὸ ἀγαθόν. Seneca's

This passage clearly shows that Seneca was well-informed when it came to technical, interscholarly debates and must have had a Stoic source ready at hand when writing it. What is also interesting is that Seneca says he does not agree with the Stoics, and thinks that holding on to previous assumptions has forced them to revert to linguistic trickery and take up a counter-intuitive position:[461] 'being wise', he thinks, is obviously something good. In the same manner that the existence of the gods is agreed upon by everyone, it is also generally accepted that both wisdom and 'being wise' are good.[462] But Seneca does not want to rely on the *communis opinio* and comes with the following argument:

> "When something affects a given object, is it outside the object which it affects, or is it inside the object it affects? If it is inside the object it affects, it is as corporeal as the object which it affects. For nothing can affect another object without touching it, and that which touches is corporeal. Nothing can be an attribute without an action, and what acts is a body. If it is outside, it withdraws after having affected the object. And withdrawal means motion. And that which possesses motion, is corporeal."[463]

And again:

> "That which the good man alone can possess, is a good; now 'being wise' is the possession of the good man only; therefore it is a good. The objector replies: 'It is only an accessory of wisdom.' Very well, then, I say, this quality which you call 'being wise' – does it actively produce wisdom, or is it a passive concomitant of wisdom? It is corporeal in either case. For that which is acted upon and that which acts, are alike corporeal; and, if corporeal, each is a good. The only quality which could prevent it from being a good, would be incorporeality."[464]

---

expetendum and *expetibile*, then, translate τὸ αἱρετὸν and τὸ αἱρετέον. For the characterization of the *expetibile* as "adjunct of the good" (*bono accedit*), cf. Sextus Emp. *M* 11.22.7 (*SVF* 3.75).

[461] The previous assumption probably being that the good is 'worth choosing' (*expetendum*, τὸ αἱρετὸν); the reply that 'being wise' is also worth choosing, Seneca thinks, forced the Stoics into the twisting of words Seneca is unhappy with. Cf. *EM* 117.25-33, where Seneca chastises the Stoics for engaging in such morally useless issues like the one at hand. See chapter 1, section 5.

[462] Seneca obviously refers to the Stoic notion of *prolêpsis* or preconception, effectively using it against those same Stoics. Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 27; Inwood (2007), p. 293.

[463] *EM* 117.7: *Quod accidit alicui, utrum extra id, cui accidit, est an in eo, cui accidit? Si in eo est, cui accidit, tam corpus est quam illud, cui accidit. Nihil enim accidere sine tactu potest; quod tangit, corpus est. Nihil accidere sine actu potest; quod agit corpus est. Si extra est, posteaquam acciderat, recessit. Quod recessit, motum habet. Quod motum habet, corpus est.*

[464] *EM* 117.9f.: *Quod nisi bonus non habet,bonum est. Accidens est, inquit, sapientiae. Hoc ergo, quod vocas sapere, utrum facit sapientiam an patitur? Utroque modo corpus est. Nam et quod fit et quod facit, corpus est; si corpus, bonum est. Unum enim illi deerat, quominus bonum esset, quod incorporale erat.*

Much has been written about Seneca's disagreement with his own school's tenets,[465] his possible lack of comprehension of the Stoic theory of incorporeals,[466] and his scorn for those who concern themselves with "bandying empty subtleties in idle and petty discussions", as he remarks further on in the letter.[467] The important point for our current subject, however, is not that Seneca disagrees with an official Stoic view, but that despite this disagreement, he holds to the view that the good must be corporeal. More generally, he repeatedly insists on the Stoic point that, for a thing to be able to affect something else, both the active 'affecter' and passive 'affected' have to be corporeal. Turning back to *EM* 65, where god clearly is "that which acts' (*quod facit*), we may safely assume that Seneca believed god to be corporeal, in order for him to be able to mould and form matter.

3. God's location in and relation to the cosmos

For Seneca, then, like all the earlier Stoics, all things consist of matter and god, both of which are corporeal. Matter is wholly passive, while god is the active cause that operates on this passive matter: this continuous activity of god on matter constitutes first the elements and, from these, the individual entities and thus the cosmos as a whole. In the following sections (3.2.1-3.2.3) we will compare Seneca's views on different aspects of god's relation to this cosmos with those of the early Stoics, and discuss the arguments of those who suspect an influence of Platonism in some of Seneca's ideas.

3.1 God's presence in the cosmos

In the first chapter we have seen that the Stoics envisioned god in his formative aspect as fire or *pneuma* operating on the passive elements, i.e. water and earth, to give each individual thing its peculiar character.[468] The constitution of these individual things takes place according to the so-called 'seminal principles' (*spermatikoi logoi*),[469] "a rational pattern of constructive growth which is both the life of god and the ordered development of all particular things."[470] Seneca subscribes to this view when he speaks of "the force which inheres in all the seeds of things, giving them the power to fashion each thing according to its kind."[471]

---

[465] Cf. Gersh (1986), p. 159-63. Cf. chapter 1, section 1.5. Hijmans (1972) notes that at other places, such as *EM* 90.29, Seneca accepts the *lekta* as incorporeals.
[466] Cf. Cooper (2004), p. 328-9 and Inwood (2007a), p. 294.
[467] *EM* 117.25: *[...] disputatiunculis inanibus subtilitate, vanissimam agitare.* Cf. chapter 1, section 1.5 and Barnes (1997), Cooper (2004) and Inwood (2007), p. 301-5.
[468] Cf. chapter 1, section 3.3.
[469] Aetius 1.7.33 (*SVF* 2.1027), D.L. 7.148 (*SVF* 2.1132).
[470] LS (1987), vol. 1 p. 277.
[471] *EM* 90.29: *vim omnium seminum singula proprie figurantem.* Cf. "seminal power" (*seminum vis*) at *Ben.* 4.8.1; also *Ben.* 1.6.3, where god is called "the ruling principle [...] that gives to things their form." *rector [...] a quo forma rebus datur.* In *Helv.* 8.3, as noted, one of the options that Seneca enumerates seems to be the Stoic position: " [...] divine spirit pervading all things from the smallest to the greatest with uniform energy [....]"*divinus spiritus per omnia maxima ac minima aequali intentione diffusus [...].*

God, then, is present in the cosmos as this formative principle or force in all things: "nothing is void of him, he himself fills all his work."[472] It is because of this omnipresence that we may equate him with nature or even the world (*mundus*) itself. We may call him nature, because "it is he from whom all things are born, and we have life from his breath,"[473] and we are ungrateful if we think that nature, not god, is responsible for all the good things we have received:

> "For what else is nature but god and the divine reason that pervades the whole universe and all its parts? [...] there is no nature without god, nor god without nature, but both are the same thing, they differ only in their function."[474]

We may also call him *mundus*, because "he himself is all that you see, infused throughout his parts, sustaining both himself and his own."[475] In another passage, Seneca argues that we can be as virtuous and happy as god because we are part of god:

> "And why should you not believe that something of a divinity exists in one who is a part of god? All this universe which encompasses us is one, and it is god; we are associates of god; we are his members."[476]

The passages discussed above show that Seneca describes god's exact relation to the cosmos in different ways, since god is both said to be working *in* the cosmos and to *be* the cosmos. For Seneca, it appears, these different descriptions express the same idea: in the second-last passage cited above, god is identified with the world *because* he is "infused throughout his parts". In another passage, god is said to be "the all-embracing world and the ruler of the universe", who "reaches forth into outward things".[477] This passage, too, combines various perspectives on god's relation to the cosmos as he is said both *be* the world and the ruler *of* the world or cosmos; moreover, in the same sentence god is also described as being *in* the world, in terms ("reaches forth into outward things" (*in exteriora tendit*)) that most probably refer to the Stoic notion of how the specific 'tension' (*tonos*) of divine *pneuma* in individual things gives them their peculiar nature.[478] The alternative descriptions of how god and the world are related to each other are also common to Stoic theology, which, as seen, allows for different perspectives

---

[472] *Ben.* 4.8.2: *nihil ab illo vacat, opu suum ipse implet.*
[473] *NQ* 2.45.2: *hic est ex quo nata sunt omnia, cuius spiritu vivimus.* With *ex quo nata sunt*, Seneca tries to give an etymologization of the appellative *natura*. Cf. Chaumartin (1996).
[474] *Ben.* 4.7.1: *Quid enim aliud est natura quam deus et divina ratio toti mundo partibusque qius inserta? [...] nec natura sine deo est nec deus sine natura, sed idem est utrumque, distat officio.*
[475] *NQ* 2.45.3: *ipse enim est quod vides totum, partibus suis inditus, et se sustinens et sua.*
[476] *EM* 92.30: *Quid est autem cur non existimes in eo divini aliquid existere, qui dei pars est? Totum hoc, quo continemur, et unum est et deus; et socii sumus eius et membra.* The idea that we humans are a part of god, or that there is a part of god in all of us, is discussed in the chapter 5, section 2.
[477] *Vita* 8.4: *[...] mundus quoque cuncta complectens rectorque universi deus in exteriora quidem tendit [...].*
[478] *SVF* 2.439-62. See chapter 1, section 3.3.

on god's exact nature.[479] From the ontological point of view, god might be said to be *in* the cosmos (as he is *in* matter as the formative cause); from an aetiological perspective, however, there is only god, since matter is not a cause,[480] and accordingly, god can be seen as *being*, in an important sense, the entire cosmos.

Seneca, then, believes that god is immanent in the cosmos as the formative force, cause, or principle of that cosmos. As such, god is extended throughout the cosmos as a whole, simply because it is impossible for anything to be what it is without god. That does not mean, however, that god is everywhere and in everything present in the same way. There are, of course, the differences in pneumatic tension that explain the differences between individual entities such as a plant, an animal or a human being. The passage in *De Vita Beata* cited above shows, as said, that Seneca is familiar with this Stoic notion, and other passages support this idea as well.[481] The difference in pneumatic tension can probably be equated with a qualitative difference: i.e. god suffuses certain things in the cosmos in other ways, i.e. with a different *tonos*, than other things.[482]

3.2 God's location in the cosmos

There are also differences between the presence of god in the various parts or regions of the cosmos. Specifically, Seneca believes that god resides mainly in the higher regions of the cosmos. All the heavenly bodies, i.e. the sun, moon, planets and stars, are gods, as is explicitly stated in various passages. The planets are called "divine beings" (*divina*);[483] the sun, the moon and the planets are divine, because of their splendour and their regular movement, which is of great benefit to us;[484] the stars, too, by their movement, contribute to the beauty and providence of the whole and are thus divine:

> "For there is no reason why you should suppose that there are only seven wandering stars [i.e. sun, moon, and five planets - MvH], and that all the others are fixed; there are a few whose movements we apprehend, but, farther removed from our sight, are

---

[479] Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.39. See chapter 1, section 3.3.
[480] For the Stoics, as we have seen (2.1), something must have an effect in order to count as a cause.
[481] The notion of 'tension' (*intentio*) is discussed in *NQ* 2.6.2ff., while in *Ira* 1.3.7 the difference between man and animal is explained with reference to the nature of their respective souls. Cf. *EM* 76.9-10, 87.19, 124.9-24. Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 73-5.
[482] Cf. D.L. 7.138-9 (*SVF* 2.634).
[483] *Helv.* 6.8, *NQ* 1.Praef.12, *Vita* 20.5.
[484] *Ben.* 4.23.1-4. Cf. *Ben.* 6.22, where the heavenly bodies are said to have been appointed as guardians of the universe; during the conflagration, "these many gods" (*tot deos*) are destroyed along with the whole diffentiated cosmos (*diakosmêsis*). Cf. *Tranq.* 8.5, where it is claimed that ordinary possessions mean nothing: "Come, turn your eyes upon heaven; you will see the gods quite needy, giving all and having nothing." These gods must be the heavenly bodies.

> countless divinities that go their rounds, and very many of those that our eyes can reach proceed at an imperceptible pace and veil their movements."[485]

In book 7 of the *NQ*, when dealing with the topic of comets, Seneca appears to have doubts as to the exact physical make-up of the heavenly bodies, but not their divine status, when he says that "no one could study anything more magnificent or learn anything more useful than the nature of the stars and planets, whether they are of concentrated flame, which our eyes and the light itself flowing from them and the heat descending from them attests, or whether they are not flaming orbs at all but solid and sort of earthy bodies which slip through fiery tracks and take from them brightness and heat, and are not bright on their own account."[486]

The heavenly bodies as being made up of earth might be thought to be incompatible with their supposed divinity, since earth is one of the passive elements,[487] but in this passage Seneca merely remarks on different ideas on the exact constitution of the heavenly bodies: their magnificence is a given.

It is worthwhile, Seneca holds, to study whether comets are of the same nature as the stars and planets, because comets have much in common with these. If planets are earthy, comets will be, too; conversely, if comets prove to be nothing but pure fire, the planets are likely to be of a fiery nature as well.[488] In the following chapters, Seneca dismisses various theories about comets: the main reason for these dismissals is that he holds that comets show such regularity and constancy that they cannot be satisfactorily explained as atmospheric phenomena, i.e. phenomena taking place in the air.[489] Fiery phenomena in the atmosphere, such as lightning and shooting stars, are always short and unpredictable in duration: "No fires have any duration except in their own element. I refer to those divine fires which the universe maintains as eternal fires because they are parts and works of it."[490] He concludes that comets, because of their long duration and constancy, must be of a fiery nature, and, just as the

---

[485] *Ben.* 4.23.4: *Nec enim est, quod existimes septem sola discurrere, cetera haerere; paucorum motus comprehendimus, innumerabiles vero longiusque a conspectu seducti di eunt redeuntque, et ex his, qui oculos nostros patiuntur, plerique obscuro gradu pergunt et per occultum aguntur.* Cf. *NQ* 7.24.3.

[486] *NQ* 7.1.6: *non aliud quis aut magnificentius quaesierit aut didicerit utilius quam de stellarum siderumque natura, utrum flamma contracta, quod et visus noster affirmat et ipsum ab illis fluens lumen et calor inde descendens, an non sint flammei orbes, sed solida quaedam terrenaque corpora, quae per igneos [tractus] labentia inde splendorem trahant caloremque, non de suo clara.* Cf. Inwood (2002), p. 143-7 for an overview of the Seneca's discussion of various theories on comets. See chapter 7 for Seneca's views on the limits of our knowledge of comets.

[487] Philosophers such as Anaxagoras, who believed that the heavenly bodies were made of earth, did indeed deny that they were divine. Seneca refers to them in *Ben.* 7.31.3 as well: "others call the sun [...] merely a mass of stone or a fortuitous collection of fiery particles – anything rather than a god."

[488] *NQ* 7.2.1.

[489] On this point he explicitly says to disagree with "our Stoics" (*NQ* 7.22: *ego nostris non assentior*).

[490] *NQ* 7.23.2: *Nullis ignibus nisi in suo mora est, illis dico divinis quos habet mundus aeternos, quia partes eius sunt et opera.*

eternally maintained "divine fires" (which surely refers to the planets and stars),[491] are "among the eternal works of nature."[492] He counters various objections to the position that comets are divine things,[493] and even sees them as very special and marvellous occurrences, displaying the beauty of the cosmos:

> "Nature does not often display comets. She has assigned to them a different place, different periods, movements unlike the other heavenly bodies. Also, she wished by means of comets to honour the magnitude of her work. [...] They are not bound and confined to a narrow spot but are let loose and freely cover the region of many heavenly bodies."[494]

This region where the heavenly bodies abide is also divine, Seneca seems to think, because it consists of *aether*, i.e. the most pure form of fire.[495] In the first book of the *NQ*, he discusses coronae that appear around the sun and stars. These coronae, Seneca argues, actually occur in the region of air and not around the heavenly bodies themselves: "in the vicinity of the stars and of the sun nothing of this sort can possibly happen because only tenuous *aether* exists there."[496] This upper region of the cosmos is "pure and without admixtures",[497] and its purity and orderliness set it apart from the other regions, where fiery phenomena such as lightning bolts occur:

> "Yet [the fires such as lightning] do not go; they are carried. Some other force presses them downward, a force which is not in the upper atmosphere, for in that place nothing is compelled by violence, nothing is ruptured, nothing occurs beyond the usual. There exists an order in things, and the fire, which is cleansed and assigned in the guardianship of the universe to the highest regions, circles around the borders of an absolutely beautiful creation. From here it cannot descend. It cannot even be pushed down by external force, because no unstable body has a

[491] Technically, of course, these are not eternal, but only last until the next conflagration (*ekpurôsis*). See the discussion in chapter 5, section 4.2.1.
[492] *NQ* 7.22: *inter aeterna opera naturae.*
[493] See e.g. *NQ* 7.24.1, where comets are called *divina*. See also 7.26.2, where an imaginary objector says that comets, unlike the heavenly bodies, do not have a globular but an elongated shape, and thus cannot be counted among those heavenly bodies. This would indeed be an impediment to their divinity, since Seneca holds to the Stoic idea that the globular shape, being the most perfect, is the shape of divine beings (cf. *EM* 113.22: "a round shape, like that of a god" – *rotundam [...] qualem deo*). Accordingly, Seneca argues that comets *do* in fact have a globular shape, and only appear to be elongated because of the glow that extends from them.
[494] *NQ* 7.27.6: *Cometas non frequenter ostendit, attribuit illis alium locum, alia tempora, dissimiles ceteris motus; voluit et his magnitudinem operis sui colore. [...] non in angustum coniecta et artata, sed dimissa liberius et multarum stellarum amplexa regionem.*
[495] Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.39-41 (*SVF* 2.684 and 1.504). See Furley (1999), especially p. 440-1, for a recent discussion.
[496] *NQ* 1.2.4: *In vicina autem stellarum et solis nihil tale fieri potest, quia illic tenuis aether est.*
[497] *NQ*7.12.7: *superiora pura et sincera sunt [...].*

> place in the upper atmosphere. Elements that are fixed and ordered are not in conflict."[498]

While Seneca does not explicitly call the upper region, or heaven, divine, its description as a guardian that encloses the cosmos[499] and a region of purity, order, and regularity clearly show that this is what he has in mind.[500] Because of these descriptions and the fact that it consists of pure *aether*, it is reasonable to assume that god, insofar as he is the ruling principle of the cosmos,[501] is mainly present in this upper region.

3.3 The immanence of god

Certain scholars have argued that Seneca, when he locates the divine primarily in the heavens and describes god as the "mind of the universe"[502] who rules the cosmos as the soul rules the body,[503] no longer holds to his usual Stoic immanentism and materialism, but tends towards a Middle Platonic view of god as intelligible and incorporeal and transcending the cosmos he has created.[504]

The assumption that Seneca is not consistent with himself on this point might be thought to be supported by a passage from *De Otio*, where he lists several questions, one of which is "whether he [god] encompasses it [the cosmos] without, or pervades the whole of it".[505] At first sight, it appears that Seneca is hesitant on this issue,[506] since it is posed as a question and an answer is not directly forthcoming. The passage at hand, however, is not about matters that Seneca personally is unsure about, but merely lists important questions that a philosopher should engage in. Another question listed is whether the cosmos is eternal or perishable, and we know that Seneca firmly held to the Stoic view that it was in fact perishable.[507] The fact that Seneca lists the question as to god's encompassment or pervasion, then, does not in itself mean that Seneca has real doubts as to the answer.

In support of the idea that Seneca deviates from Stoic theory concerning god's relation to the cosmos, certain passages in the *NQ* are often cited as well. In the preface of the first book Seneca says the following:

---

[498] *NQ* 2.13.3-4: *Non eunt tamen, sed feruntur; aliqua illos potentia deprimit. Quae non est in aethere; nihil enim illic iniuria cogitur, nihil rumpitur, nihil praeter solitum evenit. Ordo rerum est, et expurgatus ignis in custodia mundi summa sortitus horas operis pulcherrimi circumit. Hinc descendere non potest, sed ne ab externo quidem deprimi, quia in aethere nulli incerto corpori locus est; certa et ordinata non pugnant.* Cf. NQ 2.13.1-2: "Nothing analogous to this happens in the case of that pure celestial fire (*igne purissimo*), in which there is nothing that might be pressed down." Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.56.

[499] Cf. *EM* 102.21, where the stars are called *numina* doing their guard duty.

[500] Cf. *NQ* 6.16.2.

[501] Further discussed below, section 3.3.

[502] *NQ*1.Praef.13: *mens universi [...].*

[503] *EM* 65.24.

[504] Stahl (1964), Donini (1979), p. 209-42, Donini (1982), p. 190-6, Gauly (2004), p. 175.

[505] *Otio* 4.2: *utrumne extrinsecus illi circumfusus sit an toti inditus [...].*

[506] So Bonhöffer (1894), p. 249 n.1.

[507] See chapter 4.

> "What is god? The mind of the universe. What is god? All that you see and all that you do not see. [...] In ourselves the better part is the mind, in god there is no part other than the mind. He is entirely reason [...]."[508]

Gisela Stahl argues that the emphasis on god as a purely rational being signals a shift in Seneca's definition of god. No longer is he a pantheistic god that is present throughout the cosmos, but "nur den bedeutendste und beste Teil der Schöpfung,"[509] as Stahl sees affirmed by the following passage from book 7 of the *NQ*:

> "The very one who handles this universe, who established it, who laid the foundations of all that is and placed it around himself, and who is the greater and better part of his work, has escaped our sight; he has to be perceived in thought. [...] the greatest part of the cosmos, god, remains hidden."[510]

These are examples, Stahl argues, of a Platonic conception of the world that "die materialistisch-monistische Konzeption absolut sprengt. [...] Nach platonischem Vorbild sieht der römische Philosoph also die Welt in den erhabenen Bereich des Göttlichen und in die Zone niederen Menschendaseins gespalten. [...] Die *regio caelestis* dagegen als Ursprungsstätte des Geistes[511] und Sitz der *divina* ist ein absolutes *altum*. [...] Seneca entwirft hier in platonischer Bildersprache ein Reich der Transzendenz, das den normalen Bedingungen des Kosmos nicht unterworfen ist wie unzulänglicher Körperlichkeit und damit Vergänglichkeit."[512]

Pierluigi Donini agrees with Stahl that Seneca's description of god as "all that you see and all that you do not see" constitutes a deviation from Stoicism.[513] When Seneca says that "god remains hidden" and "has escaped our sight"[514] he arrives at "una nozione del divino come puramente intelligibile e trascendente il mondo visibile[.]"[515] Likewise, the characterization of

---

[508] *NQ*1.Praef.13-4: *Quid est deus? Mens universi. Quid est deus? Quod vides totum et quod non vides totum. [...] Nostri melior pars animus est, in illo nulla pars extra animum est. Totus est ratio[...].*

[509] Stahl (1964), p. 437.

[510] *NQ* 7.30.3-4: *ipse qui ista tractat, qui condidit, qui totum hoc f[und]avit deditque circa se, maiorque est pars sui operis ac melior, effugit oculos; cogitatione visendus est. [...] maxima pars mundi, deus, lateat.* Stahl also refers to *EM* 65.24, where she discerns a strong dualism between god and the world.

[511] On the heavens as the origin of the human soul, see chapter 5, section 4.

[512] Stahl (1964), p. 438f. Cf. p. 440, where Stahl says that the definition of *divina* as "bloßen *ratio*-Prinzips" constitutes a break with Stoic dogma.

[513] Donini (1979), p. 211. On p. 201, n. 7 he criticizes Oltramare for equating this passage to *NQ* 2.45.3 where god is said to be "all that you see" (*hoc quod vides totum*) and concluding that Seneca "n'a certainement pas voulu attribuer à Dieu une existence transcendente" (Oltramare (1929), p. 93, n. 5).

[514] *NQ* 1.Praef.13-4; see *supra*.

[515] Donini (1979) p. 210. Similarly Natali (1992), p. 505. Cf. Donini (1982), p. 194: "Sopratutto nelle prefazioni premesse as alcuni dei libri, sopratutto in quella che precede il primo libro, affiora l'ipotesi di

god as "the greater and better part of his work"[516] points to a "bipartizione platonico-aristotelica fra mondo visibile e cosmo intelligibile [...] Il dio del settimo libro è dunque molto simile al supremo noeton del medio-platonico Alcinoo o dell'aristotelico Alessandro."[517] Donini agrees with Stahl that this bipartition or strong dualism is also found *EM* 65.24, where god is separated from matter as being "better" (*melior*) and "more precious" (*pretiosius*). The emergence of this intelligible and transcendent god in the *NQ*, Donini argues, is accompanied by a hierarchical view of the cosmos, in which the higher regions show more order, harmony and regularity than the lower ones. The lower, terrestrial region is not wholly devoid of order and natural laws, but the idea of god as an immanent principle of this order and regularity has been replaced by a view in which god is the "artefice e garante ultima dell'ordine della natura visibile come il demiurgio dei platonici."[518]

Donini's conclusions are shared by Gauly (2004), who says that "Doninis These, nat. 1 pr. zeige eine Hierarchie des Kosmos, in der ein intelligibler Gott der Natur übergeordnet sei, trifft also das Richtige."[519] Gersh (1986) recognizes both transcendent and immanent images of god in Seneca's works: "in those passages which distinguished God in some way from the world as its mind, its reason, and so on [i.e. the passages from the first and seventh book of the *NQ* as cited above and discussed by Stahl and Donini - MvH], the dominant aspect is transcendence; whereas in those texts which identified God with the world by saying, for example, that he is all things, it is the immanent aspect which dominates." Gersh does not explicitly answer his own question whether "the Stoic notion of divinity is being gradually replaced by a Platonic conception; whether materialistic monism is being replaced by a dualism of spiritual and material,"[520] but he does seem to think it is, when he says that Seneca speaks "of god as an incorporeal 'power' or 'reason' operating in the cosmos."[521]

The scholars discussed above all share the opinion that Seneca, to a greater or lesser extent (and mostly, but not exclusively, in the *NQ*), turns away from the Stoic notion of an immanent, corporeal and both perceptible and intelligible[522] god and towards a Platonic view of god as an incorporeal and thus merely intelligible being transcending the cosmos he created. Earlier it was shown that there is no evidence for the incorporeality of god in Seneca's works and some

---

una divinità completamente trascendente e completamente immateriale, soltanto intelligibile e puramente intellettuale come il principio divino dei platonici e degli aristotelici[.]

[516] *NQ* 7.30.3; see *supra*.

[517] Donini (1979), p. 211.

[518] Donini (1982), p. 194.

[519] Gauly (2004), p. 175, n. 172. On p. 165 he speaks of Seneca's definition of god "die dem Begriff eines transzendenten Gottes zumindest nahe kommt."

[520] Gersh (1986), p. 170.

[521] Gersh (1986), p. 174, referring to *incorporalis ratio* in *Helv* 8.3 and *incorporalem potentiam* in *NQ* 7.25.2.

[522] Depending on the perspective chosen: god as identical to the cosmos would be perceptible, god as *in* the cosmos intelligible, cf. section 3.1 above. See below for these different perspectives in Seneca.

substantial evidence to the contrary.[523] In the following it will be argued that there are no cogent reasons to assume that he endorses a transcendent view of god, either, because the passages cited in evidence can be better explained within a Stoic context. [524]

Starting off with the passages submitted by Gersh, it was shown earlier that *Helv.* 8.3 does *not* say that god is incorporeal and that *NQ* 7.25.2 is a passage about the human soul and not about god.[525] Turning to the passages from the *NQ*, the context shows that there is no need to assume that these indicate a turn towards the transcendence of god. The passage where Seneca remarks that god is "all that you see and all that you do not see"[526] continues as follows:

> "In short, only if he alone is all things, if he maintains his own work both from within and without, is he given due credit for his magnitude; nothing of greater magnitude than that can be contemplated."[527]

Taken in its entirety, then, the passage is not about god as an intelligible being transcending the cosmos, but about god's omnipresence and supreme power. It was established earlier that Seneca affirms both that god *is* the cosmos and that he is *in* the cosmos.[528] The same is expressed here: insofar as god *is* the cosmos, he is all we can see, but as the formative power *in* all things around us, he is also all we do *not* see.[529] These different aspects of god were prevalent in early Stoicism as well, as was shown above. Something similar can be said about the passage in the seventh book of the *NQ*, where god is characterized as "the greater and better part of his work", who "has escaped our sight; he has to be perceived in thought. [...] the greatest part of the cosmos, god, remains hidden."[530] This passage does not claim that god is an intelligible being that transcends his creation; he is said to be a part of the cosmos, albeit the

---

[523] See section 2.3 above.

[524] Cf. Bonhöffer (1894), p. 247: ""Sowohl die Identität Gottes mit der Welt als auch seine Erhabenheit über dieselbe hat er so deutlich wie kein anderer Stoiker ausgesprochen [...]." Bonhöffer believes that both the immanent and transcendent views find support in Seneca's works. Seneca himself is hesitant about god's nature, Bonhöffer believes, but what he says does not constitute an "Abweichung von der stoischen Grundanschauung." (p. 248 n.1) Bovis (1948), p. 167ff. holds that despite appearances, Seneca sees god as immanent in the cosmos; passages such as *NQ* 7.30.3, he believes (p. 168), "ne brisent pas l'unité d'une inspiration immanentiste."

[525] Gersh makes the same mistake on p. 167. As said in section 2.3 this passage does not state the incorporeality of the soul either, but merely gives it as a possibility.

[526] *NQ* 1.Praef.13: *Quod vides totum et quod non vides totum.*

[527] *NQ* 1.Praef.13: *Sic demum magnitudo illi sua redditur, qua nihil maius cogitari potest, si solus est omnia, si opus suum et intra et extra tenet.* This last remark (*si opus suum et intra et extra tenet*) refers to the Stoic idea, which Seneca shares, that god is present in the cosmos as a whole, but mostly in the upper regions of it, i.e. in the aether (and thus *extra* all other things in the cosmos). This point is further discussed *infra*. See also chapter 1, section 3.3.

[528] See section 3.1. Cf. *EM* 90.35, where Seneca berates Epicurus for placing the gods outside the cosmos (*extra mundum*).

[529] Cf. Burton (1909), p. 364: "There is no room in Seneca' conception for the notion of transcendence. God is literally the all of existence - the universe, seen and unseen."

[530] *NQ* 7.30.3-4: *maiorque [...] pars sui operis ac melior [...] effugit oculos; cogitatione visendus est. [...] maxima pars mundi, deus, lateat.*

best part and one that is merely intelligible. The context of the passage is the topic of comets, the difficulty of which is likened to the difficulty of knowing god – the main idea here is not that god can only be "perceived by thought" because he transcends the cosmos, but that there are certain aspects of god that cannot readily be perceived by the senses but must be grasped by the mind.[531] That Seneca does not base his distinction between those things we can see and those we can only grasp with the mind on a form of Platonic dualism, is affirmed by a passage from the second book of the *NQ*, where he says "the cosmos includes all things which are, or can be, within our knowledge."[532] Anything we do know, then, either by the senses or with the mind only (such as certain aspects of god), is part of the cosmos and not to be sought beyond or transcending that cosmos.[533] What these aspects of god are in the passage from book 7 is clear from how god is described, viz. as "the very one who handles this universe, who established it, who laid the foundations of all that is and placed it around himself, and who is the greater and better part of his work",[534] in other words, god as the formative principle working *in* the cosmos.[535]

When Seneca describes a kind of dualism between the cosmos and god as the ruler of that cosmos, he is not overstepping Stoic bounds, either. In *EM* 65.24 god is distinguished from matter as the 'better' or 'worthier' ruling principle, comparable to the human soul as distinguished from the body. In the preface of book 1 of the *NQ* it is said that he is "the mind of the universe" and that while "in ourselves the better part is the mind, in god there is no part other than the mind. He is entirely reason[.]"[536] The suggestion of Stahl and Donini that Seneca in such passages, by focusing on god's aloofness on the basis of his supreme rationality, deviates from Stoicism is misleading, since it is well-attested that the early Stoics could characterize god as the supremely rational[537] and fiery[538] mind of the cosmos as well, a mind which has the world as his body.[539] When Seneca in a certain context defines god as a rational

---

[531] See chapter 2 for the Stoic idea, shared by Seneca, that certain theological issues are difficult to grasp and should only be tackled by advanced students. Seneca's ideas about human epistemological capabilities concerning the divine are discussed in chapter 7. This passage in particular is deatl with in section 4.5 of chapter 7.

[532] *NQ* 2.3.1: *Omnia quae in notitiam nostram cadunt aut cadere possunt mundus complectitur.*

[533] Cf. Inwood (2002), p. 151: "There is nothing, then, which a human being can know which is not part of the cosmos – we have, clearly, an important explicit assertion of naturalism; this is welcome, since the repeated emphasis in the *Natural Questions* on the fact that there are things which he senses cannot grasp or that can only be grasped by reason might lead one to suspect the influence of a quasi-Platonic dualism. But the existence of things graspable only by reason is compatible with Stoic monism, just as much as the distinction in value between earthly and celestial realms." See further below.

[534] *NQ* 7.30.3: *Ipse qui ista tractat, qui condidit, qui totum hoc fundavit deditque circa se, maiorque est pars sui operis ac melior [...].*

[535] See chapter 1, section 3.3.

[536] *NQ* 1.Praef.14: *Nostri melior pars animus est, in illo nulla pars extra animum est. Totus est ratio [...].*

[537] See chapter 1, section 3.3. Cf. Cic. *Acad.* 2.126 (*SVF* 1.154 [4]).

[538] Aetius 1.7.23 (*SVF* 1.157), Servius *In Verg. Aen.* 6.27 (*SVF* 2.1031).

[539] Lact. *Div. Inst.* 7.3 (*SVF* 2.1041). Cf. *SVF* 2.1026. In *SVF* 3.33 (Diogenes of Babylon) Diogenes is said to have held that god is in the cosmos in the same way our soul is in us. As we will see in chapter 5, Seneca does not believe the human soul to be transcendent either, nor capable of it. Cf. Setaioli (2007), p. 338.

principle, then, we should not conclude, *pace* Stahl, that Seneca "konsequent aus der stoischen Dogmatik ausbrech[t]".[540] A further look at the opinions of the early Stoics on god's nature shows Stahl to be wrong on another issue as well. Stahl believes that Seneca is deviating from Stoicism by rigorously separating the terrestrial and the divine realm from one another: "Die *regio caelestis* (1.Praef.13) dagegen als [...] Sitz der *divina* (1.Praef.12) ist ein absolutes *altum*."[541] As shown above, however, Seneca locates the "Sitz der *divina*" mainly in the upper regions of the cosmos, and thus not in any transcendent realm that is in an absolute sense separated from that cosmos.[542]

What is more, when he locates god, as the ruling and rational principle of the cosmos, mainly in those upper regions of the cosmos, Seneca is in full agreement with early Stoicism. The evidence for the early Stoics on this topic is substantial. Like Seneca, they held the heavenly bodies to be gods;[543] they also held that the upper region of the cosmos consisted of *aether*[544] and that god, even though he is immanent in the cosmos as a whole,[545] resides mainly in, or can be equated with, this divine *aether*,[546] especially insofar as he is the mind or ruling principle of the cosmos.[547] Like Seneca in *EM* 65.24, the Stoics draw the parallel between god as the ruling principle of the cosmos and the ruling principle of the human soul as occupying a particular place in the body, viz. the heart. It is safe to conclude, then, that Seneca's emphasis

---

540 Stahl (1964), p. 440. See Zeller (1909), p. 738ff.: "So folgt er [Seneca - MvH] auch der stoischen Lehre vom Verhältnis Gottes und der Welt: Gott ist nicht bloß die Vernunft der Welt, sondern die Welt selbst, das Ganze sichtbaren wie der unsichtbaren Dinge. Weit stärker hebt aber Seneca allerdings die sittliche und geistige Seite der stoischen Gottesidee hervor, und dementsprechend stellt er die Wirksamkeit der Gottheit in der Welt mit Vorliebe unter den Begriff der Vorsehung, die Einrichtung der Welt unter den teleologischen Gesichtspunkt. [...] Viel zu weit jedoch geht es, wenn behauptet worden ist, Seneca habe die stoische Gottesidee verlassen und dadurch auch der Moral eine neue Richtung gegeben: während für den echten Stoicismus Gott und Materie dem Wesen nach eins seien, erscheinen sie bei Seneca wesentlich verschieden, Gott sei ihm das unkörperliche Wesen, das durch seinen freien Willen die Welt gebildet habe, es sei nicht mehr der stoische, sondern der platonische Gott, den er habe." Cf. Pohlenz (1948), p. 320f.: "Es bedeutet für Seneca keinen Widerspruch, wenn er gelegentlich Gott nur als 'den wichtigsten Teil der Welt' bezeichnet. Dann will er die Geistesnatur Gottes im Gegensatz zur Materie hervorheben. [...] an der monistischen Grundlage des Weltbildes rüttelt er sowenig wie an der Immanenz der Gottheit."

541 Stahl (1964), p. 439.

542 Even in the passage Stahl refers to, *NQ* 1.Praef.12, it is clear that the divine truly has the heavens as its abode and not, as Stahl (1964), p. 439 suggests, merely as "metaphorischer Ort".

543 Explicitly so in Cic. *ND* 2.39 (*SVF* 2.684), Stob. *Ecl.* 1.185, 6 (*SVF* 2.527), 1.213, 15-17 and 1.219, 12-13 (*SVF* 1.120) affirm that the Stoics held the heavenly bodies to be endowed with intelligence . Cf. *SVF* 1.121. In Cic. *ND* 1.36 (*SVF* 1.165) and 1.37 (*SVF* 1.530) it is said that Zeno and Cleanthes, respectively, attribute a divine force to them. In Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1075D (*SVF* 1.510) and Philo *Aet. Mun.* 47 (*SVF* 2.613) it is said that the Stoics think that the heavenly bodies are gods.

544 D.L. 7.137 (2.580), Achilles Tat. *Isag. in Arat.* 129E (*SVF* 1.115), Stob. *Ecl.* 1.185, 2-3 (*SVF* 2.527).

545 D.L. 7.148 (*SVF* 1.163 and 2.1022).

546 Cic. *ND* 1.36 (*SVF* 1.154), 1.37 (SVF 1.530) and 1.39 (*SVF* 2.1077), D.L. 7.138 (*SVF* 2.634). Cf. Rist (1969), p. 207ff.

547 Cic. *Acad.* 2.126 (*SVF* 1.154 [4]), Aetius 1.7.23 (1.157), D.L. 7.139 (*SVF* 2.644): Cleanthes held that the sun, not the *aether*, was the prime abode of the divine. Cf. Pohlenz (1948), p. 95f.

on god's rational nature and his supreme position in the cosmos does not go beyond what the early Stoics said and is not indicative of any tendency to see god as transcending the cosmos.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that, despite the arguments of various scholars for an alleged divergence of Seneca from Stoic doctrines, Seneca actually holds to or even explicitly defends those doctrines. Like the early Stoics, he sees god and matter as the constitutive and corporeal principles of all things, and believes that god is to be regarded as the one cause of all that is. As creative *pneuma*, god gives each thing its individual character, be it a tree or a horse or a man; as such, he is present throughout the cosmos, but not everywhere in the same way. Seneca follows the early Stoics here in holding that god is mostly present in the heavenly bodies and the upper regions of the cosmos, which consists of pure divine *aether*. By locating god primarily in the heavens and characterizing him as the supremely rational mind of the cosmos, Seneca has given some scholars the impression of tending towards a conception of god as transcending the cosmos as a purely intelligible being; the evidence, however, does not warrant this conclusion, as Seneca's views actually fit those of the early Stoics.

Chapter 4
Conflagration and deluge

1. Introduction

An important and distinctive dogma of Stoic theology is that the cosmos will periodically be consumed by fire in the so-called conflagration (*ekpurôsis*), and reconstituted anew by god. Even though not all Stoics accepted this dogma, most did, and as we will see, Seneca accepts it as well – but that is not all he has to say on the topic of worldwide destruction. If it were all, there would not be much reason to devote an entire chapter to this topic. As it is, Seneca affirms not only the conflagration, but also introduces the periodic drowning of the whole world in a huge deluge. Such a recurrent destruction by immense floods does not seem to have a Stoic antecedent, which raises the question where Seneca got this notion. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the deluge not only is absent from Stoic theory, but actually incompatible with it, because the dramatic and moral overtones in Seneca's description of it allegedly are at variance with the Stoic commitment to providence.

In this chapter we will determine the merits of this claim by closely examining the relevant passages in Seneca on the conflagration and the deluge and comparing them to the Stoic position. It will be argued that, although the deluge does not have a Stoic pedigree, its occurrence as suggested by Seneca is not inconsistent with the Stoic world view either; the moral and dramatic character of Seneca's description, moreover, can be satisfactorily explained without having to accept that Seneca here suspends his belief in the cosmos as a providentially run place.

2. The Stoics and Seneca on the conflagration

In the section on Stoic theology we have seen that because of his fiery nature, god will ultimately 'consume' the matter of all individually existing entities and use this matter for himself.[548] During this total conflagration (*ekpurôsis*) there is only divine or creative fire or *pneuma*, i.e. god mingled with matter - there are no more individual entities, i.e. no differentiated cosmos (*diakosmêsis*).[549] At some point god will create this cosmos anew: the fiery substance that is god first is turned into hot air, then condenses into moisture, after which the four standard elements are formed out of this moisture by god, who is now present as the seminal principle (*spermatikos logos*) within this 'seminal fluid'.[550] Finally, all the other things, i.e. the individual entities, are formed out of these elements. This cycle of creation and destruction of the differentiated cosmos repeats itself without end, and the differentiated

---

[548] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1052C, Cic. *ND* 2.118.
[549] Alternately translated as 'world order'.
[550] D.L. 7.136 (*SVF* 1.102 [2]), Stobaeus *Ecl.* 1.129.1-130.20 (*SVF* 2.413); cf. *SVF* 1.98.

cosmos will always be the same in each cycle, since it is the best cosmos god can create.[551] As indicated, the notion of periodical conflagrations and creations was doubted or even rejected by later Stoics, notably Panaetius.[552] Seneca, however, does not have any doubts about the continuous cycle of destruction and recreation of the cosmos, as is clear from various passages. In *EM* 71 he claims that we need not fear change, i.e. death or misfortune, because all things are subject to change:

> "Those things you see moving above us [i.e. the heavenly bodies], and that seemingly most solid of things to which we cling and on which we are set [i.e. the earth], will be scattered and will cease to exist."[553]

In *EM* 74.10 Seneca seems to contradict this when he says that human existence is short compared to the "eternity of the cosmos as a whole" (*mundi totius aevo*). He does not claim that the differentiated cosmos is eternal, however,[554] but that there will always be *some* combination of matter and god, whether it is a differentiated cosmos or just divine fire, as is shown in a passage from *EM* 58.

> "The cosmos, too, immortal and enduring as it is, changes and never remains the same. For though it has within itself all that it has had, it has it in a different way than before; it keeps changing its arrangement."[555]

In these two passages Seneca uses *mundus* to refer to this whole of god and matter, which is eternal, whereas elsewhere he also uses it to refer to the differentiated cosmos (see *infra*), which is finite in time. We have evidence that Seneca's use of *mundus* parallels a distinction the early Stoics made between two senses of 'cosmos' (κόσμος):

---

[551] Cf. Eusebius, *Pr. Ev.* 15.19.1-2 (*SVF* 2.599). The absolute identity of all *diakosmêseis* is thought to be the standard Stoic position: Nemesius, 309.5-311.2 (*SVF* 2.625), Alex. Aphr. *In Ar. An Pr.*180, 33-6. Some sources report other interpretations of what the Stoics meant when they said that the cosmos will always be created the same. One of these other interpretations is that insignificant peculiarities, such as someone having moles on his face or not, might vary from cycle to cycle: Alex. Aphr. *In Ar. An Pr.* 181, 25-31 (*SVF* 2.624), Origen, *Contra Cels.* 5.20; see Long (2006), p. 274-80 for a discussion.

[552] Philo, *Aet. Mundi* 76-7, Cic. *ND* 2.118 (*SVF* 2.593). See chapter 1, section 3.3.

[553] *EM* 71.13: *Quaecumque supra nos vides currere, et haec, quibus inmixti atque inpositi sumus veluti solidissimis carpentur ac desinent.* Cf. *Ad Polyb.* 1.1-2, where Seneca says it is folly to deplore our mortality when even the world itself will perish.

[554] This was the view of Plato (as Seneca recognizes in *EM* 58.27-30) and Aristotle.

[555] *EM* 58.24: *mundus quoque, aeterna res et invicta, mutatur nec idem manet. Quamvis enim omnia in se habeat, quae habuit, aliter habet quam habuit: ordinem mutat.* The destruction of the differentiated cosmos would then be nothing but another *ordo*. Cf. *EM* 71.13: "Whatever is will cease to be, and yet it will not perish, but will be dispersed (*resolvetur*)." Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 2.1.18, 3.24.10. Cf. Ari. *Cael.* 1.10, where Aristotle discusses different possibilities as to the temporal origin and end of the cosmos. One of these is that the cosmos is alternately combined and dissolved, which Aristotle says "is no different from making the world everlasting, merely changing its shape." (280a12f., transl. Long (2006))

> "The whole cosmos [...] with all its parts they call god; and this cosmos is one and finite, and a living being, and eternal and god. [...] This is why they say that the cosmos in the first sense is eternal, but that *qua* differentiated cosmos it is generated and subject to substantial change according to the infinite periods that have been and are still to come."[556]

Returning to the passage from *EM* 71, we see that the emphasis is on the fact *that* the differentiated cosmos as a whole will eventually be destroyed (*carpentur ac desinent*) – *how* exactly this will happen is not elaborated upon. In another passage, however, we find that Seneca sticks to the standard Stoic idea that all things will be consumed by fire, after which a new cosmos will be created out of the moisture that is the result of the fire's subsiding.

> "[We Stoics] say that it is fire which takes possession of the cosmos and changes all things into itself; it becomes feeble, fades, and sinks, and when fire is extinguished nothing is left in nature except moisture, in which lies the hope of the cosmos to come. Thus fire is the end of the cosmos, moisture the beginning."[557]

The cyclical recurrence of this destruction and creation is affirmed by Seneca when he says that "the world renews itself over and over within the bounds of time."[558]
The Stoics, as we have seen, could describe the conflagration as the absorption of all things by fire, i.e. as a physical process that occurs in accordance with certain natural conditions:

> "The argument of Zeno of Citium, who states that the 'all' will be subject to conflagration: 'Everything which burns and has something to burn will burn it completely; now the sun is a fire and will it not burn what it has?' From this he concluded, as he supposed, that the 'all' will be subject to conflagration."[559]

The Stoics also sought to make clear, *pace* Plato and Aristotle, that the destruction of this cosmos is not a bad thing, because it is not merely part of a physical process, but an integral part of god's providential plan:

---

[556] Ar. Did. fr. 29 Diels (*SVF* 2.528): Ὅλον δὲ τὸν κόσμον [...] ἕνα μόνον εἶναί φασι καὶ πεπερασμένον καὶ ζῷον καὶ ἀΐδιον καὶ θεόν. διὸ κατὰ μὲν τὴν προτέραν ἀπόδοσιν ἀΐδιον τὸν κόσμον εἶναί φασι, κατὰ δὲ τὴν διακόσμησιν γενητὸν καὶ μεταβλητὸν κατὰ περιόδους ἀπείρους γεγονυίας τε καὶ ἐσομένας. The same distinction is referred to in D.L. 7.137-8. Cf. Algra (2004), p. 184-5.

[557] *NQ* 3.12.1-2: *Dicimus enim ignem esse qui occupet mundum et in se cuncta convertat; hunc evanidum languentemque considere et nihil relinqui aliud in rerum natura igne restincto quam umorem; in hoc futuri mundi spem latere. Ita ignis exitus mundi est, umor primordium.* Cf. *NQ* 6.32.4, *Ben.* 6.22.

[558] *Marc.* 21.2: *[mundus] se intra huius spatium toties remetiatur*. Cf. *EM* 36.10.

[559] Alex. Lycopolis *De Plac. Man.* 19.2-4: τὸν Ζήνωνος τοῦ Κιτιέως [...] λόγον, ὃς τὸ πᾶν ἐκπυρωθήσεται λέγων· πᾶν τὸ καῖον ἔχον ὅτι καύσῃ ὅλον καύσει· καὶ ὁ ἥλιος πῦρ ἐστιν καὶ ὃ ἔχει οὐ καύσει; ἐξ οὗ συνήγετο, ὡς ᾤετο, τὸ πᾶν ἐκπυρωθήσεσθαι. This text is not in the *SVF* – see further Horst/Mansfeld (1974), especially p. 74.

> "Chrysippus asserts that Zeus and the cosmos are like a man, and providence is like the soul: so that when the conflagration comes, Zeus, being the only imperishable one among the gods, withdraws into providence, whereupon both, having come together, continue to occupy the single substance of the aether."[560]

The conflagration is thus also the final phase (in this particular world-cycle) in the development of god himself. Seneca elaborates on this idea by saying that during the conflagration, god is by himself and only occupied with himself:

> "It will be like the life of Jupiter, who, amid the dissolution of the world, when the gods are confounded together and nature rests for a space from her work, can retire into himself and give himself over to his own thoughts."[561]

In this sense the Stoic god resembles the Aristotelian self-contemplating *nous* or Unmoved Mover,[562] the difference being that the former, as the passage from Plutarch cited above shows, remains united with matter and can still be identified as providence.[563]

There can be little doubt, then, that Seneca understood and endorsed the Stoic theory of the conflagration. As a consequence, it may come as something of a surprise that in book 3 of the *Naturales Quaestiones* he gives a lengthy and dramatic description of how the world will be swallowed up in a giant deluge. Before turning to the questions of the origins of this idea and whether it fits in with Stoic cosmology, we will take a brief look at Seneca's account.

---

560 Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1077E (*SVF* 2.1064, see also 1067A (*SVF* 2.606)): λέγει γοῦν Χρύσιππος ἐοικέναι τῷ μὲν ἀνθρώπῳ τὸν Δία καὶ τὸν κόσμον τῇ δὲ ψυχῇ τὴν πρόνοιαν· ὅταν οὖν ἡ ἐκπύρωσις γένηται, μόνον ἄφθαρτον ὄντα τὸν Δία τῶν θεῶν ἀναχωρεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν πρόνοιαν, εἶθ᾽ ὁμοῦ γενομένους ἐπὶ μιᾶς τῆς τοῦ αἰθέρος οὐσίας διατελεῖν ἀμφοτέρους. Plutarch thinks that Chrysippus' words here contradict the Stoic doctrine that two individual entities cannot occupy the same portion of matter. Long (2006), p. 270, shows that Plutarch is wrong, because Chrysippus means that God and providence are one and the same at the time of the conflagration. Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.73-4, where the Stoic Balbus says that providence is not a separate cause, but an aspect of god. Incidentally, "aether" here refers to the Stoic "aether", the purest form of fire, not the quintessence of Aristotle; cf. D.L. 7.137. See further chapter 1, section 3.3.

561 *EM* 9.16: *Qualis est Iovis, cum resoluto mundo et dis in unum confusis paulisper cessante natura adquiescit sibi cogitationibus suis traditus.* Cf. Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.13.4-7: "Why, if being alone is enough to make one forlorn, you will have to say that even Zeus himself is forlorn at the conflagration, and bewails himself: 'Wretched me! I have neither Hera, nor Athena, nor Apollo, nor, in a word, brother, or son, or grandson, or kinsman.' There are even those who say that this is what he does when left alone at the conflagration; [...] Zeus communes with himself, and is at peace with himself, and contemplates the character of his governance (*ennoiei tên dioikêsin tên heautou*), and occupies himself with ideas appropriate to himself (*epinoiais prepousais heautôi*)."

562 Cf. Long (1986), p. 155, n. 2.

563 Mansfeld (1979), p. 178: "the Unmoved Mover, being only the separately existing, unextended Form that is the remote final cause of order in the universe, is definitely not to be identified with Providence, whereas Chrysippus' god, being extended and forever remaining united with matter, takes care of it both during total unification at ἐκπύρωσις and, in innumerable ways, when it is organized within the created world."

3. The flood in Naturales Quaestiones 3

Book 3 of the *NQ* deals with terrestrial waters, such as rivers and seas: Seneca discusses various theories concerning, e.g., the different aspects and peculiarities of water and the origins of rivers. Concerning this last issue, Seneca thinks that the transformation of the four elements into each other is the best answer as to why rivers keep flowing and do not dry out: water is one of the elements and "whatever is derived from an element cannot become deficient":[564] in fact, water is so potent as to be the source of life in the newly created differentiated cosmos after the fire that has burnt up all things has subsided for lack of fuel.[565] But water is not merely productive of or beneficial to life. In 26.8 he discusses the self-purifying ability that flowing water has - rivers and seas wash away any filth that tries to settle in them. This subject, Seneca says, reminds him to consider "how a great part of the earth will be covered over by water when the fated day of the deluge comes."[566] Mankind is vulnerable to even slight changes, and "when that destined time comes, the fates put into motion many causes at the same time."[567] There follows a lengthy and vivid description of how torrential rains, overflowing rivers, rising seas and melting snows overflow the whole world, hills and mountains included, except for the highest peaks, on which some surviving humans seek refuge (27.4-12): "Only on the highest ranges of mountains are there shallows. To these heights men have fled with children and wives, driving their cattle before them."[568] Seneca then quotes several passages from Ovid's description of a destructive flood in the *Metamorphoses*, approving of some, but critical of others which are not serious enough for the grave subject at hand.

After this short intermezzo, he turns to the question as to how destructive the deluge will be: according to Seneca, when it is decided "that the human race is to be changed" (28.2), the rains and floods will be limitless and the earth as a whole will be submerged, including "those safe little refuge-places of men" (28.4), which were earlier described as safe havens. The sea normally rises and subsides within certain limits, but now is "freed from its laws [and] advances without limit."[569] The ultimate cause of this breaking of laws is god, who decides when a deluge or conflagration is in order: "Both will occur when it seems best to god for the old things to be ended and better things to begin."[570] In apparent contradiction with *NQ* 3.13.1, where moisture is called the *spem futuri mundi*, water is now called, like fire, an agent of both creation and destruction. Seneca then turns to specific causes of the deluge. He refers to a theory of the Babylonian astronomer Berosos,[571] according to which massive floods and fires

---

[564] *NQ* 3.12.3: *quod ab illo proficiscitur non posse deficere.*

[565] *NQ* 3.12.1-2: See section 2 *supra* for the exact text.

[566] *NQ* 3.27.1: *cum fatalis dies diluvii venerit, quemadmodum magna pars terrarum undis obruatur;*

[567] *NQ* 3.27.3: *cum affuerit illa necessitas temporis, multas simul fata causas movent.*

[568] *NQ* 3.27.11: *Tantum in summis montium iugis vada sunt; in ea excelsissima cum liberis coniugibusque fugerunt actis ante se gregibus.*

[569] *NQ* 3.28.7: *solutus legibus sine modo fertur.*

[570] *NQ* 3.28.7: *Utrumque fit, cum deo visum ordiri meliora, vetera finiri.*

[571] Cf. *Pauly RE*, vol. III, col. 309-16; Vitruvius has some biographical details in *De architectura* 9.2.1; 9.2.6.

alternately, and in accordance with various arrangements of the heavenly bodies, destroy everything on earth (but Berosos probably did not believe the earth itself would be destroyed). Seneca also considers other causes, because he thinks something as big as a deluge cannot have a single cause.[572] The ultimate cause, however, is that which "we Stoics" also consider to be the cause of the conflagration:

> "there is incorporated in [the world] from its beginning to its end everything it must do or undergo.[573]

All the other causes (rain, tides, earthquakes) are merely carrying out the "decrees of nature" (*naturae constituta*).[574] The earth itself is a major contributor, because, as Seneca has remarked earlier,[575] the element earth naturally changes into water. At present, the elements are finely balanced: any increase in the amount of water will immediately lead to floodings somewhere on earth. There follows another dramatic description of how the whole world will be covered in water and how "a single day will bury the human race."[576] Since the deluge was planned for from the beginning of the earth and the waters that will effect it are all around us and beneath us, Seneca concludes in chapter 3.30 that "there will be no long delay in the destruction."[577] But the deluge is not the end: after the destruction of the human race, the waters will finally recede and "every living creature will be created anew and the earth will be given men ignorant of sin, and born under better auspices."[578] The periodicity that Seneca sees in all things is borne out in the somewhat downhearted consideration at the very end of the book:

> "But their innocence, too, will not last, except as long as they are new. Vice quickly creeps in. Virtue is difficult to find; it needs a director and guide. Vices can be learned even without a teacher."[579]

The status of Seneca's description of the deluge *vis-à-vis* Stoic philosophy has been the subject of much scholarly discussion.[580] This discussion centres on several aspects of Seneca's account: the apparent juxtaposition of the deluge and the conflagration as destructive agents, the moral element that Seneca seems to attach to the deluge, and the dramatic or even grim character of the account.

---

[572] See Inwood (2002), p. 130ff. for a discussion of the various causes.
[573] *NQ* 3.29.2: *ab initio eius usque ad exitum quicquid facere quicquid pati debeat, inclusum est.*
[574] *NQ* 3.29.4.
[575] *NQ* 3.10.1.
[576] *NQ* 3.29.9: *unus humanum genus condet dies.*
[577] *NQ* 3.30.5: *Nec longa erit mora exitii.*
[578] *NQ* 3.30.8: *Omne ex integro animal generabitur dabiturque terris homo inscius scelerum et melioribus auspiciis natus.*
[579] *NQ* 3.30.8: *Sed illis quoque innocentia non durabit, nisi dum novi sunt. Cito nequitia subrepit. Virtus difficilis inventu est, rectorem ducemque desiderat; etiam sine magistro vitia discuntur.*
[580] Levy (1928), Waiblinger (1977), Mansfeld (1979), Donini (1979), p. 256-61, Mader (1983), Gross (1989), Gauly (2004), Limburg (2007).

4. The juxtaposition of conflagration and deluge

As noted above, Seneca at *NQ* 3.13.1 adheres to the standard Stoic theory that each differentiated cosmos ends in fire and starts from moist, whereas at 3.28.7 he contradicts this when he says that water is just as much of a destructive force as fire is. When god decides that the world must be renewed, he need not necessarily opt for fire as the destructive agent: "the sea is sent against us from above, like raging fire, when another form of destruction is decided upon."[581] In another passage, Seneca also mentions floods and fire as destructive agents, but they are now presented as preceding the destruction of the same differentiated cosmos:

> "[Age] will cover with floods the face of the inhabited world, and, deluging the earth, will kill every living creature, and with vast fires it will scorch and burn all mortal things. And when the time shall come for the world to destroy itself in order that it may begin its life anew, these things will destroy themselves by their own power, and stars will clash with stars, and all the fiery matter of the world that now shines in orderly array will blaze up in a common conflagration."[582]

There is no evidence in our sources on the early Stoics on the notion of alternate destructions of the world by fire and water, or the cooperation of the two elements in bringing about the end of the world – the sources that do attribute it to Stoicism are either late or suspect, suggesting that it may be a late development in Stoicism, and even one that Seneca might have been instrumental in initiating.[583] The only name that Seneca mentions when he juxtaposes fire

---

[581] *NQ* 3.28.7: *sic in nos mare emittitur desuper, ut fervor ignisque cum aliud genus exitii placuit.* Cf. *NQ* 3.Praef.5, where Seneca expresses his dislike of grand stories about famous people: "It is much better to celebrate the works of the gods than the robberies of Philip, or of an Alexander, or of others who were no less famous for the destruction of the human race (*exitio gentium*) than a flood (*inundatio*) that inundated every plain or a conflagration that burned up the majority of living creatures."

[582] *Ad Marc.* 26.6: *Vetustas* [...] *inundationibus quicquid habitatur obducet necabitque omne animal orbe submerso et ignibus vastis torrebit incendetque mortalia. Et cum tempus advenerit, quo se mundus renovaturus extinguat, viribus ista se suis caedent et sidera sideribus incurrent et omni flagrante materia uno igni quicquid nunc ex disposito lucet ardebit.* Cf. *EM* 71.15.

[583] Cf. Mansfeld (1979), p. 147, n. 52: "No destruction of the universe by water is known to be valid for Early Stoic cosmology". Mansfeld rejects Von Arnim's attribution of Origenes' text at *SVF* 2.1174 to Chrysippus as 'not sufficiently grounded', and claims the scholium on Lucan (Commenta Lucani Lib. VII 813, pp. 252 Usener (*SVF* 2.608)), which says that the Stoics claim that *kataklusmoi* (floods) will precede the conflagration, is a late report. Dio Chrysostomos *Or.* 36.47-9 is also late, cf. Mansfeld (1983), p. 219. Gross (1989),p, 146, agrees with Mansfeld that "[e]ine Sintflut als einzige Ursache eines Weltuntergangs [...] nicht der orthodoxen stoischen Lehre vom Weltbrand [entspricht]", but on p. 142 refers to *SVF* 2.1174 and 2.608 when he says that "[m]anche Stoiker lehrten, daß beim Weltuntergang zuerst eine Sintflut und dann der Weltbrand stattfinde." Cf. Gauly (2004), p. 239: "Eine [...] Theorie über eine zyklisch wiederkehrende Flut ist für die alte Stoa nicht nur nicht belegt, sie ist auch nicht denkbar, weil die systemwidrig wäre." Caduff (1986), p. 153 n. 44, hints that Stoics earlier than Diogenes of Babylon (maybe Chrysippus or even Cleanthes) might have been influenced by deluge scenarios, but gives no further evidence. Strabo (2.3.6 = Pos. EK Fr. 49) reports that Posidonius believed that certain parts of the earth might be suddenly inundated: nothing is said about the earth as a whole, however, and the passage itself might be corrupted (see commentary to Pos. EK Fr. 49).

and water as alternating destructive agents is that of Berosos. The idea has a long pedigree, however, since we find it already in Plato[584] and Aristotle,[585] and it also occurs in other philosophical works that Seneca probably knew.[586] It is also a literary *topos*, as is apparent from Seneca's reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[587]

As far as we are able to determine, the floods and fires in the sources mentioned above are, unlike the Stoic conflagration, not all-destructive. They wipe out the majority of all living beings, leaving only (in the case of humans) small groups of survivors that will eventually repopulate the earth and rediscover all the arts and crafts that were lost.[588] In Seneca's account, the scope of the destruction caused by the deluge is bigger than this: all living beings, humans included, are destroyed. In several passages, Seneca also appears to claim that the deluge will destroy even the world itself. We have already seen that in 3.28.7, Seneca equates the deluge to the Stoic conflagration in its capacity to bring about the "renewal of the world" (*res novae mundo*), and in 3.27.2 he says that all things are easy for nature, "especially when she rushes to destroy herself."[589] The difficulty with 3.28.7 is that the exact meaning of *mundus* is unclear: it could mean the whole cosmos, or just the inhabited world; [590] similarly, when Seneca says that during the deluge "winter will hold strange months, summer will be prohibited, and all the stars that dry up the earth will have their heat repressed and will cease"[591] it is not clear whether the stars (probably referring to the sun and moon) merely cease to dry up the earth or that *compresso ardore* hints at their own destruction. Other passages, at any rate, indicate that the deluge is *less* destructive than the Stoic conflagration. According to these passages, the earth itself is not destroyed by the deluge, it is just wholly submerged; after all human life has been

---

[584] Plato *Tim.* 22c-e, *Laws* 677a.

[585] *Met.* 1.14, 352a28ff. Cf. Philo *Aet. Mundi* 1.146-50, where Philo, drawing from a Peripatetic source (cf. McDiarmid (1940)), or maybe Plato's *Timaeus* itself (cf. Runia (1986)), argues against the Stoic view that the world is mortal.

[586] Cic. *Somn. Scip.* 23 (= *Rep.* 6.23), Lucr. *De Rerum Natura* 5.380ff., Manilius *Astron.* 4.831-33. At the beginning of his account, Seneca mentions Papirius Fabianus, a rhetorician and philosopher, whose *Naturalium Causarum Libri* may have been a source for the theory of the deluge. Cf. Griffin (1972), p. 16.

[587] In Ovid, too, god (Zeus) has the option of using either water or fire to bring about the destruction: cf. *Metam.* 1.253-61.

[588] Plato *Tim.* 23a, Philo *Aet. Mundi* 1.149.

[589] *NQ* 3.27.2: *utique ubi in finem sui properat.*

[590] See the discussion in section 2 on the ambiguity of the terms *mundus* and κόσμος. Depending on the interpretation of *mundus* in *res novae mundo*, Seneca either means that the differentiated cosmos (*diakosmêsis*) itself is replaced by another, or that there is a major rearrangement within one and the same differentiated cosmos. A similar dilemma presents itself in *NQ* 3.27.3, where Seneca claims that many causes will contribute to the deluge, and in support says that *neque [...] sine concussione mundi tanta mutatio est*: in the Loeb, this is translated as "such a great change does not occur without a shattering (*concussione*) of the universe (*mundi*)." One might also interpret this passage, however, as picking out earthquakes (*concussione mundi*) as an example of the many causes involved in such a great change. This is supported by a passage in *NQ* 3.29.4, where earthquakes are said to contribute to the deluge and 6.2.9, where Seneca refers to an earthquake with *orbe concusso*. Cf. Hutchinson (1993), p. 128.

[591] *NQ* 3.29.8: *tenebit alienos menses hiems, aestas prohibebitur, et quodcumque terras sidus exiccat compresso ardore cessabit.*

extinguished, "again the earth will absorb the waters."[592] The passage from the *De Consolatione ad Marciam* quoted above concurs with this: the *inundationes*, like the *ignes vastes*, drown and burn all living beings, but they do not destroy the earth itself: that only happens afterwards, "when the time has come for the world to destroy itself in order that it may begin its life anew" (*cum tempus advenerit, quo se mundus renovaturus extinguat*). [593]

It is impossible to come to definite conclusions here; Limburg (2007) seems to be right in noting that the confusion is largely due to Seneca's attempt to integrate the account of the deluge into the Stoic theory of the conflagration.[594] The idea of a recurring deluge, as we have seen, does not itself have a Stoic origin, but had been a well-known topic in both philosophy and literature for a long time; as such, "the depiction of the destruction of the world by a flood must have seemed to Seneca a fitting ending for the book."[595] But even so, Seneca wants to keep his account within Stoic bounds by likening the deluge to the conflagration. It is important to note that both times Seneca explicitly does so, it is in respect of their being part of the divine plan of this world.[596] Because of these efforts to make the deluge consistent with Stoic philosophy by equating it to a familiar and crucially important element of this theory, Seneca may at times have attributed other aspects of the conflagration to the deluge as well, such as its all-destructiveness.[597]

5. Moral aspects of the deluge

Seneca's account of the deluge is often considered to have moral overtones that are absent from the standard Stoic account of the conflagration. The conflagration is not a better or worse state than the world order it brings to an end; [598] it is simply part of the natural development of

---

[592] *NQ* 3.30.7: *iterum aquas terra sorbebit.* Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 57, and especially n. 344. Also, right at the beginning of the account (3.27.1), where Seneca explains his shift from the characteristics of water to the deluge, he says that "the greater part" (*magna pars*) of the earth will be covered over by water. See section 3.

[593] *Marc.* 26.6. Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 152.

[594] Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 154.

[595] Limburg (2007), p. 154. The exact function and status of the 'moral' epilogues to the different books of the *NQ* cannot be studied here; Limburg's study, p. 423, concludes that "from a literary point of view [the] prefaces and epilogues [...] place the work in a greater context."

[596] *NQ* 3.28.7; 3.29.2.

[597] Though literary considerations may also have played their part – see *infra* on Seneca's account as an emulation of Ovid's description of the deluge.

[598] Mansfeld (1979) argues that the conflagration is in fact the best possible state the cosmos can be in and that the differentiated cosmos only comes into existence when, and because, god runs out of combustible material. Long (2006), originally written in 1985, argues against this position, as does Wildberger (2006), n. 313. Cf. Mansfeld (1999), p. 468: "At the very least, this homogeneous cosmic state is not inferior to that of the differentiated world we know", referring in note 87 to both his own and Long's articles. The evidence suggests that Long and Wildberger are right in claiming that the differentiated cosmos cannot have been thought to be inferior to the conflagration. During the conflagration, god is identical with providence (Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1077E (*SVF* 2.1064)), and in Cic. *ND* 2.58 (*SVF* 1.172) it is said that providence aims at securing "for the world, first, the structure best fitted for survival; next, absolute completeness; but chiefly, consummate beauty and embellishment of very kind." This providential

the cosmos that the fiery *pneuma* that is god will periodically consume all matter. Many scholars have claimed that the deluge in Seneca's account is different in its origin and purpose: it is not so much a necessary and natural step in the cyclical development of the cosmos, but rather a cleansing tool or even punishment that is used to wipe out the human race, which has become vicious, and clear the way for a new and better world.[599]

There are indeed several passages that bear out this idea, because they focus specifically on the destruction of the human race[600] or suggest that the newly created humans will be (morally) better than their drowned predecessors.[601] We should also take into account, however, that Seneca envisions the occurrence of the deluge as being fated:

> "Whether the world is an animated being, or a body governed by nature, like trees and plants, there is incorporated in it from its beginning to its end everything it must do or undergo. [...] In the same way [that semen contains the peculiarities of a living being - MvH], the origin of the world included the sun and the moon and the revolutions of the heavenly bodies and the rise of animal life no less than the changes which the earth's materials undergo. Among these changes was flood, which occurs by a universal law just as winter and summer do."[602]

The explicit comparison of the deluge to the Stoic idea that the conflagration happens according to a pre-ordained plan shows that Seneca is concerned to keep the causation of the

---

activity cannot be reconciled with the assumption that the differentiated cosmos only serves to provide fuel for another conflagration.

599 Mader (1983), p. 65: "the catastrophes have a moral and cathartic causation far more explicit than anything found in the early fragments" and p. 66: "The catastrophes are therefore a *punishment* for moral degeneration." Waiblinger (1977) notes that the gods send the deluge "zur Bestrafung des Menschengeschlechts" (p. 44), "weil die Welt in einen slechten Zustand geraten ist." (p. 46), Gauly (2004), p. 248ff., argues that although Seneca does not characterize the deluge explicitly as punishment, it nevertheless "[wird] dadurch zur Sintflut, dass ihr mehrfach die Funktion zugeschrieben wird, ein moralisch verkommenes Menschengeschlecht von der Erde zu vertilgen und ein besseres hervorzubringen." Seneca's deluge receives its punitive character, Gauly argues, by being compared with the deluge as described by Ovid, which is definitely sent as punishment.

600 *NQ* 3.27.1: "destruction of the human race (*exitium humani generis*)"; 3.27.3: "destruction of mankind (*exitium mortalium*)"; 3.27.12: (about remnants of humanity seeking refuge on mountain tops); 3.28.2: "it is decided that the human race is to be changed (*mutarique humanum genus placuit*)"; 3.28.4: (about refuge places of the remnants of humanity being submerged as well); 3.29.5: "the end for human affairs (*terminus rebus humanis*)"; 3.29.9: "one day will bury the human race (*unus humanum genus condet dies*)"; 3.30.7: "when the destruction of the human race is completed (*peracto exitio generis humani*)."

601 *NQ* 3.28.7: "it seems best to god for the old things to be ended and better things to begin (*deo visum ordiri meliora, vetera finiri*)"; 3.29.5: "all may be generated from the beginning again, new and innocent, and no tutor of vice survives (*totae rudes innoxiaeque generentur nec supersit in deteriora praeceptor*)"; 3.30.8: "man, ignorant of sin and born under better auspices (*homo inscius scelerum et melioribus auspiciis natus*)."

602 *NQ* 3.29.2f.: *sive anima[l] est mundus, sive corpus natura gubernabile, ut arbores, ut sata, ab initio eius usque ad exitum quicquid facere quicquid pati debeat, inclusum est. [...] Sic origo mundi non minus solem et lunam et vices siderum et animalium ortus quam quibus mutarentur terrena continuit. In his fuit inundatio , quae non secus quam hiems, quam aestas, lege mundi venit.* Cf. Levy (1928), p. 462.

deluge within Stoic bounds.[603] If this is true, then his statement that the deluge (again, like the conflagration) will take place "when it seems best to god for the old things to be ended and better things to begin"[604] means that the ending of the 'older' things and the beginning of the 'better' ones is not something god decides on the spur of the moment, but rather is something that has been planned from the very beginning of the cosmos.[605] God's decision, then, is not really a decision – since god could not have decided otherwise - but the initiation of the next phase in the development of the cosmos.[606] This means that Seneca did not see the deluge as punishment in the ordinary sense of the term, i.e. as an *ad hoc* reaction to a transgression.

There are indications, however, that the Stoics *did* recognize a form of what might be called divine punishment. This punishment is not understood as "the *direct* intervention of god in human affairs, but rather the providential accommodation of evil that is already there."[607] Chrysippus, e.g., had claimed that the gods may send plague or famine as punishment for the wicked, so as to warn the rest of mankind off becoming vicious too.[608] He admits that such punishment may affect the virtuous as well, but considers that to be an unavoidable consequence of how god steers the cosmos for the greater good.[609] For the Stoics, then, something that is fated to happen may be used by god to further his providential governance of the cosmos: to use Chrysippus' example, a plague may be both fated *and* used by god as punishment to persuade mankind to live better lives.[610] In this sense, then, Seneca's implicit characterization of the flood as punishment does not compromise god's providence. Seneca further explicitly claims that the gods do punish the wicked, while denying that they can actually harm anyone: that is to say, the punishment they dole out is for the good.[611] One may wonder, of course, what the perceived good of a total annihilation of the human race might be: it cannot be meant as a warning to others, since there are no survivors. It might be argued that since the newly created human race will be more virtuous than the one that will drown, the deluge helps in making the cosmos better. Although this might look like throwing

---

[603] Cf. *NQ* 3.28.4, where Seneca says that at the time of the deluge, a vast underground reserve of water will be "moved by the fates (not by the tide – for the tide is only an agency of fate)." *fatis mota (non aestu – nam aestus fati ministerium est)[.]* See also 30.1: "But from the very first day of the cosmos [...] it was decreed when earthly things would be submerged."

[604] *NQ* 3.28.7: *cum deo visum ordiri meliora, vetera finiri.*

[605] Cf. *Marc.* 26.7, where the conflagration is said to occur *cum deo visum erit iterum ista moliri*, while the context suggests that it actually occurs at a set time.

[606] Cf. Eusebius *Pr. Ev.* 15.18.2 (LS 46K), where the Stoics are said to have wanted to present the conflagration not as mere destruction, but as natural change. Cf. Long (2006), p. 263.

[607] Algra (forthcoming).

[608] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1040C. In Cic. *ND* 3.81, 82 the Stoics are said to argue that the wicked will be punished sooner or later. In 3.90, they are even said to have claimed that this punishment may be visited upon the children or grandchildren of the wicked. As Wildberger (2006) notes in n. 218, this ascriptions is part of the Sceptic criticism of Stoic theology, and we have no Stoic evidence to support this claim.

[609] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1050D-E. See chapter 6 for a further discussion of such theodicean issues.

[610] For the compatibility of fate and punishment, see also D.L. 7.23.

[611] Cf. *EM* 95.50: " They [the gods] neither give nor have evil; but they do chasten and restrain certain persons, and impose penalties[.] *Hi nec dant malum nec habent; ceterum castigant quosdam et coercent et inrogant poenas[.]*

out the baby with the bathwater, since it will kill the virtuous along with the wicked, Seneca could reply, following Chrysippus, that sometimes the virtuous might suffer as a consequence of what is good for the cosmos as a whole.[612] It might also be said that the death of the wicked is for their own good: in *De Ira*, Seneca says that when someone has become irreversibly vicious, he should be put to death so he may be cured of the insanity that his viciousness is.[613]

Seneca's account also has other moral aspects, in the sense that Seneca considers it a good thing that vicious humanity will be replaced by a new and unspoilt generation. As said, this idea is not found with the early Stoics, but several reasons may be given as to why Seneca adds this dimension to his account. First of all, as Limburg indicates, "this element in Seneca's description might [...] derive from his personal concerns."[614] Throughout the *NQ* (and most of his other works as well) we see Seneca deploring the dominance of vice in his day and age – the deluge gives him the opportunity to lash out against it.[615] Secondly, there are definite moral overtones in some of the possible sources of Seneca's account as well, such as in Ovid's description of the flood in the *Metamorphoses* and in Plato's *Laws*, and these may have affected Seneca's characterization of the deluge.[616] Thirdly, while we have seen that there is no evidence that the Stoics saw the conflagration as superior to the differentiated cosmos, Plutarch notes that according to Chrysippus, "at the conflagration no evil whatever is left behind, but the whole is then prudent and wise."[617] At the moment the differentiated cosmos is created again, there will presumably not yet be any vice either, and in this sense the newly created world can be said to be 'better' than the previous one right before the conflagration. This idea is also

---

[612] It should further be noted that the death of the virtuous is not an evil, since the Stoics consider death to be indifferent. See further chapter 6. Cf. Hierocles *ap.* Stob. *Ecl.* 1.64, 7-11 (transl. Ramelli/Konstan (2009)): "[...] famines and droughts and also floods and earthquakes and every such thing mostly occur because of other, physical causes, but sometimes are also caused by the gods, when it is time for the faults of many people to be chastised publicly and collectively [...]."

[613] See *Ira* 1.15.1-1.16.4.

[614] Limburg (2007), p. 157. Cf. *NQ* 4a.Praef.19, where Seneca advises Lucilius to heed the poet Menander,"for every intellectual has aroused the full greatness of his talents against this evil, detesting the universal consensus of a human race that tends towards vice: the poet says that all men live evil lives. He then springs forward on to the stage in the role of a man from the country. He excepts neither old man nor boy, neither woman nor man, and he adds that it is not just one or a few individuals who sin, but by now crime is woven into the fabric of society."

[615] On the relation between scientific explanation and moral adhortation in the *NQ*, cf. Inwood (2002), Limburg (2007), Berno (2003), Parroni (2000).

[616] Ovid *Metam.* 1.228f. and 240ff. where it is said that all men share in vice and accordingly deserve punishment. For the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on Seneca's account see Levy (1928), Mazzoli (1970), p. 238-47, Degl' Innocenti Pierini (1990) and *infra*. Plato: cf. *Leg.* 677b, where it is agreed upon that the survivors of the flood "must have been quite innocent of the crafty devices that city-dwellers use in the rat-race to do each other down; and all the other dirty tricks that men play against one another must have been unknown." [transl. T. J. Saunders, in Cooper (1997)]

[617] Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1067A (*SVF* 2.606): ὅταν ἐκπυρώσωσι τὸν κόσμον οὗτοι, κακὸν μὲν οὐδ' ὁτιοῦν ἀπολείπεται, τὸ δ' ὅλον φρόνιμόν ἐστι τηνικαῦτα καὶ σοφόν. Cf. also various late reports where it is said that the Stoics saw the conflagration as a *katharsis*: *SVF* 1.153, 2.598, 2.622, 2.630: Long (2006), n. 63, argues that these reports are unreliable as evidence for the early Stoics, however, and Mansfeld (1983), p. 220f., thinks this characterization of the conflagration is a Christian reinterpretation.

borne out by a passage in one of Dio Chrysostomos' orations;[618] in this passage it is said that the newly created cosmos is "once more a thing of beauty and inconceivable loveliness, much more resplendent, indeed, than it appears today."[619] In one of his moral letters, Seneca also expresses the idea that the new world is better because it is younger:

> "I would not deny that they were men of lofty spirit and – if I may use the phrase – fresh from the gods. For there is no doubt that the world produced a better progeny before it was yet worn out."[620]

The idea that our cosmos was once somehow better than it is now implies that somewhere along the line things have gone wrong. In *EM* 90 Seneca argues that technological developments have given rise to vices.[621] From other sources we know that the early Stoics tried to explain how, given the divine providence that steers the cosmos, vice first came to be. Since vice is identical to erroneous judgement,[622] the Stoics sought to find the origin of this error, and appear to have come up with a twofold answer:[623] the persuasiveness of things themselves on the one hand[624] and the corruptive influence of our social surroundings on the other.[625] This latter point can be explained as the claim that the wrong opinions of, say, our parents, teachers or friends influence us, especially when we are young and impressionable.[626] This corruptive influence has to start somewhere, however, and the first point is meant to explain how it could come into existence in the first place. The Stoics tied this corruption from 'the persuasiveness of things themselves' to our experience of things when we are young and not yet fully rational. In this phase of our lives, we mistakenly come to believe that pleasure is a good thing. Pleasure is, as the Stoics argue, either a passion and thus bad,[627] or a by-product of being in a state that is

---

[618] Dio is admittedly a late source (1st century A.D.), but the passage is embedded in an account of what appears to be the standard Stoic theory of the conflagration and the Stoics' famous interpretation of the *hieros gamos* of Zeus and Hera as the interpenetration and formation of matter by god. Cf. Mansfeld (1979), p. 181-3, Pohlenz (1970), vol. 2, p. 46.

[619] Dio Chr. *Or.* 36.58 ἐξ ἀρχῆς [...] εὐειδῆ καὶ καλὸν ἀμηχάνως, πολὺ δὴ λαμπρότερον ἢ οἷος ὁρᾶται νῦν.

[620] *EM* 90.44: *Non [...] negaverim fuisse alti spiritus viros et, ut ita dicam, a dis recentes. Neque enim dubium est, quin meliora mundus nondum effetus ediderit.* Cf. 90.4: "[T]he first men and those who sprang from them, still unspoiled, followed nature." *primi mortalium quique ex his geniti naturam incorrupti sequebantur [...].*

[621] Cf. *EM* 90.8, 18-19.

[622] Usually the judgement that an indifferent thing is really good or bad. Cf. Stobaeus *Ecl.* 2.7, p. 106.21ff. (*SVF* 3.528), Plut. *Virt. Mor.* 441D.

[623] See Tieleman (2003), p. 132ff., Graver (2007), chapter 7, Sijl (2010), chapter 3.

[624] See Tieleman (2003), p. 161ff.

[625] D.L. 7.89 (*SVF* 3.228): διαστρέφεσθαι δὲ τὸ λογικὸν ζῷον, ποτὲ μὲν διὰ τὰς τῶν ἔξωθεν πραγματειῶν πιθανότητας, ποτὲ δὲ διὰ τὴν κατήχησιν τῶν συνόντων· ἐπεὶ ἡ φύσις ἀφορμὰς δίδωσιν ἀδιαστρόφους. Cf. Calc. *In Tim.* 165-7 (*SVF* 3.229) and Gal. *PHP* 5.5, 14 (3.229a).

[626] Cf. Bénatouïl (2007), p. 113-9.

[627] Stobaeus *Ecl.* 2.88, p. 8 W. (*SVF* 3.378).

natural to one's constitution;[628] in this latter sense it is not bad, but indifferent.[629] Because infants "lack the cognitive instruments required to consistently distinguish between pleasure *pur sang* and the pleasure that occurs as a side effect of obtaining the good," Van Sijl argues, they erroneously come to believe that it is pleasure itself that is good: "[i]f uncorrected, such confusions of pleasure with the truly beneficial lead to bad habits and extended mistaken beliefs."[630] Van Sijl then sketches how the twofold origin of error explains how vice can and will develop in human society:

> "These initial misconceptions subsequently find their way into the education of new generations of children and thus grow and spread among people and throughout human history. [...] The general idea is that even if the infant is capable of keeping misconceptions at bay for himself, he also has to cope with the talk of the people with whom he is associated (parents, teachers, poets, etc.). In fact, the Stoics found the social and cultural environment of their time so thoroughly degenerated, that they held it more likely than not that the infant would succumb to this corruptive influence."[631]

These considerations may shed some light on another problem that some have found in Seneca's text: as the last lines of book 3 indicate, the new human generation will in turn become vicious as well, which leads to the conclusion that there will be a never-ending cycle of creations and destructions (by either fire or water) of the human race.[632] The renewal of the world and the creation of an initially innocent generation might seem to be a pointless exercise in light of the fact that things, in the end, will go wrong again; worse, the recurrence of vice does not seem to bode well for the idea that the cosmos is a work of divine providence.[633] These apparent problems, as we have seen, are not exclusive to Seneca's account, however. Chrysippus, too, is reported to have held that moral depravity has increased over time,[634] and we may thus extrapolate that this would be the case in all the future cosmic cycles as well. The problem of the origin and increase of vice is thus a general Stoic one, not just a problem for Seneca. Yet, we do have some indications as to what the Stoics might have come up with in their attempts at an answer. We have, e.g., various reports about how Chrysippus tried to show

---

[628] D.L. 7.85-6.
[629] The Stoics appear to have disagreed on whether it is a preferred indifferent or not: in D.L. 7.102 it is said to be preferred, in Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.57.19 it is simply listed as one of the indifferents, while according to Sextus Empiricus, *M* 11.73 Cleanthes considered pleasure to be 'neither natural nor of value for life'. Cf. Haynes (1962), p. 413.
[630] Sijl (2010), p. 92.
[631] Sijl (2010), p. 92-3.
[632] Cf. Levy (1928), p. 462.
[633] Donini (1979), p. 260-1, even believes that the description of how a new generation of men will emerge and subsequently turn to vice, found in the latter sections of book 3 (30.7-8), is meant by Seneca as an implicit denuncation of what he sees as the absurdity of the Stoic cyclical cosmos.
[634] Orig. *Contra Celsum* 4.63 (*SVF* 3, app. 2.17.3)

that vice is not merely an unavoidable, but actually a necessary component of the provident cosmos: virtue could not exist without vice,[635] and vice "does occur in accordance with the rationale of nature, and its occurrence is not, so to speak, useless in relation to the whole world."[636] Furthermore, and more importantly, the Stoics held that moral evil is not god's responsibility, but our own, and Seneca concurs with this point.[637] Accordingly, Seneca's view of each new generation of man turning to vice does not imply, as some have thought, that he presents the Stoic cosmos as absurd and no longer rational: [638] he merely expresses his pessimism about the moral well-being of mankind.[639]

There is no doubt that Seneca's account of the deluge has stronger moral connotations than any other Stoic description of the end of the world; at the same time, it is likely that the very idea of a periodic renewal had always carried with it connotations of improvement, purification, or a return to a better state.[640] Seneca's emphasis on these connotations is best explained with reference to his preoccupation with the moral depravity of his fellow man and his literary aspirations.

6. The dramatic character of the account of the deluge

Another striking aspect of Seneca's account is the dramatic, even dark and gloomy, character of the description of the deluge.[641] Those who interpret the deluge as punishment often mention this character to support the idea that the account does not fit the provident and well-governed world the Stoics envisioned.[642] Now that it has been shown that Seneca can present

---

[635] Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.1-6 (*SVF* 2.1169) and 7.1.13 (last lines of *SVF* 2.1170)
[636] Plut. *Stoic. Rep.* 1050F: γίνεται μὲν γὰρ καὶ αὐτή πως κατὰ τὸν τῆς φύσεως λόγον, καί, ἵν' οὕτως εἴπω, οὐκ ἀχρήστως γίνεται πρὸς τὰ ὅλα· Cf. *Comm. Not.* 1065C-D, 1066D. Cf. Long (2006), p. 272; Mansfeld (1979), p. 183; Long (1968) gives an overview of the Stoic ideas on evil. See ch. 6.
[637] As we shall see in chapter 6.
[638] Cf. Gauly (2004), p. 251-2, who believes that "der rationale Kosmos der Stoa ist hier nicht mehr wiederzuerkennen: 'La suprema manifestazione dell' ordine cosmico denuncia improvvisamente la totale assurdità del cosmo stoico.'", quoting Donini (1979), p. 261.
[639] Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 158, criticizing Gauly's and Donini's view: "In my opinion, such an awareness [of the Stoic cosmos being absurd] is not present in Seneca's text: his denunciation is only directed at the human depravity."
[640] Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 58, on the conflagration: "Nun ist nicht mehr nur der Äther oder der Himmel der leitende Seelenteil des Kosmos, sondern der ganze Kosmos ist reiner Geist geworden. In diesem Sinn kann man also tatsächlich davon sprechen, daß die Zerstörung der differenzierten Welt zu einer 'Reinigung' führt."
[641] Waiblinger (1977) speaks of "das Grauen, das Seneca im Finale erregen will" and of the 'dark character' of the book. Gauly (2004) agrees, saying (p. 246) that "Waiblinger hat gezeigt, daß das Thema des Untergangs im gesamten Buch über das Wasser vorbereitet wird, indem von Anfang an, zunehmend aber in der zweiten Hälfte nach dem moralphilosophischen Exkurs die unheimlichen und negativen Aspekte der Phänomene des Wassers in den Vordergrund treten." Hutchinson 1993, 128: "[Seneca] generates a terrifying narrative sequence." Cf. Donini (1979), p. 256-61.
[642] Donini (1979), p. 259: "Questa [Seneca's description of the earth being ready to destroy us without any difficulty] è piuttosto la descrizione accorata di un assedio che non la presentazione di un'opera

the deluge both as part of the divine plan *and* as a form of punishment, however, we need to give another explanation for the dramatic scenery that Seneca creates. Three possible relevant factors will be discussed: Seneca's literary aspirations, his belief that awe-inspiring phenomena have moral relevance, and the influence of the subject matter itself on the way it is presented.

We have already seen that different aspects of Seneca's account, such as the moral overtones, can be explained with reference to the influence of Ovid's description of the Deucalionic flood. This influence is also evidenced by the occurrence of similar elements in Seneca's and Ovid's accounts,[643] and Seneca's evaluation of various lines from the *Metamorphoses*.[644] The dramatic description of what happens during the deluge is mainly found in chapter 27, in which Seneca builds towards a crescendo of ever increasing violent destruction: excessive rains, dark clouds and mist are followed by the failure of crops and the rotting and washing away of plants and trees – even buildings start sagging and are no longer supported by the earth: "nothing is stable."[645] Next, forest and villages, humans and animals are swept away by torrents of melted snow crashing down from the mountains; rivers overflow their banks, flood the land and even the mountains. As the skies grow ever darker and thunderstorms abound, the rivers carry more and more water to the sea, and the sea level rises until its waters merge with that of the rivers and the whole world is completely covered with water, save for certain mountain peaks on which the remnants of humanity have retreated.

At this point (3.27.13) Seneca praises Ovid for saying, "appropriate to the magnitude of his theme" (*pro magnitudine rei*), that "All was sea, and the sea had no shores"[646] and "The widespread rivers rush through open plains. [...] Towers totter and sink under the flood."[647] Seneca does not approve, however, of the lines where Ovid describes how a wolf swims among the sheep and lions are floating around.[648] Ovid cannot truly have believed this, since nothing would be able to survive being swept away by the deluge (3.27.14), and accordingly "it is not a sufficiently serious attitude to make fun of the whole world now swallowed up."[649] In the final section of 3.27 Seneca even addresses Ovid directly, exhorting him to keep his expressions in

provvidenziale." Gauly (2004), p. 247: Es bleibt also die Erkenntnis, daß die ungeheure negative Gewalt des Textes nach Maßstäben stoischer Philosophie nicht zu begreifen ist."

[643] To list a few: the availability of fire and water as alternative methods of destruction, and the decision for water (*NQ* 3.28.7, *Metam.* 1.260); the human race as the focus of the deluge (*NQ* 3.28.2, *Metam.* 1.188, 1.260); the cooperation of many contributing causes (*NQ* 3.27.1, 3.29.2, *Metam.* 1.262-292); the innocence of the new generation (*NQ* 3.30.8) or the survivors (*Metam.* 1.322f., 1.327).

[644] See Degl' Innocenti Pierini (1990) for an overview of the influence of Ovid on Seneca.

[645] *NQ* 3.27.6: *Nihil stabile est.*

[646] *Metam.*1.292: *Omnia pontus erat, deerant quoque litora ponto.*

[647] *Metam.* 1.285 and 1.290: *Expatiata ruunt per apertos flumina campos [...] pressaeque labant [latent* in Ovid*] sub gurgite turres.*

[648] *Metam.* 1.304.

[649] *NQ* 3.27.14: *Non est res satis sobria lascivire devorato orbe terrarum.* Cf. Hutchinson (1993), p. 129, Degl' Innocenti Pierini (1984), p. 144, Elliott (1985), Berno (2003), p. 93-102.

accordance with the gravity of the subject: "You will know what is fitting if you bear in mind that the entire earth is swimming."[650]

Levy has noted that Seneca's critical appraisal of Ovid separates two rather different parts of his own account: the latter part, from 3.28.1 onward, he mostly uses the future tense, discussing what *is going* to happen at the time of the deluge. In 3.27, however, Seneca describes the happenings in the present tense, thereby increasing the dramatic character of the events described.[651] His use of the present tense, the parallels with Ovid's account,[652] and his explicit criticism of Ovid show that Seneca's main concern here is to provide not merely an *imitatio*, but an *aemulatio* of Ovid's account of the deluge.[653] This aim is well-illustrated by the fact that the survival of Deucalion and Pyrrha in the *Metamorphoses* is paralleled in Seneca's account by the survival of a few human beings, while in 3.28.4 Seneca claims that even these initial survivors will drown and the whole human race will perish. Not recognizing Seneca's literary effort in 3.27 may lead to the conclusion that Seneca disregards the Stoic notion of divine providence. The whole of Seneca's account should be taken into consideration, and it is only after he has finished with his appraisal of Ovid[654] that he tries to characterize the deluge (which is now, as noted *supra*, described mostly in the future tense) as something that fits into the Stoic world view.

In these chapters (3.28-30), however, there are also many passages that are rather gloomy in character. To list a few: the submerged earth is called a 'great shipwreck' (*naufragium* 3.28.2), the saturated earth will dissolve anything around it just like diseases infect previously healthy bodies and sores spread themselves (3.29.7), and the human race is repeatedly singled out as the object of destruction. These passages seem to bear out the idea that the deluge is a terrible and fearful happening. To explain this, we might still take recourse to Seneca's literary aspirations, of course, but it is important to keep the following in mind here as well. As we have seen (section 4), Seneca more than once claims that whatever happens during the deluge is part of god's providential plan with the world. As such, we need not fear it and should even accept our fate willingly: "Let a great soul comply with god's wishes, and suffer unhesitatingly whatever fate the law of the universe ordains."[655] The Stoics also believed that the furtherance of providence might involve individual suffering for the greater good,

---

[650] *NQ* 3.27.15: *Scies quid deceat, si cogitaveris orbem terrarum natare.* Cf. Manilius *Astron.* 4.829: *natat orbis in ipso[.]*
[651] Levy (1928), p. 460-1.
[652] Such as the overflowing of even the tops of mountains – cf. 3.27.9, *Metam.* 1. 1.310.
[653] Cf. Reinhardt (1974), p. 174.
[654] *NQ* 3.28.1: *Nunc ad propositum revertamur.* This might be read, perhaps, as a concession of Seneca that the preceding bit is less 'factual' and more of an effort in dramatic prose that is, meant to evoke certain emotions in his readers.
[655] *EM* 71.16: *Magnus animus deo pareat et quicquid lex universi iubet, since cunctatione patiatur.* Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 2.6.10: "But if I really knew that it was ordained for me to be ill at this present moment, I would even seek illness; for the foot also, if it had a mind, would seek to be covered with mud."

suggesting that a sage would face the end of the world with contentment.[656] There are various passages in Seneca's work where he is rather positive about dying in natural disasters or even the conflagration:

> "Do you think it more glorious to die from diarrhoea than from a lightning bolt? So, rise up all the more bravely against the threats of heaven, and when the universe burns on all sides think that you have nothing to lose in so glorious a death."[657]

Dying in a major natural disaster, such as an earthquake, can even be soothing:

> "I might say the same thing: if I must fall, let me fall with the world shaken, not because it is right to hope for a public disaster but because it is a great solace in dying to see that the earth, too, is mortal."[658]

If man could only rise above his own level, he would no longer fear death, understanding that his existence is part of an eternal cycle of creation and destruction that is steered by god.[659] More in general, an important purpose of the *Naturales Quaestiones* may well have been, as Inwood argues, to "put comets, earthquakes, and hailstones to work in justifying the ways of god to man"[660] and to provide "a sober analysis of the relationship between the cosmic order and human life."[661] In the account of the deluge, however, this purpose is only noticeable in Seneca's explicit, and repeated, characterization of the deluge as part of fate. Apart from that, Seneca's account in book 3 of the *Naturales Quaestiones*, is about how the common man would experience the deluge and the end of all things, including himself. We have no other Stoic

---

[656] Cf. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1049A, where Chrysippus is said to have held that god uses wars to get rid of excess population. Cf. Cic. *ND* 3.86. There are various passages where Seneca says that the whole cosmos is more important than the individual: cf. *Ben.*6.22; 6.23.3-4, *EM* 73.6; 95.50.

[657] *NQ* 2.59.11: *Honestius putas deiectione perire quam fulmine? Eo itaque fortior adversus caeli minas surge et, cum undique mundus exarserit, cogita nihil habere te tanta morte perdendum.* Cf. Volk (2006), p. 186-7.

[658] *NQ* 6.2.9: *Idem mihi licet dicere: si cadendum est, est cadam orbe concusso, non quia fas est optare publicam cladem, sed quia ingens mortis solacium est terram quoque videre mortalem.* Cf. *NQ* 6.32.8,: "Why should I fear to die when the earth perishes before I do, when the forces which do the shaking are shaken and bring about our destruction only by destroying themselves? [...] Indeed, when I know that all things are finite am I to fear a final breath?" *Ego autem perire timeam, cum terra ante me pereat, cum ista quatiantur quae quatiunt et in iniuriam nostram non sine sua veniant? [...] Immo, cum sciam omnia esse finita, ego ultimum suspirium timeam?* Cf. Berno (2003), p. 263.

[659] *EM* 71.13-4: "Whatever is will cease to be, and yet it will not perish, but will be resolved into its elements (*resolvetur*). To our minds, this process means perishing, for we behold only that which is nearest; our sluggish mind, under allegiance to the body, does not penetrate to bournes beyond. Were it not so, the mind would endure with greater courage its own ending and that of its possessions, if only it could hope that life and death, like all things around us, go by turns, that whatever has been put together is broken up again, that whatever has been broken up is put together again, and that the eternal craftsmanship of god, who controls all things, is working at this task."

[660] Inwood (2002), p. 121.

[661] Inwood (2002), p. 156.

account of how a particular world order comes to an end: however much the conflagration is part of god's plan, witnessing it from up close would probably be a rather terrifying experience as well.[662] In sum, Seneca agrees with the Stoics that everything that happens, even major cataclysms such as the deluge, are part of how god's providential plan comes about; in his account of the deluge, however, he takes a more human and less Stoic point of view, so to speak, which also allows him the opportunity to exhibit his literary prowess.

7. Conclusion

The account of the deluge, we may conclude, is not so much a deviation from Stoic theory as Seneca's own addition to it, which also provides him with the opportunity to display his literary ability. As an author, Seneca tries to outdo Ovid in the description of the grim and apocalyptic character of the watery cataclysm that is to come. As a philosopher, Seneca surely knows that the idea of an all-destructive deluge does not have a Stoic origin, and he does try to stay within Stoic bounds in his description of it, by explicitly characterizing it, like the conflagration, as happening according to god's pre-ordained plan.

There is no doubt that he moral overtones in Seneca's account are stronger than we might expect, given this characterization of the deluge as a fated occurrence - see e.g. his claim that the deluge is a change for the good in that it will put an end to human vice, and that the generation of men created after the waters have receded will be morally pure once more. The Stoic view of the conflagration, however, is not wholly neutral either, the reabsorption of all things into fire sometimes being regarded as a return to a purer state, and in any case a state where there is no vice. Seneca merely emphasizes this more than other Stoics, probably because of his preoccupation with the moral depravity of his fellow men.

---

[662] Whether the earth itself is destroyed in the flood or merely submerged (see section 4) is not important here – in either case, the destruction wrought is sufficiently enormous to allow a comparison with the conflagration.

Chapter 5
God and man

1. Introduction

In this chapter we will examine Seneca's ideas on the human soul: what is its nature, its origin, and its purpose? These questions will only be approached insofar as they are closely related to Seneca's theological views; the extensive scholarly debate on whether so-called Middle Stoicism, and especially Posidonius, had abandoned Stoic psychological monism and reverted to a Platonic tripartition of the soul, will only be touched upon briefly, as will be the alleged influence of this development on Seneca's view of the soul. The reasons for this are first, that the magnitude of this issue means that it must fall outside the scope of this work, and second, that even though the debate is not settled, modern scholarship tends to play down any Platonizing tendencies in Middle Stoicism, and accordingly the supposed influence of this 'Platonizing Stoicism' on Seneca.[663]

However, even if we confine ourselves to those aspects of the soul that are pertinent to Seneca's theological views, we also find that there is disagreement here. Most scholars agree that he usually subscribes to the Stoic view of the soul as a part of the divine and corporeal *pneuma* that suffuses us and makes us what and who we are. Some scholars, however, have stated that in certain passages Seneca espouses what amounts to the Platonic view that the soul is an originally transcendent entity, which longs to escape the body in which it is trapped during its earthly existence.

In this chapter it will be argued that this conclusion is unwarranted, and that in the relevant passages Seneca is not suggesting that the soul should, or could, escape or transcend its bodily existence, but rather uses this Platonic imagery as a tool to exhort us to live according to what makes us special and divine, i.e. our rationality. As argued in chapter 3, he sees this as consisting in, and aiming at, both the morally good life and the study and contemplation of the cosmos. In the passages under consideration here the emphasis is on the contemplative part of the good life, and it is for the purpose of endorsing this that Seneca uses Platonic parlance: but nowhere does he express belief in any true transcendence of the soul in the Platonic (or Middle Platonic) sense. Seneca may well have thought it desirable that we obtain a state of pure contemplation after death, but he does not dare to commit himself to this possibility explicitly and ultimately prefers to emphasize that we should pursue this perfect rationality here and now.

[663] Even the term 'Middle Stoicism' is often regarded as a mere chronological designation and no longer as a term to distinguish the doctrines of Stoicism of that period from those of early Stoicism. Cf. Tieleman (2003), chapter 5. See further below, section 3.

2. The nature of the human soul

The Stoics held that the way in which a part of the divine *pneuma* pervades a certain quantity of matter determines the particular character of each individual thing.[664] The pneumatic tension (*tonos*) manifests itself in four distinctive ways, thereby establishing a *scala naturae* in which the entities higher up on the scale encompass the characteristics of those that are lower: as tenor (*hexis*), *pneuma* is what holds inanimate objects, such as stones, together. In plants, it is not merely this structural force, but also the principle of life and growth (*phusis*); in animals it is over and above this present as soul (*psuchê*), giving them the capacities of sensation and movement. Human beings, finally, are also characterized by soul, but in their case this soul is rational.[665] Seneca, too, holds that we share *phusis* with plants and *psuchê* with animals, and that it is our rationality that sets us apart:

> "I am not seeking to find that which is greatest in him, but that which is his own. Man has body; so do trees. Man has the power to act and to move at will; so do beasts and worms. [...] What then is peculiar to man? Reason."[666]

The Stoics further held that god, as divine *pneuma*, was the soul of the cosmos[667] and saw a close kinship between this cosmic soul and the human soul, based on the rationality shared by both, or better, derived by the human soul from that of the cosmic soul.[668] In a very literal sense, the human soul was seen as an offshoot (*apospasma*) of the divine and intelligent *pneuma* that permeates the cosmos as a whole; this should probably be taken to mean that the human soul, like all other entities on the *scala naturae*, is an individually existent part of *pneuma*, which happens to be capable of having the same tension (*tonos*) as the divine *pneuma* in its undifferentiated state.[669] Seneca shares this view as well. He sees the soul as *pneuma* in a

---

[664] See chapter 1, section 3.3, also for references to secondary literature.

[665] D.L. 7.138-9, Origen *Princ.* 3.1.2-3 (*SVF* 2.988), Philo *Leg. Alleg.* 2.22-3 (*SVF* 2.458), *Deus Imm.* 35-6 (*SVF* 2.458).

[666] *EM* 76.9: *Non quaero, quid in se maximum habeat, sed quid suum. Corpus habet; et arbores. Habet impetum ac motum voluntarium; et bestiae et vermes. [...] Quid in homine proprium? Ratio.* Cf. *EM* 41.8: "Praise the quality in him which cannot be given or snatched away, that which is the peculiar property of man. Do you ask what this is? It is soul, and reason brought to perfection in the soul. For man is a reasoning animal." Similarly in *EM* 87.19.

[667] D.L. 7.142 (*SVF* 2.633).

[668] Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.18, where the fact that we are intelligent beings is used as an argument for the intelligence of what has produced us, i.e. the cosmos, since it is only from the cosmos that we can have gotten our intelligence. Cf. D.L. 7.143 (*SVF* 2.633), Calc. *In Tim.* 251 (*SVF* 2.1198). In Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*, man is said to have been made in the image of god (*SVF* 1.537, l. 4) – accepting a certain conjecture, the text being corrupt. See Renehan (1964), p. 382-6 for a discussion. Cf. Cic. *Leg.* 1.59.

[669] D.L. 7.156 (*SVF* 2.774) describes the soul as a part of the world-soul; Hieronymus *epist.* 126 (*SVF* 2.776) reports that the Stoics held the soul to be derived from god's substance (*a propria dei substantia*), cf. *SVF* 1.495. Cic. *Div.* 2.119 says that the Stoics "declare that our souls are divine"; in D.L. 7.143 (*SVF* 2.633) our soul is described as an offshoot (*apospasma*) of the world-soul. This appellation recurs in Epict. *Diss.* 1.14.6, 2.8.11, MA 5.27. Cf. further MA 2.1, 2.4, 9.19, 12.2, 12.26. This Stoic view of the soul is

certain condition,[670] and as having the same nature as the heavenly bodies.[671] Since these heavenly bodies are intelligent and divine, the same can be said about our rational soul as well:

> "Reason, however, is nothing else than a portion of the divine spirit set in a human body."[672]

In other passages Seneca calls our soul our "better or divine part"[673] and claims that something divine exists in one "who is part of god"[674] and speaks of "the mind of god, from whom a part flows down into even this heart of a mortal."[675] He also characterizes our soul as being itself a god:[676] in one of his moral letters, he says that the virtuous soul is a god[677] and in another he calls the soul of a good man "a god dwelling as a guest in a human body."[678]

3. The soul as inner demon

The idea expressed in this last passage, that our soul is a god that dwells in us, is put more explicitly in the following passage:

> "God is near you, he is with you, he is within you. This is what I mean, Lucilius: a holy spirit indwells within us, one who marks our good and bad deeds, and is our guardian."[679]

Elsewhere (*EM* 110.1) Seneca says that we should not accept the traditional idea that every individual has an external personal god watching over him or her.[680] Even so, he claims, our

---

similar to, and may derive from, Plato's view of the human soul in the *Timaeus*, where it is said to have its roots in the heavens (*Tim.* 90a).

[670] *EM* 50.6: *Quid enim est aliud animus quam quodam modo se habens spiritus?*

[671] *Marc.*25.2, *Helv.* 6.6, *NQ* 1.Praef.12.

[672] *EM* 66.12: *Ratio autem nihil aliud est quam in corpus humanum pars divini spiritus mersa.* Cf. *EM* 92.10; in *Const. Sap.* 8.3, the rational man is said to bear all that happens to him "with a divine soul" (*animo divino*).

[673] *EM* 78.10: *meliore ac divina parte.* Cf. *NQ* 7.25.2, where the soul as "divine power and part of god (*vim divinam et dei partem*)" is mentioned as one possible opinion on the nature of the soul.

[674] *EM* 92.30: *qui dei pars est.*

[675] *EM* 120.14: *mens dei, ex quo pars et in hoc pectus mortale defluxit.*

[676] Cf. Epiph. *Adv. Haer.* 3.2.9 (*SVF* 1.146), where Zeno is said to have held that our own intellect (*nous*) is a god. This authenticity of this report cannot be taken for granted, however, since Epiphanius is notoriously unreliable and this particular report it is not supported by other sources.

[677] *EM* 82.1: *Quem, inquis, deorum sponsorem accepisti? Eum scilicet, qui neminem fallit, animum recti ac boni amatorem.*

[678] *EM* 31.11: *deum in corpore humano hospitantem.*

[679] *EM* 41.1-2: *Prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est. Ita dico, Lucili: sacer intra nos spiritus sedet, malorum bonorumque nostrorum observator et custos.*

[680] *EM* 110.1: "Lay aside for the present the belief of certain persons – that a god is assigned to each one of us as a sort of attendant – not a god of regular rank, but one of a lower grade – one of those whom Ovid calls 'plebeian gods'."

ancestors were actually Stoic in assigning a Genius or Iuno to every one of us;[681] in all probability he interprets this idea of a personal guardian demon as referring to the presence of a divine being *in* us, and believes this to be a Stoic idea as well.[682] We do in fact find this idea attributed to the early Stoics in a passage in Diogenes Laertius:

> "Our own natures are parts of the nature of the universe. Therefore, living in agreement with nature is the goal of life, that is, in accordance with the nature of oneself and that of the universe, engaging in no activity that the universal law is wont to forbid, which is the right reason pervading everything and identical to Zeus, who directs the organization of reality. And when the principle of every action is concordance between each person's divine spirit and the will of the director of the universe, precisely this is the virtue of the happy human being and his good flow of life."[683]

This passage expresses, first of all, the already established Stoic idea that we are an integral part of the divine cosmos. Our nature, i.e. what defines us, is equated here with "each person's divine spirit", and bringing this inner demon into agreement with god's plan is what constitutes happiness (*eudaimonia*) and virtue.[684] Posidonius is also reported to have held this idea:

> "The cause of the affections, i.e. of inconsistency and the unhappy life, is not to follow in everything the divinity within oneself who is of the same stock and has a similar nature to the one who governs the whole cosmos but at times to allow oneself to be distracted and carried along by what is worse and beast-like."[685]

---

[681] I.e., either a *Genius* (for men) or a *Iuno* (for women); cf. *OCD* s.v. 'genius'.

[682] Algra (2009b) shows that the early Stoics tried to accommodate the notion of external guardian demons (cf. D.L. 7.151 (*SVF* 2.1102)), but that in later Stoicism this was no longer the case, referring to the passage just cited and claiming that "Seneca makes it clear that he regards this view as a primitive foreshadowing of the proper Stoic conception of the inner demon." Setaioli (2007), p. 358, however, refers to *EM* 90.28, where Seneca says that philosophy, among other things, *quid sint di qualesque declarat, quid inferi, quid lares et genii, quid in secundam numinum formam animae perpetuatae, ubi consistant, quid agant, quid possint, quid velint*. He argues that this shows that Seneca did believe in personal demons, but even though we cannot rule out this possibility, it sits ill with his reinterpretation in *EM* 110.1, and we might take the passage cited by Setaioli to be an oblique reference to such a philosophical reinterpretation of traditional ideas.

[683] D.L. 7.87-8 (transl. Long (2002)): μέρη γάρ είσιν αἱ ἡμέτεραι φύσεις τῆς τοῦ ὅλου. διόπερ τέλος γίνεται τὸ ἀκολούθως τῇ φύσει ζῆν, ὅπερ ἐστὶ κατά τε τὴν αὑτοῦ καὶ κατὰ τὴν τῶν ὅλων, οὐδὲν ἐνεργοῦντας ὧν ἀπαγορεύειν εἴωθεν ὁ νόμος ὁ κοινός, ὅσπερ ἐστὶν ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος, διὰ πάντων ἐρχόμενος, ὁ αὐτὸς ὢν τῷ Διί, καθηγεμόνι τούτῳ τῆς τῶν ὄντων διοικήσεως ὄντι· εἶναι δ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο τὴν τοῦ εὐδαίμονος ἀρετὴν καὶ εὔροιαν βίου, ὅταν πάνταπράττηται κατὰ τὴν συμφωνίαν τοῦ παρ' ἑκάστῳ δαίμονος πρὸς τὴν τοῦ τῶν ὅλων διοικητοῦ βούλησιν.

[684] See e.g. Reydams-Schils (2005), p. 43f.

[685] Gal. *Plac.* 5.6.4 (Fr. 187 EK, transl. Tieleman (2003)): τὸ δὴ τῶν παθῶν αἴτιον, τουτέστι τῆς τε ἀνομολογίας καὶ τοῦ κακοδαίμονος βίου, τὸ μὴ κατὰ πᾶν ἕπεσθαι τῷ ἐν αὑτῷ δαίμονι συγγενεῖ τε

It is generally agreed that what the Stoics meant by our 'inner demon' was nothing but our rational soul;[686] in this sense it was used first by Plato, who says that "we ought to think of the most sovereign part of our soul as god's gift to us, given to be our guiding spirit"[687] and that man must keep "well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him."[688] It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that the early Stoics adopted the image of our rationality as a guiding inner demon from Plato's *Timaeus*.[689] The difference between the Platonic and the Stoic use of this image is that whereas Plato considers our inner demon to be the rational part of our soul, as opposed to its irrational parts, the early Stoics, being psychic monists, identify the inner demon with our rationality as a whole.

Turning to later Stoicism, we must briefly discuss what has long been a commonly accepted idea, viz. that Posidonius abandoned Stoic psychological monism, because he believed that Plato's tripartite model better explained human behaviour. This idea relies heavily on the account of Posidonian psychology by the philosopher-physician Galen, who repeatedly tries to show how Posidonius diverted from psychological monism as put forward by Chrysippus.[690] Many scholars have accepted Galen's claims, which led to the widespread assumption that Posidonius was an eclectic philosopher and part of an allegedly less orthodox and Platonizing phase of the Stoic school dubbed 'Middle Stoicism'.[691] In recent years, scholars have cast doubt on Galen as a reliable historical witness, seeing as other ancient evidence does not support his claims, and many now believe Posidonius to be much closer to Chrysippus than is suggested by Galen.[692]

Differences of opinion on the philosophical allegiance of Posidonius also lead to different interpretations of the passage from Galen quoted above. Anthony Long has argued

---

ὄντι καὶ τὴν ὁμοίαν φύσιν ἔχοντι τῷ τὸν ὅλον κόσμον διοικοῦντι, τῷ δὲ χείρονι καὶ ζῳώδει ποτὲ συνεκκλίνοντας φέρεσθαι.

[686] Rist (1969), p. 262ff. believes that D.L. 7.87-8 shows that Chrysippus believed all of us to have a real, i.e. external, guardian demon watching over us. Betegh (2003), p. 287, argues that this assumption of an external overseer of each human being is superfluous, "causing an unwanted complication in the scheme and an unnecessary mediation in the relationship between individual human nature and cosmic nature, which is after all the focal point of Chrysippus' view". Betegh is surely right in claiming that the passage in Diogenes Laertius is not about external guardian demons; his further claim, that there is no evidence whatsoever that the Stoics were interested in the notion of a 'real' guardian demon is refuted by Algra (2009), however, who discusses several passages that suggest that the early Stoics *did* allow for the existence of such external guardians.

[687] *Tim.* 90a: τὸ δὲ δὴ περὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου παρ' ἡμῖν ψυχῆς εἴδους διανοεῖσθαι δεῖ τῇδε, ὡς ἄρα αὐτὸ δαίμονα θεὸς ἑκάστῳ δέδωκεν[.]

[688] *Tim.* 90c: εὖ κεκοσμημένον τὸν δαίμονα σύνοικον ἑαυτῷ[.]

[689] So Reydams-Schils (1999), p. 69f., 111-15, Betegh (2003), Wildberger (2006), p. 222.

[690] Gal. *PHP* books 4 and 5. Cf. Tieleman (2003), chapter 5.

[691] See Tieleman (2003), p. 199, n. 3 for references..

[692] Fillion-Lahille (1984), p 151-62; Cooper (1998) argues that Posidonius was orthodox in seeing the passions as rational judgements of the soul, but introduced certain irrational forces into the judgement-proces as well; Tieleman (2003), p. 198-87, claims that Posidonius, far from returning to Platonism, actually tried to show that the irrational parts of the soul postulated by Plato were anticipations of the Stoic idea that the soul, due to its corporeal nature, had certain passive and receptive and conative aspects (but not *parts*) that could lead the soul to wrong judgements.

that Posidonius chose Plato's model, because "it allowed him to explain deviations from good reasoning as due to the bad influence of the soul's other parts."[693] Teun Tieleman, however, believes that Posidonius actually closely follows what is expressed in D.L. 7.87-8 and that both Chrysippus and Posidonius tried to improve on what Plato had said in the *Timaeus* by saying that living well is not a matter of having the rational part of our soul leading the irrational parts, but consists in doing everything in a perfectly rational way, i.e. in the total agreement of our inner demon with what god has ordained.[694] Jula Wildberger thinks, first, that Chrysippus' and Posidonius' ideas are rather similar, and second, that the Stoics could long since have taken over the idea of the internal demon from Plato anyway, so that the question of the origin of Posidonius' ideas is rather moot. [695]

While there is little doubt that we can establish a Stoic pedigree for Seneca's ideas on our inner demon, then, there is disagreement on how 'Platonic' or 'Stoic' Posidonius' inner demon is. This matter is important for determining the role of the inner demon in Seneca and the other imperial Stoics. According to Long, Epictetus "verges closely on the Platonic conception adopted by Posidonius", because "Epictetus *daimôn* is quite certainly, as Chrysippus' is not, the ideally rational or normative self."[696] The passage most relevant to Long's judgement is the following:

> "[Zeus] has presented to each person each person's *daimôn*, as a guardian, and committed his safekeeping to this trustee, who does not sleep and cannot be misled [...] Remember never to say that you are alone, because you are not. God is within and your own *daimôn* is within."[697]

We must be obedient to this inner demon and make sure it is not defiled by immoral behaviour.[698] Keimpe Algra agrees that while in the standard Stoic view the inner demon "is the soul, which is given a divine status in virtue of its potential rationality, whether this soul is *de facto* rational or not", in Seneca's and Epictetus' texts "the notion of the 'divine in us' seems to have developed, at least at times, into the notion of what we might call a 'normative self': that purely rational being which we *should* be or which we *strive* to be, but are not yet in

---

[693] Long (2002), p. 164. So also Reydams-Schils (1999), p. 112: "The parallel [of Posidonius Fr. 187 EK] with the *Timaeus* [...] is striking [...]: even more so because Posidonius in his psychology has reintroduced the components of the irrational soul, allowing him to criticize the Chrysippean position and to follow Plato more closely."
[694] Tieleman (2003), p. 228-30.
[695] Wildberger (2006), p. 221. See Bees 2004, p. 321-37.
[696] Long (2002), p. 166.
[697] Epict. *Diss.* 1.14.12-14 (transl. Long (2002)): ἀλλ' οὖν οὐδὲν ἧττον καὶ ἐπίτροπον ἑκάστῳ παρέστησεν τὸν ἑκάστου δαίμονα καὶ παρέδωκεν φυλάσσειν αὐτὸν αὐτῷ καὶ τοῦτον ἀκοίμητον καὶ ἀπαραλόγιστον. [...] ὅταν κλείσητε τὰς θύρας καὶ σκότος ἔνδον ποιήσητε, μέμνησθε μηδέποτε λέγειν ὅτι μόνοι ἐστέ· οὐ γὰρ ἐστέ, ἀλλ' ὁ θεὸς ἔνδον ἐστὶ καὶ ὁ ὑμέτερος δαίμων ἐστίν.
[698] Epict. *Diss.* 4.12.11-12, 2.8.12-13, 2.8.23, cited by Long (2002) on p. 165-6. Cf. the Posidonius-fragment (Gal. *PHP* 5.6.4 (Fr. 187 EK)) cited above.

fact."[699] For Seneca, Algra refers to the passage from *EM* 41 cited above, where our inner demon is said to be a *malorum bonorumque nostrorum observator et custos*.[700] In this passage, then, Seneca appears to hold the idea that our inner demon is not our rationality in a general sense (as the early Stoics put it), but perfect rationality, coming close to the Platonic version. At the same time, however, Long submits that Epictetus "sides with Chrysippus over the through-and-through rationality of the human soul"[701] and that his insistence on our obedience to our normative self is a metaphor for our obligation to live in accordance with god.[702] Algra, too, contends that the difference between the standard Stoic view on the one hand and that of Epictetus and Seneca on the other "may be little more than a matter of style and emphasis," with the latter two couching their appeal for virtuousness in religious rather than psychological terminology for rhetorical effect.[703]

In Seneca's case, there are other passages where he pretty explicitly advocates the standard Stoic position. He repeatedly states that while we have been gifted with a rational soul, we ourselves must perfect this rationality.[704] If and when we do so, we become god's equal in rationality and virtue, if not immortality.[705] In one of his moral letters, Seneca describes this as follows:

> "God comes to men; nay, he comes nearer – he comes into men. No mind that has not god, is good. Divine seeds are scattered throughout our mortal bodies; if a good farmer receives them, they spring up in the likeness of their source and equal to those from which they came. If, however, the farmer be bad, like a barren or marshy soil, he kills the seeds, and causes weeds to grow up instead of wheat."[706]

---

[699] Algra (2009b), p. 366.
[700] *EM* 41.1-2.
[701] Long (2002), p. 165.
[702] Long (2002), p. 166.
[703] Algra (2009b), p. 367. Algra also suggests that Seneca, and even more so Epictetus, "allow more room for a personalistic and a more strongly theistic way of conceiving the relation between god and us." See *infra* for this issue. In Marcus Aurelius, by contrast, this religious and theistic perspective on god is less present and he seems closer to the standard Stoic view, as Algra shows by citing MA 3.3 (soul is νοῦς καὶ δαίμων - see also 3.7) and 12.26 (ἑκάστου νοῦς θεὸς) in evidence. In other passages, however, Marcus' expressions are reminiscent of Epictetus, saying that we should take care of our inner demon (2.13) and keep it pure (2.17, 3.12, 12.3). In 5.27 the two views come together: we should listen to our inner demon, which is a part of god, as our captain and guide, but at the same time this inner demon is nothing but our own intelligence and reason (ὁ δαίμων, ὃν ἑκάστῳ προστάτην καὶ ἡγεμόνα ὁ Ζεὺς ἔδωκεν, ἀπόσπασμα ἑαυτοῦ. οὗτος δέ ἐστιν ὁ ἑκάστου νοῦς καὶ λόγος). On the whole, though, Marcus seems less interested than Epictetus or Seneca in using the normative perspective to facilitate a more personal approach of the inner demon.
[704] *EM* 49.11, 76.10, 104.23, 124.14.
[705] *EM* 31.9, 53.11, 73.13, 85.19, 92.27, 98.9, *Prov.* 1.5, *Const.* 8.2, Frg. 27 Haase. Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 1.12.26.
[706] *EM* 73.16: *Deus ad hominem venit, immo quod est propius, in homines venit; nulla sine deo mens bona est. Semina in corporibus humanis divina dispersa sunt, quae si bonus cultor, excipit, similia origini prodeunt et paria iis, ex quibus orta sunt, surgunt; si malus, non aliter quam humus sterilis ac palustris necat ac deinde creat purgamenta pro frugibus.*

The Stoics hold that all individually existing things are determined in their being by so-called 'seminal principles' (*logoi spermatikoi*): i.e. specific parts of the divine *pneuma* that pervade a particular quantity of matter and give it its peculiar character.[707] The specific part of *pneuma* that constitutes, e.g., an acorn, is at the same time the cause of that acorn growing into an oak. According to the Stoics, each seminal principle has the capacity to engender that of which it is a seminal principle:[708] an acorn can become an oak, but not an elm. More technically expressed, the precise place of a particular thing in the *scala naturae*, as discussed above,[709] is determined by the sort of tension (*tonos*) that that thing's *pneuma* can attain to, i.e. what its seminal principle allows it to become. Inanimate things cannot go beyond *hexis*, while plants have *phusis*, which allows them to live and grow. Animals have *phusis* as well, but this changes into *psuchê* at birth.[710] Human beings are special in the sense that even though they, too, are characterized by *psuchê*, our seminal principles allow our *psuchê* to become rational.[711]

The presence of a certain seminal principle in a particular quantity of matter is not in itself the guarantee *that* things will fully go according to what that seminal principle can engender: in other words, the soul-*pneuma* of a human being will attain the *tonos* that makes that soul a rational one, but the perfection of this rationality is not guaranteed. God himself is perfectly rational, and by giving us a part of himself in the form of our rational soul, he gave us the opportunity to become just as rational[712] – but in the end we ourselves are responsible for attaining this perfection. This is what Seneca means by the metaphor of the good farmer, who ensures that the sowed seeds come to full fruition.[713] Given the fact that our soul is also seen as an offshoot of god, it seems plausible to interpret the divine 'normative self' or super-ego that we should live up to, as expressed in the passage from *EM* 41, as indeed another way of expressing the appeal to develop our god-given rational soul to its full potential.[714] The reason for explicitly presenting the normative self in this way as a guardian may be explained by assuming, as Algra does, "that Seneca and Epictetus hypostasize the internal demon by 'internalizing' the external guardian demon of the early Stoic tradition."[715] In other words,

---

[707] D.L. 7.148 (*SVF* 2.1132), Aetius 1.7.33 (*SVF* 2.1027), Gal. *Def. med.* 95, 19.371 (*SVF* 2.1133), SE *M* 9.103. God is also said to be the seminal principle of the cosmos as a whole: cf. D.L. 7.136 (*SVF* 1.102). See Hahm (1977), chapter 2 'Cosmogony' for a comprehensive discussion.
[708] D.L. 7.158 (*SVF* 2.741), Gal. *Def. med.* 94, 19.370 (*SVF* 2.742), Sen. *EM* 90.29.
[709] See section 2.
[710] As noted in section 2, the entities higher up on the scale encompass the characteristics of those that are lower; this means that a being with *psuchê* has *phusis* and *hexis* as well.
[711] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.103.
[712] *EM* 49.11. Cf. Phil. *Piet.* 11 (*SVF* 2.1076).
[713] Cf. *EM* 108.8, where we said to have received the "seed of virtue" (*semen virtutum*).
[714] Wildberger (2006), p. 230: "Statt ein „normatives" Selbst anzunehmen, möchte ich vorschlagen, das Normative, die von Long bemerkte Differenz von Sein und Sollen, in dem Begriff des Samens zu suchen: Menschen sind mit Gott verwandt, weil in ihnen Samen Gottes sind; ein Samen aber ist „etwas das fähig ist, etwas von derselben Art hervorzubringen wie das, von dem es selbst abgetrennt wurde" [Wildberger's translation of D.L. 7.158 (*SVF* 2.741) - MvH]. Wenn etwas aber zu etwas (prinzipiell) „fähig ist", dann bedeutet das noch lange nicht, daß es dies auch wirklich vollbringt."
[715] Algra (2009b), p. 367.

Seneca and Epictetus could transfer the protective role that the early Stoics ascribed to external guardian demons to the inner demon, thereby dispensing with the need for such an external demon.

4. The origin and destination of the soul

4.1 Introduction

The Stoics held that human beings have a privileged position in the cosmos. All other existing things, of course, also consist of a part of the divine *pneuma* in a quantity of matter, but only humans can share in god's rationality. Because of our special status, the Stoics can say that god has made all other things for our use.[716] The cosmos is the shared abode of man and god, and the latter two live in a community of rational beings.[717] Considering the similarity between god and man and the presence of god in us as (the seminal principle of) our rational soul,[718] it is not surprising that the Stoics could refer to god as our father.[719] Later Stoics, among whom Seneca, more explicitly described god in this way.[720]

Normally speaking, of course, the Stoics recognized that all of us have human parents, who are, biologically speaking, responsible for our existence and for passing along our inherited characteristics.[721] The soul only comes into existence through a change in the *tonos* of our *pneuma* at the moment of birth, and is thus closely tied to our biological generation.[722] In some of the passages where god is called our father, then, this is done metaphorically[723] – in *De Providentia*, e.g., god's 'tough love' of good men is often explained in terms of how a good father raises his children.[724] Regarding the coming-to-be of a human being from a larger, or rather cosmic, perspective, the Stoics could also say that our biological parents are nothing but tools used by our true father, i.e. god.[725] Seneca appears to agree with this,[726] but takes the idea of our divine origin even further. On many occasions, he states that our soul is not merely divine in the sense that it is part of divine *pneuma*, but that it actually has its origin and true home in the higher regions of the cosmos and has come down from this higher abode for its

---

[716] *SVF* 2.1152-67.
[717] *SVF* 3.333-39, D.L. 7.138, Epict. *Diss.* 1.9.4.
[718] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.101.
[719] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021), Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* (*SVF* 1.537, l. 34).
[720] *Ben.* 2.29.4, 4.8.1, 7.31.4, *EM* 107.11, 110.10, *Prov.* 1.5, 2.6, 2.7, Epict. *Diss.* 1.3.1, 1.13.3-4, 1.19.9, 2.10.7, 3.22.82, 3.24.16.
[721] *SVF* 2.741-49. Seneca agrees, cf. *NQ* 3.29.3.
[722] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1052E-F, 1053C-D, *Comm. Not.* 1084D-E (*SVF* 2.806), Hierocles, 1.15-33 (= LS 53B2-3). Wildberger (2006), p. 219, and n. 1069 for further references.
[723] Cf. Setaioli (2007), p. 347.
[724] That is, according to the 'spare the rod and spoil the child'-principle. See chapter 6.
[725] Epict. *Diss.*1.9.4. Cf. Philo *Quaest. Gen.* 3.48 (*SVF* 2.740), which is a possible reflection of Stoic theory.
[726] *EM* 44.1: "All men, if traced back to their original source, spring from the gods." *Omnes, si ad originem primam revocantur, a dis sunt.*

life here on earth,[727] after which it will return to its place of origin.[728] At first sight, this seems to be a flat contradiction of the Stoic idea, noted above, that the human soul simply does not exist up until the moment of birth. That our soul hails from a higher reality is a well-known Platonic tenet, and its occurrence in Seneca has accordingly been interpreted as caused by the influence of Platonism.[729]

This question will be considered in a larger context, since many of the passages in which Seneca describes the human soul as hailing from the heavens also advocate the return of our soul to this exalted origin of ours,[730] while giving a low estimation of our bodies. The dualism between body and soul expressed in these passages and the emphasis on the elevation of our minds have been interpreted as indicative of a tendency in Seneca towards a Platonic view of an immaterial and immortal soul that must endeavour to escape the body and transcend the mortal and material realm.[731] Before turning to these passages, we will consider Seneca's opinions on the fate of the human soul after death.

4.2 Death and the afterlife

The Stoics held that when the human soul is separated from the body at death, the soul continues to exist as an individual entity. This continued existence is due to the pneumatic nature of the soul. Contrary to the Epicureans, who believed that the soul was held together by the body and thus could not survive the separation of the two, the Stoics maintained that the soul, as the active and formative principle of the soul-body compound that we are, is capable of surviving this separation.[732]

The duration of this continued existence was not agreed upon: Cleanthes believed that the souls of all the deceased lived on until the conflagration, while according to Chrysippus (and the Stoic tradition after him) only the souls of sages did so, while the souls of non-sages perished sometime after the separation from the body, but before, i.e. not during, the conflagration.[733] The duration of a soul's postmortem existence was linked to the *tonos* of that soul in the sense that souls with a weaker *tonos* collapsed sooner than those with a stronger, with the sage's soul being the epitome of the latter.[734] There is not much evidence on what this postmortem existence consisted in, but it appears that the Stoics believed these souls

---

[727] *NQ* 1.Praef.11-12, *EM* 41.4-5, *EM* 65.16, 20-21, 92.29-32, *Helv.* 6.6, *Ben.* 3.28.2.
[728] *EM* 79.12, 86.1, 102.21, 120.14-18, *Marc.* 23.1-2, 24.5, *Polyb.* 9.3, 7-8.
[729] Zeller (1909), p. 737, Donini (1982), p. 201-2.
[730] I.e. during life, as distinguished from the passages where the soul is said to return to its higher origin after death.
[731] Donini (1979), p. 210-12, 221-25, Gauly (2004), p. 170-76.
[732] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.72, Posidonius Fr. 149 EK. Cf. Algra (2009b), p. 369-72.
[733] D.L. 7.157 (*SVF* 1.522, 2.811), Arius Didymus fr. 39 Diels (*SVF* 2.809)
[734] Aetius 4.7.3 (*SVF* 2.810).

to move upwards into the upper layers of the sublunar realm and, like the heavenly bodies, to receive sustenance from the exhalations of the earth and terrestrial waters.[735]

Later Stoics appear to have been more hesitant about the possibility of an afterlife. Epictetus does not concern himself with the issue much, and when he does he favours the idea that when we die we simply (and entirely) dissolve into our constitutive elements.[736] Marcus Aurelius is hesitant, saying time and again that death is either a change (*metastasis*) or simply extinction (*sbesis*).[737] Once he considers the standard Stoic view related above, viz. that the souls of the dead live on for a while before dissolving into "the seminal principle of the whole",[738] but he does not affirm or reject it.[739]

Seneca's position is notoriously difficult to establish, since it appears to be shifting.[740] Sometimes he advocates the Stoic position that the soul, or at least the sage's soul, will live until the conflagration;[741] at other times he resembles Marcus Aurelius in his agnosticism and asserts simply that death is "either the end or a change."[742] He can even deny the possibility of the soul's survival altogether, and one of his longer explorations of the topic is preceded by his concession that the idea of an afterlife is merely "a beautiful dream."[743]

To come to a better understanding of Seneca's ideas on this topic, we must take a closer look at the various passages in which we find these different positions, and take their context into consideration. Not surprisingly, this context is often of a consolatory kind, with Seneca arguing why death is not to be feared or mourned. As will become clear, Seneca's concern for the vested interest that we humans have in possible immortality must be taken into account when judging the doctrinal value of such passages. Before turning to these passages,

---

[735] Cf. Sextus Emp. *M* 9.71 on the soul moving upwards to the sphere of the moon; 9.73 reports the souls as being fed by exhalations. In Cic. *Tusc.* 1.42-7 there is a lengthy exposition on the soul as being of such a light constituency that, after death, it leaves the body and soars up into the heavens and lives a life of bliss and knowledge, while being nourished, like the heavenly bodies, by moist exhalations from the earth. It is impossible to find an exact source for this passage, but the lightness of the soul is explicitly credited to Panaetius and the lightness and heat attributed to the soul suggests that it is considered to be corporeal, which makes it at least possible that the passage is Stoic. Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 224 and n. 1098. Cf. Plato *Tim.* 42b, where it is said that the souls of the dead, provided they have have led a morally good life, will return to the star they descended from at the moment of birth into a human body.

[736] Epict. *Diss.* 3.13.14-15, 1.9.10-17. See Hoven (1971), p. 133-37.

[737] MA 3.3, 5.33, 7.32, 8.25, 8.58, 11.3. Marcus' expression is reminiscent of Socrates' desciption of death as either nothing or change (*metabolê*) at *Apol.* 40c.

[738] MA 4.21: εἰς τὸν τῶν ὅλων σπερματικὸν λόγον.

[739] In 4.14, he states simply that we *will* be dissolved into the seminal principle of the whole, but in 4.21 (where he really addresses the issue of a possible afterlife) he does not commit himself.

[740] See Hoven (1971) for an overview of the various Stoics' opinions on the afterlife, including Seneca's, p. 109-26. Rist (1989), p. 2004, claims, based on Hoven's findings, that "it is clear that no single position can be affirmed as Seneca's consistent view."

[741] *Marc.* 26.7.

[742] *EM* 65.24: *Mors quid est? Aut finis aut transitus.* Cf. *EM* 71.16, *Prov.* 6.6.

[743] *EM* 102.2: *bellum somnium.*

we must first briefly examine the one text where he addresses the topic from a theoretical, disinterested viewpoint. [744]

In *EM* 57, Seneca rejects the idea of certain Stoics that when someone is crushed under a heavy object, his soul cannot escape and will fall apart instantaneously.[745] Just as fire is simply displaced by whatever falls on top of it and air flows round whatever moves through it, Seneca argues,

> "similarly the soul, which consists of what is most subtle, cannot be arrested or destroyed inside the body, but, by virtue of its delicate substance, it will rather escape through the very object by which it is being crushed."[746]

This point leads him to consider the immortality of the soul; he does not hazard affirming that the soul is actually immortal, but says that if it can survive the crushing of the body, nothing can crush it, "precisely because it does not perish; for the rule of immortality never admits of exceptions, and nothing can harm that which is eternal."[747]

Theoretically, then, Seneca seems to think it is possible or even likely that the soul is immortal, and in various passages throughout his works, he expresses his belief or hope that this is indeed the case. These passages we will now discuss, starting with letter 102.

4.2.1 The soul survives until the conflagration

In this letter, Seneca ruminates at length on the appealing idea of the eternity of the soul, an idea that does not seem to fit the Stoic world-view, according to which souls can survive at best until the next conflagration, during which there are no individually existing entities.[748] He says that the human soul is "a great and noble thing" (*magna et generosa res*) which has its "homeland" (*patria*) not on earth but in the heavens, among the heavenly bodies.[749] It is trapped inside and constrained by the human body. At death, the soul is stripped of this mortal

---

[744] In what follows, the relevant terms Seneca uses are *aeternus* and *immortalis* and their cognates. The two terms are not exactly synonymous, as will be shown, but Seneca often uses them to express the same idea. For clarity's sake, *aeternus* will be translated as 'eternal' and *immortalis* as 'immortal'.

[745] No Stoic is named, and there is no evidence whatsoever that this was a common Stoic view. At most, then, this is the opinion of a minor Stoic, all the more since it seems hard to reconcile with Stoic physics, according to which the soul consists of very fine *pneuma*, which can penetrate other bodies wholly. Cf. Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1084D (*SVF* 2.806).

[746] *EM* 57.8: *sic animus, qui ex tenuissimo constat, deprehendi non potest nec intra corpus effligi, sed beneficio subtilitatis suae per ipsa, quibus premitur, erumpit.* Cf. 57.8: "Just as lightning, no matter how widely it strikes and flashes, makes its return through a narrow opening, so the soul, which is still subtler than fire (*tenuior est igne*), has a way of escape through any part of the body (*per omne corpus fuga est*)." Seneca agrees with the standard Stoic view here, see the previous note.

[747] *EM* 57.9: *propter quod non perit, quoniam nulla immortalitas cum exceptione est nec quicquam noxium aeterno est.*

[748] See section 4.2 above.

[749] *EM* 102.21.

shell, and is born again, so to say, with the body being thrown away like the afterbirth.[750] Our temporary existence on earth is a mere prelude to a longer and better life,[751] and we should thus not fear the day we die, because it is "the birthday of our eternity."[752] After death, we shall know the secrets of nature and bask in the divine light and even in life we should prepare ourselves for this blissful eternity, by withdrawing from the body and its pleasures as much as possible, and contemplating higher and nobler things.[753]

Apart from this letter, the most elaborate and explicit affirmations of the soul's eternity are found in Seneca's three consolatory letters, i.e. *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, resp. *Polybium* and *Helviam*. He tries to convince Marcia, e.g., by saying that her son is better off now that he is dead:

> "Only the image of your son – and a very imperfect likeness it was – has perished; he himself is eternal and has reached now a far better state, stripped of all outward encumbrances and left simply himself."[754]

Likewise, Polybius' dead brother should not be mourned, since "at last he is free, at last safe, at last eternal."[755] Finally, in trying to convince his mother Helvia that his exile is nothing to worry about, Seneca claims that it is only the human body that is subject to all kinds of mishap, since "the soul itself is sacred and eternal, and upon it no hand can be laid."[756] Again, he says that he is perfectly fine in exile, since he has time to let his soul wander through the cosmos, where, "mindful of its own eternity, it proceeds to all that has been and will ever be throughout the ages of all time."[757]

In all these passages, then, the soul is said to be eternal (*aeternus*), which might seem to be somewhat unusual, given Seneca's adherence to the periodical conflagration and renewal of the cosmos.[758] His characterization of the soul as *aeternus* may well be hyperbolic, as is shown by a passage at the very end of the consolatory letter to Marcia, where he describes the mortality of all things:

> "And when the time shall come for the world to be blotted out in order that it may begin its life anew, these things will destroy themselves by their own power, and

[750] *EM* 102.22-28.
[751] *EM* 102.23: *Per has mortalis aevi moras illi meliori vitae longiorique proluditur.*
[752] *EM* 102.26: *aeterni natalis est.*
[753] *EM* 102.28-9.
[754] *Marc.* 24.5: *Imago dumtaxat fili tui perit et effigies non simillima; ipse quidem aeternus meliorisque nunc status est, despoliatus oneribus alienis et sibi relictus.* Cf. 19.6: "a great and everlasting peace (*pax aeterna*) has welcomed him." Cf. 25.3.
[755] *Polyb.* 9.7: *Tandem liber, tandem tutus, tandem aeternus est.*
[756] *Helv.* 11.7: *Animus quidem ipse sacer et aeternus est et cui non possit inici manus.*
[757] *Helv.* 20.2: *aeternitatis suae memor in omne quod fuit futurumque est vadit omnibus saeculis.*
[758] See chapter 4.

> stars will clash with stars, and all the fiery matter of the world that now shines in orderly array will blaze up in a common conflagration. Then we too, souls blessed and partaking of eternity, when it shall seem best to god that these things be built anew, shall, as a small addition to the enormous destruction, be changed into our former elements."[759]

Seneca does not, then, see any problem in claiming both that the soul is eternal and that it will be dissolved during the conflagration. To put it differently: this passage is a strong indication that by 'eternal' (*aeternus*) Seneca means 'existing until the next conflagration'.[760] The fact that the heavenly bodies, though destined to be destroyed in the conflagration as well, are also labelled as *aeternus* further corroborates this idea.[761] In other contexts, too, *aeternus* is used to indicate the considerable longevity of something that clearly is not thought of as being truly everlasting.[762] Likewise, *immortalis* as used by Seneca often does not literally mean 'immortal'.[763] He often speaks of "the immortal gods" (*di immortales*), i.e. in the plural. Strictly speaking, of course, a Stoic cannot accept a plurality of immortal gods, since only the active principle that is god is immortal.[764] In some cases, *di immortales* refers to the heavenly bodies, which, as we have seen, Seneca believes to be perishable.[765] In other contexts this is less obvious

---

[759] *Marc.* 26.7: *Nos quoque felices animae et aeterna sortitae, cum deo visum erit iterum ista moliri, labentibus cunctis et ipsae parva ruinae ingentis accessio in antiqua elementa vertemur.* Cf. *EM* 71.13: "Whatever is, will cease to be, and yet it will not perish (*peribit*), but will be dispersed (*resolvetur*)."

[760] See Hoven (1971), p. 110, 120; Setaioli (2000), p. 303-5.

[761] Cf. *NQ* 2.10.2, 7.22.1, 7.23.2, 7.25.6, 7.27.2. Cf. *Ben.* 21.4, 23.1.

[762] Cf. *Marc.* 26.1 (where *aeternus* is predicated of Marcia's father's political activities), *Vit. Beat.* 2.2 (we should strive for *felicitatis aeternae*), *Tranq. An.* 15.5 (to worry about other people's misfortune leads to *aeterna miseria*), *NQ* 3.9.2 (under the earth there is *frigus aeternum*), 4b.11.5 (certain mountains have *vertices aeterna nive*). In *EM* 59.19 Seneca discusses the Platonic ideas and a particular Idea is called an *exemplar aeternum*. Here it may be taken to literally mean 'eternal', since Seneca is describing Plato's ideas, not his own; cf. 58.24. Occasionally, however, Seneca really does mean *aeternus* as eternal when describing Stoic theory, such as when the divine reason (*ratio aeterna*) in all things is said to be *aeternus* (*EM* 90.29). Fate, too, is often said to be eternal: cf. *EM* 77.12, *Prov.* 5.6, *Marc.* 18.2, *NQ* 2.35.2.

[763] In several passages it really does mean immortal: in *Otio* 4.2 Seneca says we should study "whether the cosmos (*mundus*) is immortal (*immortalis*), or is to be counted among the things that perish (*caduca*) are are born for only a time (*ad tempus nata*)", and in *EM* 58.14 says that Stoic ontology distinguishes *mortalia* and *immortalia*. In *EM* 65.7, he describes the Platonic ideas as being immortal. Seneca also uses the term metaphorically, when in *Tranq. An.* 16.4 he claims several *exempla* of Stoic virtue, such as Hercules, Regulus and Cato, to have "reached immortality by dying (*ad immortalitatem moriendo venerunt*)." Taking the context into account, it quickly becomes apparent that this does not refer to their postmortem existence but is meant to convey their legendary status and widespread fame, which they mainly got through their brave stance towards their own deaths: cf. *EM* 67.7: "the cup of poison which removed Socrates from gaol to heaven (*e carcere in caelum*)." In *Polyb.* 18.2 it is said that while all other human achievements will perish, "the fame of genius is immortal (*immortalis est ingeni memoria*)." Cf. *Prov.* 3.12, *Tranq.* 14.10, *Brev.* 15.4 and Fr. 176 Vottero (Lact. *Div. Inst.* 3.12.11). See Hoven (1971), p. 113, Wildberger (2006), p. 132, n. 676.

[764] Cf. Algra (2004).

[765] *Tranq.* 8.5, *Ben.* 7.3.2

or likely, but there he uses the term to rather loosely refer to the divine governance of the cosmos.[766]

It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that when Seneca describes the human soul as *aeternus*, he does not commit himself to any true eternity or immortality of the soul.[767] He does express the idea that the soul is of such a nature that it lives on after death up until the conflagration, a privilege it shares with the heavenly bodies. Seneca's position here does not differ from the orthodox Stoic one described above,[768] then, other than that his consolatory efforts may cause him to put his case somewhat hyperbolically.

4.2.2 Doubts about the survival of the soul

There is reasonable doubt, however, whether what Seneca in the consolatory letters and in *EM* 102 says about the survival of the soul truly expresses his deepest convictions on the topic. The whole exposition in *EM* 102, e.g., forms the conclusion of a letter that starts off with Seneca 'chastising' Lucilius for waking from a dream he has been having. This dream was about the immortality of the soul, he took pleasure in it and was hoping it might actually be true, being himself already old and close to death.[769] The dream was triggered by his thinking about certain ideas that are not primarily his own, he says, but those of learned men he is reading. These learned men, as he puts it, give him the hope that death may not be the end:

> "For I was lending a ready ear to the opinions of the great authors, who promise rather than prove this most pleasing condition."[770]

That an actual afterlife is promised rather than posited, is significant here, as is Seneca's remark that it was a beautiful dream[771] from which he did not want to wake and that he hoped might be true.[772] As opposed to the passages discussed above where he confidently endorses the

---

[766] *Prov.* 2.12, 4.6, 5.5, *Const. Sap.* 2.1, *Ira* 2.27.1, *Marc.* 12.4, *Helv.* 11.5, *Ben.* 1.1.9, 2.29.6, 7.7.3, *Clem.* 1.1.4, *EM* 7.5, 90.1, 92.27, 95.36, 115.12, 124.14, *NQ* 2.37.2.
[767] See Setaioli (2000), Wildberger (2006), p. 24, n. 154.
[768] Cf. Arnold (1911), p. 268-9. It should be noted, however, that he does not seem to restrict the existence up until the conflagration to the souls of sages only and thus shares Cleanthes' rather than Chrysippus' view. This may well have been prompted by the consolatory context: it would be a bit pointless to say that Marcia's son, if only he had been a sage, would live to see the end of all things.
[769] *EM* 102.1-2. Seneca was well into his sixties when writing this letter. Passages such as these contradict the claim of Rist (1989), p. 2004, that the multitude of opinions on the matter of the soul's mortality show that "in a sense, he [Seneca] seems uninterested; he is happy to say that morality itself gives us immortal fame when we have learned to live in the right way." This 'immortality through morality' is certainly emphasized by Seneca, but that does not mean that he does not care about the potential afterlife of the soul. If anything, the fact that he considers various possibilities shows that it occupies him a great deal.
[770] *EM* 102.2: *Praebebam enim me facilem opinionibus magnorum virorum rem gratissimam promittentium magis quam probantium.*
[771] *EM* 102. 2: *bellum somnium.*
[772] Cf. *EM* 63.16: "And perhaps, if only the tale told by wise men (*sapientium fama*) is true and there is a bourne to welcome us, then he whom we think we have lost has only been sent on ahead (*praemissus est*)." The *sapientium fama*, which are reminiscent of *opinionibus magnorum virorum* in *EM* 102.2, are

Stoic idea of qualified survival of the soul, Seneca here dares to do no more than say that it is a desirable condition;[773] when in the latter part of *EM* 102 Seneca describes the soul as surviving death, then, it may well be that his position there is brought about by this desire.

This acknowledgement of a personal interest in the survival of the soul is also important when considering what he says in the consolatory letters. In those to Marcia and Polybius, he tries to explain why their deceased beloved should not be mourned and in the one to Helvia he argues that his exile is not a bad thing because he himself (i.e. his soul) is never in exile. In other words, the addressees have the same interest in a blessed postmortem existence of the soul that Seneca expresses in *EM* 102. That in itself is not enough to decide that what he says about the soul's afterlife is not genuine: he might, after all, understand and share the common wish for an afterlife *and* as a philosopher be convinced that there actually is an afterlife (albeit of the Stoic variety).

There is more, however, since even in two of the consolatory letters Seneca is not ready to affirm the survival of the soul in any definite way. In these letters, and in other passages as well, he expresses his doubts by saying that the survival of the soul is merely one of two mutually exclusive possibilities, the other being the return to the state of nothingness we were in before we were born.[774] Several paragraphs before his emphatic statements about Polybius' brother being free and *aeternus* he mentions a post-mortem existence merely as one of the two possible fates of the soul of a dead person, both of which ensure that it will not suffer and therefore need not be mourned – the other being that he has returned to a state of oblivion:

> "If I grieve on his account, I must decide that one or the other of the following views is true. For, if the dead retain no feeling whatever, my brother has escaped from all the ills of life, and has been restored to that state in which he had been before he was born, and, exempt from every ill, he fears nothing, desires nothing, suffers nothing.[775] [...] If, however, the dead do retain some feeling, at this moment my brother's soul, released, as it were, from its long imprisonment, exults to be at last its own lord and master, enjoys the spectacle of nature, and from its higher place looks

---

here presented as a mere preferable possibility. Cf. *EM* 76.25: "If only it is true that our souls, when released from the body, stil abide, a happier condition (*felicior status*) is in store for them than is theirs while they dwell in the body." Cf. *Tranq.* 14.8, where Seneca quotes Julius Canus, a Stoic philosopher, as saying, when he was about to be executed on Caligula's orders: " 'Why', said he, 'are you sorrowful?' You are wondering whether our souls are immortal; but I shall soon know.' "

[773] In chapter 7 we will discuss various other passages in which Seneca professes his uncertainty as to certain aspects of the soul. Cf. Wlosok (1960) p. 28, who argues that in the imperial age matters such as the fate of the soul after death started to shift from being philosophical topics to matters of hope and religious conviction. Cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.24: "The views of the rest of the teachers offer the hope, if this rejoice you, that souls, on their separation from the body, find their way to heaven as to their dwelling-place."

[774] As noted in the case of Marcus Aurelius, this view of death as 'the end or change' has its literary origin in Plat. *Apol.* 40c. See Hoven (1971), p. 114.

[775] This is a Epicurean argument against the fear of death; cf. Lucr. *DRN* 3.830ff. See section 4.2.3 below for further discussion of Seneca's use of Epicurean arguments.

> down upon all human things, while upon things divine, the explanation of which it had so long sought in vain, it gazes with a nearer vision. And so why should I pine away in yearning for him who either is happy or does not exist?"[776]

In the consolation to Marcia, Seneca argues alternately that the soul survives death, as discussed above, and that death is nothing to us since dying means reverting to the state of nothingness we were in before we were born.[777] In other works, too, Seneca considers different possibilities without making a definite choice. In *EM* 24, e.g., he says that

> "Death either annihilates us or strips us bare. If we are then released, there remains the better part, after the burden has been withdrawn; if we are annihilated, nothing remains; good and bad are alike removed."[778]

In *EM* 65 and *De Providentia*, too, he calls death either the end or change,[779] and he does the same in *EM* 71:

> "Let great souls comply with god's wishes, and suffer unhesitatingly whatever fate the law of the universe ordains; for the soul at death is either sent forth into a better life, destined to dwell with the deity amid greater radiance and calm, or else, at least,

---

[776] *Polyb.* 9.2-3: *Si illius nomine doleo, necesse est alterutrum ex his duobus esse iudicem. Nam si nullus defunctis sensus superest, evasit omnia frater meus vitae incommoda et in eum restitutus est locum, in quo fuerat antequam nasceretur, et expers omnis mali nihil timet, nihil cupit, nihil patitur. [...] Si est aliquis defunctis sensus, nunc animus fratris mei velut ex diutino carcere emissus, tandem sui iuris et arbitrii, gestit et rerum naturae spectaculo fruitur et humana omnia ex loco superiore despicit, divina vero, quorum rationem tam diu frustra quaesierat, propius intuetur. Quid itaque eius desiderio maceror, qui aut beatus aut nullus est?* This passage is in first person singular, because it is what Seneca wants Polybius to consider for himself. A similar argument is found in *Polyb.* 5.1-2. and also in Cic. *Tusc.* 1.25.

[777] *Marc.* 19.5: "Death is a release from all suffering, a boundary beyond which our ills cannot pass – it restores us to that peaceful state in which we lay before we were born. If anyone pities the dead, he must also pity those who have not been born. Death is neither a good nor an evil; for only what is something is able to be a good or an evil. But that which is itself nothing and reduces all things to nothingness consigns us to neither sphere of fortune: for evils and goods must operate upon something material. Fortune cannot maintain a hold upon that which nature has let go, nor can he be wretched who is non-existent."

[778] *EM* 24.18: *Mors nos aut consumit aut exuit. Emissis meliora restant onere detracto, consumptis nihil restat, bona pariter malaque submota sunt.* Cf. *EM* 93.10: "" 'And yet', says the wise man, 'I do not depart more valiantly because of this hope – because I judge the path lies clear before me to my own gods. I have indeed earned admission to their presence, and in fact have already been in their company; I have sent my soul to them as they had previously sent theirs to me. But suppose I am utterly annihilated, and that after death nothing mortal remains; I have no less courage, even if, when I depart, my course leads – nowhere.' "

[779] *EM* 65.24: *Mors quid est? Aut finis aut transitus. Prov.* 6.6: "Scorn death, which either ends you or transfers you (*finit aut transfert*)."

> without suffering any harm to itself, it will be mingled with nature again, and will return to the universe."[780]

The better life mentioned as one of the options here refers to the beatific afterlife as described in the consolatory letters, but here it is just one of two possible fates of the soul of dead person, the other being the dissolution of the soul back into the cosmos.

4.2.3 There is no survival of the soul

There are even passages in which Seneca simply says that death is a return to a state of nothingness. In these passages he claims that we need not fear dying, because when we die, we simply revert to the same oblivious state we were in before we were born.[781] He even uses Epicurus' argument that death is not harmful, since death means non-existence, and what does not exist cannot be harmed.[782] In such passages Seneca tries to take away the fear that people have of dying itself and of being punished in the underworld.[783] At the same time, however, he is sensitive to the fact that for many the idea of death as a state of oblivion is scant comfort, "for the fear of going to the underworld is equalled by the fear of going nowhere."[784] As a Stoic, however, Seneca can always point to the fact that even though the soul may not survive death, it will eventually be reborn in the next world cycle:

> "Whatever is will cease to be, and yet it will not perish, but will be resolved into its elements. To our minds, this process means perishing, for we behold only that which is nearest; our sluggish mind, under allegiance to the body, does not penetrate to bournes beyond. Were it not so, the mind would endure with greater courage its own ending and that of its possessions, if only it could hope that life and death, like the whole universe about us, go by turns, that whatever has been put together is broken up again, that whatever has been broken up is put together again, and that the eternal craftsmanship of god, who controls all things is working at this task."[785]

---

[780] *EM* 71.16: *Magnus animus deo pareat et quicquid lex universi iubet, sine cunctatione patiatur; aut in meliorem emittitur vitam lucidius tranquilliusque inter divina mansurus aut certe sine ullo futurus incommodo sui naturae remiscebitur et revertetur in totum.*

[781] *EM* 54.4-5, 77.11.

[782] *EM* 30.6, 36.9, 99.30, *Marc.* 19.4-6. Epicurus expresses the idea in his letter to Menoeceus (D.L. 10.125); it also occurs in Lucretius: cf. *DRN* 3.830ff.

[783] Seneca has no patience for popular ideas about postmortem punishment, Cerberus, fire, damnation and the like: cf. *EM* 24.18, 82.16, *Marc.* 19.4. Cf. Lucr. *DRN* 3.966-1023.

[784] *EM* 82.16: *Aeque enim timent, ne apud inferos sint, quam ne nusquam.*

[785] *EM* 71.13-14: *Quicquid est, non erit, nec peribit, sed resolvetur. Nobis solvi perire est, proxima enim intuemur; ad ulteriora non prospicit mens hebes et quae se corpori addixerit; alioqui fortius finem sui suorumque pateretur, si speraret, ut omnia illa, sic vitam mortemque per vices ire et composita dissolvi, dissoluta componi, in hoc opere aeternam artem cuncta temperantis dei verti.*

The following passage expresses how this idea of periodic destruction and renewal of the soul is a better solace for those who fear dying than Epicurus' argument that death does not affect us.

> "In death there is nothing harmful; for there must exist something to which it is harmful. And yet, if you are possessed by so great a craving for a longer life, reflect that none of the objects which vanish from our gaze and are re-absorbed into the world of things, from which they have come forth and are soon to come forth again, is annihilated; they merely end their course and do not perish. And death, which we fear and shrink from, merely interrupts life, but does not steal it away; the time will return when we shall be restored to the light of day."[786]

4.2.4 The reason for the multitude of viewpoints

Having examined the various views that Seneca expresses on the afterlife of the soul, since they are so diverse, sometimes even conflicting, and often put hesitantly, we must conclude that Seneca simply did not feel confident to hold to the (or a) Stoic theory. The soul, Seneca admits in one of his letters, is difficult to know, saying that "we know that we possess souls, but we do not know the essence, the place, the quality, or the source, of the soul."[787] It is possible to see, however, *why* Seneca generally does not admit his uncertainty, but comes up with so many different ideas. He is very much aware of the universal fear of death and the hope that there is something beyond the grave, and the widespread belief that there is, for better or worse, some kind of afterlife.[788] Often, especially in the consolatory letters, he is trying to convince the addressees of his letters that death is not to be feared, and he is willing to use all kinds of

---

[786] *EM* 36.10: *Mors nullum habet incommodum; esse enim debet aliquid, cuius sit incommodum. Quod si tanta cupiditas te longioris aevi tenet, cogita nihil eorum, quae ab oculis abeunt et in rerum naturam, ex qua prodierunt ac mox processura sunt, reconduntur, consumi; desinunt ista, non pereunt. Et mors, quam pertimescimus ac recusamus, intermittit vitam, non eripit; veniet iterum, qui nos in lucem reponat dies.*

[787] *EM* 121.12. This epistemic uncertainty about the soul's exact nature, and thus its capacity to survive the separation from the body, is best understood in the wider context of Seneca's views on human epistemological capabilities as discussed in chapter 7. For now, it is enough to point out that Seneca's hesitance on this particular topic need not come as a surprise, considering that Cleanthes and Chrysippus, e.g., disagreed on certain details concerning the nature of the soul, such as the longevity of the soul after the separation from the body that was noted above (section 4.2).

[788] In *EM* 117.6 he says that the Stoics, when discussing the eternity of the soul, take popular opinion very seriously: *Cum de animarum aeternitate disserimus, non leve momentum apud nos habet consensus hominum aut timentium inferos aut colentium.* He does not, however, divulge what the Stoic position is or how it is influenced by this popular opinion. It may be, as Hoven (1971), p. 124 argues, that Seneca simply means that the Stoics saw the widespread belief in an afterlife as supportive of their own view that souls could survive the death of the body. The words *aut timentium inferos aut colentium* may shed some light on this issue; the popular belief was that the souls of the dead had an afterlife in the underworld. The Stoics rejected this idea by arguing that due to the lightness and fineness of the soul, it cannot move down into Hades, but soars upwards into the sky - cf. Sextus Emp. *M* 9.71 (*SVF* 2.812). There is evidence, however, that they believed the souls of the dead (called *hêroes*) could work as forces of good (and maybe of evil as well) in the cosmos. Cf. Algra (2009b), p. 369-72.

arguments, even incompatible ones, in order to achieve that goal.[789] Seneca is not the first Stoic to do so: Chrysippus, in his *On the Passions*, sanctioned the use of non-Stoical arguments for therapeutical purposes. An Epicurean who fears death, e.g., might be better served (in the short run) with Epicurus' argument that death is nothing to us because we are not there to experience it, than by quickly trying to convert him to the Stoic world view.[790]

4.2.5 Conclusion

Seneca's view on the fate of the soul after death may be characterized as follows. The Stoics had always held that there is some form of afterlife for the human soul; it is a part of the divine and active *pneuma* that suffuses all things and capable of some form of individual existence apart from the body. There was some disagreement on how long it could survive, but the common view was that the souls of sages could live on up until, and could only be destroyed by, the conflagration, while the souls of everyone else would perish a certain amount of time after the person's death, due to the weakness of their *tonos*. The souls of the dead probably had some kind of individual existence in the upper layers of the sublunar realm, living a life similar to that of the divine heavenly bodies, though the evidence is scarce here.

We can see how these ideas recur in Seneca, and how certain aspects appeal to him, but also that he is hesitant to confirm them in any definite way. He agrees that the soul is a part of divine *pneuma*, being the principle of life, movement, perception and reason in us and allowing us to become as perfectly rational as god himself. It is made of the same subtle *pneuma* as the heavenly bodies and Seneca considers that this might enable it, like the heavenly bodies, to survive up until the conflagration.[791] This 'physical' argument is not pursued further, but the idea of an afterlife recurs in several other passages, mostly in consolatory contexts. Even in these consolatory works, however, he voices his doubts as to the actual truth of this idea; in many other passages, too, he is much more hesitant about any postmortem existence or even denies it. It seems reasonable to assume that Seneca is attracted by the idea of an afterlife of the soul, and that he puts it to good use for consolatory purposes, but that it is no more than an ideal or, as he puts it himself, a beautiful dream.[792]

4.3 The abode of the surviving soul and the return to its origin

We have seen, then, that insofar as Seneca accepts an afterlife for the soul, he extends the Stoic view that at least some souls can live on until the next conflagration to all souls. In many of these passages, however, there is something new in what Seneca envisions the postmortem existence of the soul to consist in. The souls of the dead, he often claims, when they are

---

[789] In *Marc.* 19.4-6, e.g., he tries to convince Marcia with both the Stoic argument that her son's soul will live on *and* the Epicurean one that her son cannot be suffering, because he no longer exists (see above). The use of these two arguments in combination shows that Seneca's concern to provide help outweighs the importance of doctrinal uniformity.

[790] Orig. *Cels.* 1.64 and 8.51 (*SVF* 3.474). Cf. Tieleman (2003), p 166-9 and Tieleman (2007), p. 141.

[791] *EM* 57.7-9, see section 4.2.

[792] *EM* 102.2.

released from the body, soar back up into their place of origin, the heavens, and live a life of peace and bliss among other souls and the heavenly bodies. This idea is expressed, e.g., in what follows on a passage from the consolatory letter to Marcia cited above.[793]

> "This vesture of the body which we see, bones and sinews and the skin that covers us, this face and the hands that serve us and the rest of our human wrapping – these are but chains and darkness to our souls. By these things the soul is crushed and strangled and stained and, imprisoned in error, is kept far from its true and natural sphere. It constantly struggles against this weight of the flesh in the effort to avoid being dragged back and sunk; it ever strives to rise to that place from which it once descended. There eternal peace awaits it when it has passed from earth's gloom and confusion to the vision of all that is pure and bright."[794]

This is what befell Marcia's son, Seneca argues, so there is no need to mourn over his remains - he himself has gone to a happier place:

> "A saintly band gave him welcome – the Scipios and the Catos and, joined with those who scorned life and through a draught of poison found freedom, your father, Marcia. Although there all are akin with all, he keeps his grandson near him, and, while your son rejoices in the newfound light, he instructs him in the movement of the neighbouring stars, and gladly initiates him into nature's secrets, not by guesswork, but by experience having true knowledge of them all. [...] Throughout the free and boundless spaces of eternity they wander; [...] there every way is level, and, being swift and unencumbered, they easily are pervious to the matter of the stars and, in turn, are mingled with it."[795]

---

[793] *Marc.* 24.5. See section 4.2.1.

[794] *Marc.* 24.5: *Haec quae vides circumdata nobis, ossa nervos et obductam cutem vultumque et ministras manus et cetera quibus involuti sumus, vincula animorum tenebraeque sunt. Obruitur his, offocatur, inficitur, arcetur a veris et suis in falsa coiectus. Omne illi cum hac gravi carne certamen est, ne abstrahatur et sidat; nititur illo, unde demissus est. Ibi illum aeterna requies manet ex confusis crassisque pura et liquida visentem.* Cf. 23.1. Cf. *EM* 79.12: "Our soul will not have reason to rejoice in its lot until, freed from this darkness in which it gropes, it has not merely glimpsed the brightness with feeble vision, but has absorbed the full light of day and has been restored to its place in heaven (*caelo suo*), – until, indeed, it has regained the place (*receperit locum*) which it held at the allotment of its birth (*sorte nascendi*). The soul is summoned upward by its very origin (*initia*)."

[795] *Marc.* 25.1-3: *Excepit illum coetus sacer, Scipiones Catonesque, interque contemptores vitae et veneficio liberos parens tuus, Marcia. Ille nepotem suum – quamquam illic omnibus omne cognatum est – applicat sibi nova luce gaudentem et vicinorum siderum meatus docet, nec ex coniectura sed omnium ex vero peritus in arcana naturae libens ducit. [...] Aeternarum rerum per libera et vasta spatia dimissi sunt; [...] omnia ibi plana et ex facili mobiles et expediti et in vicem pervii sunt intermixtique sideribus.* Scipio Africanus' soul as having returned to the heavens is also mentioned in *EM* 86.1: "That his soul has indeed returned to the heavens (*in caelum*), whence it came (*ex quo erat*), I am convinced [...] because he showed moderation and a sense of duty to a marvellous extent." Cf. *Polyb.* 9.8: "He delights now in the open and boundless

The last lines of this passage shed light on what he says on the souls of the dead returning to their place of origin. The soul, Seneca holds, is made of the same stuff as the heavenly bodies, which allows it to move through them smoothly and unhindered. The heavenly bodies, as we have seen, consist of aether, the purest form of fire,[796] and our soul does too:

> "It [our soul] was not formed from heavy and terrestrial matter, it came down from yonder spirit in the sky; [...] the human soul has been formed from the same elements as these divine beings [the heavenly bodies]."[797]

The early Stoics, too, held the soul to have the finest and most subtle substance,[798] enabling it to suffuse heavier bodies, such as, indeed, the human body. Like Seneca, then, they believed that the soul was essentially similar to god or the gods, including the heavenly bodies.[799] Seneca's position seems to differ from that of the early Stoics in two respects, however: first, the Stoics did not hold that the soul would move all the way up into the sphere of the planets and stars, but that it would remain in the sublunar realm,[800] where it would draw nourishment from the exhalations of the earth, just like the heavenly bodies.[801] Second, as said, they probably did not believe the soul to have descended from the aethereal sphere surrounding the cosmos, but to have come into existence at the moment of birth.[802] Both ideas, the heavenly origin of the soul and its return to this origin after death, are common, however, to Platonist theories and can be traced back to the *Timaeus*.[803] One passage in particular appears to be an echo of a passage in the *Timaeus* where the embodied human soul is said to nourish itself on its roots in the heavens and to return to this divine place of origin after death.[804] The passage in Seneca is from *EM* 41:

> "When a soul rises superior to other souls, when it is under control, when it passes through every experience as if it were of small account, when it smiles at our fears and at our prayers, it is stirred by a force from heaven. A thing like this cannot

heaven (*caelo*), from a low and sunken region he has darted aloft to that place (whatever it be) which receives in its happy embrace souls that are freed from their chains; and he now roams there, and explores with supreme delight all the blessings of nature."

[796] See chapter 3, section 3.2.

[797] *Helv.* 6.7-8: *Non est ex terreno et gravi concreta corpore, ex illo caelesti spiritu descendit; [...] humanum animum ex isdem, quibus divina constant, seminibus compositum.*

[798] Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1084D (*SVF* 2.806).

[799] See section 2 above for references.

[800] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.73 (*SVF* 2.812). Cf Wildberger (2006), p. 225, Hoven (1971), p. 66-78.

[801] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.73 (*SVF* 2.812) Cf. *SVF* 2.659, Cic. *ND* 2.118 (*SVF* 2.593). Seneca also believes the heavenly bodies to be nourished by exhalations; cf. *NQ* 6.16.2.

[802] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1052E-F, 1053C-D, *Comm. Not.* 1084D-E (*SVF* 2.806), Hierocles, 1.15-33 (= LS (1987) 53B2-3). See above, section 4.1.

[803] Cf. Plat. *Tim.* 41e, where each human soul is appointed its own star, in which it resides before being embodied; after death, the souls of those who have lived well will be returned to their respective stars (42b).

[804] Plat. *Tim.* 90a.

> stand upright unless it be propped by the divine. Therefore, a greater part of it abides in that place from whence it came down to earth. Just as the rays of the sun do indeed touch the earth, but still abide at the source from which they are sent; even so the great and hallowed soul, which has come down in order that we may have a nearer knowledge of divinity, does indeed associate with us, but still cleaves to its origin; on that source it depends, thither it turns its gaze and strives to go, and it concerns itself with our doings only as a being superior to ourselves."[805]

Such passages in Seneca, then, might be thought to go beyond what a Stoic might say on the nature of the human soul and to reveal a direct or indirect influence from Platonism, as is held by some.[806]

Even though there can be little doubt that Seneca here employs Platonic imagery, we should be wary of seeing this as a true divergence from Stoicism, since the evidence on the Stoic position on both issues (the origin of the soul and its postmortem abode) leaves much to be desired. Starting with the latter point, the report in Sextus referred to earlier does indeed indicate that souls stay in the sublunar realm:

> "Nor, indeed, is it possible to suppose that souls move downwards; for since they are of fine particles and no less fiery than of a vaporous nature, they rather soar lightly to the upper regions. [...] For having quitted the sphere of the sun they inhabit the region below the moon, and there, because of the pureness of the air, they continue to remain for a long time, and for their sustenance they use the exhalation which rises from the earth, as do the rest of the stars, and in those regions they have nothing to dissolve them."[807]

This point is also attested by several passages in Tertullian.[808] Posidonius, however, may well have believed that the souls of the dead stay even lower, viz. in the air around us.[809] There is

---

[805] *EM* 41.5: *Animum excellentem, moderatum, omnia tamquam minora transeuntem, quicquid timemus optamusque ridentem, caelestis potentia agitat. Non potest res tanta sine adminiculo numinis stare. Itaque maiore sui parte illic est, unde descndit. Quemadmodum radii solis contingunt quidem terram, sed ibi sunt, unde mittuntur; sic animus magnus ac sacer et in hoc demissus, ut propius divina nossemus, conversatur quidem nobiscum, sed haeret origini suae; illic pendet, illuc spectat ac nititur, nostris tamquam malior interest.*

[806] Cf. Zeller (1909), p. 737, Donini (1982), p. 201-2.

[807] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.71-3 (*SVF* 2.812, transl. Algra (2009b), which is based on the Loeb-translation): καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲ τὰς ψυχὰς ἔνεστιν ὑπονοῆσαι κάτω φερομένας· λεπτομερεῖς γὰρ οὖσαι καὶ οὐχ ἧττον πυρώδεις ἢ πνευματώδεις εἰς τοὺς ἄνω μᾶλλον τόπους κουφοφοροῦσιν. [...] ἔκσκηνοι γοῦν ἡλίου γενόμεναι τὸν ὑπὸ σελήνην οἰκοῦσι τόπον, ἐνθάδε τε διὰ τὴν εἰλικρίνειαν τοῦ ἀέρος πλείονα πρὸς διαμονὴν λαμβάνουσι χρόνον, τροφῇ τε χρῶνται οἰκείᾳ τῇ ἀπὸ γῆς ἀναθυμιάσει ὡς καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἄστρα, τὸ διαλῦσόν τε αὐτὰς ἐν ἐκείνοις τοῖς τόποις οὐκ ἔχουσιν.

[808] Tert. *An.* 54 (*SVF* 2.814). Wildberger (2006), n. 1111, notes that Tertullian may not be very reliable as a source. In Cic. *Tusc.* 1.43, the soul of a deceased person is said to soar upwards until it reaches a height where there are fires that are "composed of a combination of thin air and a moderate solar heat (*iunctis ex*

also a report that Chrysippus said that the souls of the deceased assume a spherical shape,[810] like the heavenly bodies, which suggests they may ascend to the "heavenly fire or *aithêr*."[811] Lactantius, too, hints at this when he says that according to the Stoics the souls of the sages "return to the heavenly abodes from which they had their origin."[812] This is not to deny that the idea of the sublunar realm as the limit to the ascension of surviving souls is Stoic. It might very well be the standard Stoic view, or at least a common one: all the same, the evidence suggests that there may have been different views among the Stoics. When Seneca says that such souls reach the sphere of the planets and stars, then, he need not be unorthodox in doing so.

The evidence of Lactantius is also of interest regarding the second point, i.e. the origin of the soul, which he reports the Stoics as locating in the heavens. Had Lactantius' report been an isolated one, we might have dismissed it, but there is more. In the passage from Sextus cited above, the souls that continue to exist in the region under the moon are said to have "quitted the sphere of the sun" (*ekskênoi goun hêliou*), which suggest that before their embodied state they resided in, and probably originated from, the superlunar and heavenly realm. Further, in a passage in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum,* the Stoic spokesman Balbus argues that the aether, being rarefied and swiftly moving, is perfect for the creation of beings possessing sensation and intelligence. The passage is about the stars, but the fact that human souls also possess sensation and intelligence suggests that they, too, might naturally or originally belong in the aethereal sphere,[813] and this is further corroborated by a passage in Sextus where it is said that there must be living beings in the aether, "from which men too derive their share of intellectual power, having drawn it from thence."[814] These reports fit well with an opinion ascribed to Zeno, that the earliest humans were created out of earth by the creative working of divine fire[815] and Epictetus explicitly calls us god's offspring.[816] Also, as was discussed earlier, the Stoics called

---

anima tenui et ex ardore solis temperato)", where it then halts. The source for this passage is unclear, however, as is its exact meaning.

[809] Cic. *Div.* 1.54: *plenus aer sit immortalium animorum.* Cf. Wildberger (2006). p. 225 and n. 1109.

[810] *Scholia in Hom. Iliad* Ψ 65 (*SVF* 2.815), cf. *SVF* 2.816.

[811] Sharples (1996), p. 67.

[812] Lact. *Div. Inst.* 7.20 (*SVF* 2.813): *ad sedem coelestem, unde illis origo sit, remeare.* Lactantius often cites Seneca, so one might suspect that he is merely reporting Senecan ideas, not general Stoic ones. When citing Seneca, however, he ususally does so by name; here, he refers the idea to 'the Stoics'.

[813] Cic. *ND* 2.42, cf. 2.79.

[814] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.87: ὅθεν καὶ ἄνθρωποι νοερᾶς μετέχουσι δυνάμεως, ἐκεῖθεν αὐτὴν σπάσαντες.

[815] Censorinus *Die Nat.* 4.10 (*SVF* 1.124). See Cic. *Leg.* 1.24 (*SVF* 2.738): *primos homines ex solo, adminiculo divini ignis [...] genitos.* Cf. Origen *Cels.* 1.37 (*SVF* 2.739): "According to the Greeks themselves, all men were not born of a man and woman. For if the world has been created, as many even of the Greeks are pleased to admit, then the first men must have been produced not from sexual intercourse, but from the earth, in which seminal principles existed (σπερματικῶν λόγων συστάντων ἐν τῇ γῇ)." Cf. Tieleman (2002), p. 212, n. 76. Cic. *Sen.* 77 and *Rep.* 6.13, 6.25, and 6.29 also describe the soul as having a heavenly origin to which it will return after death; as Wildberger (2006) notes on p. 226, however, it is uncertain whether these passages report Stoic theory.

[816] Epict. *Diss.* 1.13.

the soul an 'offshoot' (*apospasma*) of god[817] and Cleanthes may have said that we are made in his image.[818]

All this evidence suggests that the Stoics, even though they held that the soul is formed at birth, apparently could also, like Seneca, describe it as being of a divine and higher origin. There is no need to assume that the Stoics were confused on the actual origin of the soul, since we have sufficient evidence on how they could reconcile these two viewpoints.[819] As discussed earlier, they held that the parents pass on their characteristics to their offspring, because the *pneuma* that is to form the soul (and body) of this offspring is contained in the seed of the parents. The many ancestors of our parents will similarly have received their parents' *pneuma* and passed it on to their children. Given the Stoic idea that in each cosmic cycle humanity is created anew by the working of creative fire, i.e. *pneuma*, on matter, we might conjecture that all of us ultimately have one of these first humans as our progenitor. Since these humans were directly created from the divine fire itself (or by the *spermatikoi logoi* that Zeno said were emitted by the world, i.e. god)[820] and have since passed on their soul to their progeny, the Stoics were entitled to claim that each soul is, in a sense "indirectement et lointainement",[821] of divine origin[822] and an *apospasma* of god.[823]

In his consolatory efforts, then, Seneca liberally avails himself of this characterization of the soul, purposely omitting any qualification or explanation of *how* the soul can exactly be said to be of divine origin. His description of the surviving soul's upward journey as a return to its original abode, we may conclude, stretches the limits of what a Stoic might say, but does not go beyond it.

---

[817] D.L. 7.143 (*SVF* 2.633). Cf. σπάσαντες in the passage from Sextus Emp. *M* 9.87 cited above.

[818] Depending on the textual reading of *SVF* 1.537, l. 4; see section 2 above. See also the other passages referred to above on the divine status of the human soul. The idea of the human soul as having a heavenly origin and being an image of god is also found in the *Astronomica* of the poet Manilius (1st century A.D.), which contains many Stoic elements, such as the conflagration and the cosmic cycle (*Astron.* 4.818-65). See Colish (1985), p. 313-6 for an overview of the Stoic elements in Manilius, and Volk (2009) for a discussion of Manilius, the *Astronomica* and its philosophical and intellectual sources. The origin of the soul is described at 4.866ff., cf. 2.115-25.

[819] Cf. Hoven (1971), p. 42-3.

[820] Sextus Emp. *M* 9.101: τὸ προϊέμενον σπέρμα λογικοῦ καὶ αὐτὸ λογικόν ἐστιν· ὁ δὲ κόσμος προΐεται σπέρμα λογικοῦ· λογικὸν ἄρα ἐστὶν ὁ κόσμος.

[821] Hoven (1971), p. 42-3.

[822] This indirect divine origin is even recognized by Seneca himself in *Ben.* 3.28.2, when he says that "the cosmos (*mundus*) is the one parent of us all, whether from his earliest origin each one arrives at his present degree by an illustrious or obscure line of ancestors." Cf. *EM* 44.1, cited in section 4.1 above.

[823] See Sedley (2007), p. 224, referring to Sextus Emp. *M* 9.101: "Zeno [...] singled out cosmic intelligence as having a unique *causal* relation to the intelligences of individual humans. It is [...] their quasi-biological parent or progenitor. [...] [I]f it is true that our own parents generate us, there is a much stronger sense in which the world generates us (or – if the reference is rather to the origin of mankind as a whole – *has* generated us)."

4.4 The soul's return to its origin during life

The image of our soul hailing from the heavens and striving to return there does not, however, feature solely in contexts where the fate of the soul after death is considered. There are many other passages in which the soul is said to come into its own by disregarding the body and concerning itself merely with the contemplation of the heavenly bodies, the sphere of which is its own origin. The most conspicuous example is the preface of the first book of the *NQ*, which has elicited much commentary from Senecan scholars.

> "Spaces in the heavens are immense; but your mind is admitted to the possession of them only if it retains very little of the body, only if it has worn away all sordidness and, unencumbered and light, flashes forth, satisfied with little. When the mind contacts those regions it is nurtured, grows, and returns to its origin just as though freed from its chains. As proof of its divinity it has this: divine things cause it pleasure, and it dwells among them not as being alien things but things of its own nature. Serenely it looks upon the rising and setting of the stars and the diverse orbits of bodies precisely balanced with one another. The mind observes where each star first shows its light to earth, where its culmination, the highest altitude of its course, lies and how far it descends. As a curious spectator the mind separates details and investigates them. Why not do this? It knows that these things pertain to itself."[824]

A similar text is found in *EM* 65, where Seneca, in answer to the question why he bothers dealing with such matters as how many causes there are according to the different philosophical schools:

> "For all these questions, provided that they be not chopped up and torn apart into such unprofitable refinements, elevate and lighten the soul, which is weighted down by a heavy burden and desires to be freed and to return to whence it came. For this body of ours is a weight upon the soul and its penance; as the load presses down the soul is crushed and is in bondage, unless philosophy has come to its assistance and has bid it take fresh courage by contemplating the universe, and has turned it from things earthly to things divine. There it has liberty, there it can roam abroad; meanwhile it escapes the custody in which it is bound, and renews its life in heaven. Just as skilled workmen, who have been engaged upon some delicate piece of work

[824] *NQ* 1.Praef.11-12: *Sursum ingentia spatia sunt, in quorum possessionem animus admittitur, et ita si secum minimum ex corpore tulit, si sordidum omne detersit et expeditus levisque ac contentus modico emicuit. Cum illa tetigit, alitur, crescit ac velut vinculis liberatus in originem redit et hoc habet argumentum divinitatis suae quod illum divina delectant, nec ut alienis, sed ut suis interest. Secure spectat occasus siderum atque ortus et tam diversas concordantium vias; observat ubi quaeque stella primum terris lumen ostendat, ubi columen eius summumque cursus sit, quousque descendat; curiosus spectator excutit singula et quaerit. Quidni quaerat? Scit illa ad se pertinere.*

> which wearies their eyes with straining, if the light which they have is niggardly or uncertain, go forth into the open air and in some park devoted to the people's recreation delight their eyes in the generous light of day; so the soul, imprisoned as it has been in this gloomy and darkened house, seeks the open sky whenever it can, and in the contemplation of the universe finds rest. The wise man, the seeker after wisdom, is bound closely, indeed, to his body, but he is an absentee so far as his better self is concerned, and he concentrates his thoughts upon lofty things. Bound, so to speak, to his oath of allegiance, he regards the period of life as his term of service. He is so trained that he neither loves nor hates life; he endures a mortal lot, although he knows that an ampler lot is in store for him."[825]

These passages have been cited at length so as to convey their specific character, which some have taken to be non-Stoic in its description of the human soul as yearning for a better life, a life of contemplation and bliss that it may attain by disregarding the body as much as it can and concentrating on what is higher. The origin of such a strong body-soul dualism, low estimation of the body, and portrayal of a so-called 'flight of the mind'[826] to the higher reality it originated from must, or so it is thought, be sought in the influence of Platonism on Seneca. In the following pages this supposition will be critically examined and contrasted with other, more comprehensive, interpretations of what is happening in these passages. As a first step, we must examine the Platonic heritage of the idea of the flight of the mind.

There can be little doubt that this idea, as it appears in the Senecan passages cited above, does have a pedigree stretching back to Plato's works. In the *Timaeus*, our souls are said to have been born in heaven and we are told to direct our attention to what is akin to us in heaven. The original harmony of our divine soul, Plato holds, was lost when it was installed in a body;[827] by contemplating the harmonies and revolutions of the cosmos we will become

---

[825] *EM* 65.16-18: *Ista enim omnia, si non concidantur nec in hanc subtilitatem inutilem distrahantur, attollunt et levant animum, qui gravi sarcina pressus explicari cupit et reverti ad illa quorum fuit. Nam corpus hoc animi pondus ac poena est; premente illo urguetur, in vinclis est, nisi accessit philosophia et illum respirare rerum naturae spectaculo iussit et a terrenis ad divina dimisit. Haec libertas eius est, haec evagatio; subducit interim se custodiae in qua tenetur et caelo reficitur. Quemadmodum artifices alicuius rei subtilioris quae intentione oculos defetigat, si malignum habent et precarium lumen, in publicum prodeunt et in aliqua regione ad populi otium dedicata oculos libera luce delectant, sic animus in hoc tristi et obscuro domicilio clusus, quotiens potest, apertum petit et in rerum naturae contemplatione requiescit. Sapiens adsectatorque sapientiae adhaeret quidem in corpore suo, sed optima sui parte abest et cogitationes suas ad sublimia intendit. Velut sacramento rogatus hoc quod vivit stipendium putat; et ita formatus est ut illi nec amor vitae nec odium sit, patiturque mortalia quamvis sciat ampliora superesse.* Cf. *EM* 79.12.

[826] This phrase is used by Limburg (2007), p. 386, to characterize what happens in the preface of *NQ* 1; she prefers this to 'flight of the soul' as used by Hadot (1995), since Seneca uses *animus* in the *NQ*. Wlosok (1960), p. 37, calls it 'Seelenaufstieg'; I will use 'mind' because, like Limburg, I think that Seneca wants to distinguish the mind, i.e. the *hêgemonikon*, from *anima*, i.e. the "entire soul including the sub-rational parts responsible for reproduction and nutrition, sense-perception, etc." (Inwood (2007), p. 274)

[827] *Tim.* 42e ff.

rational and happy once again.[828] The idea that our earthly existence is worth little, that our body is a prison of the soul, and that we should strive to transcend it and live a godlike life, an endeavour made possible only by doing philosophy,[829] recurs in other passages in Plato's works as well,[830] notably in the *Phaedrus*, where it is said that the soul, before being assigned to the body, had knowledge of the Ideas and that we should strive for this divine knowledge in life as well.[831] In Middle Platonism, too, the emphasis on the intellectual-contemplative *telos* of the human soul coincides with a comparative disregard for the body.[832]

The presence and presentation of these ideas in the Senecan passages has, as said, led some to suppose that these passages cannot be integrated into a Stoic world view. Gauly, e.g., holds that in such passages there is manifested a "Hoffnung auf Transzendenz, die aber zumindest vorerst unerfüllt bleibt. Der Text bleibt also, wenn man ihn nach den Maßstäben systematischen Philosophierens betrachtet, problematisch; die Bilder lassen sich nicht in ein schlüssiges theoretisches Konzept rückübersetzen, mit stoischem Rationalismus sind sie nicht zu vereinbaren."[833] Others have argued that despite the Platonic imagery in the 'flight of the mind'-passages, Seneca ultimately does not envisage a transcendence of the soul, but wants to advocate the rational philosophical life: "Am entscheidenden Punkt steht die Philosophie, und diese ist die ganz eigene Leistung des Weisen [...] Seine Erlösung bleibt Selbsterlösung durch die eigene ratio und virtus[.]"[834] These scholars have also noted that the 'flight of the mind' is a philosophical commonplace that expresses the ideal of gaining a more comprehensive grasp of things, i.e. to go beyond the limited perspective of an individual human being.[835] As such, the imagery in Seneca's case might be Platonic, the idea itself need not be.[836] In the following it will

---

[828] *Tim.* 90a-d, cf. 47b-c.

[829] Wlosok (1960), p. 15, argues that Plato, by emphasizing the importance of philosophy, "der Erlösungsweg der Mysterienreligionen durch den intellektuellen Seelenaufstieg ersetzt. An die Stelle einer mysterienhaften Wahrheitsoffenbarung und sakramentalen Vergottung ist die Selbsterhöhung und rationale Erkenntnis des wahrheitsstrebenden Philosophen getreten. Mysterientheologie ist umgesetzt in Philosophie."

[830] *Theaet.* 176a-b, *Rep.* 621c, *Gorg.* 526c.

[831] *Phaedr.* 248a ff., *Rep.* 517b, *Phd.* 62b.

[832] See chapter 1, section 4.4.

[833] Gauly (2004), p. 175, specifically on the preface of *NQ* 1. In a note to the passage cited, Gauly refers to Stahl (1960), p. 152, who thinks that in such passages Seneca is not fully aware of the gap between Platonic transcendence and Stoic immanence.

[834] Wlosok (1960), p. 43.

[835] A famous example is the *Somnium Scipionis* in Cic. *Rep.* 6.9ff in which Scipio Africanus the Younger (destroyer of Carthage (146 B.C.) in the 3rd Punic war and son of Scipio Africanus the Elder, who defeated Hannibal at Zama in 202 B.C.) describes a dream he had; in this dream his soul is taken upward into the heavens, from which it regards the affairs of everyday life as puny and irrelevant, and finds happiness among the heavenly bodies. See e.g. Lucr. *DRN* 1.72-7, where Epicurus is described as traversing the "immeasurable universe in thought and imagination" (*omne immensum peragravit mente animoque*) and 2.1044ff., where man's mind is said to strive to understand what is "beyond the walls of the heavens [...] whither the mind's projection flies free of itself" (*extra moenia mundi [...] animi iactus liber quo pervolet ipse*).

[836] Hadot (1995), p. 242: "Plato developed these ideas and concepts in a specifically Platonic direction, but in and of themselves they are not specifically Platonic. Rather, they are to be found in all the ancient

be argued that this is indeed the best way of reading the passages on the flight of the mind and that there is no need to assume that Seneca, in his view on the origin and aspirations of the human soul, deviated from Stoicism.

What is of prime importance here is that, as Limburg argues, there are no undisputably Platonic elements in the passages under consideration.[837] There is no reference to the Platonic Ideas, e.g.,[838] and the soul is not said to transcend the cosmos into an incorporeal realm of eternity and unchangeability. In another letter, Seneca does appear to take this view:

> "We are weak, watery beings standing in the midst of unrealities; therefore let us turn our minds to the things that are everlasting. Let us look up to the ideal outlines of all things, that flit about on high, and to the god who moves among them."[839]

In this letter, however, Seneca is dealing with certain ideas of Plato and the lines just cited are part of his apology for doing so. Studying Plato can be helpful for learning to attain the right attitude towards indifferent things, because Plato, like the Stoics, believes that man is meant to do more than gratify his bodily needs. In other words, Seneca uses Platonic imagery to convey a perfectly Stoic message.[840] And the imagery is not even truly Platonic, Donini remarks: "le idee non passeggiano negli spazi celesti, né il dio medioplatonico va in visita dall'una all'altra."[841] Limburg suggests that Seneca might have conflated the Ideas with the planets here;[842] a further look at the passages from the *NQ* and *EM* 65 under consideration shows this suggestion to be rather plausible. In both passages, the origin that the human soul is said to strive to return to is not a transcendent realm, but the sphere of the heavenly bodies.[843] The idea that we can and should study the heavenly bodies in order for us to live a happy and god-like life is a Stoic one, as is apparent form the following passage in Cicero, where the Stoic spokesman Balbus states the following:

> "We alone of living creatures know the risings and settings and the courses of the stars, the human race has set limits to the day, the month and the year, and has

philosophical schools, be they Epicurean, Stoic, or Cynic." Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 385-98, who concludes (p. 396) that Seneca's flight of the mind "need not be explained by specific Platonic influences."

[837] Limburg (2007), p. 391.

[838] Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 391, Hadot (1995), p. 240.

[839] *EM* 58.27: *Inbecilli fluvidique inter vana consitimus; ad illa mittamus animum, quae aeterna sunt. Miremur in sublimi volitantes rerum omnium formas deumque inter illa versantem [...].*

[840] Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 395.

[841] Donini (1979), p. 183.

[842] Limburg (2007), p. 391, n. 45.

[843] In *NQ* 1.Praef.11-12, as cited above, the divine origin of the soul is said to be evident from how it takes delight in studying the movements of the planets and stars and recognizing them as being akin to itself. In 65.16-18, the soul is said to return to where it came from when philosophy points it toward the *rerum naturae spectaculo* and thus sends it *a terrenis ad divina.*

> learnt the eclipses of the sun and moon and foretold for all future time their occurrence, their extent and their dates. And contemplating the heavenly bodies the mind arrives at a knowledge of the gods, from which arises piety, with its comrades justice and the rest of the virtues, the sources of a life of happiness that vies with and resembles the divine existence and leaves us inferior to the celestial beings in nothing else save immortality."[844]

The Stoics have no problem in likening the heavenly bodies and the sphere in which they go their rounds to the human soul, because they all consist of the fine *pneuma* that characterizes them as divine.[845] Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that a Stoic might say that our soul is akin to the heavens, meaning that it consists of the same divine stuff as the heavens themselves.[846] The similarity of the Stoic passages in Cicero to the ones in Seneca suggests that Seneca might be thinking along the same lines, and that the advocated return to our origin during life does not refer to any transcendence of the soul, but to the study and contemplation of the whole cosmos, and especially its more divine parts such as the heavenly bodies.[847]

This issue is linked to another idea that, even though it has a strong basis in Platonism, is not foreign to Stoicism. This is the idea that in an important sense, the soul is superior to the body and is more 'us' than the body is. Cleanthes is reported to have said that only the soul can properly be called 'man',[848] and in Cicero's *De Finibus* the Antiochean spokesman criticizes Chrysippus for seeing man as nothing "except soul" (*praeter animum*).[849] Like Seneca, then, the early Stoics could say that a man's soul is the "best part of himself" (*optima sui parte*).[850] This is not to deny that there are no echoes or allusions to, e.g., Plato's *Phaedo* in Seneca,[851] but the presence of a form of body-soul dualism is not in itself a reason to suspect that Seneca himself has reverted to Platonic-like dualism, in which the soul has its origins in a transcendent realm.[852] One might object that in both Plato's *Phaedo* and in Seneca, the soul is not merely superior to the body, but actually seeks to escape from it.[853] This escape is accomplished at

[844] Cic. *ND* 2.153: *Soli enim ex animantibus nos astrorum ortus obitus cursusque cognovimus, ab hominum genere finitus est dies mensis annus, defectiones solis et lunae cognitae praedictaeque in omne posterum tempus, quae quantae quando futurae sint. Quae contuens animus accedit ad cognitionem deorum, e qua oritur pietas, cui coniuncta iustitia est reliquaque virtutes, e quibus vita beata existit par et similis deorum, nulla alia re nisi immortalitate, quae nihil ad bene vivendum pertinet, cedens caelestibus.*
[845] See chapter 3, section 3.2 for the divinity of the heavenly bodies and section 2 above for the divinity of the human soul.
[846] So Reydams-Schils (2005), p. 36: "For the Stoics, our "origin upward" is the divine breath (*pneuma*) that permeates everything, and of which the human mind is a fragment." Cf. Setaioli (2007) p. 350.
[847] Cf. Setaioli (2007), p. 353-5.
[848] Epiph. *Adv. Her.* 3.2.9 (*SVF* 1.538). Cf Long (1982), p. 52.
[849] Cic. *Fin.* 4.28 (*SVF* 3.20).
[850] *EM* 65.18.
[851] See e.g. Inwood (2007), p. 150-51, and Inwood (1993).
[852] Inwood (2007), p. 155.
[853] See, e.g., *NQ* 1.Praef.6 and 4a.20.

death, but can be anticipated upon in life by withdrawing from the bodily life as much as possible. The Stoics, as seen, do believe that the soul survives death for at least a while and that it will take up residence in the upper atmosphere. The idea that our bodily existence is a burden and a tour of duty that we must fulfil while trying to transcend it, on the other hand, does not appear to have a clear Stoic pedigree, so its presence in Seneca might be thought to lie with Platonism after all.[854]

At this point, however, it is important to understand that in the passages under consideration Seneca does *not* envisage a literal transcendence of the soul or mind, but rather wants to emphasize that we should disregard all that is indifferent and focus exclusively on living a fully rational life in which everything we do is done in full accordance with and comprehension of the divine force that permeates and steers our cosmos. For Seneca, the Platonic image of a soul escaping the body into an unchanging realm of perfection and peace is perfect for showing his readers what is really important in life. Using such a Platonic image is warranted by Chrysippus himself, who allows, as we have seen above,[855] the use of non-Stoic ideas for therapeutic purposes.[856] But where Platonism seeks this perfection in a transcendent realm, Seneca promises that we can find it here and now, if only we start living according to our rational and divine nature.

A good indication of this idea is that when describing in the preface of *NQ* 1 how the soul 'flashes forth' (*emicuit*)[857] and "returns to its origin" (*in originem redit*) Seneca adds the rider that the soul does so "*as though* freed from its chains" (*velut vinculis liberatus*).[858] This suggests that the image of the soul escaping from the body is just that, an image that Seneca uses.[859] In the passage from *EM* 65 such a qualification is not present,[860] but there (as in the *NQ*-passage) are other indications that make clear what Seneca has in mind. Our soul is restrained "unless philosophy has come to its assistance and has bid it take fresh courage by contemplating the cosmos"[861] and "the soul, imprisoned as it has been in this gloomy and darkened house, seeks the open sky whenever it can, and in the contemplation of the cosmos finds rest."[862] These remarks show that the kind of escape that Seneca has in mind is of the Stoic kind; the soul does not seek to leave the cosmos behind, but on the contrary, to find rest and freedom in contemplating it.[863] Neither does Seneca promote any total disregard of the

[854] Gauly (2004), p. 173-5 remarks that while the flight of the mind in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* is presented as a dream, there are no such qualifications in the preface of *NQ* 1 and that it must thus be taken to describe a veritable transcendence of the soul, which would be incompatible with Stoicism.
[855] See section 4.3.
[856] Orig. *Cels.* 1.64 and 8.51 (*SVF* 3.474), cf. Limburg (2007), p. 393 and Tieleman (2007), p. 141.
[857] *NQ* 1.Praef.11.
[858] *NQ* 1.Praef.12, my italics.
[859] So Wlosok (1960), p. 39.
[860] As Limburg (2007) notices, p. 392, n. 48.
[861] *EM* 65.16: *nisi accessit philosophia et illum respirare rerum naturae iussit.*
[862] *EM* 65.17: *animus in hoc tristi et obscuro domicilio clusus, quotiens potest, apertum petit et in rerum naturae contemplatione requiescit.*
[863] See, e.g., *EM* 79.12, cited above.

body: the emphasis on the soul striving to contemplate the divine cosmos naturally implies that the distractions of the body should be ignored as much as possible, and the Platonic imagery used by Seneca may cause him to put this point in rather strong terms sometimes.[864] Nevertheless, other passages show that he actually believes that the rational and virtuous life also involves attending to the bodily needs just as much as is required to engage in contemplation and study.[865] This idea that the human task lies in admiring the cosmos, including the heavenly bodies, recurs throughout Seneca's works:

> "Nature elevated our gaze towards the sky and willed that we should look upward to behold her glorious and wonderful works. She gave us the rising and the setting sun, the whirling course of the on-rushing world which discloses the things of earth by day and the heavenly bodies by night, the movements of the stars[.]"[866]

This cosmos that we must contemplate is the beautiful abode which is, Seneca says in good Stoic fashion, "shared by gods and men - a city that embraces the universe, that is bound by fixed and eternal laws, that holds the celestial bodies as they whirl through their unwearied rounds."[867] We can witness the various movements of the heavenly bodies and all that goes on in the heavens, and "when your eyes are sated with the spectacle of things above and you lower them to earth, another aspect of things, and otherwise wonderful, will meet your gaze."[868] In *De Otio*, Seneca says that there is a commonwealth (*res publica*) of men and gods,[869] which we are to serve by studying the cosmos. This study ensures that god's works do not remain without a witness:[870]

> "Nature has bestowed upon us an inquisitive disposition, and being well aware of her own skill and beauty, has begotten us to be spectators of her mighty array, since she would lose the fruit of her labour if her works, so vast, so glorious, so artfully contrived, so bright and so beautiful in more ways than one, were displayed to a lonely solitude. That you may understand how she wished us, not merely to behold

---

[864] See Reydams-Schils (2005), p. 36 (the first sentence was already cited above): "For the Stoics, our "origin upward" is the divine breath (*pneuma*) that permeates everything, and of which the human mind is a fragment. Within these limits, Seneca apparently feels free to co-opt Platonic phrases in order to denigrate the body."

[865] See e.g. *EM* 66.12, *Vita* 8.2.

[866] *EM* 94.56: *Illa vultus nostros erexit ad caelum et quidquid magnificum mirumque fecerat, videri a suspicientibus voluit. Ortus occasusque et properantis mundi volubilem cursum, interdiu terrena aperientem, nocte caelestia.*

[867] *Marc.* 18.2: *dis, hominibus communem, omnia complexam, certis legibus aeternisque devinctam, indefatigata caelestium officia volventem.*

[868] *Marc.*18.4: *Cum satiatus spectaculo supernorum in terram oculos deieceris, excepiet te alia forma rerum aliterque mirabilis.*

[869] *Otio* 4.1: *[...] magnam et vere publicam, qua dii atque homines continentur, in qua non ad hunc angulum respicimus aut ad illum, sed terminos civitatis nostrae cum sole metimur[.]*

[870] *Otio* 4.2: *Haec qui contemplatur, quid deo praestat? Ne tanta eius opera sine teste sit.*

> her, but to gaze upon her, see the position in which she has placed us. She has set us in the centre of her creation, and has granted us an all-encompassing view; and she has not only created man erect, but in order to fit him for contemplation of herself, she has given him a head to top the body, and set it upon a pliant neck, in order that he might follow the stars as they glide from their rising to their setting and turn his face about with the whole revolving heaven."[871]

In one of his letters, Seneca compares the activities of ordinary public life with those that fit our membership of the commonwealth of gods and men. The Stoic sage, concerned primarily with "that field of public life which is worthy of him – in other words, the cosmos",[872] is not precluded from engaging in ordinary public life *per se*:

> "Perhaps he has abandoned only one little corner thereof and has passed over into greater and wider regions; and when he has been set in the heavens, he understands how lowly was the place in which he sat when he mounted the curule chair or the judgement-seat."[873]

Here, then, is a clear example of how Seneca can use the idea of us rising up to heaven, not to promote the soul's transcendence, but to describe how the rational and contemplative life brings us as close to our divine origin as we can come.[874]

The various passages given above show that for Seneca, that which we must strive to contemplate and, so to speak, return to, is part of a singular and monistic cosmos. This cosmos is an organic divine whole and even though some parts of it may be more divine than others, there is no ontological divide we know from Platonism and accordingly the soul does not need to transcend its earthly existence to reach a blissful state.[875] All that is needed is that we consciously apply ourselves to what is truly worthwhile, as the following passage affirms:

---

[871] *Otio* 5.3f.: *Curiosum nobis natura ingenium dedit et artis sibi ac pulchritudinis suae conscia spectatores nos tantis rerum spectaculis genuit, perditura fructum sui, si tam magna, tam clara, tam subtiliter ducta, tam nitida et non uno genere formosa solitudini ostenderet. Ut scias illam spectari voluisse, non tantum aspici, vide quem nobis locum dederit: in media nos sui parte constituit et circumspectum omnium nobis dedit; nec erexit tantummodo hominem, sed etiam habilem contemplationis factura, ut ab ortu sidera in occasum labentia prosequi posset et vultum suum circumferre cum toto, sublime fecit illi caput et collo flexili inposuit[.]* The idea that god has placed our head on top of our body so as to facilitate the contemplation of the movement of the heavenly bodies is taken from Plato *Tim.* 47b.

[872] *EM* 68.2: *rem publicam ipso dignam dedimus, id est mundum[.]*

[873] *EM* 68.2: *[...] fortasse relicto uno angulo in maiora atque ampliora transit et caelo inpositus intellegit, cum sellam aut tribunal ascenderet, quam humili loco sederit.*

[874] Cf. *Otio* 5.6.

[875] See also chapter 3. Cf. Reydams-Schils (2005), p. 36: "[T]he celestial realm in Seneca's accounts may be the place where souls can have more insight, but it is still the abode of the Stoic immanent active divine principle and not a window onto the radically transcendent Platonic Forms."

> "This world, than which nature has created nothing greater and more beautiful, and the most glorious part of it, the human mind that surveys and wonders at the firmament, are our own everlasting possessions, destined to remain with us so long as we ourselves shall remain. Eager, therefore, and erect, let us hasten with dauntless step wherever circumstance directs, let us traverse any lands whatsoever. Inside the world there can be found no place of exile; for nothing that is inside the world is foreign to mankind. No matter where you lift your gaze from earth to heaven, the realms of god and man are separated by an unalterable distance.[876] Accordingly, so long as my eyes are not deprived of that spectacle with which they are never sated, so long as I may behold the sun and the moon, so long as I may fix my gaze upon the other planets, [...] so long as I may be with these, and, in so far as it is permitted to a man, commune with celestial beings, so long as I may keep my mind directed ever to the sight of kindred things on high, what difference does it make to me what soil I tread upon? [...] But it is a narrow mind that finds its pleasure in earthly things; it should turn from these to those above, which everywhere appear just the same, everywhere are just as bright."[877]

The reference to 'kindred things on high' and the idea that we can 'commune with celestial beings' are sure indications that when Seneca, in the passages from the *NQ* and *EM* 65 under consideration, claims that the soul seeks to escape the body and return where it came from, he means no more than that we should disregard all that is unimportant and focus merely on our human task of admiring the divine cosmos we are a part of and living our lives in accordance with its ordered and provident structure.

5. Conclusion

After the careful examination of the relevant source-material, we may conclude that Seneca has a Stoic view of the soul as being a corporeal entity and part of the divine *pneuma*. What happens to the soul after death is unclear: Seneca's obviously struggles and it is hard to determine his exact position here. Sometimes he is sceptical on any possible afterlife and considers the possibility of the soul's *pneuma* returning to the whole, i.e. without any remaining individuality. At other times he expresses his hope that the soul is indeed immortal

---

[876] Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 4.4.48.

[877] *Helv*. 8.4-6, 9.2: *Mundus hic, quo nihil neque maius neque ornatius rerum natura genuit, et animus contemplator admiratorque mundi, pars eius magnificentissima, propria nobis et perpetua et tam diu nobiscum mansura sunt quam diu ipsi manebimus. Alacres itaque et erecti quocumque res tulerit intrepido gradu properemus, emetiamur quascumque terras: nullum inveniri exilium intra mundum potest; nihil enim quod intra mundum est alienum homini est. Undecumque ex aequo ad caelum erigitur acies, paribus intervallis omnia divina ab omnibus humanis distant. Proinde, dum oculi mei ab illo spectaculo cuius insatiabiles sunt non abducantur, dum mihi solem lunamque intueri liceat, dum ceteris inhaerere sideribus [...] dum cum his sim et caelestibus, qua homini fas est, inmiscear, dum animum ad cognatarum rerum conspectum tendentem in sublimi semper habeam, quantum refert mea quid calcem? [...] Angustus animus est quem terrena delectant: ad illa abducendus est quae ubique aeque apparent, ubique aeque splendent.*

and will enjoy an existence in its original abode, the higher regions of the cosmos. It is clear, nevertheless, that whenever he positively states the soul to be immortal, he has the Stoic kind of immortality in mind, which means that the existence of an individual soul in those upper parts of the cosmos will last no longer than until the time of the next conflagration.

These considerations render it unlikely that Seneca envisioned anything like a so-called 'flight of the mind' during life as a preparation for the ultimate transcendence of the soul after death. Seneca's focus, simply, lies elsewhere: he urges us to do the right thing here and now. We must indeed occupy ourselves with what is most worthy and exalted, but these things are found in this very cosmos, not in any transcendent realm. The cosmos as a whole is divine, and it is our human task to use our own divine soul to contemplate and to try and understand this whole.

Chapter 6
Theodicy

1. Introduction

Any philosophy that claims that the world we live in is a good world has to come up with an answer to the rejoinder that many things could have been better. A philosophy that claims that our world is actually the *best* world possible has to do even better than that by also claiming that *nothing* could have been better than it actually is. This is what the Stoics do in their defence of divine providence, as will be discussed in section 2, and they use a variety of arguments to counter the arguments of their opponents that the existence of evil proves that providence falls short. Evil, the Stoics hold, is either the responsibility of men themselves and cannot be blamed on god, or can be reinterpreted as being either not evil at all or as necessary for bringing about the good. This necessity shows that god is not omnipotent and that he has not created the absolutely best cosmos, viz. one in which the good could be created without evil: the Stoics, however, like Plato in the *Timaeus*, only claimed that he had created the best *possible* cosmos and that the existence of some forms of evil therein is inevitable.

Seneca, as we will see in section 3, shares this Stoic view, as is apparent form his *De Providentia*, which focusses mainly on the alleged suffering of good men. Like the Stoics, Seneca claims that men themselves are responsible for evil when they let their souls get in a bad state (3.1). The sufferings and hardships of good men, meanwhile, are actually not evil, but a test of their strong character (3.2.1). This training is necessary, because god, not being omnipotent, could not prevent bad things from happening to all of us, sooner or later. When a good man suffers hardship, then, it is both for his own good (because his resilience grows) and for the good of mankind (because he is a shining example to the rest of us). The lack of omnipotence of god that Seneca notices, and which is the reason why we need to be able to endure hardship in the first place, will be examined in detail; some have suggested that the explanations for god's limitations that Seneca comes up with are not Stoic in kind, but rather Platonic. It will be argued that this is not the case, and that Seneca is of the same mind as the early Stoics here (3.2.2).

The limits to god's providence, Seneca agrees with the Stoics, do not in any way diminish his goodness nor do they imply that god could have done better for us. By making us rational he has given us everything we need to cope with the hardships that he could not keep from us. Our rationality also allows us to understand that many other 'bad things' that may affect us, like earthquakes, storms, and other natural phenomena, are not meant by god to harm us, but are part of the providential plan that makes our cosmos the best possible cosmos (3.2.3).

2. The Stoic position

Because of their claim that we live in the best of all possible *kosmoi*, which is providentially steered by a benevolent god, the Stoics were continuously engaged in countering arguments that sought to prove that there is evil in the cosmos and that as such, it is lacking in providence and *not* the best cosmos possible. In the chapter on Stoic theology, we have seen that the Stoics distinguished between moral evil (human viciousness) and cosmic evil (bad things that befall us).[878] We become vicious through erroneously believing that indifferent things such as health and wealth are truly valuable, while they are in fact indifferent. The passions or emotions are no more than such faulty judgements or beliefs. By holding these false beliefs our soul is in a morally reprehensible state, and this state is the only true evil that the Stoics recognize.[879] When we live according to our rational nature – and we ourselves are responsible for this decision – we are virtuous and thus wholly free from passions, i.e. vice.[880] Even a virtuous man, however, will be subjected to what are usually deemed to be 'bad things', such as war, disease and poverty. Strictly speaking, these are morally indifferent and therefore not truly evil, and they are thus incapable of harming the virtuous man:[881] nevertheless, they do seem to be detrimental to the providential world view of the Stoics[882] and therefore need to be explained.[883] The various answers that the Stoics came up with to explain this so-called 'cosmic evil' will now be discussed in more detail.

Firstly, there are so-called evils that, when properly understood, are actually blessings in disguise, such as mice reminding us to be tidy and bedlice keeping us from being lazy and lying in bed all day.[884] Secondly, Chrysippus argues that there is an epistemological and ontological interdependence of good and evil. This means that we cannot conceive of either one without the other and that neither can exist without the other, in the same way as there can be no (conception of) justice without injustice or pleasure without pain.[885] This extends

[878] See chapter 1, section 3.3. The most comprehensive discussion of the concept of evil in Stoicism is Long (1968). Cf. Arnold (1911), p. 205-9, Kerferd (1978), Wicke-Reuter (2000) and Algra (2003a), p. 170-3.
[879] Stob. *Ecl.* 2.57.19 (*SVF* 3.70), Sext. Emp. *M* 11.90.
[880] Cf. *SVF* 3.557-566.
[881] There are many passages where the Stoic sage is said to be free from harm; cf. *SVF* 3.567-581.
[882] Cf. Long (1968), p. 330.
[883] These 'bad things' are, for brevity's sake, put under the collective name 'cosmic evil'; Chrysippus was willing to call them 'evil' in a non-technical sense: cf. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1048A (*SVF* 3.137). Kerferd (1978), p. 478, however, goes too far in saying that "[i]t is probable that for the Stoics there was no real distinction to be drawn between either the sources or the nature of the evil involved in the two cases [viz. moral evil and cosmic evil - MvH]."
[884] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1044D (*SVF* 2.1163); cf. Porph. *De Abst.* 3.20 (*SVF* 2.1152), where lions and bears are said to test our courage; cf. *SVF* 2.1173 and Plut. *St Rep.* 1049A (*SVF* 2.1177). Lact. *Ira* 13.9-10 (*SVF* 2.1172) reports the Stoics as arguing that many plants and animals which irritate or even threaten us, have a usefulness that is yet to be discovered.
[885] Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.2-6 (*SVF* 2.1169) and 7.1.13 (last lines of *SVF* 2.1170). Chrysippus refers to Plato's *Phaedo* 60b, where Socrates says that pain and pleasure are joined at the head, so that we cannot experience the one without the other. Cf. LS, p. 332, Algra (2003a), p. 171.

even to true evil, i.e. moral evil, as is apparent from a passage of Chrysippus which Plutarch is happy to report twice, believing that it destroys the goodness or providence of the Stoic god.

> "Vice is peculiarly distinguished from dreadful accidents, for even taken in itself it does in a sense come about in accordance with the reason of nature and, if I may put it so, its genesis is not useless in relation to the universe as a whole, since otherwise the good would not exist either."[886]

Thirdly, the Stoics allowed that individuals might have to suffer hardships for the greater good. Chrysippus allows that, presumably in order for the cosmos to develop in accordance with its providential design, wars are sometimes used by god to get rid of overpopulation.[887] Likewise, good men may suffer from the punishment that god inflicts on vicious men.[888] Chrysippus, as Plutarch reports, also argued that god uses vice, which in itself is evil, to serve the greater good. How he envisioned this is unclear: in the passage in Plutarch he likens it to how certain lines in a comedy may be vulgar or bawdy by themselves, but serve to improve the piece they belong to.[889] In his *Hymn to Zeus*, Cleanthes had already praised god, because even though bad things are done by man "you have so welded into one all things good and bad that they all share in a single everlasting reason."[890] It is probably for this reason, viz. that evil serves a purpose in the greater whole, that Chrysippus claimed that its abolition, even if it were possible, would not be a good thing.[891]

Fourthly, the Stoics believed that the *modus operandi* of god's providence involved certain unintended but equally unavoidable or necessary consequences. In other words, bringing about what is good involves concomitant phenomena that are not good.[892] A notable example, one that Chrysippus borrowed directly from Plato's *Tim.* 75a-c, concerns the fragility of the human skull:

> "Just as, he says, when nature was creating men's bodies, it was required for the enhancement of our rationality and for the very utility of the product that she should construct the head of very thin and tiny portions of bone, but this utility in

[886] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1050F (*SVF* 2.1181 [1]) and *Comm. Not.* 1065A-B. Cf. *St. Rep.* 1051A and *Comm. Not.* 1066D (*SVF* 2.1181).
[887] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1049B (*SVF* 2.1177 [1]).
[888] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1050E (*SVF* 2.1176). See chapter 4, section 5.
[889] Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1065D (*SVF* 2.1181 [3]). Cf. MA 6.42.
[890] Stob. *Ecl.* 1.26, 9-10 (*SVF* 1.537, transl. LS): ὧδε γὰρ εἰς ἓν πάντα συνήρμοκας ἐσθλὰ κακοῖσιν, ὥσθ' ἕνα γίγνεσθαι πάντων λόγον αἰὲν ἐόντα.
[891] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1051A-B (*SVF* 2.1182).
[892] Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.7-12 (*SVF* 2.1170).

the principal enterprise had as a further, extraneous consequence the inconvenience that the head became thinly protected and fragile to small blows and knocks."[893]

In other passages, too, Chrysippus says that certain inconvenient things are the consequence of how god arranges the cosmos.[894] As noted in the first chapter, Plutarch also mentions oversight and the influence of evil demons as possible explanations given by Chrysippus, but the formulation (as alternative options in a question) leaves it unclear as to whether he considered these to be serious options.[895]

The different Stoic justifications of the existence of cosmic (and in certain cases moral) evil as given above have one explanatory factor in common, viz. that god is not seen as omnipotent, but limited in what he can accomplish. There are certain things he cannot do, apparently, such as provide us with a functional skull *and* adequate physical protection. This example, as said, hails from the *Timaeus*, in which the limitations that the Platonic Demiurge and his helpers encounter are due to the non-cooperative and hindering influence of matter.[896] The Stoics, however, held that matter is wholly passive and tractable[897] and thus unable to foil god's creative intentions in any way.[898] Rejecting the debilitating influence of matter, then, the Stoics referred to the rational and corporeal nature of god himself to account for these limitations.[899] As Algra puts it:

---

893 Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.10-11 (*SVF* 2.1170, transl. LS): *Sicut, inquit, cum corpora hominum natura fingeret, ratio subtilior et utilitas ipsa operis postulavit, ut tenuissimis minutisque ossiculis caput compingeret. Sed hanc utilitatem rei maioris alia quaedam incommoditas extrinsecus consecuta est, ut fieret caput tenuiter munitum et ictibus offensionibusque parvis fragile.*

894 Cf. Plut., *St. Rep.* 1050E (*SVF* 2.1176), 1051C (*SVF* 2.1178). For the same point in Marcus Aurelius see MA 2.3, 6.36, 6.44, 12.26. Cleanthes' view, reported in Calc. *In Tim.* 144 (*SVF* 1.551 and 2.933) that certain fated things are not part of providence may have been an attempt to save divine providence from blame here. Dragona-Monachou (1973) is critical of Calcidius' claim about Cleanthes. In any case, Chrysippus disagreed and claimed that all that is part of fate is part of providence as well, and this position became the standard Stoic one.

895 Plut. *St. Rep.* 1051C (*SVF* 2.1178). Other sources indicate that at least some Stoics referred to oversight as a real explanation: cf. Cic. *ND* 2.167, where the Stoic spokesman Balbus claims that "the gods attent to great matters, they neglect small ones (*magna di curant, parva neglegunt*)"; the Academic Cotta criticizes this point in 3.86 (*SVF* 2.1179) and 3.90 (*SVF* 2.1180). Algra (2009b) argues that Plutarch willfully misinterprets Chrysippus as saying that god is responsible for appointing evil demons to certain tasks.

896 Accepting the interpretation of Aristotle and Theophrastus, widely accepted in antiquity, of the Receptacle as matter; see chapter 1, section 4.1. Sedley (2007), chapter IV §5, has argued that, contrary to what is generally accepted, the *Timaeus* does not assign a hindering influence to matter and that the Stoic view of matter as wholly passive is an endorsement of Plato's views.

897 So Long (1968), p. 334, who criticizes Pohlenz (1970) for his suggestion (p. 100) that god is limited by matter. Burton (1909), p. 366, errs similarly. Galen *De Usu Part.* 5.4, p. I, 260 Helmreich (*SVF* 2.1136), which claims matter hinders god, cannot and therefore should not be taken to report Stoic thought.

898 Cic. *ND* 3.92, Plut. *St. Rep.* 1076C-D (*SVF* 2.1168). Cf. 1054A (*SVF* 2.449 [2]). Cf. Sharples (1994), p. 171-2.

899 Cic. *ND* 2.86-87, Epict. *Diss.* 1.1.7-13, 1.4.2 and 2.5.27.

> "As a rational principle, he [god] incorporates the laws of rationality, where opposites may be said to entail each other, and as a physical force he incorporates the laws of physics, according to which some things cannot be created without a certain amount of waste."[900]

Given these limitations, however, god has created the best possible cosmos[901] and has given us all that he could give us,[902] most notably our rationality, which sets us apart from and above all other created beings.[903] This is such a great gift that it justifies its necessary physical concomitant: taking the human skull as an example, we are better off perceptive and vulnerable, than well-protected but literally thickheaded. At the same time, the limits set to providence entailed that god could not create us perfectly rational and virtuous,[904] but could only give us the capacity to attain this perfection.[905] The laws of logic, however, appear to dictate that our capacity for virtue entails the capacity for its opposite, vice.[906] Their opponents often criticized the Stoics on this point, arguing that we would have been better off without our rationality altogether, given the fact that so many of us are vicious.[907] The Stoics disagreed, arguing both that the abuse of reason is our own responsibility[908] and that a vicious life is still better than the life of an animal or non-existence.[909]

We may conclude, then, that the Stoics ultimately attributed the existence of cosmic and moral evil to the non-omnipotence of god. Cosmic evil, however, is not real evil, but the common name for those circumstances and conditions which, although non-preferable from our point of view, are necessary and unavoidable in the coming about of god's providential plan. As such, cosmic evil does not detract from god's providence and goodness. The possibility of real evil, i.e. moral evil, is also one of these necessary conditions – without the possibility of vice there would not be the possibility of virtue either. It is man, however, not god, who is responsible for the actual existence of moral evil by abusing his rationality. The fact that we ourselves choose to do evil, combined with god's ability to use this evil for the greater good, is what ultimately saves god from blame.

---

[900] Algra (2003a), p. 172.
[901] Cic. *ND* 2.86-87.
[902] Epict. *Diss.* 1.1.7-13.
[903] Cic. *ND* 2.34, 3.66.
[904] *SVF* 2.1183.
[905] Cic. *ND* 2.147.
[906] As Chrysippus argues, cf. Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.1-6 (*SVF* 2.1169) and 7.1.13 (last lines of *SVF* 2.1170); see sbove, section 2. Since virtue and vice are constituted by the correct and incorrect judgement of impressions, respectively, both are the product of reason. Cf. Cic. *ND* 3.71.
[907] Cic. *ND* 3.67-78. Cf. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1048D: "Yet, if the gods are able to grant virtue, they are not benignant if they do not grant it."
[908] Cic. *ND* 3.70, 3.76.
[909] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1039D-E (*SVF* 3.761), 1042A-C (partly in *SVF* 3.760).

3. Seneca on evil

When we turn to Seneca,[910] we will find that, like the early Stoics, he recognizes the need for an explanation of moral and cosmic evil, given the providential and rational character of the cosmos. Seneca's answers are most comprehensively given in his *De Providentia*, a work dedicated to absolving god from blame for the alleged suffering of good men, but passages from other works must and will be regarded as well. We will find that Seneca, despite the suspicions of certain scholars, stays well within Stoic boundaries in his explanations of evil.

3.1 Seneca on moral evil

Seneca distinguishes between moral and cosmic evil as well, as is clear from *De Providentia*. In this essay Seneca deals with the question "why, if providence rules the world, it still happens that many evils befall good men."[911] The question is put to him by Lucilius, who accepts that the world is ruled by divine providence, but does not understand that despite this providential rule, good men still suffer *mala*. Seneca's response is quite simple: the good man does *not* suffer *mala*, "for nature never permits good to be injured by good [i.e. god's providence]."[912] Lucilius' question is answered even more directly in the last chapter of *De Providentia*:

> " 'But why', you ask, 'does God sometimes allow evil to befall good men?' Assuredly he does not. Evil of every sort he keeps far from them - sin and crime, evil counsel and schemes for greed, blind lust and avarice intent upon another's goods."[913]

It is clear that Seneca understands 'evil' to mean 'moral evil': i.e. a bad condition of the soul or the consequences of this bad condition. This condition, as we have seen, is solely the result of faulty judgement on our part.[914] Greed, e.g., is the passion that consists in the mistaken belief that wealth is truly good. The fact that these evils are coextensive with wrong judgement implies that the good man, who supposedly does not err,[915] is free from them.[916]

---

910 See Wildberger (2006), chapter 3.3 for a recent discussion of Seneca's ideas on evil.

911 *Prov.* 1.1: *quid ita, si providentia mundus regeretur, multa bonis viris acciderent.* This was a common accusation levelled against the Stoics; cf. Cic. *ND* 3.80-81.

912 *Prov.* 1.5: *Neque enim rerum natura patitur ut umquam bona bonis noceant.* Cf. *EM* 95.49: "One who thinks that [the gods] are unwilling to do harm (*nocere*), is wrong; they cannot do harm. They cannot receive or inflict injury (*iniuriam*); for doing harm is in the same category as suffering harm. The universal nature, most glorious and beautiful, has rendered incapable of inflicting ill those whom it has removed from the danger of ill."

913 *Prov.* 6.1: *Quare tamen bonis viris patitur aliquid mali deus fieri? Ille vero non patitur. Omnia mala ab illis removit, scelera et flagitia et cogitationes improbas et avida consilia et libidinem caecam et alieno imminentem avaritiam.*

914 Cf. *EM* 31.6: "What is evil? The lack of knowledge of things (*rerum imperitia*)." Cf. *EM* 85.30: "That which is evil does harm; that which does harm makes a man worse. But pain and poverty do not make a man worse; therefore they are not evils." In *EM* 110.10 Seneca claims that giving our soul over to pleasure is the source of all evil (*initium omnium malorum*).

915 This 'good man' (*vir bonus*) is probably not the Stoic sage *per se*. Seneca names Socrates and various Roman *exempla* (such as Cato) as illustration of the good man who cannot suffer anything evil (cf. *Prov.*

Like the early Stoics, then, Seneca believes that the only true evil is moral evil, and that we ourselves are responsible for allowing it to happen.[917] But why does god give us this responsibility in the first place?[918] After all, if he had not given us the opportunity to become morally evil, none of us would do so. Seneca agrees with that, but holds that in that case we also would not be able to become morally *good*, either. Animals, e.g., cannot become vicious, but neither can they become virtuous – they always act according to their nature.[919] We humans do likewise, but our nature is not like that of an animal: we are "a reasoning animal" (*rationale animal*)[920] and "true good and virtue and perfection [...] are the privilege of reasoning beings alone."[921] It is precisely because we are able to perfect ourselves that we are also capable of degrading ourselves: "No man is vicious except one who has the capacity of virtue."[922] Rationality is god's defining attribute and we should be grateful that he endowed us with it as well.[923] There is a difference between god and man, however, since reason "in the gods is already perfected, in us it is capable of being perfected."[924] We ourselves are responsible for bringing the perfection of the marvellous gift that is rationality about, and thus also for failing to do so. Seneca repeatedly insists that the world we inhabit is wholly the product of divine providence, and when we misuse any part of it for evil purposes, we ourselves are to blame for it, not providence:

3.4ff.), and it is unlikely that he saw all of them as sages, because sages are extremely rare (*Tranq.* 7.4, *Ira* 2.10.6, *Const.* 7.1 – in this last passage Cato *is* said to have been a sage). Seneca does recognize various stages of progress towards sage-hood, however (*EM* 75.8-14), and those who have progressed far are no longer or hardly ever subject to passions. It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that the good man of *De Providentia* may refer to both the sage and such men as have made much progress but have not yet attained sage-hood. See further Roskam (2005), p. 67, esp. n. 212, for a comprehensive discussion and references to secondary literature.

[916] Cf. *Prov.* 2.1: "No evil can befall (*accidere*) a good man: opposites do not mix."

[917] Steiner (1914), p. 13, argues that Seneca believed vice to be the necessary counterpart of virtue, i.e. that there can be no virtue without vice. This argument was used by the early Stoics (see section 2 above), but Seneca does not appear to have used it in this way. Steiner mistakenly believes *EM* 31.5 to be a version of this argument: "Wie es keine Wärme ohne Feuer, keine Kälte ohne Luft, kein Licht ohne Dunkelheit gibt, so gehört auch zur Tugend das Laster und geben beide erst zusammen die volle Wirklichkeit (ep. 31,5)." The passage considered does not express the interdependence of contraries, however, but rather the idea that things become bad or good through their association with vice or virtue: "Just as nothing gleams if it has no light blended with it, and nothing is black unless it contains darkness or draws to itself something of dimness, and as nothing is hot without the aid of fire, and nothing cold without air; so it is the association of virtue and vice that makes things honourable or base."

[918] This question falls outside the scope of *De Providentia*, so the evidence will be gathered from Seneca's other works.

[919] Cf. *EM* 85.8; 124.8, 13-20.

[920] *EM* 124.23.

[921] *EM* 124.20: *bonum absolute [et] virtus [et] perfectum [...] rationalibus solis contingunt[.]* Cf. *EM* 124.2.

[922] *EM* 124.19: *Nulli vitium est, nisi cui virtus potest esse[.]* As Chrysippus had argued, see section 2 above.

[923] For reason as shared by god and man cf. *EM* 76.9; 92.27; 113.17; 124.14. In *Ben.* 2.29 Seneca argues that we should be grateful for this gift, because the gods, "in giving us a place next to themselves (*ab ipsis proximos*) have bestowed upon us the greatest honour possible." Cf. *Ira* 1.17.2.

[924] *EM* 92.27ff.: *in [dis] consummata est, in nobis consummabilis.* Cf. *EM* 49.12; 124.14.

> "Even if they do cause harm by the wrongdoing of men who use them evilly, not on this account are the winds evil by nature. Actually, providence and that god[925] who is the organizer of the universe did not arrange to move the atmosphere by winds and to distribute winds from all directions (lest anything become barren because of inactivity) only so that we might fill up our fleets with armed soldiers to seize part of the deep waters and only so that we might seek out an enemy on the sea or even beyond the sea."[926]

In like manner we pervert anything that god provided us with when we become vicious, and accordingly "we can complain of nothing but ourselves",[927] because "we have bound over our souls to pleasure, whose service is the source of all evil.[928] At the same time, it is also to our own credit if we put in the great amount of effort needed to become perfectly rational.

> "The last two [god and man], having reasoning power, are of the same nature, distinct only by virtue of the immortality of the one and the mortality of the other. Of one of these, then - to wit god - it is nature that perfects the good; of the other - to wit man - pains and study do so."[929]

Because we have to try so hard to make ourselves good, Seneca occasionally claims that we deserve more praise than god:

> "There is one point in which the sage has an advantage over the god; for a god is free from terrors by the bounty of nature, the wise man by his own bounty."[930]

Could Seneca actually mean that our situation is preferable to the one god is in, because we are capable of achieving something glorious and praiseworthy, while he is not? Turning to the last passage quoted, we see that it illustrates the fundamental difference between god and man. Man has a body to which many indifferent things pertain, such as health and wealth – as we have seen, wrongly judging these indifferents to be truly important (of which emotions such as terror are the consequence) is the source of evil,[931] whereas rightly judging our reason (which is our best part) to be truly important is the source of becoming virtuous. God, however, is

---

[925] A hendiadys, highlighting both god's providence and his power of directing all things.
[926] *NQ* 5.18.5: *Sed non ideo non sunt ista natura bona, si vitio male utentium nocent. Non in hoc providentia ac dispositor ille mundi deus aera ventis exercendum dedit et illos ab omni parte ne quid esset situ squalidum effudit, ut nos classes partem freti occupaturas compleremus milite armato et hostem in mari aut post mare quaereremus.* Cf. *NQ* 5.18.13-15.
[927] *EM* 110.10: *nihil nisi de nobis queri possumus*
[928] *EM* 110.10: *Addiximus animum voluptati, cui indulgere initium omnium malorum est [...].*
[929] *EM* 124.14: *[...] haec duo, quae rationalia sunt, eandem naturam hebent, illo diversa sunt, quod alterum immortale, alterum mortale est. Ex his ergo unius bonum natura perficit, dei scilicet, alterius cura, hominis.*
[930] *EM* 53.11: *Est aliquid, quo sapiens antecedat deum: ille naturae beneficio non timet, suo sapiens* Cf. *EM* 73.14, *Prov.* 6.6.
[931] Cf. *EM* 92.28-9.

nothing *but* reason, and since he does not have a body in the sense we do,[932] there are no indifferent things for him to judge wrongly, and he will always be perfectly virtuous.[933]
There is no doubt that Seneca believes that we deserve praise if we succeed in becoming as rational and virtuous as god, and in this sense we can be said to have "an advantage" over god. It cannot be said, however, that because of this praiseworthy effort, we are actually *better* than god: the only good is moral good, and god and the sage possess it in exactly the same way.[934] More importantly, however much praise and admiration Seneca awards those who succeed in overcoming human imperfection, he also admits that we would have been better off without it – and that god, had he been capable of doing so, would have created us without a body:

> "Had it been possible for [nature] to produce souls by themselves and naked, she would have done so."[935]

Like the earlier Stoics, then, Seneca believes that our rationality is not perfect, because god was unable to create us with perfect rationality. Though Seneca's ideas concerning the precise relation of soul and body will not be further discussed here, the following observations are important for our understanding of his ideas about moral evil. There are numerous passages where he attributes human vice to the detrimental effect of the body on the human soul.[936] This effect consists in the fact that, because of our body, we have to deal with all manner of indifferents that pertain to it and which make us susceptible to error and thus vice. The main conclusion from the examination of Seneca's ideas on moral evil, then, seems to be that *because* god had to create us as a compound of soul and body, we can err and become vicious. The responsibility for going wrong, however, is ours and not god's. At the same time, the fact that we can go wrong lends a heroic flavour to our efforts to become good, which does not imply, however, that our situation is preferable to that of god.

3.2 Seneca on cosmic evil

3.2.1 Hardships make us strong

According to Seneca, then, it is clear that nothing evil can befall the good man. Even so, an explanation is required for the 'cosmic evil' that does befall him, i.e. hardships (*aspera*) and adversities (*adversa*).[937] Seneca's explanation is pretty straightforward: these hardships are not merely not evil, they are actually to the benefit of the good man. God is like a good father, who

---

[932] *SVF* 1.153, 2.1027.
[933] D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021), Cic. *ND* 2.39.
[934] This is apparent from various passages where Seneca says that the only difference between god and man is god's immortality: cf. *EM* 66.11; 73.13; *Const.* 8.2.
[935] *EM* 66.3: *Si posset per se nudos edere animos, fecisset [...].*
[936] See e.g. *EM* 24.17, 65.16, 21, 92.33.
[937] As explained above in section 2, this 'cosmic evil' is not truly evil, but nevertheless stands in need of explanation by those who hold that our world is run providently. The following discussion of Seneca's opinions on this matter once again takes it starting point in the *De Providentia*.

does not pamper his children like mothers do, but shows his love for them by being stern and demanding and non-indulgent.[938] God does not do this whimsically or out of spite, but because he wants the good man to be strong: "He [god] does not make a spoiled pet of a good man: he tests him, hardens him, and fits him for his own service."[939] Seneca even lets god explain himself:

> "'Let them be harassed by toil, by suffering, by losses,' he says, 'in order that they may gather true strength.'"[940]

Hardships and adversities, then, are mere training for the good man. In the same way that a wrestler pitches himself against the toughest opponents in order to maintain and increase his strength, so the good man welcomes hardships as opportunities to train his endurance of them:

> "Without an adversary, prowess shrivels. We see how great and how efficient it really is, only when it shows by endurance what it is capable of."[941]

We might ask why such training is needed, Seneca realizes, why it is that the good man needs to be capable of enduring adversity and hardship.[942] Seneca suggests that it might well be for the enjoyment of god;[943] in the same way that adults are impressed and entertained by the courage shown by young people, the struggle of a virtuous man against the worst adversity provides "a spectacle worthy of the regard of god as he contemplates his works."[944] What may be more important, however, is that Seneca also believes that hardships are to the benefit of those who suffer them as well as for the whole of mankind.[945] He likens hardships such as losing loved ones, sickness and exile, to surgery and amputation: it might hurt and we might lose something we would have preferred to hold on to, but it is ultimately for our own good,

---

[938] Throughout the *De Providentia*, as we will see, Seneca takes up a very theistic perspective on god and continuously describes as our father who is concerned for our well-being. The rationale for this may be found in the purpose of the work: a defense of god's goodness and care for good men is well served by a perspective that evokes associations of personal involvement and the like.

[939] *Prov.* 1.6: *Bonum virum in deliciis non habet, experitur, indurat, sibi illum parat.*

[940] *Prov.* 2.6: *Operibus, inquit, doloribus, damnis exagitentur, ut verum colligant robur.*

[941] *Prov.* 2.4: *Marcet sine adversario virtus; tunc apparet quanta sit quantumque polleat, cum quid possit patientia ostendit.* Cf. *EM* 113.1-3.

[942] *Prov.* 2.7: "Do you wonder if that god, who most dearly loves the good, who wishes them to become supremely good, allots to them a fortune that will make them struggle (*exerceantur*)?"

[943] *Prov.* 2.7-12.

[944] *Prov.* 2.9: *spectaculum dignum ad quod respiciat intentus operi suo deus[.]*

[945] *Prov.* 3.1. The first lines of 3.1, which follow on the argument that the good man's suffering is for god's enjoyment, are indicative that what follows may be more seriously meant as a defence or explanation of the good man's suffering: "But as the discussion progresses (*procedente oratione*), I shall show you that the things that seem to be evil are not really so."

because we will be stronger for it than we were before.[946] Seneca emphatically approves of a saying by Demetrius, a Cynic and friend of his:[947]

> "'No man,' said he, 'seems to me more unhappy than one who has never met with adversity.' For such a man has never had an opportunity to test himself."[948]

Specifically, a man who has had an easy time of it misses an opportunity for fame and glory. A gladiator needs a worthy opponent to gain a great victory: likewise, "it is only evil fortune that discovers a great exemplar."[949] Seneca hails several traditional Roman heroes, such as Mucius, Fabricius, Rutilius, Regulus, and Cato the Younger (as well as Socrates),[950] all of whom, through suffering hardships, torture and even death, have reached a happiness that could never be attained by those who lead an easy life. Seneca admires Cato most of all, and says that "it will be granted by the consensus of mankind that he reached the pinnacle of happiness."[951] Those who suffer the most are thus not punished by god, but favoured:

> "God, I say, is showing favour to those whom he desires to achieve the highest possible virtue whenever he gives them the means of doing a courageous and brave deed, and to this end they must encounter some difficulty in life. [...] Do not, I beg of you, shrink in fear from those things which the immortal gods apply like spurs, as it were, to our souls. Disaster is virtue's opportunity."[952]

---

[946] *Prov.* 3.2.
[947] Cf. *Pauly RE*, vol. IV, col. 2843-4.
[948] *Prov.* 3.3: *Nihil, inquit, mihi videtur infelicius eo, cui nihil unmquam evenit adversi. Non licuit enim illi se experiri.*
[949] *Prov.* 3.4: *Magnum exemplum nisi mala fortuna non invenit.*
[950] *Prov.* 3.4-14. Mucius Scaevola, when order to be burned alive by the Etruscans, famously showed his contempt of pain by thrusting his hand into the fire; cf. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 2.12-3. Fabricius Luscinus, a general who fought Pyrrhus, was the epitome of integrity and incorruptability; cf. Plut. *Pyrrhus* 18. Rutilius Rufus stoically accepted exile after being falsely accused by his enemies, Atilius Regulus was a general who was captured by the Carthaginians and, having been sent on parole back to Rome for negotiations, supposedly honoured his parole by returning to the Carthaginians and being put to (a rather gruesome) death; cf. Horace *Odes* 3.5. Cato the Younger was a staunch defender of the Roman republic, taking his own life after the defeat of the republican troops by Caesar's legions at the battle of Thapsus.
[951] *Prov.* 3.14: *summam illi felicitatem contigisse consensus hominum fatebitur[.]*
[952] *Prov.* 4.5: *Ipsis, inquam, deus consulit, quos esse quam honestissimos cupit, quotiens illis materiam praebet aliquid animose fortiterque faciendi, ad quam rem opus est aliqua rerum difficultate. [...] Nolite, obsecro vos, expavescere ista, quae dii immortales velut stimulos admovent animis: calamitas virtutis occasio est.* Cf. *Tranq.* 16.1-4, where Seneca addresses those who despair at seeing the best men (Cato e.g.) suffer terribly. Those who die bravely should rather be admired, because "all these by a slight sacrifice of time found out how they might become eternal (*aeterni*), and by dying reached immortality." See chapter 5, section 4.2.1.

These famous individuals are thus benefitted through their own suffering; the whole of humanity, however, "for which the gods have a greater concern than for single persons"[953] also benefits from these exemplary figures. Seneca lets nature, the implementer of god's decisions, remark that the advantage of Cato's sufferings is "that all may know that these things of which I have deemed Cato worthy are not real evils."[954]

Hardships, then, are not evil, because they allow the good man to "show off" his strength before god and be a shining example to the rest of humanity.[955] But on closer examination, praise and glory and exemplarity are not the purpose of learning to endure *per se*. In fact, Seneca believes that endurance of hardships is not merely something praiseworthy, but a bare necessity: sooner or later, all humans will have to face adversity, and those who have had an easy life will not be ready for it when it comes.

> "In like manner god hardens, reviews, and disciplines those whom he approves, whom he loves. Those, however, whom he seems to favour, whom he seems to spare, he is really keeping soft against ills to come. For you are wrong if you suppose that any one is exempt from ill. Even the man who has prospered long will have his share some day; whoever seems to have been released has only been reprieved."[956]

Apparently god was not able to keep hardships from us, and therefore needs to train us in withstanding them. Seneca lets god defend himself against a critic:

> "'Yet', you say, 'many sorrows, things dreadful and hard to bear, do befall us.' Yes, because I could not withdraw you from their path, I have armed your minds to withstand them all; endure with fortitude."[957]

Seneca, in good Stoic fashion, is convinced that the divine part in us, our soul, is strong enough to withstand all the bad things that may befall us.[958] By training ourselves in this capacity we can even endure the worst of fates, such as those suffered by Cato. Such a show of endurance might even give us glory and immortality as exemplary human beings. Those who seem to lead

---

[953] *Prov.* 3.1: *quorum maior diis cura quam singulorum est.*
[954] *Prov.* 3.14: *Ut omnes sciant non esse haec mala quibus ego dignum Catonem putavi.* Cf. Prov. 5.1: "It is god's purpose (*propositum*), and the wise man's as well, to show that those things which the ordinary man desires and those which he dreads are really neither goods nor evils."
[955] Cf. *EM* 96.4-5, Epict. *Diss.* 1.6.32, 3.24.113.
[956] *Prov.* 4.7: *Hos itaque deus quos probat, quos amat, indurat, recognoscit, exercet; eos autem quibus indulgere videtur, quibus parcere, molles venturis malis servat. Erratis enim, si quem iudicatis exceptum. Veniet et ad illum diu felicem sua portio; quisquis videtur dimissus esse, dilatus est.* Cf. *EM* 96.1-2. Similarly in MA 9.1.3.
[957] *Prov.* 6.6: *At multa incidunt tristia, horrenda, dura toleratu. Quia non poteram vos istis subducere, animos vestros adversus omnia armavi; ferte fortiter.*
[958] *Ira* 2.12.6, *EM* 44.6, 98.2.

easy lives are actually worse off, because they will not be ready when things will eventually go wrong:

> "The creatures whom you regard as fortunate, if you could see them, not as they appear to the eye, but as they are in their hearts, are wretched, filthy, base - like their own house-walls, adorned only on the outside. Sound and genuine such good fortune is not; it is a veneer, and a thin one at that."[959]

It is in this sense that Seneca is even willing to speak of divine punishment. We have already seen that god cannot do harm, but what Seneca has in mind is punishment through alleged benefaction: those who live luxuriously and decadently are morally corrupted and will wrongly judge their wealth and comfort to be truly valuable. When it all falls away, they will not be ready and the things they held so dear will be no more than a "thin veneer", and in this sense they can be said to be punished.

> "There is no reason, however, why you should ask the gods to be hostile to anyone whom you regard as deserving of punishment; they are hostile to such a person, I maintain, even though he seems to be advanced by their favour."[960]

Likewise, good men are benefitted by having to cope with hardships and adversities:

> "Apply careful investigation, considering how our affairs actually stand, and not what men say of them; you will then understand that bad things are more likely happen to us than to harm us. For how often has so-called affliction been the source and the beginning of happiness!"[961]

At the same time, none of this would have been necessary, if only god had been able to keep all this hardship from us. But evidently, he was not. The upshot of this is that Seneca does not believe god to be omnipotent, but limited in what he can achieve. We will examine this matter in the next section.

---

[959] *Prov.* 6.4: *Isti quos pro felicibus aspicis, si non qua occurrunt sed qua latent videris, miseri sunt, sordidi, turpes, ad similitudinem parietum suorum extrinsecus culti; non est ista solida et sincera felicitas; crusta est et quidem tenuis.* As Cic. *ND* 3.81-5 shows, the apparent prosperity of criminals and vicious men was used as an argument against the Stoic idea of providence.

[960] *EM* 110.2: *Sed non est quare cuiquam, quem poena putaveris dignum, optes, ut infestos deos habeat; habet, inquam, etiam si videtur eorum favore produci.* Cf. *EM* 95.50: "[The gods] neither give nor have evil; but they do chasten (*castigant*) and restrain certain persons, and impose penalties (*inrogant poenas*), and sometimes punish (*puniunt*) by bestowing that which seems good outwardly (*specie boni*)."

[961] *EM* 110.3: *Adhibe diligentiam tuam et intuere, quid sint res nostrae, non quid vocentur; et scies plura mala contingere nobis quam accidere. Quotiens enim felicitatis et causa et initium fuit, quod calamitas vocabatur?*

3.2.2 God's power is limited

The early Stoics, as we have seen, held god to be limited in what he can do as well.[962] This restriction on god's creative options was used to explain certain imperfections in the world, such as the fragility of the human skull. Such imperfections were seen as unwanted, yet unavoidable, consequences of what god wanted to bring about. The Stoics disagreed with Plato on the cause of these limitations; whereas Plato blamed them on the hindering effect of matter on the creative activity of the Demiurge,[963] the Stoics held that matter was wholly inert and incapable of interfering with god's plans and they believed that, since god works as a physical force, he has to obey certain physical and logical laws. When we turn to Seneca, some passages suggest that he might prefer the Platonic position or at least sees it as a viable option.[964] In the *Naturales Quaestiones*, e.g., he considers the extent of god's powers:

> "Does god do whatever he wishes? Or in many cases do the things he treats fail him, just as many things are poorly shaped by a great artist not because his art fails him but because the material in which he works often resists his art?"[965]

In *De Providentia* he appears to confirm this idea, when he says that "god cannot change matter."[966] The interpretation that Seneca takes recourse to a Platonic argument sits ill with other evidence, since in *EM* 65 Seneca explicitly affirms the Stoic idea that matter is wholly tractable and pliable by god:

> "Matter lies sluggish, a substance ready for any use, but sure to remain unemployed if no one sets it in motion. Cause, however, by which we mean reason, moulds matter and turns it in whatever direction it will, producing thereby various concrete results. [...] All things are made up of matter and of god; god controls matter, which encompasses him and follows him as its guide and leader. And that which creates, in other words, god, is more powerful and precious than matter, which is acted upon by god."[967]

---

[962] See above, section 2.
[963] Seneca reports this view in *EM* 58.27-8. See section 2 above.
[964] Cf. Hijmans (1972), p. 48-52 for a discussion of these passages.
[965] *NQ* 1.Praef.16: *Deus quicquid vult efficiat an in multis rebus illum tractanda destituant et a magno artifice prave multa formentur, non quia cessat ars, sed quia id in quo exercetur saepe inobsequens arti est?* Cf. Hijmans, p. 48-52.
[966] *Prov.* 5.9: *non potest artifex mutare materiam[.]* Verbeke (1945), p. 156, n. 417: "Sénèque s'écarte ici, sous l'influence du platonisme, du panlogisme des anciens Stoïciens." Similarly Setaioli (2007), p. 343ff., esp. p. 346: "We can therefore conclude by suggesting that Seneca, probably under the influence of the Platonic tradition of his own time, did introduce an incongruous element into the monism of his Stoic doctrine."
[967] *EM* 65.2; 65.23: *Materia iacet iners, res ad omnia parata,cessatura, si nemo moveat. Causa autem, id est ratio, materiam format et quocumque vult versat, ex illa varia opera producit. [...] Nempe universa ex materia et ex deo constant. Deus ista temperat, quia circumfusa rectorem secuntur et ducem. Potentius*

Most of the passages cited do not warrant the supposition that Seneca is confused or careless about this issue or changes his mind from time to time.[968] The consideration from the *Naturales Quaestiones* (whether god creativity is hindered by matter) is part of a list of questions that Seneca believes are important for each man to consider. The answers to these questions are not given, however, and Seneca's own position cannot be established on the basis of it.[969] Even so, we must give an adequate interpretation of the passage from *Prov.* 5.9 in question, and for that it is useful to take the context into consideration. Seneca's remark that god cannot change matter is a reply to a paraphrase of Lucilius' question that at the very beginning of *De Providentia* is posited as the topic of the work.[970] Having said in reply to this question that god cannot change matter, Seneca emphasizes that this specifically is not possible: *hoc passa non est.*[971] As Jula Wildberger has argued, this remark should be interpreted jointly with what precedes Lucilius' question, viz. Seneca's assertion that it is not hard to accept whatever fate brings us, since even god himself cannot change fate.

> "Although the great creator and ruler of all things himself wrote the decrees of fate, yet he follows them. He obeys for ever, he decreed but once."[972]

With the various *perfecta* (*passa est*, *scripsit*, *iussit*), Wildberger argues, Seneca refers to what he metaphorically describes as the moment in history when god decided on what the best possible cosmos was going to look like. The decisions that were made at that time, so to say,

---

autem est ac pretiosus, quod facit, quod est deus, quam materia patiens dei. Cf. Cic. *ND* 3.92, where the Academic Cotta discusses the Stoic position: "For you yourselves are fond of saying that there is nothing that a god cannot accomplish (*efficere non possit*), and that without any toil; as man's limbs are effortlessly moved merely by his mind and will, so, as you say, the gods' power can mould and move and alter all things (*omnia fingi moveri mutarique posse*). Nor do you say this as some superstitious fable or old wives' tale, but you give a scientific and systematic account of it: you allege that matter, which constitutes and contains all things, is in its entirety flexible and subject to change (*totam esse flexibilem et commutabilem*), so that there is nothing that cannot be moulded and transmuted out of it however suddenly (*ex ea quamvis subito fingi convertique possit*), but the moulder and manipulator of this universal substance is divine providence, and therefore providence, whithersoever it moves, is able to perform whatever it will." Cf. Plut. *Comm. Not.* 1076C (*SVF* 2.1168).

[968] *Pace* Steiner (1914), who does not believe that Seneca deviates from Stoic monism, but concludes the following on the basis of such passages as *Prov.* 5.9 (cited *supra*): "Unser eklektischer Feuilletonist plaudert oft gar mancherlei, ohne an irgendwelche Folgen für sein System zu denken." (p. 15)

[969] Setaioli (2007), p. 344, errs by claiming that in this passage Seneca "*tells us* that matter resists god's craft" (my italics). See chapter 3, section 2.3, for another example of how Seneca can list several opinions about a certain issue without indicating his own preference.

[970] *Prov.* 1.1: "You have asked me, Lucilius, why, if providence rules the world, it still happens that many evils befall good men."*Quaesisti a me, Lucili, quid ita, si providentia mundus regeretur, multa bonis viris mala acciderent.* Paraphrased in 5.9 as: "'Why, however,' do you ask, 'was god so unjust in his allotment of destiny as to assign to good men poverty, wounds and painful death?'"

[971] *Prov.* 5.9, accepting the addition of *non*. Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 52, n. 319.

[972] *Prov.* 5.8: *Ille ipse omnium conditor et rector scripsit quidem fata, sed sequitur; semper paret, semel iussit.* This passage is further discussed below.

will hold for ever, or at least until the end of this cosmic cycle,[973] whatever their unfortunate consequences, such as the fact that good men suffer "poverty, wounds and painful death."[974] What follows indicates that what Seneca has in mind is not the hindering influence of matter itself, but something like Chrysippus' explanation of the vulnerability of the human skull that was discussed above:

> "Certain qualities cannot be separated from certain others; they cling together, are indivisible.[975]

The important point here is that Seneca says that certain things are interdependent: you cannot have one without the other. This is ultimately what is meant by his remark that god cannot change matter. A particular piece of matter, the Stoics hold, always exists in a certain way, as determined by that part of god that interpenetrates it: in other words, it is impossible for god *not* to qualify any part of matter in some particular way.[976] And as Seneca argues in various other passages, and as the early Stoics had argued, certain ways of qualifying matter are incompatible: this is not caused by any debilitating influence of matter, however, but by the logical and physical constraints inherent to god's creative action. In *De Beneficiis*, he criticizes those who unjustly complain that the gods made us inferior to many animals in various physical abilities such as speed and beauty. These ingrates do not understand the limitations that are integral to the creation of living beings:

> "And, though nature does not suffer certain qualities, as for instance speed of body and strength, even to meet in the same creature, yet they call it an injustice that man has not been compounded of various good qualities that are incompatible, and say that the gods are neglectful of us because we have not been given the good health that can withstand even the assaults of vice, because we have not been gifted with a knowledge of the future."[977]

God had to make certain choices when he created us, and he made the best choice for us: he made us rational beings. Through our rationality, we have become "lords of the earth" and are most blessed of all of god's creatures:

---

[973] Which in practice means forever, of course, since every newly created cosmos is identical; cf. chapter 4.
[974] *Prov.* 5.9: *paupertatem et vulnera et acerba funera.*
[975] *Prov.* 5.9: *Quadam separari a quibusdam non possunt, cohaerent, individua sunt. Languida ingenia et in somnum itura aut in vigiliam somno simillimam inertibus nectuntur elementis; ut efficiatur vir cum cura dicendus, fortiore fato opus est.*
[976] Cf. Hijmans (1972), p. 51: "It is not so much, then, what the schoolmen later are to call *materia prima* that is refractory, but the inseparable (ἀχωρίστη, *individua*) combination of a ὕλη [...] with a particular shape."
[977] *Ben.* 2.29.2: *Et cum quaedam ne coire quidem in idem natura patiatur, ut velocitatem corporum et vires, ex diversis ac dissidentibus bonis hominem non esse compositum iniuriam vocant et neclegentes nostri deos, quod non bona valetudo etiam vitiis inexpugnabilis data sit, quod non futuri scientia.*

> "Though you should range through all creation, and, because you will fail to find there a thing which as a whole you would rather have been, should select from all creatures the particular qualities that you could wish had been given to you, yet any right estimate of the kindliness of nature will force you to acknowledge that you have been her darling."[978]

Notwithstanding the fact that the decision to make us rational was the most beneficial one, it also had the consequence that certain other "qualities that you could wish had been given to you" could not in fact be given. By making us rational god no longer had the option of giving us the strength or speed or keenness of sense that he gave to other living beings. But these other beings have their own limitations as well, and overall we humans have received the best 'package deal' of all:

> "Nothing has been denied us that could possibly have been granted to us. [...] The fact is, the immortal gods have held - still hold - us most dear, and in giving us a place next to themselves have bestowed upon us the greatest honour that was possible. Great things have we received, for greater we had no room."[979]

It is significant that the limitations as described here are not attributed to a hindering factor such as matter, but to a natural or physical incompatibility of certain design options. The incompatibility of such options and the unintended, yet unavoidable, consequences of choosing to make us rational are very reminiscent of the Chrysippean explanation of the fragility of the human skull. According to this explanation,

> "when nature was creating men's bodies, it was required for the enhancement of our rationality and for the very utility of the product that she should construct the head of very thin and tiny portions of bone, but this utility in the principal enterprise had as a further, extraneous consequence the inconvenience that the head became thinly protected and fragile to small blows and knocks[.]"[980]

---

[978] *Ben.* 2.29.5: *Circumeas licet cincta et, quia nihil totum invenies, quod esse te malles, ex omnibus singula excerpas, quae tibi dari velles; bene aestimata naturae indulgentia confitearis necesse est in deliciis te illi fuisse.*

[979] *Ben.* 2.29.3; 6: *Quidquid nobis negatum est, dari non potuit. [...] Ita est: carissimos nos habuerunt di immortales habentque, et, qui maximus tribui honos potuit, ab ipsis proximos collocaverunt. Magna accepimus, maiora non cepimus.* Cf. *EM* 76.9, where various animals are described as outstripping us in certain areas, and that our specific boon is our rationality.

[980] Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.10-11 (*SVF* 2.1170): *[...] cum corpora hominum natura fingeret, ratio subtilior et utilitas ipsa operis postulavit, ut tenuissimis minutisque ossiculis caput compingeret. Sed hanc utilitatem rei maiorem alia quaedam incommoditas extrinsecus consecuta est, ut fieret caput tenuiter munitum et ictibus offensionibusque parvis fragile.* This passage, borrowed from Plato *Tim.* 75a-c, is also cited *supra*, section 2.

It has now become evident that Seneca agrees with the early Stoics that it was physically impossible for god to make us invulnerable to all kinds of mishap, hardship, and adversity. This fact does not diminish god's providence, however, because god *did* give us all that he could have given us, including a mind with which we are able to withstand all the hardship that could not be withheld from us. What is new in Seneca is that he literally makes a virtue of necessity: *because* we are vulnerable to hardships, we are also able to gloriously overcome them. This, then, seems to be the point of the rather difficult passage in *De Providentia* that appears to be an elaboration of "god cannot change matter", which was discussed earlier:[981]

> "Certain qualities cannot be separated from certain others; they cling together, are indivisible. Natures that are listless, that are prone to sleep, or to a kind of wakefulness that closely resembles sleep, are composed of sluggish elements. It takes sterner stuff to make a man who deserves to be mentioned with consideration. His course will not be the level way; uphill and downhill must he go, be tossed about, and guide his bark through stormy waters; he must keep his course in spite of fortune. Much that is hard, much that is rough will befall him, but he himself will soften the one, and make the other smooth. Fire tests gold, misfortune brave men."[982]

A jellyfish is quite invulnerable to hardships such as exile or the loss of loved ones, as is a snail. But being a jellyfish or a snail does not provide much opportunity for glory: only by being susceptible to "much that is hard, much that is rough" could Cato and Socrates become the shining examples that they became.[983]

At the end of the section on moral evil it was established that, however much admiration Seneca has for those who become as virtuous as god, this particularly human capacity was born from necessity, not choice.[984] In the same manner, Seneca admires those who serve as *exempla* of human endurance, but the prime purpose of their suffering is not to show how much a man *can* take, but to show how much a man *must be able* to take.

---

[981] It is now also clear that with *non potest artifex mutare materiam* Seneca, somewhat sloppily, one might say, expresses the Stoic view that god's providence operates has to take certain physical and logical laws into account.

[982] *Prov.* 5.9: *Quadam separari a quibusdam non possunt, cohaerent, individua sunt. Languida ingenia et in somnum itura aut in vigiliam somno simillimam inertibus nectuntur elementis; ut efficiatur vir cum cura dicendus, fortiore fato opus est. Non erit illi planum iter; sursumoportet ac deorsum eat, fluctuetur ac navigium in turbido regat. Contra fortunam illi tenendus est cursus; multa accident dura, aspera, sed quae molliat et complanet ipse. Ignis aurum probat, miseria fortes viros.* Cf. *Prov.* 2.7, where the same point is made.

[983] Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 1.6.32ff., where he argues that Hercules could only become legendary through all the difficult tasks he had to accomplish.

[984] See section 3.1.

> "Why do they suffer certain hardships? It is that they may teach others to endure them; they were born to be an example."[985]

3.2.3 Suffering for the greater good

Seneca believes that the gods care more for humanity as a whole than for the individual;[986] the suffering of the *exempla*, then, apart from the fact that it brings them personal glory, also happens in the interest of the whole of humanity and thus does not encroach upon god's providence. This idea is similar to an argument that was used by the early Stoics in the defence of providence, viz. that the individual might have to suffer for the greater good.[987] Seneca's use of this argument can also be discerned in various passages where he discusses such natural disasters as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and lightning storms. These disasters might well be seen as compromising divine providence, because they do not seem to be compatible with the Stoic view that god made the world as an abode for himself and us, an abode that is both beautiful and well-crafted and which caters to our every need.[988] In various passages Seneca shows his awareness of this problem. In book 6 of the *Naturales Quaestiones*, he discusses the occurrence of devastating earthquakes and why we need not fear them:

> "It will help also to keep in mind that gods cause none of these things and that neither heaven nor earth is overturned by the wrath of divinities. These phenomena have causes of their own; they do not rage on command but are disturbed by certain defects, just as our bodies are. At the time they seem to inflict damage they actually receive damage."[989]

At the beginning of *De Providentia* Seneca is arguing that the cosmos we live in and whatever happens in it cannot be the result of chance occurrences (as Epicurus had said):

> "Even the phenomena which seem irregular and undetermined - I mean showers and clouds, the stroke of crashing thunderbolts and the fires that belch from the riven peaks of mountains, tremors of the quaking ground, and the other disturbances which the turbulent element in nature sets in motion about the earth, these, no matter how suddenly they occur, do not happen without a reason; nay, these too have causes of their own, and so, in like manner, are those things which seem miraculous by reason of the incongruous situations in which they are beheld,

---

[985] *Prov.* 6.2-3: *Quare quaedam dura patiuntur? Ut alios pati doceant; nati sunt in exemplar.*
[986] *Prov.* 3.1.
[987] Cf. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1049A-B (*SVF* 2.1177).
[988] See chapter 4, section 5.
[989] *NQ* 6.3.1: *Illud quoque proderit praesumere animo nihil horum deos facere nec ira numinum aut caelum [converti] aut terram; suas ista causas habent nec ex imperio saeviunt sed quibusdam vitiis, ut corpora nostra turbantur, et tunc, cum facere videntur, iniuriam accipiunt.*

> such as warm waters in the midst of the sea- waves, and the expanses of new islands that spring up in the wide ocean."[990]

In both passages Seneca says that all kinds of natural phenomena, and especially the harmful ones, have "causes of their own". This could be seen as an attempt by Seneca to absolve god from any responsibility for these phenomena, especially when he says that "gods cause none of these things". This would be a surprising move, since Seneca usually sees god as the ultimate cause of all things[991] - and there is sufficient evidence that shows that Seneca did not, in fact, try to save providence in this way, i.e. by removing certain phenomena from god's sphere of responsibility. A passage from *De Ira* illustrates this:

> "Those, therefore, are mad and ignorant of truth who lay to the gods' charge the cruelty of the sea, excessive rains, and the stubbornness of winter, whereas all the while none of the phenomena which harm or help us are planned personally for us. For it is not because of us that the universe brings back winter and summer; these have their own laws, by which the divine plan operates. We have too high a regard for ourselves if we deem ourselves worthy to be the cause of such mighty movements. Therefore none of these phenomena takes place for the purpose of injuring us, nay, on the contrary, they all tend toward our benefit."[992]

Seneca's point here is that all manner of great happenings are not sent to harm or help an individual human being or even all of them: they happen because they are needed for the realization of god's great plan. We have already seen that god is bound by certain physical laws and limitations; because of these, certain unintended side-effects of his provident working, such as human vulnerability to disease and injury, have to be accepted.[993] Earthquakes, heavy rains and the like are no different: they may cause us harm, but that is only the unintended

---

[990] *Prov.* 3.1: *Ne illa quidem quae videntur confusa et incerta, pluvias dico nubesque et elisorum fulminum iactus et incendia ruptis montium verticibus effusa, tremores labantis soli aliaque quae tumultuosa pars rerum circa terras movet, sine ratione, quamvis subita sint, accidunt, sed suas et illa causas habent non minus quam quae alienis locis conspecta miraculo sunt, ut in mediis fluctibus calentes aquae et nova insularum in vasto exsilientium mari spatia.*

[991] Cf. *NQ* 2.45.2: "You wish to call him fate? You will not be wrong. It is he on whom all things depend (*ex quo suspensa sunt omnia*), the cause of causes. You wish to call him providence? You will still be right. It is by his planning (*consilio*) that provision is made for this universe so that it may proceed without stumbling and fulfill its appropriate functions." Seneca here sides with Chrysippus, who identified god's providence with fate, against Cleanthes' idea that certain fated things are not part of providence. See above, section 2.

[992] *Ira* 2.27.1: *Dementes itaque et ignari veritatis illis imputant saevitiam maris, immodicos imbres, pertinaciam hiemis, cum interim nihil horum quae nobis nocent prosuntque ad nos proprie derigatur. Non enim nos causa mundo sumus hiemem aestatemque referendi; suas ista leges habent, quibus divina exercentur. Nimis nos suspicimus, si digni nobis videmur propter quos tanta moveantur. Nihil ergo horum in nostram iniuriam fit, immo contra nihil non ad salutem.*

[993] See section 3.2.2.

side-effect of their being a integral part of the divine plan.[994] Seneca believes that we can cope with these events by understanding "that the very agencies which seem to bring harm are working for the preservation of the world, and are a part of the scheme for bringing to fulfilment the order of the universe and its functions."[995]

When Seneca says that "gods cause none of these things", then, he does not mean that god is not causally responsible for their occurrence, but that god does not send them to harm us: "lightning bolts are not sent by Jupiter but all things are so arranged that even those things which are not done by him none the less do not happen without a plan, and the plan is his. For, although Jupiter does not do these things now, it is Jupiter who brought it about *that* they happen."[996] These occurrences are thus simply a part of the plan that god devised for this particular cosmos and which determines everything that will happen during its lifetime.[997] While Seneca often describes the emphasis on god's providence in theistic terms, here he takes up a rather more deistic perspective on god, in the sense that after the creation of the cosmos, there is no further divine intervention in how this cosmos develops. God's divine plan and all it entails, which can also be called fate, will unroll itself unalterably from beginning to end.[998] God himself cannot change fate, once it is underway, even if he wanted to.

> "Although the great creator and ruler of the universe himself wrote the decrees of fate, yet he follows them. He obeys for ever, he decreed but once."[999]

But god does not want to change it, of course, because the cosmos he created is the best possible one. All that is fated is part of his plan, and all of it happens, directly or indirectly, for the good of the cosmos as a whole; in the end, therefore, whatever happens is also to our benefit, because we are part of this cosmos and we should accept or even welcome it:

> "I owe a great debt to the sun and to the moon; and yet they do not rise for me alone. I am personally beholden to the seasons and to the god who controls them, although in no respect have they been apportioned for my benefit."[1000]

---

[994] Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 179; Mansfeld (1992), p. 328-9.
[995] *EM* 74.20: *illa ipsa, quibus laedi videtur, ad conservationem universi pertinere et ex iis esse, quae cursum mundi officiumque cosummant.* Cf. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1049A (*SVF* 2.1177, discussed in section 2) for Chrysippus' idea that god may use wars to get rid of excess population.
[996] *NQ* 2.46: *fulmina non mitti a Iove, sed sic omnia esse disposita ut etiam quae ab illo non fiunt tamen sine ratione non fiant, quae illius est. Nam etiamsi Iupiter illa nunc non facit, Iupiter fecit ut fierent.* Cf. *NQ* 2.32.4.
[997] God's plan will be the same in each new world cycle; see chapter 4.
[998] *NQ* 2.36: "What do you understand as fate? I consider it the necessity of all events and actions which no force may break." *Quid enim intellegis fatum? Existimo necessitatem rerum omnium actionumque, quam nulla vis rumpat.* Cf. *EM* 19.6, 77.12, *NQ* 35.2.
[999] *Prov.* 5.8: *Ille ipse omnium conditor et rector scripsit quidem fata, sed sequitur; semper paret, semel iussit.* This seems to be a clear answer to the question that Seneca raises in *NQ* 1.Pref.3: ""[whether] it is possible for him (*liceat illi*) to make decisions today and to repeal in part any sort of universal law of fate (*ex lege fatorum*)." Cf. *Ben.* 6.23.1

The early Stoics, too, even though they held that the cosmos was made as the abode for man and god,[1001] held that god always has the greater good in mind and that individual men may suffer for this.[1002] We may take the conflagration as the best example of this. Its occurrence is part of god's providential plan and thus good for us insofar as we are a part of the whole; nevertheless, the destruction of the current world order will inevitably cause the death of countless individual human beings.

4. Conclusion

Seneca's defence of god's providence in the face of apparent evil in the cosmos, we may conclude, is typically Stoic. The only true evil, i.e. moral evil, is not god's responsibility but our own, Seneca believes. By making us rational, god has given us the capacity to become virtuous; but this capacity for virtue implies the capacity for its opposite, vice. The decision for either opposite is ours, not gods, and consequently we ourselves are to blame for abusing god's gift of rationality by becoming vicious.

Seneca uses this self-inflicted moral evil as a foil for the commonly perceived evil of hardships and adversities suffered by good men. This perceived evil, he argues, is not evil at all, but actually to the benefit of these men, as it makes them mentally strong and resilient. Such men inspire the rest of humanity to endure hardship as well: this is needed because, as Seneca agrees with the earlier Stoics, god is not omnipotent and could not prevent us from suffering diseases, poverty, injury and painful death. Instead of criticizing god for our vulnerability, we should be grateful to him for providing us with all that he *could* give us. With our rationality, Seneca claims, we can endure all the bad things that god could not keep from us and become just as virtuous as god himself.

This last point shows that, while the arguments used by Seneca all fit in with established Stoicism, Seneca also has personal take on the matter at hand: the fact that we are vulnerable and that bad things are going to happen to us also gives the opportunity to show off our mental strength and virtue. Similarly, the fact that we can become morally evil means that we deserve praise for being morally good. In short, the fact that we are vulnerable beings with an imperfect rationality gives us the opportunity for glory.

[1000] *EM* 73.6: *Soli lunaeque plurimum debeo, et non uni mihi oriuntur. Anno temperantique annum deo privatim obligatus sum, quamvis nihil in meum honorem discripta.* Cf. MA 6.44 for a similar attitude.
[1001] Cic. *ND* 2.133 (*SVF* 2.933).
[1002] See section 2 above.

Chapter 7
Knowledge of god

1. Introduction

From its earliest beginnings, ancient philosophy has recognized and often emphasized that human knowledge, both in general and more in particular, viz. concerning our knowledge of the divine, is limited or at least fraught with difficulty. Xenophanes claimed that no one would ever know the truth about the gods,[1003] Protagoras famously said that he did and could not know whether the gods existed or what their nature was, the topic being too unclear (*adêlon*) and the human lifespan too short.[1004] Plato, too, characterizes his account in the *Timaeus* of how the Demiurge created the cosmos as no more than a 'likely story' (*eikos logos*)[1005] and claimed that it is difficult to know this Demiurge and impossible to convey this knowledge to others.[1006]

At the same time, however, we find that most ancient philosophers, to a greater or lesser extent, believe that they have a true understanding of god or the gods, and that this understanding is somehow important to us. The Stoics were very explicit about these points, as we have seen.[1007] Without a basic comprehension of the cosmos as a rationally ordered whole governed by an immanent divine principle, they held, there can be no good life and happiness. This required conception of god as an immanent and providential force was thought to be naturally available to anyone living in the cosmos, even though (Stoic) philosophy was seen as necessary for a further articulation of this conception. Seneca, we established,[1008] agreed with the earlier Stoics that an elemental understanding of god is necessary for the good life. He also concurs that certain other aspects of god are so complex that studying them can be likened to an initiation into arcane knowledge or religious rites.

In this chapter we will take a closer look at what the Stoics, and Seneca in particular, had to say about the human capabilities to pursue the study of such difficult theological topics. After briefly restating the Stoic position (section 2), we will consider Seneca's opinion on the matter of proving that god exists and what his nature is (section 3). In section 4 we will discuss Seneca's take on whether we are actually able to acquire theological knowledge, i.e. to know god. While we will find that in many passages he appears to affirm this (4.2), provided that we put in a lot of effort (4.3), there are also certain other passages where Seneca appears to be much less confident on human epistemological capabilities, both in general and more specifically, i.e. concerning the divine: it is these passages that are said, by some, to be indicative of a deviation of Seneca from the alleged orthodox Stoic epistemological optimism

---

[1003] DK 21 B34. See Lesher (1999) for a discussion of epistemological ideas in the Presocratics.
[1004] DK 80 B4.
[1005] Plato *Tim.* 29d.
[1006] Plato *Tim.* 28c.
[1007] See chapter 2, section 2.1.
[1008] Also in chapter 2, section 2.2.

(4.4). In the latter sections of this chapter (4.5-4.8) various considerations will be offered that, hopefully, give a better and more refined interpretation of what actually happens in these passages.

2. The Stoic position

In chapters 1 and 2 it was established that the Stoics held that a basic knowledge of god was a *sine qua non* for any student of Stoicism, and more in general, for anyone wishing to lead a morally good life. The morally good life consists in a life in accordance with our rational nature; we can only live this life if and when we understand ourselves to be a part of a cosmos that is rationally and providently governed by god, who is identical to or immanent in that cosmos. The Stoics argued that this basic understanding of the world and ourselves is easy to achieve; anyone observing the beauty and order of the cosmos and appreciating how well everything in it caters to our every need, will naturally form a conception of god as a beneficent and rational being. This so-called preconception (*prolêpsis*), the Stoics believed, was the indubitable basis for a further understanding of the divine and provident nature of the cosmos and how we should live in it, and as such is important to the whole of philosophy. Also, more specifically, it was seen as the starting point for the further study of theology, i.e. the study of the nature and different aspects of god and the divine,[1009] of which some, on account of their difficulty, should only be tackled by advanced students of Stoicism.[1010]

3. Seneca's arguments for god's existence

Seneca shares the Stoic idea that the divine character of the world is apparent to all who live in it. In *EM* 41, as discussed earlier,[1011] Seneca advocates the Stoic point that god is immanent in man, *c.q.* that our soul is a part of god. That god should be present in us is not surprising, Seneca argues, because there are many other phenomena that induce us to infer a divine presence:

> "If ever you have come upon a grove that is full of ancient trees which have grown to an unusual height, shutting out a view of the sky by a veil of pleached and intertwining branches, then the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, and your marvel at the thick unbroken shade in the midst of the open spaces, will prove to you the presence of deity. Or if a cave, made by the deep crumbling of the rocks, holds up a mountain on its arch, a place not built with hands but hollowed out into

[1009] See chapter 1, section 3.4.
[1010] See chapter 1, section 3.2; chapter 2, section 2.1.
[1011] Chapter 5, sections 2 and 3.

> such spaciousness by natural causes, your soul will be deeply moved by a certain intimation of the existence of god."[1012]

The earlier Stoics had also argued that the beauty and awe-inspiring character of the cosmos should convince anyone of the existence of the gods.[1013] Like the early Stoics, Seneca argues that the widespread belief in the gods is an argument for their existence:

> "We are wont to concede much to what all men take for granted; in our eyes the fact that all men agree upon something is a proof of its truth. For instance, we infer that the gods exist, for this reason, among others – that there is implanted in everyone an idea concerning deity, and there is no people so far beyond the reach of laws and customs that it does not believe at least in gods of some sort."[1014]

It has been noted that with "what all men take for granted" (*praesumptio omnium hominum*) and "implanted idea" (*opinio insita*) Seneca probably refers to the notion of preconception (*prolêpsis*).[1015] The Stoics held that even though not everyone agreed with them that this preconception of god included his providential nature,[1016] e.g., there was a universally shared notion of god as a supreme living being.[1017] They used this agreement as an argument for god's existence, and Seneca clearly agrees with them, when he characterizes the widespread belief in something as a "proof of the truth" (*veritatis argumentum*) of that belief.[1018]

Unlike the early Stoics, however, Seneca does not argue extensively or systematically for the existence of god or the gods. The passages cited above are all that he has to offer by way of argument.[1019] Neither does Seneca ever argue explicitly for the Stoic conception of god.[1020]

[1012] *EM* 41.3: *Si tibi occurrerit vetustis arboribus et solitam altitudinem egressis frequens lucus et conspectum caeli ramorum aliorum alios protegentium summovens obtenu, illa proceritas silvae et secretum loci et admiratio umbrae in aperto tam densae atque continuae fidem tibi numinis faciet.*

[1013] Cf. *ND* 2.14-15, 95, 98. See further chapter 1, section 3.4.

[1014] *EM* 117.6: *Multum dare solemus praesumptioni omnium hominum, et apud nos veritatis argumentum est aliquid omnibus videri; tamquam deos esse inter alia hoc colligimus, quod omnibus insita de dis opinio est nec ulla gens usquam est adeo extra leges moresque proiecta ut non aliquos deos credat.* Cf. Cic. *TD* 1.30, *ND* 2.5, 2.12, *Leg.* 1.24. Sextus Emp. *M* 9.60f. Dragona-Monachou (1976), p. 197, thinks that with *apud nos* Seneca refers to himself only, not to the Stoics in general, because in the context of the passage cited he contrasts his own opinion with that of the early Stoics. This is not convincing: in *EM* 117 Seneca is indeed in disagreement with the early Stoics on whether 'being wise' is a good or not (see chapter 3, section 2.3). The Stoics held that it is not a good, while Seneca holds that it is. Before turning to more technical arguments, Seneca appeals to the Stoic theory of preconceptions in order to refute them: since the Stoics believe that the universal agreement on something is an argument for its truth, they should also recognize that the universal belief that 'being wise' is good is an argument for the truth of that belief.

[1015] Dragona-Monachou (1976), p. 186ff.

[1016] Epicurus, notably, did not: cf. Cic. *ND* 1.43ff.

[1017] Cic. *ND* 2.5, 2.12, 2.46.

[1018] See chapter 1, section 3.4.

[1019] Cf. Dragona-Monachou (1976), p. 182: "Actually God's existence was never presented by Seneca as a subject for debate."

Usually, the view that our cosmos is a beautifully crafted and organized whole is taken for granted as the correct one,[1021] and Seneca fulminates against those who do not share it:[1022]

> “ [...] a great error possesses mortals: men believe that this universe, than which nothing is more beautiful or better ordered or more consistent in plan, is an accident, revolving by chance, and thus tossed about in lightning bolts, clouds, storms, and all the other things by which the earth and its vicinity are kept in turmoil. Nor does this nonsense exist among only the common people; it also infects those who say they have knowledge. There are some men who conclude that they themselves have a mind, indeed a provident one, evaluating situations, both their own and other peoples’; but the universe, in which we also exist, they presume is lacking in plan and either moves along in some haphazard way or else nature does not know what it is doing.”[1023]

The last lines obviously refer to the theories of the Epicureans and the Peripatetics, who denied that the cosmos was run by divine providence.[1024] Seneca’s implicit rejection of the thesis that even though we humans do have a provident mind, the cosmos itself does not, is probably reminiscent of Stoic arguments that premise the supreme rationality of the cosmos on that of the inhabitants or parts of that cosmos.[1025] Seneca does not put forward such arguments explicitly, then, but refers to them elliptically with his statement that the universe is that “than which nothing is more beautiful or better ordered or more consistent in plan.”[1026]

[1020] In *Prov.* 1.2-4, though, in a fine example of *praeteritio*, Seneca says that there is no need to show that the structural complexity of the cosmos, the orderly movement of the heavenly bodies, and the fertility of the earth cannot be the result of chance but must be ascribed to a providential divine force.

[1021] See e.g. *NQ* 2.45.2, *EM* 113.16, *Ben.* 4.23.1.

[1022] Cf. *Ben.* 4.4.2, where Seneca argues that the universal awareness of the benefits the gods bestow upon us show the idiocy in assuming, with Epicurus, that the gods are not providential.

[1023] *NQ* 1.Praef.14-5: *[...] tantus error mortalia tenet ut hoc, quo neque formosius est quicquam nec dispositius nec in proposito constantius, existiment homines fortuitum et casu volubile ideoque tumultuosum inter fulmina nubes tempestates et cetera quibus terrae ac terris vicina pulsantur. Nec haec intra vulgum dementia est sed sapientiam quoque professos contigit. Sunt qui putent ipsis animum esse, et quidem providum, dispensantem singula et sua et aliena, hoc autum universum, in quo nos quoque sumus, expers consilii aut ferri temeritate quadam aut natura nesciente quid faciat.*

[1024] Specifically, “some haphazard way” refers to the randomness with which things happen in the Epicurean universe, while “nature does not know what it is doing” might refer to the fact that Aristotle does not attribute the teleological structure of reality to the designs of a higher being, but more probably expresses the opinion of Strato, the third scholarch of the Lyceum (c. 335-269 B.C.), who emphasized the naturalistic aspect of Aristotle’s cosmogony and cosmology, denying any creative or active involvement of a conscious divine being. Cf. Cic. *ND* 1.35. See Sharples (1998) for a discussion and further reference; see also chapter 1, section 3.4.

[1025] Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.16 (*SVF* 2.1012), where the characterization of the belief that there is nothing superior to man as “insane arrogance” (*desipientis adrogantiae*) is similar to what Seneca calls *error* and *dementia*. See further *ND* 2.18, 2.36, Sextus Emp. *M* 85 (last lines of *SVF* 2.1013) This rationality, the Stoics argue, implies the exercise of providence; cf. Cic. *ND* 2.76-7. See further chapter 1, section 3.4.

[1026] *NQ* 1.Praef.14, cited above.

4. Knowledge of god

4.1 Introduction

As discussed earlier,[1027] Seneca agrees with the early Stoics that a basic understanding of the cosmos as the supremely beautiful and well-governed whole he believes it to be is needed for living virtuously, and that this understanding is not hard to come by, since "there is nothing that is hard to discover except that which, when discovered, brings no other reward than the fact of discovery; all that tends to make us better and happier has been placed either in plain sight or nearby."[1028] Among the questions that would bring "no other reward than the fact of discovery" when answered are such as deal with the causes of the tides, optical illusions, and certain enigmas concerning the conception and lives of twins. With regard to such matters Seneca declares that "truth lurks in deep hiding and is wrapped in mystery."[1029]

He may have put his point somewhat hyperbolically, however, since he does in fact recognize that gaining insight into certain more difficult matters *is* worthwhile, both for moral purposes and in itself.[1030] He says that he is grateful to nature:

> "not just when I view it in that aspect which is obvious to everybody but when I have penetrated its mysteries; when I learn what the stuff of the universe is, who its author or custodian is, what god is, whether he keeps entirely to himself or whether he sometimes considers us; whether he creates something each day or has created it only once; whether he is a part of the universe or is the universe; whether it is possible for him to make decisions today and to repeal in part any sort of universal law of fate; whether it is a diminution of his majesty and an admission of his error that he had done things which had to be changed."[1031]

The mysteries of nature that are worth penetrating, it appears, all concern certain theological issues. Several sections later, Seneca lists more questions concerning god's nature and attributes, claiming the study of them to be of great use to us.[1032] He thinks that difficult matters such as these are reserved for advanced students only: "And as only the initiated know the more hallowed portion of the rites, so in philosophy the hidden truths are revealed only to

[1027] See chapter 2, esp. section 2.2.1.
[1028] *Ben.* 7.1.6: *nullius rei difficilis inventio est, nisi cuius hic unus onventae fructus est invenisse; quidquid nos meliores beatosque facturum est, aut in aperto aut in proximo posuit.*
[1029] *Ben.* 7.1.5: *Involuta veritas in alto latet.*
[1030] See chapter 2, section 2.2.2 and 2.2.3.
[1031] *NQ* 1.Praef.3: *Equidem tunc rerum naturae gratias ago cum illam non ab hac parte video qua publica est, sed cum secretiora eius intravi, cum disco quae universi materia sit, quis actor aut custos, quid sit deus, totus in se tendat an et ad nos aliquando respiciat, faciat cotidie aliquid an semel fecerit, pars mundi sit an mundus, liceat illi hodieque decernere et ex lege fatorum aliquid derogare an maiestatis deminutio sit et confessio erroris mutanda fecisse.*
[1032] *NQ* 1.Praef.16-7. See chapter 2, sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3, for a discussion of how exactly Seneca believes the study of these topics to be of use for us.

those who are members and have been admitted to the sacred rites."[1033] This is a striking and maybe intentional echo of Chrysippus' claim that studying theology, on account of its difficulty, is like an initiation into mysteries.[1034] We may conclude first, that while Seneca believes that certain difficult matters are not really worth studying, he also thinks that it is worthwhile to learn more about god's nature, difficult though that topic may be, and second, that he believes that we have the epistemological capabilities to tackle these theological issues. This second point will now be examined in more detail.

4.2 Knowledge of god is possible

Seneca thinks that philosophy aims at improving both our understanding of the cosmos and our moral dispositions; this dual purpose is expressed in his statement that "the sole function (*opus unum*)" of philosophy is to discover "the truth about things divine and things human (*divinis humanisque verum*)."[1035] This virtuous state that is the goal of philosophy may be called wisdom as well,[1036] and, as argued above, it provides us with a privileged knowledge of the divine:

> "[Wisdom] discloses to us what the gods are and of what sort they are; what are the nether gods, the household deities, and the protecting spirits; what are the souls which have been transferred to the second class of divinities, where is their abode and what their activities, powers, and will. Such are wisdom's rites of initiation, by means of which is unlocked, not a village shrine, but the vast temple of all the gods – the universe itself, whose true apparitions and true aspects she offers to the gaze of our minds. [...] Then she [wisdom - MvH] goes back to the beginning of things, to the eternal reason which was imparted to the whole, and to the force which inheres in all the seeds of things, giving them the power to fashion each thing according to its kind."[1037]

The use in this passage of the same image as was discussed at the end of the previous section, viz. that of an initiation into secret or arcane knowledge, shows that Seneca believes that

[1033] *EM* 95.64: *Sicut sanctiora sacrorum tantum initiati sciunt, ita in philosophia arcana illa admissis receptisque in sacra ostenduntur; at praecepta et alia eiusmodi profanis quoque nota sunt.* Cf. *NQ* 1.Praef.3.
[1034] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1035A-B. Cf. Etym. Magn. s.v. *teletê* (*SVF* 2.1008), and Epiph. *Adv. Her.* 3.2.9. (*SVF* 1.538) for a similar idea of Cleanthes. See also chapter 2, section 2.1.
[1035] *EM* 90.3. Cf. *EM* 31.8, 89.5, *NQ* 1.Praef.1. See further chapter 2, especially section 2.2.3.
[1036] *EM* 89.6-7. Seneca says that *sapientia* translates *sophia*, thereby indicating that he is aware of the literal meaning of *philosophia* as 'love of wisdom'.
[1037] *EM* 90.28-9: *Quid sint di qualesque declarat, quid inferi, quid lares et genii, quid in secundam numinum formam animae perpetitae, ubi consistant, quid agant, quid possint, quid velint. Haec eius initiamenta sunt. per quae non municipale sacrum, sed ingens deorum omnium templum, mundus ipse reseratur, cuius vera simulacra verasque facies cernendas mentibus protulit. [...] Ad initia deinde rerum redit aeternamque rationem toti inditam et vim onium seminum singula proprie figurantem.*

detailed knowledge of god is only available to advanced philosophers. In several other passages, too, Seneca lists all kinds of theological issues that he believes philosophy makes us capable of understanding.[1038] In *EM* 117, e.g., he says that "wisdom has large and spacious retreats: we may investigate the nature of the gods, the fuel which feeds the constellations, or all the varied courses of the stars, whether the impulse to motion comes from thence into the minds and bodies of all, and whether even these events which we call fortuitous are fettered by strict laws and nothing in this universe is unforeseen or unregulated in its revolutions."[1039] The same is expressed in *EM* 95:

> "[Philosophy] says: 'I investigate the whole universe [...] In the words of Lucretius: To thee shall I reveal the ways of heaven and of the gods, spreading before thine eyes; the first things, - from which all others are created, increased, and fostered by nature, and wherein is their end when nature casts them off.' [...] It is the doctrines which will strengthen and support us in peace and calm, which will include simultaneously the whole of life and the universe in its completeness."[1040]

The reason why Seneca quotes Lucretius is not, of course, because he agrees that we will discover the atoms to be the underlying structure of reality, which is what the lines allude to; he does so, because those lines by themselves can also be taken to express the Stoic view that we can and must recognize god as the creator and principle of all things.[1041] A similar point is made in the following passage:

> "Do you forbid me to contemplate the universe? Do you compel me to withdraw from the whole and restrict me to a part? May I not ask what are the beginnings of all things, who moulded the universe, who took the confused and conglomerate mass of sluggish matter, and separated it into parts? May I not inquire who is the master-builder of this universe, how the mighty bulk was brought under the control of law and order, who gathered together what is scattered, who separated the

[1038] Another such list is found in the passage from *NQ* 1.Praef.3 quoted *supra*. Cf. *NQ* 2.59.2, where Seneca argues that moral virtue is needed "when we go into the secrets of nature, when we treat the divine" (*cum imus per occulta naturae, cum divina tractamus*). Apparently, then, we are able to do so.

[1039] *EM* 117.19: *[...] amplos habet illa spatiososque secessus: de deorum natura quaeramus, de siderum alimento, de his tam variis stellarum discursibus, an ad illarum motus nostra moveantur, an corporibus omnium animisque illinc impetus veniat, an et haec quae fortuita dicuntur certa lege constricta sint nihilque in hoc mundo repentinum aut expers ordinis volutetur.*

[1040] *EM* 95.10-12: *'Totum' inquit 'mundum scrutor [...] Nam tibi de summa caeli ratione deumque / disserere incipiam et rerum primordia pandam, / unde omnis natura creet res, auctet alatque, / quoque eadem rursus natura perempta resolvat, ut ait Lucretius.' Decreta sunt quae muniant, quae securitatem nostram tranquillitatemque tueantur, quae totam vitam totamque rerum naturam simul contineant.* The Lucretian lines are from *DRN*, 1.54-7, but Lucretius has *quove eadem rursum* for *quoque eadem rursus*.

[1041] For Seneca's use of Epicurean tenets in the *Epistulae Morales*, see chapter 1, section 5. In chapter 2, section 2.2.1, we have seen how, in *EM* 58, he feels justified in discussing Plato's theory of the Forms by referring to its moral utility.

> disordered elements and assigned an outward form to elements that lay in one vast shapelessness?"[1042]

The main point of this passage is not Seneca's opinion on the different subjects he mentions, but the fact that he believes that it is particularly important for us to be dealing with them in the first place. Several other passages attach the same importance to studying all kinds of aspects of god, his nature and the way he operates in the cosmos.[1043] On the basis of this repeated insistence on the importance of studying theological topics, then, it seems reasonable to assume that Seneca is convinced that we are actually capable of comprehending god's nature and how he operates in the cosmos.

This assumption is further corroborated by many passages that explicitly state that we can know god or at least certain aspects of him. In *EM* 93, he claims that we have already learned a great deal about how the cosmos operates and about the movements of the heavenly bodies, which Seneca, like the early Stoics, believes to be gods: [1044]

> "We have had the joy of learning the truth about all things: we know from what beginnings nature arises; how she orders the course of the heavens; by what successive changes she summons back the years; how she will bring to an end all things that ever have been, and has established herself as the only end of her own being; we know that the stars move by their own motion, and that nothing except the earth stands still, while all the other bodies run on with uninterrupted swiftness; we know how the moon outstrips the sun; why it is that the slower leaves the swifter

---

[1042] *EM* 65.19: *Interdicis mihi inspectione rerum naturae, a toto abductum redigis in partem? Ego non quaeram, quae sint initia universorum? Quis rerum formator? Quis omnia in uno mersa et materia inerti convoluta discreverit? Non quaeram, quis sit istius artifex mundi? Qua ratione tanta magnitudo in legem et ordinem venerit? Quis sparsa collegerit, confusa distinxerit, in una deformitate iacentibus faciem diviserit?*
[1043] Cf. *Otio* 4.2, where we are recommended to take time off "so that we may inquire [...] whether this world, which embraces (*complectitur*) seas and lands and the things that are contained in the sea and land, is a solitary creation or whether god has strewn about many systems (*corpora*) of the same sort; whether all the matter from which everything is formed is continuous (*continua*) and compact (*plena*), or whether it is disjunctive (*diducta*) and a void is intermingled with the solid (*solidis inane permixtum*); what god is - whether he idly gazes upon his handiwork, or directs it; whether he encompasses it from without, or pervades the whole of it (*extrinsecus illi circumfusus sit an toti inditus*); whether the cosmos (*mundus*) is eternal, or is to be counted among the things that perish and are born only for a time." Cf. *Brev*. 19.1, where Seneca urges us to study "what substance (*materia*), what pleasure, what mode of life (*condicio*), what shape (*forma*) god has; what fate (*casus*) awaits your soul; where nature lays us to rest when we are freed from the body; what the principle is that upholds all the heaviest matter (*gravissima*) in the centre of this world, suspends the light on high, carries fire to the topmost part, summons the stars to their proper changes - and other matters, in turn, full of mighty wonders?"
[1044] See chapter 3, section 3.2.

behind; in what manner she receives her light, or loses it again; what brings on the night, and what brings back the day."[1045]

That Seneca believes we can know god is also apparent from his repeatedly stated opinion that we need to know what god is, in order for us to live fully in accordance with our god-given rationality. In *De Ira*, Seneca argues that there is no need to take the behaviour of animals as paradigm "when you have the universe and god, whom man of all creatures alone comprehends in order that he alone may imitate him;"[1046] in *EM* 41 he describes the soul of the sage as having come down from heaven "in order that we may have a nearer knowledge of divinity,"[1047] while in *EM* 90 it is said that the sage teaches us "not merely to know the gods, but to follow them."[1048] In *EM* 110, finally, Seneca claims that nothing but a thorough study of "things divine and human" (*humanorum divinorumque*)[1049] will enable us to live well; this study includes topics from ethics, but also theological issues: "The range of the human intelligence is not confined within these limits; it may also explore outside the universe - its destination and its source, and the ruin towards which all nature hastens so rapidly."[1050]

Seneca expressly states that nature, i.e. god, has endowed us with the epistemological capacity to understand the divine cosmos that we live in: "See how great a privilege nature has bestowed upon us, how the terms of man's empire do not restrict him to mankind; [...] see how great is the audacity of our minds, how they alone either know, or seek, the gods, and, by directing their thought on high, commune with powers divine."[1051]

[1045] *EM* 93.9: *Omnium rerum cognitione fruiti sumus: scimus a quibus principiis natura se attollat, quemadmodum ordinet mundum, per quas annum vices revocet, quemadmodum omnia quae usquam erunt cluserit et se ipsam finem sui fecerit; scimus sidera impetu suo vadere, praeter terram nihil stare, cetera continua velocitate decurrere; scimus quemadmodum solem luna praetereat, quare tardior velociorem post se relinquat, quomodo lumen accipiat aut perdat, quae causa inducat noctem, quae reducat diem[.]* Cf. *NQ* 1.Praef.12-3, where the soul is described as capable of studying the nature and movement of the heavenly bodies; by doing so, the soul "begins to know god" (*incipit deum nosse*). In all three of his consolatory letters, Seneca also describes the human soul as capable of studying, or enjoying the spectacle of, the divine heavenly bodies: cf. *Marc.* 25.2, *Polyb.* 9.3, *Helv.* 20.2. See also *Helv.* 8.6.

[1046] *Ira* 2.16.2: *cum habeas mundum deumque, quem ex omnibus animalibus, ut solus imitetur solus intellegit [....]*

[1047] *EM* 41.5: *ut propius [quidem] divina nossemus [...]* See chapter 5, sections 2 and 3 on the divinity of the human soul.

[1048] *EM* 90.34: *nec nosse tantum sed sequi deos docuit [...].*

[1049] Cf. *EM* 90.3, cited in the first paragraph of section 4.1 *supra*.

[1050] *EM* 110.9: *Nec intra haec humani ingenii sagacitas sistitur: prospicere et ultra mundum libet, quo feratur, unde surrexerit, in quem exitum tanta rerum velocitas properet.* This last list of topics (*quo feratur* etc.) shows that with *ultra mundum* Seneca does not refer to knowledge of what transcends the cosmos, but rather meta-knowledge about the cosmos, i.e. knowledge about the cosmos as a whole (rather than about a particular part of it).

[1051] *Ben.* 6.23.6: *Vide, quantum nobis permiserit, quam non intra homines humani imperii condicio sit; [...] vide, animi quantum audeant, quemadmodum soli aut noverint deos aut quaerant et mente in altum elata divina comitentur.* Cf. *Helv.* 8.6, where it is said we may study and "commune with" (*immiscear*) the heavenly bodies, and *Otio* 5.5-6, where Seneca lists a host op topics that nature meant for us to study: e.g.,

4.3 Knowledge of god is difficult to achieve

The evidence adduced so far indicates that Seneca is convinced that we are able to know god and deal with all kinds of theological issues and questions. He does not, however, believe that we can obtain this knowledge easily; as shown, he regards it as a privilege for those initiated into Stoic philosophy,[1052] and the last two passages quoted above contain a certain hesitance as well. In the passage from *De Beneficiis*, Seneca glorifies the inquisitive and elevated nature of our minds, but his claim that they know the gods (*noverint deos*) is tempered by his adding "or seek" (*aut quaerant*).[1053] Likewise, in a passage from the *NQ*, his statement that certain things are within our knowledge is qualified by his "or can be [within our knowledge - MvH]" (*aut cadere possunt*).[1054]

Other passages confirm that Seneca believes that this knowledge is not readily available, but must be earned; he argues that the gods have been especially beneficent towards us providing us with a mind "to which nothing is inaccessible the moment it makes the effort"[1055] and that certain subjects need our full attention:

> "There are some subjects [...] that, if they are to be known, require more than a first acquaintance provides (for knowledge of them is lost unless it is continued) - I am thinking of the knowledge of geometry and of the motions of the heavenly bodies and of other similar subjects that, on account of their subtlety, have a slippery hold."[1056]

In the preface to the third book of the *NQ*, seen by many as originally the first book of the whole work,[1057] Seneca ponders the enormity of the task he has set himself: "Lucilius, best of men, I realize how I, an old man, am starting the groundwork for a vast project, once I have decided to survey the cosmos, to uncover its causes and secrets, and to pass them on to the knowledge of others. When will I catch up with so much material, gather together such scattered fields of study, gain insight into such mysteries?"[1058] There may be a measure of

---

the origin of the stars, how the ordering of the different parts of the cosmos took place, whether man is a part of god, whether the cosmos is spatially finite.

[1052] See the end of section 4.1 *supra*.

[1053] Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 360f.

[1054] *NQ* 2.3.1.

[1055] *Ben.* 2.29.5: *cui nihil eodem, quo intendit, momento pervium est[.]* Cf. *EM* 120.4, on our understanding of the good: "Nature could not teach us this directly; she has given us the seeds of knowledge, but not knowledge itself." *Hoc nos natura docere non potuit; semina nobis scientiae dedit, scientiam non dedit.*

[1056] *Ben.* 3.5.1: *Quemadmodum [...] quaedam res [...] non est satis didicisse (intercidit enim eorum scientia, nisi continuetur), geometriam dico et sublimium cursum et si qua alia propter subtilitatem lubrica sunt [...].* The examples suggest that Seneca has the liberal arts (*artes liberales*) in mind here. As we will see, however (below, in a passage from *NQ* 7.30.4), Seneca also ascribes *subtilitas* to theological topics.

[1057] Codoñer (1989), Hine (1996), Limburg (2007). See Limburg (2007), p. 10-12 for a recent overview of the discussion.

[1058] *NQ* 3.Praef.1: *Non praeterit me, Lucili virorum optime, quam magnarum rerum fundamenta ponam senex, qui mundum circuire constitui et causas secretaque eius eruere atqui aliis noscenda prodere. Quando*

rhetoric involved here, if it is accepted that Seneca *did* finish the *NQ*,[1059] but Seneca clearly does see it as a difficult and time-consuming undertaking. He calls it "a work that is serious, difficult, immense" (*rem seriam, gravem, immensam*) and a task he is not confident he can get on top of (*opus nescio an superabile*).[1060] In fact, at the end of book 7, when he has dealt with various theories about comets and posited his own, he professes that he is not confident at all about the veracity of any of them:

> "Whether or not they are true only the gods know, who have knowledge of the truth. We can only investigate these things and grope into the dark with hypotheses, not with the assurance of discovering the truth, and yet not without hope."[1061]

This seems somewhat more hesitantly put than the passages cited above, where 'slippery' topics such as the movement of the heavenly bodies are said to be graspable, provided we put in enough sustained effort. In the latter parts of book 7 of the *NQ* there are more passages that have prompted the idea that Seneca, at least in certain parts of his work, is much less optimistic about our epistemological capabilities, especially concerning the divine but also in general. These passages will be discussed in the next section.

4.4 The unknowability of god

Right after saying, in the passage discussed above,[1062] that there is only hope of, not confidence in, trying to understand the nature of comets, Seneca launches into a comparison of the studies of the heavenly bodies and the performance of religious rites. When we come to bring offerings in a temple, we show modesty and humbleness, so "how much more ought we to do so when we discuss the planets, the stars, the nature of the gods, lest in our ignorance we assert something rashly, impudently, or even lie knowingly!"[1063] When we realize that comets are not haphazardly occurring atmospheric phenomena, but magnificent works of nature (as Seneca

---

tam multa consequar, tam sparsa colligam, tam occulta perspiciam? The *Naturales Quaestiones* are not directly an inquiry into god, of course, but Seneca's terminology (*secreta*, *occulta*) shows that he believes studying the cosmos is tantamount to a study of god. Cf. *NQ* 2.59.2, where he puts the study of the "secrets of nature (*occulta naturae*)" on a par with studying the divine.

[1059] Some scholars believe he did not: see Limburg (2007), p. 14f. for an overview of the positions and arguments.

[1060] *NQ* 3.Praef.3-4.

[1061] *NQ* 7.29.3: *Quae an vera sint, dii sciunt, quibus est scientia veri. Nobis rimari illa et coniectura ire in occulta tantum licet, nec cum fiducia inveniendi nec sine spe.* Cf. Gauly (2004), p. 158. Cf. *Ben.* 4.33.2 for a more general statement on the difficulty of ascertaining the truth of something: "Our answer to this will be that we never wait for absolute certainty, since the discovery of truth is difficult (*in arduo est veri exploratio*), but follow the path that probable truth (*veri similitudo*) shows." These passages are further discussed below in section 4.7.

[1062] *NQ* 7.29.3.

[1063] *NQ* 7.30.1: *quanto hoc magis facere debemus, cum de sideribus de stellis de deorum natura disputamus, ne quid temere, ne quid impudenter aut ignorantes affirmemus, aut scientes mentiamur!*

believes)[1064] that we do not yet fully understand,[1065] we will assume this humble attitude, or so Seneca seems to think. In fact, he continues, there are many more heavenly bodies moving about that we are not able to see:

> "For god has not made all things for man. How much a part of god's immense work is entrusted to us? The very one who handles this universe, who established it, who laid the foundations of all that is and placed it around himself, and who is the greater and better part of his work, has escaped our sight; he has to be perceived in thought. Moreover, many things related to the highest divinity or allotted a neighbouring power are obscure. Or perhaps – which may surprise you more – they both fill and elude our vision. Either their subtlety is greater than the human eye-sight is able to follow or such a great majesty conceals itself in too holy a seclusion. It rules its kingdom – that is, itself – and grants no admission to any except the mind. What this is, without which nothing exists, we are not able to know, and yet we are surprised if we imperfectly understand some little bits of fire, even though the greatest part of the universe, god, remains hidden!"[1066]

This passage has elicited a lot of comments, since Seneca seems to be moving from his perceived lack of human knowledge of the nature and behaviour of comets to the opinion that there are certain things we humans categorically cannot know.[1067] When he says that "god has not made all things for man" and that we are not able to know "that without which nothing exists", i.e. god, who "remains hidden," he appears to contradict his own claims about human epistemological capabilities discussed above.[1068] David Runia suggests that Seneca in this passage might be edging away from Stoic optimism about our knowledge of god.[1069] In Runia's scenario, "there was a distinct difference between philosophy in the Hellenistic and in the imperial age."[1070] While the Hellenistic schools (Epicureans, Stoics) "argued with confidence

---

[1064] See chapter 3, section 3.2.

[1065] *NQ* 7.30.2, where nature is said to move the comets *in occulto*; in 7.3.1 Seneca says that, on account of the rarity of comets, we do not understand their trajectories or pattern of appearance. Cf. 7.27.6, where comets are said to occur infrequently.

[1066] *NQ* 7.30.3-4: *Neque enim omnia deus homini fecit. Quota pars operis tanti nobis committitur? Ipse qui ista tractat, qui condidit, qui totum hoc fundavit deditque circa se, maiorque est pars sui operis ac melior, effugit oculos; cogitatione visendus est. Multa praeterea cognata numini summo et vicinam sortita potentiam obscura sunt aut fortasse, quod magis mireris, oculos nostros et implent et effugiunt, sive illis tanta subtilitas est quantam consequi acies humana non possit, sive in sanctiore secessu maiestas tanta delituit et regnum suum, id est se, regit, nec ulli dat aditum nisi animo. Quid sit hoc sine quo nihil est scire non possumus, et miramur si quos igniculos parum novimus, cum maxima pars mundi, deus, lateat!*

[1067] Cf. Stahl (1964), p. 430, Waiblinger 1977, p. 85, Gross (1989), p. 303, Inwood (2002), p. 147, Limburg (2007), p. 347ff.

[1068] Cf. Dragona-Monachou (1976), p. 191: "[...] Seneca is not in full agreement with himself as to whether or not man is ever able to attain the perfect knowledge of God."

[1069] Runia (2002), esp. p. 306-7.

[1070] Runia (2002), p. 286.

about the nature of god (or the gods),"[1071] this confidence "is seen to be giving way to a different approach which is less confident and more complex" in the imperial age.[1072] The emergence of this so-called 'negative theology' is illustrated by a discussion of its presence in the works of Philo of Alexandria. The precise role of Philo in the change from Hellenistic to Imperial philosophy is difficult to establish, but Runia thinks that he was "sensitive to changes that were in the air, e.g. in the case of negative theology."[1073] Seneca, apparently, was also sensitive to this change; while "in diverse passages of his *Naturales Quaestiones* Seneca appears to breathe the optimism of Stoic theology," the passage from the *NQ* cited above "is rather more pessimistic."[1074]

Runia also refers to another passage where Seneca admits that "there are many things that we concede exist; what their qualities are we do not know."[1075] The soul is used as an example; all agree that we have a mind (*animus*) that controls and steers us, but there is no consensus whatsoever on the nature of this mind. [1076] It is not strange, then, Seneca argues, that we have not yet come to a full understanding of comets: we do not even fully understand ourselves. Seneca's assertions of human ignorance, Albrecht Dihle argues, "lassen sich nur schwer mit jenem Grundgedanken aller dogmatischen Philosophie der hellenistischen und kaiserzeitlichen Epoche vereinen, demzufolge nur das sichere, abgeschlossene Grundwissen von Welt und Mensch die Basis einer rationalen, praktikabelen Ethik abgeben kann. Das Nichtwissen, von dem Seneca spricht, bezieht sich ja auf ein so zentrales Thema wie das der menschlichen Seele."[1077]

In various other passages Seneca also appears to attest to limitations on human knowledge concerning the divine; in *De Otio* he complains that even if we spend all our time studying all sorts of theological and metaphysical questions, "yet man is too mortal to comprehend things immortal",[1078] a sentiment that is reiterated at the very end of book 7 of the *NQ*, where Seneca reckons that even if we all turned into ardent philosophers "we would scarcely reach to the bottom, where truth is located."[1079] This could also be taken to refer to our epistemological capabilities in general; we have seen that Seneca believes that "the discovery of truth is difficult."[1080] It might even be more than difficult, as a passage from the third book of

---

[1071] Runia (2002), p. 283. Even the Sceptics, Runia claims, "are no less direct in showing the weaknesses of the arguments and the evidence on which their premisses are based." But surely the alleged confidence of the dogmatists does not express the same epistemological attitude as the directness of the Sceptics.
[1072] Runia (2002), p. 289.
[1073] Runia (2002), p. 311-2. See chapter 1, section 4.4.
[1074] Runia (2002), p. 306.
[1075] *NQ* 7.25.1: *multa sunt quae esse concedimus; qualia sunt ignoramus.*
[1076] This was a stock issue in ancient philosophy: Seneca also discusses it in *EM* 121.12. See further section 4.7 below.
[1077] Dihle (1990), p. 89.
[1078] *Otio* 5.7: *tamen homo ad immortalium cognitionem nimis mortalis est.*
[1079] *NQ* 7.32.4: *vix ad fundum veniretur in quo veritas posita est[.]* Seneca here refers to Democritus' famous dictum that "truth is in the deep" (D.L. 9.72: *en buthôi hê alêtheia*).
[1080] *Ben.* 4.33.2: *in arduo est veri exploratio*; see section 4.3.

the *NQ* suggests. In this book Seneca discusses the remarkable characteristics of certain bodies of water or rivers. The waters of the Nile, he reports, appear to stimulate the fertility of women, though no one knows why, and other waters are also said to have certain beneficial effects.[1081] Seneca does not put much stock in these stories, but does not dismiss them entirely either, since he admits that "for some phenomena [such as the alleged fertilizing powers of the Nile – MvH] a cause cannot be given."[1082]

Two other passages may be thought to bear on this issue, but must, as will be argued, be invalidated as irrelevant to the present investigation. In the first passage, from *EM* 41, when Seneca is arguing that god is present in all of us, he uses a line from Vergil's *Aeneid* when he says: "In each good man 'a god doth dwell, but what god know we not.'"[1083] The context suggests that Seneca does not really mean that he does not know which god is in us, since the point he is making about god living within us is a standard Stoic one.[1084] What happens here is probably no more than that Seneca uses Vergil to grumble about the fact that so few of us humans recognize that god dwells inside each and every one of us.[1085] In the second passage, from *EM* 31, Seneca argues that a lot of things do not contribute to our attainment of the good life: "nor will your reputation [do this], nor a display of self, nor a knowledge of your name wide-spread throughout the world; for no one has knowledge of god (*nemo novit deum*); many even hold him in low esteem, and do not suffer for so doing."[1086] Norden put *nemo novit deum* down as a statement about god's unknowability in an epistemic sense;[1087] that this is not the case, and that Seneca actually means to say that god is not famous or 'the talk of the town' and that we should not strive for such fame either,[1088] is indicated by what precedes the cited lines. There he says that god has no property and is unclad – in other words, Seneca purposefully denies god various indifferents commonly held to be important. Therefore, *nemo novit deum* most likely also refers to such an indifferent, viz. fame or popularity.[1089] Seneca's remark that "many even hold him in low esteem, and do not suffer for so doing" supports this, since it probably means that, unlike famous people, god does not care if someone thinks little of him.

[1081] The grammarian Athenaeus reports Theophrastus as attributing bowel movement-enhancing powers to the Nile, and fertility-stimulating powers to certain other waters (*Deipnosophistae* 2.15).
[1082] *NQ* 3.25.11: *Quorundam causa non potest reddi [...].*
[1083] *EM* 41.2: *In unoquoque virorum bonorum 'Quis deus incertum est, habitat deus'.*
[1084] See chapter 5, section 3.
[1085] For a similar sentiment, cf. Epict. *Diss.*2.8.10ff.
[1086] *EM* 31.10: *Fama non faciet nec ostentatio tui et in populos nominis dimissa notitia; nemo novit deum, multi de illo male existimant, et inpune.*
[1087] Norden (1956).
[1088] Here I follow Hijmans (1972), p.49, who remarks that "the words 'nemo novit deum' [...] refer to the kind of fame that was very much a social reality in Seneca's Rome and have nothing to do with ἄγνωστος θεός in the sense of Norden's famous book." Cf. Limburg (2007), p. 348, n. 13.
[1089] Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 2.8.1, where it is said that the good for us lies in reason, not indifferents like fame, since god, too, is essentially reason, not fame.

We can now turn back to those passages discussed in this section that do seem to raise serious questions about Seneca's opinion as to our ability to know god. What seems to emerge from these passages is that while Seneca is usually pretty optimistic about our capacity to really understand the divine cosmos that we live in, there is sufficient evidence that, at times, he has his doubts as to our ability to truly grasp the nature of the divine. This occasional hesitance is considered by some to be non-Stoic, the Stoics being characterized as confident about our epistemological capabilities *vis-à-vis* the divine. In the following sections, this conclusion will be critically analyzed and qualified by taking the following points into consideration: first, that Seneca sharply distinguishes between the epistemological aptitude of the senses on the one hand and of the mind on the other; second, that he believes in the continuous discovery of new things, but that this progress of knowledge is hindered by such factors as the brevity of human life and the prevalence of vice; third, that a certain epistemological modesty is not foreign to the earlier Stoics, either, but that Seneca has more leeway to assert this modesty.

4.5 The limits of the senses

The crucial passage here is *NQ* 7.30.3-4, already discussed above;[1090] Seneca does indeed say that we are not able to know god and that he remains hidden, but he does not do so in an absolute sense. Seneca's remark that "god has not made all things for man" is given as an explanation, not of our ignorance in general, but of the fact that there are lots of heavenly bodies, like comets, that we simply cannot see.[1091] The passage continues: "How much a part of god's immense work is entrusted to us? The very one who handles this universe, who established it, who laid the foundations of all that is and placed around it himself, and who is the greater and better part of his work, has escaped our sight; he has to be perceived in thought."[1092] Seneca clearly says that while our eyesight cannot perceive god, our mind can. This idea is further explicated in what follows: "Moreover, many things related to the highest divinity or allotted a neighbouring power are obscure."[1093] Seneca refines this sentence by saying that these many things "both fill and elude our vision."[1094] He then gives two different explanations of what this filling and eluding of our senses actually amounts to.

[1090] See section 4.4.

[1091] As the text *neque enim omnia deus homini fecit* in *NQ* 7.30.3 stands, it may express that there are certain things whose existence is not related to our human needs. Some (Dihle (1990), p. 91, Gauly (2004), p. 163) have taken this to be a non-Stoic element, because the Stoics allegedly held that everything in the cosmos is done for man's sake. In ch. 6, section 3.2.3, this idea is rejected. Cf. also Limburg (2007), p. 176-82 and esp. 349. The text may also assert, however, that man is not meant to know all things. It is impossible to decide this issue, although the fact that the context of the passage is clearly epistemological may be important; it led Gercke in his 1907 edition to emend *fecit* to *patefecit*, while one of the manuscripts has *notafecit*.

[1092] *NQ* 7.30.3: *Quota pars operis tanti nobis committitur? Ipse qui ista tractat, qui condidit, qui totum hoc fundavit deditque circa se, maiorque est pars sui operis ac melior, effugit oculos; cogitatione visendus est.*

[1093] *NQ* 7.30.4: *Multa praeterea cognata numini summo et vicinam sortita potentiam obscura sunt[.]*

[1094] *NQ* 7.30.4: *oculos nostros et implent et effugiunt[.]*

The first explanation is that our senses are not delicate enough to discern these aspects, because "their subtlety is greater than the human eyesight is able to follow."[1095] In other words, our eyesight is not sufficient to discern what is in principle discernible. The second explanation, similar to the one given in 7.30.3 (*effugit oculos*), is different in that it states that such things, categorically, cannot be seen, since "such a great majesty conceals itself in too holy a seclusion."[1096] This might be taken to be indicative of an absolute divide between man and god in the negative theology-sense: god transcends the cosmos and is beyond our ken, as seems to be confirmed by what follows: we cannot know god, he remains hidden. What is important here, however, is that Seneca is still dealing with *sensory* perception: he says that we cannot discern god's majesty with our eyes and that this should not surprise us, since we have enough trouble trying to perceive other divine things, such as comets. It is in reference to this fact, viz. that god cannot be perceived by the senses, that Seneca says that we know not what he is. Because this statement is thus part of one of his explanations of why our senses are inadequate, it leaves open the possibility of us being able to know god by some means other than our senses. In fact, Seneca affirms this by saying that god's *maiestas* does not allow anything or anyone entry into its kingdom *nisi animo*.

What appears from these considerations is that Seneca does not categorically deny that we can know god. He does say that we cannot perceive god with our eyes, but affirms that we can do so with the mind. The insufficiency of our eyesight, especially in comparison with the power of our mind, is a recurring theme in Seneca's works in general and the *NQ* in particular. In the first book of the *NQ* Seneca states "nothing is more deceiving than our eyesight, not only in the case of objects which distance prevents the eyesight from accurately examining, but also in the case of objects which the eye perceives close at hand."[1097] The deception that our eyesight causes is put in a rather general way: our eyes can deceive us with regard to things that are close to us, as well as those that are far away. In the rest of book 1, Seneca deals with all kinds of problems from optics, such as optical illusions[1098] and the exact workings of mirrors and rainbows. Our vision is hindered or altered in various ways by different factors: water might change the optical size or shape of an object that we see floating around in it, clouds hinder our vision of the stars[1099] and the movement of falling stars, e.g., is unobservable to us on account of their velocity.[1100] Many explanations of optical illusions can

[1095] *NQ* 7.30.4: *illis tanta subtilitas est quantam consequi acies humana non possit[.]* Cf. *Ben.* 3.5.1, discussed in section 4.3 above.
[1096] *NQ* 7.30.4: *in sanctiore secessu maiestas tanta delituit[.]*
[1097] *NQ* 1.3.9: *nihil esse acie nostra fallacius non tantum in his a quibus subtiliter pervidendis illam locorum diversitas submovet, sed etiam in his quoque quae ad manum cernit.* Cf. *EM* 89.2, where our vision is said to be failing both in regard to objects nearby as to the universe as a whole.
[1098] Seneca makes use of famous examples, such as the stick-in-the-water and the colours on a pigeon's neck.
[1099] *NQ* 1.6.5.
[1100] *NQ* 1.14.3f.

be judged as false on the basis of further observation or even better, proof based on reason.[1101] Seneca even says that a thing's invisibility is not a proof for its non-existence.[1102] When our eyesight falls short, it is reason that provides us with trustworthy evidence. Seneca uses the size and movement of the sun as an example:

> "Although reason proves [the sun] is larger than the globe of the earth, our sight has so contracted it that philosophers have contended that it is the size of a foot. We know it is the swiftest of heavenly bodies, but no one of us sees it move. In fact, we would not believe it moved at all except that it obviously has changed position. Not one of us perceives that the universe itself moves, gliding along at headlong speed, unrolling its risings and settings within a moment of time. Why are you surprised if our eyes do not separate the raindrops of a shower, and if from a great distance an observer fails to distinguish distances between minute images?"[1103]

The senses do generally give us reliable information, but when we are dealing with difficult subjects, it is in our reason that we must place our trust in order to avoid error. In *EM* 95 Seneca says that certain matters are clear (*aperta*), while others are unclear (*obscura*); the senses are fine when it comes to *aperta*, but the *obscura* are the privilege of reason, since "reason is not satisfied by obvious facts; its higher and nobler function is to deal with hidden things."[1104] When we want to get a better understanding of things, then, it is imperative that we do not rely solely on the senses, but on reason as well.[1105]

This is especially the case when we are dealing with remote objects such as the heavenly bodies; there are many that we do not or even cannot see and those that are visible cannot be perceived in all their detail by the senses:

[1101] Cf. *NQ* 1.4.1, where Seneca approves of mathematical proofs concerning the workings of mirrors.
[1102] *NQ* 1.5.11.
[1103] *NQ* 1.3.10: *Hunc, quem toto terrarum orbe maiorem probat ratio, acies nostra sic contraxit ut sapientes viri pedalem esse contenderent, quem velocissimum omnium scimus, nemo nostrum moveri videt, nec ire crederemus, nisi appareret isse. Mundum ipsum praecipiti velocitate labentem et ortus occasusque intra momentum temporis revolventem nemo nostrum sentit procedere. Quid ergo miraris, si oculi nostri imbrium stillicidia non separant et ex ingenti spatio intuentibus minutarum imaginum discrimen interit?* The *viri sapientes* may refer to Heraclitus (DK 22B3), generally regarded by the Stoics as a forerunner of theirs. It might also refer to Epicurus, who was said to have held that the sun was a foot in diameter (Cic. *Fin.* 1.30), though this ascription might be false – cf. Algra (2000), p. 177-88.
[1104] *EM* 95.61: *Ratio [...]non impletur manifestis; maior eius pars pulchriorque in occultis est.* Cf. Solimano (1991), p. 97.
[1105] Cf. *NQ* 6.3.2: "But why is anything unusual (*insolitum*) to us? Because we comprehend nature with our eyes, not our reason." Also *NQ* 6.7.5: "Now truly a man permits too much to his eyes and does not know how to project his mind beyond them (*ultra illos producere animum*) if he does not believe that bays of a vast sea exist in the hidden depths of the earth." Cf. *NQ* 2.2.3, where it is said that certain things escape the senses (*sensum effugiunt*), but are apprehended by thought (*ratione prenduntur*). In *Vit.* 8.4 Seneca also says that while reason is stimulated by and gets its beginnings from the senses, it must ultimately rely on itself only. The point here is not epistemological, however, but ethical: Seneca wants to emphasize that it is reason that must judge the true value of the externals that the senses inform us about.

> "For there is no reason why you should suppose that there are only seven wandering stars, and that all the others are fixed; there are a few whose movements we apprehend, but, farther removed from our sight, are countless divinities that go their rounds, and very many of those that our eyes can reach proceed at an imperceptible pace and veil their movements."[1106]

The heavenly bodies, as we have seen, are divine, and Seneca repeatedly states that when it comes to perceiving the divine, our eyesight comes up short. In the preface of book 1 of the *NQ*, he says that theology[1107] "has not been restricted to what can be seen; it has presumed that there is something greater and more beautiful which nature has placed beyond our sight,"[1108] a sentiment repeated several paragraphs later, where god is defined as "all that you see, all that you do not see."[1109] As noted earlier, the Stoics could describe god both as being the cosmos and as being *in* the cosmos:[1110] these different perspectives allow Seneca to claim that god is "all that you see" insofar as he is the perceptible cosmos around us, and "all that you do not see" insofar as he is the immanent principle in that cosmos and those parts of the cosmos we cannot perceive because of the insufficiency of our eyesight. Although certain aspects of god or the divine are not perceivable by the senses, then, Seneca holds that these are graspable by the mind.[1111] In *EM* 90, as cited above, he claims that wisdom (i.e. the goal of philosophy) provides us with knowledge of the gods and the divine cosmos,[1112] "whose true apparitions and true aspects she offers to the gaze of our minds. For the vision of our eyes is too dull for sights so great."[1113] Our eyesight, then, both in general and when it comes to divine, is strictly limited; it is not worthless, however, since what we can visually perceive is the starting point for a deeper understanding of god and all kinds of theological topics.

> "We have not beheld them [the twelve constellations] all, nor the full compass of them, but our vision opens up a path for its investigation, and lays the foundations

---

[1106] *Ben.* 4.23.4: *Nec enim est, quod existimes septem sola discurrere, cetera haerere; paucorum motus comprehendimus, innumerabiles vero longiusque a conspectu seducti di eunt redeuntque, et ex his, qui oculos nostros patiuntur, plerique obscuro gradu pergunt et per occultum aguntur.* Cf. *Ben.* 3.5.1, discussed above in section 3.4, where knowledge of the movement of the heavenly bodies is said to be difficult "on account of their nicety" (*propter suptilitatem*).

[1107] Literally, the part of philosophy "that deals with the gods" (*ad deos pertinet*).

[1108] *NQ* 1.Praef.1: *non fuit oculis contenta; maius esse quiddam suspicata est ac pulchrius quod extra conspectum natura posuisset.*

[1109] *NQ* 1.Praef.13: *Quod vides totum et quod non vides totum.*

[1110] See chapter 3, section 3.1.

[1111] Cf. Pohlenz (1970), p. 320, and pt. 2, p. 152 and 159.

[1112] See section 4.2 *supra*.

[1113] *EM* 90.28: *cuius vera simulacra verasque facies cernendas mentibus protulit. Nam ad spectacula tam magna hebes visus est.* Cf. Sextus Emp. *M* 9.28, where "some of the later Stoics" are said to have held that the earliest men were more intelligent than we are today, enabling them to apprehend the nature and certain powers of the gods. With "some of the later Stoics" Sextus may refer to Seneca or Posidonius, or both. See Sijl (2010), p. 76ff.

> of truth so that our research may pass from revealed to hidden things and discover something more ancient than the world itself [...] Our thought bursts through the ramparts of the sky, and it is not content to know that which is revealed."[1114]

The idea that our mind must go beyond the senses to grasp the nature of god is an early Stoic one as well. The mind is able to derive god's providence and the fact of his existence from proofs[1115] and we must try to "divert they eye of the mind from following the practice of bodily sight."[1116] Preconceptions are, of course, reliable in themselves, but they also provide us with a basis for a further reasoned or rational understanding of things.[1117]

These considerations shed a different light on what happens in book 7 of the *NQ*: Seneca, in dealing with the topic of comets, is aware of the fact that the available evidence on this topic is scarce. Comets appear infrequently and since they are so far away (Seneca counts them among the heavenly bodies), our eyesight is incapable of perceiving them in any detailed sense. The divine nature of comets leads Seneca to his ruminations on the imperceptibility of the divine as a whole; insofar as god is the principle that works *in* the cosmos, and thus also in comets, he is imperceptible in an absolute sense. That does not mean that god, as this immanent and invisible force, is wholly beyond our knowledge: he is not, because our mind is capable of perceiving god, even when the senses are not.[1118] The superiority of the mind over the senses, especially as concerns the understanding of the divine, is a common topic in Seneca, and the early Stoics also explicitly assigned the understanding of god to the mind.[1119]

4.6 The advancement of knowledge

Another indication that Seneca does not really believe that man is incapable of knowing god is the fact that he repeatedly says that, even though there are things we do not know at this time,

---

[1114] *Otio* 5.5-6: *Nec [...] omnia nec tanta visimus quanta sunt, sed acies nostra aperit sibi investigandi viam et fundamenta vero iacit, ut inquisitio transeat ex apertis in obscura et aliquid ipso mundo inveniat antiquius. [...] Cogitatio nostra caeli munimenta perrumpit nec contenta est id, quod ostenditur, scire.* Between *antiquius* and *cogitatio* and after *scire*, Seneca lists a host of physical-theological topics that we can study. See n. 1051 *supra*.

[1115] D.L. 7.52.

[1116] Cic. *ND* 2.45: *a consuetudine oculorum aciem mentis abducere.* Failure to do so leads to such views as the Epicurean one that the gods have a human form.

[1117] Cic. *Acad.* 1.42. Cf. Cic. *TD* 1.36, where we are said to know the nature of the gods through reason. Cf. *TD* 1.45ff. See Wildberger (2006), n. 1054 on p. 775, for a further discussion.

[1118] Cf. Wildberger (2006), p. 216: "Will man die wahren Geheimnisse der Natur und damit letztlich auch Gott sehen, sind die Augen ein zu grober Sinn; nur der denkende Geist hat Zugang zum Göttlichen."

[1119] Cic. *Acad.* 2.142, D.L. 7.52. Cf. Schofield (1980), p. 289: "The Stoics seem to have felt much less aversion to argument and to justification in theology than in their theory of apprehensive presentation." Cf. Inwood (2002), p. 126, n. 29: "[P]arts of the work do rely on a contrast between what can be learned by means of the soul or reason and what can be learned by way of the senses; but this in itself is hardly evidence of Platonism. The contrast between reason and the senses is both old and widespread in ancient philosophy." Cf. Solimano (1991).

our knowledge will increase in the future. Seneca remarks that, on account of their rarity, comets are not fully understood for now (*adhuc non*),[1120] implying that we will understand them when we have had more opportunity to study them. This is confirmed in a later passage, where Seneca argues that our ignorance of the nature of comets is not surprising, since many things have only recently been explained, such as the phases of the moon or the movement of the planets:

> "The time will come when diligent research over very long periods will bring to light things which now lie hidden. [...] Some day there will be a man who will show in what regions comets have their orbit, why they travel so remote from other celestial bodies, how large they are and what sort they are. Let us be satisfied with what we found out, and let our descendants also contribute something to the truth."[1121]

In book 6 of the *NQ*, where Seneca discusses various theories on earthquakes, he praises "the ancients" (*veteres*) for their efforts. Their theories might be in error, because of the novelty of the subject, but they allowed us to proceed further, because they managed "to move aside the veil from hidden places and, not content with the exterior appearance of nature, to look within and to descend into the secrets of the gods."[1122] The study of a topic as difficult as the *secreta deorum* is not easily completed: we know more than the ancients did, but later generations will have something to add to our understanding. A similar idea is expressed at the end of book 7 of the *NQ*, right after the passage where Seneca says that god remains hidden:

> "Many things that are unknown to us the people of a coming age will know. Many discoveries are reserved for ages still to come, when memory of us will have been effaced. [...] nature does not reveal her mysteries once and for all. We believe that we are her initiates but we are only hanging around the forecourt. Those secrets are not open indiscriminately and not to all. They are withdrawn and closed up in the

---

[1120] *NQ* 7.3.1.

[1121] *NQ* 7.25.4, 7: *Veniet tempus quo ista quae nunc latent in lucem dies extrahat et longioris aevi diligentia. [...] Erit qui demonstret aliquando in quibus cometae partibus currant, cur tam seducti a ceteris errent, quanti qualesque sint. Contenti simus inventis; aliquid veritati et posteri conferant.* Similarly in *EM* 33.10-11, 45.4, *Otio* 3.1. Cf. NQ 4B.5.1, where many theories are said to be unproven as of yet, though they might be proven in the future.

[1122] *NQ* 6.5.2: *naturae latebras dimovere nec contentum exteriore eius aspectu introspicere et in deorum secreta descendere.* Cf. EM 64.7: "Hence I worship the discoveries of wisdom and their discoverers; to enter, as it were, into the inheritance of many predecessors is a delight. It was for me that they laid up this treasure; it was for me that they toiled. But we should play the part of a careful householder; we should increase what we have inherited. This inheritance shall pass from me to my descendants larger than before. Much still remains to do, and much will always remain, and he who shall be born a thousand ages hence will not be barred from his opportunity of adding something further."

> inner sanctum. This age will glimpse one of the secrets; the age which comes after us will glimpse another."[1123]

As was noted earlier, Seneca followed Chrysippus in comparing theological studies to the initiation into religious mysteries, as he does here too.[1124] These *secreta deorum* and *arcana*, being "withdrawn and closed up in the inner sanctum" and not available "indiscriminately" (*promiscue*), probably require our full attention if we want to come to understand them. The problem is, Seneca complains, that hardly anyone is concerned with these difficult topics anymore. The only progress we are interested in is that of our vices, he cynically remarks.[1125] No one is interested in philosophy anymore, so the partial discoveries of the ancients are actually being forgotten instead of improved upon.[1126] It is in this context that we must place such statements as "man is too mortal to comprehend things immortal" and that even if all of us would become philosophers "we would scarcely reach to the bottom, where truth is located."[1127] Seneca is indeed pessimistic about our understanding of the divine, but not in fundamental way – the problem is practical. First, the human lifespan is too short to deal with a subject as enormous as that of the divine in any sense of completeness: "A single lifetime, even though entirely devoted to the sky, would not be enough for the investigation of so vast a subject."[1128] It is in this sense that man is too mortal to understand the immortal: he simply does not live long enough. Second, and worse, the little time that we have been given is squandered on the pursuit of vices instead of being devoted to useful research. Seneca's misgivings about our ability to understand the divine, then, are also an exhortation to spend our time on earth wisely rather than the reflection of any real epistemological pessimism. He clearly believes in the advancement of human understanding, but only when we apply ourselves fully to the task can there be any progress. When we do not fully commit ourselves, however, or even apply ourselves fully to vice, as Seneca hyperbolically states, there can be no progress in our understanding of the divine cosmos that we live in. This morally exhortative point explains the dejected tone of the last lines of book 7 of the *NQ*.

[1123] *NQ* 7.30.5-6: *Multa venientis aevi populus ignota nobis sciet; multa saeculis tunc futuris cum memoria nostri exoleverit reservantur. [...] rerum natura sacra sua non semel tradit. Initiatos nos credimus, in vestibulo eius haeremus. Illa arcana non promiscue nec omnibus patent; reducta et interiore sacrario clausa sunt, ex quibus aliud haec aetas, aliud quae post nos subibit aspiciet.* Cf. 7.30.2: "Let us not be surprised that things which are so deeply hidden (*alte iacent*) are dug out so slowly (*tarde erui*)."

[1124] See the end of section 4.1 *supra*.

[1125] *NQ* 7.31.1.

[1126] *NQ* 7.32.4.

[1127] See section 4.4 *supra*.

[1128] *NQ* 7.25.4: *Ad inquisitionem tantorum aetas una non sufficit, ut tota caelo vacet[.]* Cf. *NQ* 3.Praef.1-4, discussed in section 4.3 *supra*, where Seneca characterizes his plan to write the *NQ* as a vast project that he doubts he will finish.

4.7 Stoic hesitation

Another important consideration is that an opposition between 'Hellenistic optimism' and 'Imperial pessimism' concerning the human capacity to know god gives an oversimplified view of the philosophical reality. Seeing the Stoics as straightforward optimists sanctions the labelling of Seneca as being non-Stoic and sensitive to negative theology whenever he regards the knowledge of god as difficult. There is no need to do so, however, when a more balanced view of Stoicism is given. The early Stoics were indeed convinced that we can know god where certain crucial features are concerned, but like Seneca, they believed that a comprehensive understanding of the divine was difficult to achieve.[1129]

In fact, certain topics are so difficult that we are not able to perceive them in all their detail. In such cases the Stoics advise us to withhold judgement rather than say anything we cannot be sure about:

> "In the *Physical Propositions* he [Chrysippus - MvH] has exorted us to be quiet about matters requiring scientific experience and research if we have not something of greater force and clarity to say, 'in order', he says, 'not to make surmises either like Plato's that the liquid nourishment goes to the lungs and the dry to the belly or other errors that there have been like this.'"[1130]

Even the Stoic sage is *not* omniscient: there might all sorts of hindering circumstances that prevent him from fully comprehending something. Mental disturbance (*furor*) might be such a hindrance, but he will also refrain from judging "if his own senses happen to contain an element of heaviness or slowness, or if the presentations are rather obscure, or if he is debarred by lack of time from a close scrutiny."[1131] Seneca, too, submits that the sage is not omniscient, but will always have something new to discover, something "towards which his mind may

---

[1129] Cf. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1052A. See further chapter 1, section 3.2 and chapter 2, section 2.1. Cf. Schofield (1980), p. 289: "Between assent to individual propositions about particular events or states of affair in the world accessible to the senses and the understanding of God and of his relation to the world there seems an enormous gap. We shall not be surprised to find Stoic efforts to explain how we are entitled to bridge it problematic [...]." Cf. Inwood (2002), p. 125, n. 27, Algra (2007), p. 15: Stoic [...] theology [combines] what one might call epistemological optimism on the one hand and epistemological modesty on the other."

[1130] Plut. *St. Rep.*1047C (*SVF* 2.763.) Cf. Galen *PHP* 3.1.15 (*SVF* 2.885). See Tieleman (1996), p. 190, Limburg (2007), p. 354, n. 26. Cf. Strabo *Geogr.* 2.3.8, where it is said that the Stoics have a reserved attitude towards aetiology. This is affirmed by Cic. *Acad.* 1.29 where it is said that the Stoics allowed god to be called 'Fortune' as well, "because many of its operations are unforeseen and unexpected by us on account of their obscurity and our ignorance of causes (*obscuritatem ignorationemque causarum*)." Cf. *SVF* 2.965-7, 970-1, 973.

[1131] Cic. *Acad.* 2.53: *si aut in senisbus ipsius est alqua forte gravitas aut tarditas, aut obscuriora sunt quae videntur, aut a perspiciendo temporis brevitate excluditur.* Cf. MA 5.10: "Many philosophers have said we cannot comprehend things on account of their difficulty: nay, even the Stoics themselves find them hard to comprehend."

make new ventures (*quo animus eius excurrat*)."[1132] Two sages will "communicate to each other knowledge of certain facts, for the sage is not-all-knowing."[1133]

These considerations also shed light on certain passages where Seneca's doubts and hesitations concerning our knowledge of things share certain characteristics with what we find in Academic scepticism, more specifically probabilism.[1134] A well-known example is found in *EM* 65, in which Seneca discusses the different opinions of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics on the number of causes.[1135] Having stated the various viewpoints, he asks Lucilius to choose what he feels is the best theory:

> "Hand down your opinion, then, o judge; state who seems to you to say what is truest, and not who says what is absolutely true. For to do that is as far beyond our ken as truth itself. [...] Either give your opinion, or, as is easier in cases of this kind, declare that the matter is not clear and call for another hearing."[1136]

This sentiment, that we can only state what is most likely to be true, is not unlike some of the verdicts of Cicero in some of his works. At the end of the *De Natura Deorum*, e.g., when the Academic Sceptic Cotta has given a refutation of Balbus' Stoic theology, the Epicurean Velleius is said to have held that Cotta's discourse was the best; Cicero himself, however, feels that "that of Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth."[1137] So Cicero, a declared Philonian Academic, sees Stoic theology as a viable option, but he does not dare to profess any certainty on the topic.[1138]

Another example, that of our ignorance of the exact nature of the soul, is found in both Seneca and Cicero. In *EM* 121, Seneca says that we know "that we possess souls, but we do not know the essence, the place, the quality, or the source, of the soul."[1139] In his discussion of the difficulty of knowing comets, Seneca puts this in the broader perspective of other things we do not know:

> "There are many things that we concede exist; what their qualities are we do not know. All will agree that we have a soul, by whose orders we are impelled forward

---

[1132] *EM* 109.3.
[1133] *EM* 109.5: *quarumdam illi rerum scientiam tradet; non omnia sapiens scit.*
[1134] See chapter 1, section 4.3.
[1135] See chapter 3, section 2.2. for a discussion and further references.
[1136] *EM* 65.10, 15: *Fer ergo, iudex, sententiam et pronuntia, quis tibi videatur verissimum dicere, non quis verissimum dicat. Id enim tam supra nos est quam ipsa veritas. [...] Aut fer sententiam aut, quod facilius in eiusmodi rebus est, nega tibi liquere et nos reverti iube.* Cf. *NQ* 4B.5.1.
[1137] Cic. *ND* 3.95: *ad veritatis similitudinem videretur esse propensior.*
[1138] Cicero's verdict that Balbus' account best approximates a *veritatis similitudinem* is also similar to Seneca's contention in *Ben.* 4.33.2 (cited above in section 4.3) that we should "follow the path that probable truth (*veri similitudo*) shows", since certainty is hard to come by.
[1139] *EM* 121.12: *[nos] animum habere nos scimus: quid sit animus, ubi sit, qualis sit aut unde nescimus.* Cf. Chrysippus' idea at Galen *PHP* 3.1.15 (*SVF* 2.885) that there are no decisive scientific results concerning the seat of the *hêgemonikon*: cf. Tieleman (1996), p. 190.

> and summoned back; but what the soul is, that director and ruler of ourselves, no one can explain to you any more than where it is. One person will say that it is a spirit, another some sort of harmony, another will call it a divine power or a part of god, another the thinnest part of life's breath, another an incorporeal force. Someone will be found who calls it blood or heat. It is so impossible for the soul to be clear concerning other subjects that it is still searching for itself."[1140]

A similar list is found in book 1 of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, where Cicero submits that "which of these views is the true one it is for a divine being to determine: which is the most probable is a difficult question", a statement not dissimilar to what Seneca's says about his ideas on the nature of comets in *NQ* 7.29.3: "Whether or not they are true only the gods know, who have knowledge of the truth. We can only investigate these things and grope into the dark with hypotheses, not with the assurance of discovering the truth, and yet not without hope."[1141]

Such passages in Seneca as discussed above have often been identified as conveying a sceptical attitude on his part, and there seems little doubt that they show epistemological modesty.[1142] It has been suggested that this due to a significant influence of Cicero,[1143] but this is a hazardous claim as Seneca rarely refers to his philosophical works.[1144] Also, as Zeller already noted, such sceptical passages are so scarce that they do not warrant dubbing Seneca as a sceptic.[1145] In one of his letters, in fact, Seneca scathingly criticizes sceptics for introducing "a new science (*scientia*), 'know-nothingism' (*nihil scire*)", taking away "any hope of attaining knowledge (*spem omnis scientiae*)" and "digging out my very eyes and leaving me blind (*oculos mihi effodiunt*)."[1146] How, then, should these sceptical passages be understood?

It may be important, as Wildberger notes, that this sceptical attitude is only noticeable "wenn es um Fragen geht, die mit den empirischen und intellektuellen Mitteln seiner Zeit

---

[1140] *NQ* 7.25.1-2: *Multa sunt quae esse concedimus; qualia sunt ignoramus. Habere nos animum, cuius imperio et impellimur et revocamur, omnes fatebuntur; quid tamen sit animus ille rector dominusque nostri, non magis tibi quisquam expediet quam ubi sit. Alius illum dicet spiritum esse, alius concentum quendam, alius vim divinam et dei partem, alius tenuissimum animae, alius incorporalem potentiam; non deerit qui sanguinem dicat, qui calorem. Adeo animo non potest iquere de ceteris rebus ut adhuc ipse se quaerat.* As noted earlier, this is a well-known doxographical topic. Cf. Cic. *TD* 1.23f., *Acad.* 2.124. See Mansfeld (1990), p. 3140 for an overview of other parallel passages.
[1141] Also quoted above, section 4.3.
[1142] Rubin (1901), p. 8f., esp. n.3, Zeller (1909), p. 738, Gigon (1991), p. 312, 318, 335. Wildberger (2006), p. 224. Sedley (1989), p. 119, puts it as a question, which he does not answer: "Has Seneca's Stoicism somehow been infected by the brand of Academic philosophy [...], espoused at times by Cicero, which makes non-reliance on authority the chief tenet of Platonism."
[1143] Gigon (1991) *ad loc.*
[1144] As Inwood (2002) observes in n. 29. Inwood (2007a), p. 145, comments on *EM* 65.10 that "we should note the Ciceronian Academic flavour of the way the question is put to Lucilius here."
[1145] Zeller (1909), p. 738.
[1146] *EM* 88.44-5.

nicht mit Gewißheit zu beantworten waren."[1147] As we have seen at the beginning of this section, the earlier Stoics already recognized that certain issues might be difficult or even impossible to decide. Accordingly, taking up a sceptical attitude, in the sense of not giving assent when evidence is lacking, is not unstoic;[1148] instead, the difference between Seneca and the earlier Stoics is that Seneca more openly recognizes the difficulty of certain issues even when he, as a Stoic, understands the importance of the issue at hand in relation to school doctrines and himself chooses the Stoic option.[1149] This difference may be explained by taking the philosophical environment into consideration. The ongoing debate between the earlier Stoics and other schools, notably the Sceptics, forced all contestants to present their position more extremely than they might otherwise have done. Seneca has no such polemical circumstances to consider and feels more at liberty to admit to the difficulty or impenetrability of certain issues. When doing so, he might well consciously have used terminology that has a Ciceronian ring to it. While the lack of direct references to Cicero's philosophical works, as noted above, means that we should be wary of postulating a far-reaching doctrinal influence on Seneca, modern scholarship has recognized his literary influence on Seneca,[1150] while the latter often refers to the man himself, his pioneering work as a translator of philosophical terms into Latin[1151] and recognizes him as great author.[1152] It might not be too far-fetched, then, to suggest that while Seneca's epistemological modesty is Stoic enough, he occasionally borrows his way of expressing it from Cicero.[1153]

5. Conclusion

God exists, and he is the creative and provident principle in the cosmos: this much should be clear to anybody simply by experiencing the world in which we live, Seneca believes. If we want to know more about god, this is no longer enough, since there are many aspects of god which we cannot perceive, both practically – how could we hope to get any detailed information on comets, e.g., when they are so far away and only appear as seldom as they do? – and categorically: as the formative principle *in* the cosmos, god seems to be invisible by nature. This has led certain scholars to assume that Seneca is much less confident on the possibility of

---

[1147] Wildberger (2006), p. 224.

[1148] Cf. Cic. *Acad.* 2.53 and 59. Cf. Algra (2007), p. 15, n. 37, who notes that recognizing Stoic epistemological modesty "means that expressions of quasi-scepticism or epistemological modesty in such later Stoics as Seneca need not automatically be ascribed, as has often been done, to the influence of Platonism."

[1149] Such as in *EM* 65, where he clearly advocates the Stoic position, but still admits that it may well be impossible for Lucilius to give his verdict. Similarly, he evidently agrees with the Stoics that the soul is a part of god (see chapter 5), but even so, in *EM* 121 and *NQ* 7.25.1-2 he concedes that its nature eludes us.

[1150] Cf. Schrijvers (1990), p. 390-4 and Conradie (2010), p. 236 on how Cicero's *Tusc.* 2.44-67 must have influenced Seneca's *EM* 78.

[1151] *EM* 58.6, 107.10.

[1152] *EM* 100.7, 100.9, *NQ* 2.56.1.

[1153] Tieleman (2007), p. 146 notes that "much of [Seneca's] knowledge of Academic teaching and its representatives appears to depend on Cicero."

human knowledge of god than the earlier Stoics, and it has been suggested that his work shows traces of so-called negative theology, which was prevalent in contemporary Middle Platonism.

There are good reasons, however, to refrain from drawing such conclusions: first, while Seneca recognizes the limitations of our senses *vis-à-vis* the divine, he also holds that we *can* know this by using our god-given rationality. Second, his acknowledgement that there are many things we do not understand is qualified by his repeated claim that these things may be known in the future. Progress will be slow, however, and after thousands of years, there will still be something new to discover and. Third, as the earlier Stoics had held, Seneca even feels that some things may not be knowable at all. Still, progress is there for us to be made, and it is our duty to pursue it, because it is relevant to the good and happy life.

Chapter 8
Traditional religion and cult

1. Introduction

The last topic to be considered is how Seneca's views on god relate to various aspects of traditional religion and cult. As was briefly discussed in the first chapter,[1154] the Stoics had a mixed attitude towards the various aspects of traditional religion and cult. Certain elements, such as mantic divination, were accepted as a whole, while others, such as the character and names of the Olympian gods as related in the stories of the poets, were 'philosophically reinterpreted' to fit the Stoic world view; others still, such as the anthropomorphism of the gods, were rejected, and Zeno advised against the construction of temples and statues, which he believed unworthy of god.[1155] From a strictly philosophical point of view, then, the Stoics felt that certain aspects of traditional religion should be abolished or redefined; in practice, however, they were mostly willing to leave tradition in place,[1156] as long and insofar as it was reconcilable with Stoic theory.[1157] Much work has been done on the Stoic position on most of these of aspects of traditional religion, but while Seneca's views on several of these have also been studied to a certain extent, there remains much to be done. In this chapter, then, we will examine Seneca's opinions on various aspects of traditional religion and cult in more detail, and compare those opinions with the views of the earlier Stoics. The aspects are, in order of discussion, mantic divination (section 2), prayer (section 3), etymology and allegory (section 4), and traditional worship and cult (section 5); we will contrast Seneca's views on this last topic with a more philosophical worship of god as envisioned by him in section 6, and in section 7, finally, compare his views on religious superstition with those of the Middle Platonist Plutarch.

2. Divination

2.1 The Stoics on divination[1158]

The Stoics nearly unanimously accepted the practice of divination more or less in its entirety.[1159] They could do so by recourse to their notions of the fatedness of all things on the one hand and god as provident and beneficent towards men on the other:

[1154] See chapter 1, section 3.5.
[1155] *SVF* 1.264 and 265; see Algra (2003a), p. 177.
[1156] Plut. *St. Rep.* 1034B, Epict. *Ench.* 31.5.
[1157] Algra (2003), p. 177, notes that this conservatism was common among ancient philosophers, including Socrates, the Platonist author of the *Epinomis*, and both Academic and Pyrrhonian sceptics.
[1158] See Pfeffer (1976), p. 43-109, Denyer (1985), Hankinson (1988), Bobzien (1998), p. 87-8 and chapter 4. Cf. Wildberger (2006), n. 114 for further references.
[1159] From Cic. *Div.* 1.3.6 (partly in *SVF* 2.1187) we may gather that while Zeno and Cleanthes did some preliminary work, it was, as usual, Chrysippus who first discussed divination comprehensively and wrote

> "[S]ince all things happen by fate[...] if there were some human being who could see with his mind the connexion of all causes, he would certainly never be deceived. For whoever grasps the causes of future things must necessarily grasp all that will be. But since no one but god can do this, man must be left to gain his foreknowledge from various signs which announce what is to come."[1160]

Since keeping us in the dark about these future happenings is not compatible with god's provident nature,[1161] he gives us signs of things to come and the ability to correctly interpret these signs:

> "Chrysippus, indeed, defines divination in these words: 'The power to see, understand, and explain premonitory signs given to men by the gods.'" [1162]

Traditionally, there were many ways in which divine signs were thought to manifest themselves, such as in the condition of an animal's entrails, the specific flight of a bird or the contents of a dream, and that there were accordingly different methods of divination. These different methods fall into two main categories, of which "the first is dependent on art, the other on nature."[1163] The success of an attempt at divination belonging to the first category depended on the skill of experts on the method of divination being performed, that is to say astrologers, haruspices, augurs and the like.[1164] The types of divination belonging to the second category did not need experts or officials performing certain procedures, since they were seen as simply happening to a person – examples are oracles, prophetic dreams, and a kind of divine frenzy that could suddenly seize someone.[1165] That is not to say that all of us are equally capable of correctly interpreting our own dreams or bouts of inspired frenzy: the point is that all of us

---

a work specifically on that topic. Many other Stoics, such as Diogenes of Babylon, Antipater and Posidonius, also wrote works on divination; the last probably Cicero's source for the Stoic ideas found in the first book of *De Divinatione*, which constitutes most of our evidence on Stoic ideas on divination. Panaetius alone is mentioned as being in disagreement with his school, or rather as being in doubt as to the efficacy of divination. Cf. Cic. *Acad.* 2.107 (*SVF* 2.1188), Aet. 5.1.1 (*SVF* 2.1190).

[1160] Cic. *Div.* 1.127 (*SVF* 2.944, transl. LS): *cum fato omnia fiant [...], si quis mortalis possit esse qui conligationem causarum omnium perspiciat animo, nihil eum profecto fallat. Qui enim teneat causas rerum futurarum, idem necesse est omnia teneat quae futura sint. Quod cum nemo facere nisi deus possit, relinquendum est homini ut signis quibusdam consequentia declarantibus futura praesentiat.*

[1161] D.L. 7.149 (*SVF* 2.1191): "And they say that divination in all its forms is a real and substantial fact, if there really is providence." Cf. Cic. *Div.* 1.82f. (*SVF* 2.1192; repeated almost verbatim in *Div.* 2.101f.), *Div.* 2.41 (*SVF* 2.1193), *Leg.* 2.32 (*SVF* 2.1194).

[1162] Cic. *Div.* 2.130 (*SVF* 2.1189): *Chrysippus quidem divinationem definit his verbis: vim cognoscentem et videntem et explicantem signa, quae a dis hominibus portendantur [...].* Cf. Sextus Emp. *M* 9.132: "the science which observes and interprets the signs given by god to men."

[1163] Cic. *Div.* 1.11.

[1164] Cic. *Div.* 1.12.

[1165] Cic. *Div.* 1.34.

can have dreams and states of frenzy, while only experts can perform auguries and the like. In the first case, too, a qualified interpreter is needed to 'get the message', so to say.[1166]

The Stoics, apparently, held all these methods to be valid for knowing the future.[1167] In general, they held that the universal practice of divination itself was a strong indication that it must be efficacious.[1168] More specifically, the efficacy of natural divination could be affirmed by the Stoic tenet that there is a close kinship between the human soul and god, which allowed the supposition that humans are naturally sensitive to divine signs, such as dreams:

> "The second division of divination, as I said before, is the natural; and it, according to the exact teaching of physics, must be ascribed to divine nature, from which, as the wisest philosophers maintain, our souls have been drawn and poured forth. And since the universe is wholly filled with the eternal intelligence and the divine mind, it must be that human souls are influenced by their contact with divine souls."[1169]

Chrysippus is said to have written a work on the subject of dreams, in which he gave interpretations of a host of dreams[1170] and the Stoics apparently used stock examples to show that certain dreams were sent by the divine.[1171] The rationale for endorsing artificial divination is found in the Stoic idea that all things happen in accordance with fate, which is

---

[1166] Cf. Cic. *Div.* 1.116: *Item igitur somniis, vaticinationibus, oraclis, quod erant multa obscura, multa ambigua, explanationes adhibitae sunt interpretum.*

[1167] Cic. *Div.* 1.72 (*SVF* 2.1207).

[1168] In Sextus Emp. *M* 1.32, the efficacy and widespread use of divination is listed as one of the arguments for the existence of the gods.

[1169] Cic. *Div.* 1.110 (*SVF* 2.1208): *Altera divinatio est naturalis, ut ante dixi; quae physica disputandi subtilitate referenda est ad naturam deorum, a qua, ut doctissimis sapientissimisque placuit, haustos animos et libatos habemus. cumque omnia completa et referta sint aeterno sensu et mente divina, necesse est contagione divinorum animorum animos humanos commoveri.* Cf. *Div.* 1.34: "Men capable of correctly interpreting all these signs of the future seem to approach very near to those [i.e. the gods - MvH] whose wills they interpret, just as scholars do when they interpret the poets." Cf. *Div.* 1.113-17, 129f., *ND* 3.93 (*SVF* 2.1197), Tert. *An.* 46 (*SVF* 2.1196).

[1170] Cic. *Div.* 1.39 (*SVF* 2.1199), 2.134 (*SVF* 2.1201), 2.144 (*SVF* 2.1206). According to *Div.* 1.37 and 2.115, Chrysippus also assembled a large annotated collection of oracular sayings.

[1171] Cic. *Div.* 1.56f. (*SVF* 2.1200, 2.1204; also in 2.1205): Cicero recounts two dreams "often recalled by the Stoics (*quae creberrime commemorantur a Stoicis*)." The story concerning the first dream runs as follows: a man finds a dead body and buries it; later, he is warned in a dream by the man he buried not to board a certain ship, since it will meet with disaster. He heeds the advice and thus avoids the shipwreck that inevitably follows. In the second story, two friends go to Megara. One stays the night with another friend while the other puts up at an inn. That night, the first man has a dream in which the other implores him to come to his aid, since the innkeeper wants to kill him. He shrugs the dream off as just a dream, but then has another one, in which his friend tells him he has been murdered by the innkeeper and requests that he will ensure his body is properly buried. The dreamer finally springs into action, and, further informed by his dead friend, discovers the body and has the innkeeper arrested by the authorities. The veracity of what the dreams tell was apparently taken as an argument for its divine origin: *Quid hoc somnio dici potest divinius?* (*Div.* 1.57).

> "an orderly succession of causes wherein cause is linked to cause and each cause of itself produces an effect. That is an immortal truth having its source in all eternity. Therefore nothing has happened which was not bound to happen, and, likewise, nothing is going to happen which will not find in nature every efficient cause of its happening."[1172]

If one were to know all these causes, one would know the whole future as well, but this kind of perfect knowledge is god's own privilege.[1173] Humans have to make do with reading and correctly interpreting the signs of what is to come, but we are well-positioned to do so. The Stoic cosmos was, of course, the epitome of regularity, order, and reason; gifted with reason themselves, humans can grasp this rational structure of the cosmos and predict what effect will logically or naturally follow on a certain cause.[1174] The Stoics held that much had already been done in this field, and that "the careful study and recollection of those signs, aided by the records of former times, has evolved that sort of divination known as artificial."[1175] This ensures that we may reasonably put our trust in predictions that put the acquired knowledge of signs to good use:

> "For the results of those artificial means of divination, by means of entrails, lightning bolts, portents, and astrology, have been the subject of observation for a long period of time. But in every field of inquiry great lengths of time employed in continued observation begets an extraordinary fund of knowledge, which may be acquired even without the intervention or inspiration of the gods, since repeated observation makes it clear what effect follows any given cause, and what sign precedes any given event."[1176]

This idea allowed the Stoics to hold that god, while ultimately the guarantee of the efficacy of divination (since the regularity of cause and effect is due to god's rational plan), is not personally responsible for producing the signs that we happen to .

> "According to Stoic doctrine, the gods are not directly responsible for every fissure in the liver or for every song of a bird; since, manifestly, that would not be seemly or proper in a god and furthermore is impossible. But, in the beginning, the cosmos was so created that certain results would be preceded by certain signs, which are

---

[1172] Cic. *Div.* 1.125 (*SVF* 2.921): *ordinem seriemque causarum, cum causae causa nexa rem ex se gignat.*

[1173] Cic. *Div.* 1.127, cited above.

[1174] Cic. *Div.* 1.128.

[1175] Cic. *Div.* 1.127: *ad quas [signa] adhibita memoria et diligentia et monumentis superiorum efficitur ea divinatio, quae artificiosa dicitur [...].*

[1176] Cic. *Div.* 1.109 (*SVF* 2.1208): *Quae enim extis, quae fulgoribus, quae portentis, quae astris praesentiuntur, haec notata sunt observatione diuturna. Affert autem vetustas omnibus in rebus longinqua observatione incredibilem scientiam; quae potest esse etiam sine motu atque impulsu deorum, cum, quid ex quoque eveniat, et quid quamque rem significet, crebra animadversione perspectum est.* Cf. 1.131.

given sometimes by entrails and by birds, sometimes by lightning bolts, by portents, and by stars, sometimes by dreams, and sometimes by utterances of persons in a frenzy."[1177]

The purposeful regularity by which signs and their corresponding results occur further certifies that incorrect prophecies are not due to unclear signs, but to a lack of skill on the part of the interpreter.[1178] Hence the Stoic claim that divination is a science (*epistêmê*)[1179] and that only the sage is a true diviner.[1180]

2.2 Seneca on divination

Seneca discusses the topic of divination at length in the second book of the *NQ*: this book deals with lightning and thunder, and he considers the divinatory power attributed to lightning a serious topic of study. He agrees with the earlier Stoics that while god gives us signs of things to come, he does not send them on an *ad hoc* basis;[1181] Seneca's perspective here is deistic rather than theistic, denying any divine intervention in the cosmos. The fact that our cosmos is a rationally ordered whole in which all things are connected through fate, he holds, sufficiently explains why and how all of them are indications and signs of the future.

> "You make god too idle and the administrator of trivia if he arranges dreams for some people, entrails for others. Nonetheless, such things are carried out by divine agency, even if the wings of birds are not actually guided by god nor the viscera of cattle shaped under the very axe. The roll of fate is unfolded on a different principle, sending ahead everywhere indications of what is to come, some familiar to us, others unknown. Whatever happens, it is a sign of something that will happen. Chance and random occurrences, and without a principle, do not permit divination. Whatever has order is also predictable."[1182]

[1177] Cic. *Div.* 1.118 (*SVF* 2.1210): *Non placet Stoicis singulis iecorum fissis aut avium cantibus interesse deum; neque enim decorum est nec dis dignum nec fieri ullo pacto potest; sed ita a principio inchoatum esse mundum, ut certis rebus certa signa praecurrerent, alia in extis, alia in avibus, alia in fulgoribus, alis in ostentis, alia in stellis, alia in somnantium visis, alia in furentium vocibus.*

[1178] Cic. *Div.* 1.118 (*SVF* 2.1210): *Ea quibus ben percepta sunt, ei non saepe falluntur; male coniecta maleque interpretata falsa sunt non rerum vitio, sed interpretum inscientia.* Cf. 1.124.

[1179] Stob. *Ecl.* 2.67, 14-9 (*SVF* 3.654).

[1180] Cic. *Div.* 2.129 (*SVF* 3.607), Stob. *Ecl.* 2.67, 13 (*SVF* 3.654).

[1181] Seneca ascribes this rejected opinion to the Etruscans (*NQ* 2.32.2).

[1182] *NQ* 2.32.3: *Nimis illum otiosum et pusillae rei ministrum facis, si aliis somnia, aliis exta disponit. Ista nihilominus divina ope geruntur, si non a deo pennae avium reguntur nec pecudum viscera sub ipsa securi formantur. Alia ratione fatorum series explicatur indicia venturi ubique praemittens, ex quibus quaedam nobis familiaria, quaedam ignota sunt. Quicquid fit, alicuius rei futurae signum est. Fortuita et sine ratione vaga divinationem non recipiunt; cuius ordo est, etiam praedictio est.* Cf. *NQ* 7.28.2, where what is foretold by the appearance of comets is said to be in accordance with the laws of the cosmos as well.

Even so, we are not able to simply use any one thing as a means to divine what is going to happen. Divination is serious business, and those actually performing and interpreting divinatory acts draw upon long-established and proven insights and methods. A sign is only a sign if it is recognized as such by a skilled interpreter and since most of us are not skilled interpreters, the ever-present myriad of signs and portents that surrounds us remains largely unexploited.[1183]

Seneca holds that since all signs are part of the chain of fate, they cannot contradict one another, and he accordingly rejects the commonly held opinion that what is foretold by lightning annuls or overrides the significance of other signs: if two signs appear to conflict with one another, a mistake has been made in the interpretation of one of them.[1184] Seneca also criticizes popular opinions on the divinatory significance of lightning, such as that it is a sign of Jupiter's anger (the lightning bolts being the tools he uses to dish out punishment),[1185] once again referring to the Stoic idea that lightning happens as part of a whole plan:

> "lightning bolts are not sent by Jupiter but all things are so arranged that even those things which are not done by him none the less do not happen without a plan, and the plan is his. For, although Jupiter does not do these things now, it is Jupiter who brought it about that they happen. He is not present at every event for every person, but he gives the signal, the force, the cause, to all."[1186]

The classification of various types of premonitory lightning bolts is also scrutinized, and Seneca criticizes the Etruscan system as being too vague. Seneca prefers the theories of his former teacher Attalus,[1187] who apparently believed that the precise nature and circumstance of a particular instance of lighting was important for interpreting it.[1188] This close study should

---

[1183] *NQ* 2.32.5-8.
[1184] *NQ* 2.34.
[1185] Though Seneca (*NQ* 2.42) doubts whether "the ancients" (*antiquitas*) really believed that Jupiter tried to punish the wicked with his lightning bolts: if so, the errant destruction caused by these bolts could only be explained by accepting that Jupiter was careless or incompetent in taking his shots. See Lucr. *DRN* 6.387-395 for this stock argument against divine providence. Seneca prefers to believe that the depiction of Jupiter as a wrathful avenger was thought up by wise men to keep wannabe criminals at bay. This was also a common idea, the most famous expression of which is the so-called Sisyphus-fragment, recorded in Sextus Emp. *M* 9.54. Cf. Cic. *ND* 1.118. See Kahn (1997).
[1186] *NQ* 2.46: *fulmina non mitti a Iove, sed sic omnia esse disposita ut etiam quae ab illo non fiunt tamen sine ratione non fiant, quae illius est. Nam etiamsi Iupiter illa nunc non facit, Iupiter fecit ut fierent. Singulis non adest ad omne, sed signum et vim et causam omnibus dedit.* Cf. chapter 6, section 3.2.4, for a further discussion of Seneca's rejection of the theistic view of god as constantly intervening in the world for particular purposes, in favour of a more deistic view in which god is the force that has set the causal chain that is fate in motion, but does not and even cannot stop or change fate once it is moving.
[1187] Attalus was Seneca's Stoic teacher (cf. *EM* 108.3) and according to the elder Seneca (*Suasoriae* 2.12) an eminent philosopher. See Inwood (1995), p. 69.
[1188] *NQ* 2.47f.

not result in a convoluted system as thought up by Caecina,[1189] but in a simple division such as made by Attalus, by which we can quickly establish whether any specific lightning bolt has any significance for us and if so, whether it is favourable or not.[1190] When lightning bolts are unfavourable, "they portend either unavoidable evils, or avoidable ones, or those which can be mitigated, or those which can be deferred."[1191] This is, of course, Attalus' theory, but the fact that Seneca calls him "an outstanding man who had mixed the skills of the Etruscans with Greek accuracy"[1192] indicates that he accepts the possibility of foretold evils being averted. This is confirmed by an earlier passage in book 2 of the *Naturales Quaestiones*:

> "The study [of lightning] is divided into these three areas: how we investigate it, how we interpret it, how we charm it away. The first area pertains to classification, the second to divination, the third to propitiating the gods; it is fitting to ask when lightning is good, to pray when it is bad; to ask that the gods fulfil their promises, to pray that they set aside their threats."[1193]

Seneca is aware that the idea that foretold evils might be averted by expiation appears to be in conflict with the Stoic idea that all things are fated and that this fate is immutable. It is one thing to hold that this immutability of fate allows us to have foreknowledge of the future through divination, quite another to say that because of this foreknowledge we are able to *change* what will happen through prayer. Nevertheless, this is what Seneca appears to say in the passage cited above and we have evidence that the early Stoics also believed that divination allows us not only to predict bad things and but sometimes avert them too.

> "Chrysippus, indeed, defines divination in these words: 'The power to see, understand and explain premonitory signs given to men by the gods. It's duty is to know in advance the disposition of the gods towards men, the manner in which that disposition is shown and by what means the gods may be propitiated and their threatened ills averted.'"[1194]

[1189] Aulus Caecina was an authority on the Etruscan system of divination and may have been an influence on Cicero's *De Divinatione*, Cicero being a friend of the family. See Rawson (1985), p. 304-6.

[1190] *NQ* 2.49f.

[1191] *NQ* 2.50.2: *[...] aut inevitabilia mala portendunt, aut evitabilia, aut quae minui possunt, aut quae prorogari.*

[1192] *NQ* 2.50.1: *vir egregius, qui Etruscorum disciplinam Graeca subtilitate miscuerat [...].*

[1193] *NQ* 2.33: *Quorum ars in haec tria dividitur: quemadmodum exploremus, quemadmodum interpretemur; quemadmodum expiemus. Prima pars ad formulam pertinet, secunda ad divinationem, tertia ad propitiandos deos, quos bono fulmine rogare oportet, malo deprecari; rogare, ut promissa firment; deprecari, ut remittant minas.*

[1194] Cic. *Div.* 2.130 (*SVF* 2.1189): *Chrysippus quidem divinationem definit his verbis: vim cognoscentem et videntem et explicantem signa, quae a dis hominibus portendantur; officium autem esse eius praenoscere, dei erga homines mente qua sint quidque significent, quem ad modumque ea procurentur atque expientur.* Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.7ff., 2.162f., 2.166.

Since Seneca's discussion of this problem is also part of his views on the efficacy of prayer, we will first examine that topic, and return to the issue of divination there.

3. Prayer

It might reasonably be argued that prayer, understood as petitionary prayer, i.e. supplicating god or the gods for granting us something good or averting something bad, would appear to have no place in Stoicism.[1195] Firstly, in his capacity of fate and providence, god determines all that happens and he does not change his mind in answer to our prayers.[1196] Secondly, Algra argues, "on a Stoic line of thought the things people ordinarily pray for in petitionary prayers (health, wealth, etc.) are indifferents, which have little or no value at all: the only thing that counts is rationality and virtue."[1197] For these reasons, it would be hard to imagine a Stoic believing that petitionary prayer in the ordinary sense of the word is in any way meaningful.

Nevertheless, there are indications that certain Stoics formulated what on first appearance seem to be petitionary prayers. Epictetus repeatedly cites a prayer that he attributes to Cleanthes,[1198] who in his *Hymn* also appears to beseech god to come to the aid of mankind.[1199] Epictetus himself also addresses god,[1200] while Marcus Aurelius, too, appears to believe that the gods may come to our aid in answer to our prayers.[1201] Diogenes Laertius reports Posidonius and Hecato to have said that the Stoic sage will pray (*euksetai*) and ask god for good things (*agatha*).[1202] In Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, the Sceptic spokesman Cotta argues that it is strange that the Stoics advised to pray, considering the fact that they believed god not to care for individuals.[1203]

When we examine the relevant passages in Seneca, we find that his opinion on prayer is complex and that different passages may even be contradictory. There are passages where he simply denies that prayer has any kind of effect or use, but at other times he appears to allow prayer of some sort, maybe even petitionary prayer for indifferents.[1204] In order to settle this matter, we will now turn to the relevant passages.

1195 Grant (1952), p. 10-11.
1196 Algra (2008), p. 48: "[G]iven the identification of god with fate and providence, how could god's will [...] or the structure of what he brings about [...] ever be changed?" Cf. Algra (2003), p. 174.
1197 Algra (2008), p. 48.
1198 Epict. *Ench.* 53 (*SVF* 1.527).
1199 Stob. *Ecl.* 1.25.3-27.4 (*SVF* 1.537).
1200 For a discussion of these passages see Algra (2008), p. 47-52, Algra (2003), p. 174-77; see further below.
1201 *MA* 9.40.
1202 D.L. 7.124. See below for what a Stoic might think these 'good things' (*agatha*) are.
1203 Cic. *ND* 3.93.
1204 Richards (1964); Algra (2008), p. 49, notes that "Seneca's attitude does not always appear to be consistent – he sometimes at least gives the impression of condoning petitionary prayer even for indifferents[.]"

To begin with, there are numerous passages in which Seneca, referring to the immutability of fate, explicitly denies the usefulness of petitionary prayer: all things are part of fate and determined to happen in a specific way, and our prayers have absolutely no influence on this process whatsoever.

> "What use are expiations and precautions if the fates are immutable?[1205] Allow me to support that rigid sect of philosophers [i.e. the Stoics] who accept such practices with a smile and consider them only a solace for a troubled mind.[1206] The fates perform their function in another way and they are not moved by prayer. They do not know how to be turned by pity or by favour. Once started upon an irrevocable course they flow on in accordance with an unalterable plan."[1207]

In the Stoic cosmos, then, only those who do not grasp the causal interdependence and determinacy of all things pin their hopes on trying to influence what is going to happen, a practice which Seneca, as a Stoic, knows to be utterly futile.

> "What do you understand as fate? I consider it the necessity of all events and actions which no force may break. If you think this is averted by sacrifices or by the head of a snow-white lamb, you do not understand the divine."[1208]

When Seneca considers god as the author of fate, as in the passages cited above, he is accordingly very explicit in his denial of the efficacy of prayer. In another passage, however, Seneca approves of a famous prayer of Cleanthes, which he gives in translation:

[1205] Seneca often uses the plural *fata* instead of the singular *fatum* (see e.g. *Marc.* 21.6, *Polyb.* 3.3, 4.1, *Helv.* 18.6), maybe purposely invoking associations with the Parcae or Fates. Chrysippus is reported as using this element of traditional religion to support the Stoic theory of fate (*SVF* 2.925) and was engaged in etymologizations of the names of the Fates (Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos; cf. *SVF* 2.1092 and 2.914).

[1206] In *EM* 41.5 the sage is said to smile at human prayers.

[1207] *NQ* 2.35.1-2: *Expiationes procurationesque quo pertinent, si immutabilia sunt fata? Permitte mihi illam rigidam sectam tueri eorum qui risu excipiunt ista et nihil esse aliud quam aegrae mentis solacia existimant. Fata aliter ius suum peragunt nec ulla commoventur prece. Non misericordia flecti, non gratia sciunt. Cursum irrevocabilem ingressa ex destinato fluunt.* Cf. 35.2: "Just as the water of a rushing torrent does not flow back upon itself and does not even pause since the flood coming from behind pushes ahead the water that passed before, so the eternal sequence of events (*rerum aeterna series*) causes the order of fate to roll on. And this is its first law, to stand by its decrees." Cf. *EM* 77.12: "Why weep? Why pray? You are taking pains to no purpose. 'Give over thinking that your prayers can bend / Divine decrees from their predestined end (Verg. *Aen.* 6.376).' These decrees are unalterable and fixed (*rata et fixa*); they are governed by a mighty and everlasting compulsion (*magna atque aeterna necessitate*). [...] A sequence which cannot be broken (*invicta*) or altered by any power (*nulla mutabilis*) binds all things together and draws all things in its course." Cf. *Marc.* 21.6: "The fates go their way, and neither add anything to what has once been promised, nor subtract from it. Prayers and struggles are all in vain; each one will get just the amount that was placed to his credit on the first day of his existence." Cf. *EM* 19.6.

[1208] *NQ* 2.36: *Quid enim intellegis fatum? Existimo necessitatem rerum omnium actionumque, quam nulla vis rumpat. Hanc si sacrificiis ait capite niveae agnae exorari iudicas, divina non nosti.*

> "For this reason we should welcome our orders with energy and vigour, nor should we cease to follow the natural course of this most beautiful universe, into which all our future sufferings are woven. Let us address Jupiter, the pilot of this world-mass, as did our great Cleanthes in those most eloquent lines [...]: 'Lead me, O master of the lofty heavens, my father, whithersoever thou shalt wish. I shall not falter, but obey with speed, and though I would not, I shall go, and suffer, in sin and sorrow what I might have done in noble virtue. Aye, the willing soul fate leads, but the unwilling drags along.' "[1209]

Seneca approves of Cleanthes' appeal to god to lead him towards his appointed fate, but his citation of Cleanthes' poem is preceded by his exhortation that we must accept and even welcome whatever comes our way. In other words, what Seneca encourages us to do is not to pray to god to change anything and then hope for the best, but to actively commit ourselves to the role god has ordained for us.[1210] The prayer, then, is an appeal to ourselves to do something rather than a call upon god to do that something for us.[1211] Recent scholarship attributes this same use of prayer as self-address to Epictetus as well: in two different articles, Keimpe Algra has suggested that what we find in Epictetus is not prayer in the traditional sense of the word,[1212] but self-addressed adhortations in the guise of petitionary prayers.[1213] This supposition is supported by the fact that what Epictetus and Cleanthes ask for are not the usual boons, such as health and wealth, but virtue and reason, i.e. what Stoicism recognizes as

---

[1209] *EM* 107.10-11: *Quare inpigri atque alacres excipiamus imperia nec deseramus hunc operis pulcherrimi cursum, cui quidquid patiemur, intextum est. Et sic adloquamur Iovem, cuius gubernaculo moles ista derigitur, quemadmodum Cleanthes noster versibus disertissimis adloquitur [...]: 'Duc, o parens celsique dominator poli / Quocumque placuit: nulla parendi mora est / Adsum inpiger. Fac nolle, comitabor gemens / Malusque patiar, facere quod licuit bono. / Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt.'* Seneca's 'prayer' is a translation of the prayer by Cleanthes that is cited several times in Epictetus (*Ench.* 53 = *SVF* 1.527), see *supra*. The last line (*Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt.*) is not found in Epictetus and it is unclear whether it, too, is a translation from Cleanthes' original or Seneca's own addition. See Sevenster (1961), p. 44. On being dragged along by fate, cf. *Vita* 15.6: "But whoever complains and weeps and moans, is compelled by force to obey commands, and, even though he is unwilling (*invitus*), is rushed nonetheless to the bidden tasks (*ad iussa*)."

[1210] This role entails, of course, living our lives rationally, i.e. in accordance with the divine part in us that is our soul. See ch. 5, section 3.

[1211] So Sevenster (1961), p. 44f. Sevenster refers to two other passages in support of this thesis: *EM* 107.12 (which directly follows Cleanthes' poem): "Let us live thus, and speak thus; let fate find us ready and alert. Here is your great soul – the man who has given himself over to fate; on the other hand, that man is a weakling and a degenerate who struggles and maligns the order of the cosmos and would rather reform (*emendare*) the gods than reform himself." Also *Vita* 15.6: "All that the very constitution of the universe obliges us to suffer, must be borne with high courage. This is the sacred obligation by which we are bound – to submit to the human lot, and not to be disquieted by those things which we have no power to avoid." Cf. Epict. 2.6.9-10.

[1212] Epict. *Diss.* 1.29.48 shows that Epictetus believes prayers for indifferent things like fame and riches to be unworthy of our status as witness of god's providence. Cf. *Diss.* 4.6.36.

[1213] Algra (2008), p. 47-52, Algra (2003a), p. 174-77.

goods.[1214] Epictetus further holds that our own divine nature allows us to get these things for ourselves, instead of waiting for god to supply them.[1215] When Epictetus and Cleanthes ask god for help, then, they do not ask god to change the course of things in their favour, but actually call upon themselves to do the right thing and become a good man.[1216] The fact that the Stoics, as we have seen,[1217] could describe our soul as an internal god or demon, facilitates this self-address in the form of petitionary prayer.

Seneca, too, is convinced that we are able to get the good for ourselves, as is apparent from several passages:

> "It is foolish to pray for this [a sound mind - MvH] when you can acquire it from yourself. We do not need to uplift our hands towards heaven, or to beg the keeper of a temple to let us approach his idol's ear, as if in this way our prayers were more likely to be heard."[1218]

In chapter 3, section 3.1, we have seen how a Stoic, in different contexts, could approach the relation of god to the cosmos from different perspectives. The perspective chosen in each case affects how a Stoic could address an issue such as prayer. When Seneca considers god as the author of fate, as we have seen, he is very explicit in his denial of the efficacy of prayer. At the same time, the more theistic perspective on god he adopts in *EM* 107 allows Seneca to address god with what looks like a petitionary prayer. The context of this prayer, however, as well as the parallels in Cleanthes and especially Epictetus, show that it can best be interpreted as a form of self-address. In accordance with this idea, viz. that the only kind of prayer Seneca allows is exactly this 'philosophical prayer', Seneca repeatedly advises us to desist from ordinary petitionary prayer, i.e. petitionary prayer for boons, with the added argument that what is usually asked for in such prayer is not really worth getting after all,[1219] or even harmful.[1220] It may come as a surprise, then, that at other times he is much more positive about this kind of prayer and expresses his belief in its efficacy. In a passage in which he criticizes

---

[1214] Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 1.1.13, 2.18.29, 3.24.95-103, 3.24.114-5. The 'goods' that, according to Posidonius and Hecato (D.L. 7.124), the sage asks of god, may similarly be explained as 'Stoic goods'.

[1215] Cf. *Diss.* 4.9.13, 4.1.111.

[1216] Cf. Seneca *EM* 95.50: "Do you want to win over (*propitiare*) the gods? Then be good." In MA 9.40, too, Marcus appears to believe that it is in our own power to become morally better, but he does not reject the possibility "that the gods cooperate with us (συλλαμβάνουσιν) even in the things that are in our power."

[1217] See chapter 5, section 3.

[1218] *EM* 41.1: *[...] stultum est optare [bonam mentem - MvH], cum possis a te impetrare. Non sunt ad caelum elevandae manus nec exorandus aedituus, ut nos ad aurem simulacri, quasi magis exaudiri possimus, admittat[.]* Cf. *EM* 31.5: "What need is there of vows? Make yourself happy.

[1219] *EM* 10.4, 32.4-5.

[1220] *EM* 22.12. Cf. *Prov.* 6.4, (discussed in chapter 6, section 3.2.1) where Seneca argues that many allegedly good things are actually bad for our moral well-being and thus really harmful.

asking the gods for unworthy or evil things, he does at the same time claim that, in principle, we "most rightly make supplication to the gods."[1221]

> "As for your former prayers, you may dispense the gods from answering them; offer new prayers; pray for a sound mind and for good health, first of soul and then of body. And of course you should offer those prayers frequently. Call boldly upon god; you will not be asking him for that which belongs to another."[1222]

It is rather difficult to interpret this passage as a mere exhortation to live virtuously, i.e. as 'philosophical prayer', because whereas having a sound mind is, according to the Stoics, in our own power, bodily health ultimately is not.[1223] In another passage, Seneca confirms that we might obtain something by praying for it:

> "But he who says this [that the gods do not benefit us, i.e. Epicurus - MvH] does not hearken to the voices of those who pray and of those who all around him, lifting their hands to heaven, offer vows for blessings public and private. Assuredly this would not be the case, assuredly all mortals would not have agreed upon this madness of addressing divinities that were deaf and gods that were ineffectual, unless we were conscious of their benefits that sometimes are presented unasked, sometimes are granted in answer to prayer - great and timely gifts, which by their coming remove grave menaces."[1224]

It appears that Seneca does, after all, ascribe a certain efficacy to petitionary prayer: we can ask god for something and get it, whereas we would not have gotten it if we had not asked for it. This seems to be a flat contradiction of his other statements that it is useless to try and change that which is fated to happen.[1225] Different answers to this dilemma have been given; before discussing them, two important points must be made.

[1221] *Ben.* 2.1.4: *[...] deos, quibus honestissime supplicamus [...].*

[1222] *EM* 10.4: *Votorum tuorum veterum licet dis gratiam facias, alia de integro suscipe; roga bonam mentem, bonam valitudinem animi, deinde tunc corporis. Quidni tu ista vota saepe facias? Audacter deum roga; nihil illum de alieno rogaturus es.*

[1223] The Stoics did hold that we can and should strive to be fit and healthy; as much as we can try, however, our bodies are never immune to disease or accidents. Only the mind is fully under our control. See the commentary on *EM* 15 and 78 in Conradie (2010), p. 165-282.

[1224] *Ben.* 4.4.2: *Hoc qui dicit, non exaudit precantium voces et undique sublatis in caelum manibus vota facientium privata ac publica; quod profecto non fieret, nec in hunc furorem omnes profecto mortales consensissent adloquendi surda numina et inefficaces deos, nisi nossemus ilorum beneficia nunc oblata ultro, nunc orantibus data, magna, tempestiva, ingentes minas interventusuo solventia.*

[1225] Sevenster (1961), p. 47, claims that Seneca "seems to have sensed this inconsistency himself", citing *Ben.* 5.25.4 as a toned-down version of his belief in the efficacy of prayer: "We petition (*rogamus*) even the gods, whose knowledge nothing escapes, and, although our prayers do not prevail upon them (*exorant*), they remind them of us (*admonent*)." The context, however, suggests that Seneca's point is not about the efficacy of prayer: he is arguing that even when someone is fully aware of the benefit he owes someone, he can be reminded by his 'creditor' that the benefit should be returned without being insulted.

The first is that the context of the most explicit approval of petitionary prayer cited above must be taken into account to fully understand what Seneca is trying to say. In book 4 of *De Beneficiis* he is discussing, among other things, whether benefits are only given with a view to the advantage of the giver. If this is true, then the gods, who could not possibly gain anything by benefitting us, would not have any reason to do so.[1226] Epicurus, Seneca continues, accordingly claims that the gods do not give benefits to us at all. The passage cited above is the beginning of Seneca's reply to Epicurus' claim. This reply is essentially a lengthy and typically Stoic list of benefits that the gods have bestowed upon us, which serves to prove that Epicurus is wrong.[1227] At the end of the list, Seneca's imaginary Epicurean interlocutor claims that he has not god, but nature to thank for all that he is and has available to him.[1228] Seneca counters this argument by claiming that 'nature' is merely another name for god; god has in fact many names, another of which is 'fate', a connected chain of causes of which god is the first, "on which all others depend."[1229]

The occurrence, within the same line of argumentation, of the contradictory views of god as listening to our prayers on the one hand, and as the author of fate on the other, might seem odd or even inconsistent. It is important to understand, however, that the two views serve their own particular purpose. The description of god as fate is part of an attempt by Seneca to demonstrate that the different gods or divine institutions to which people ascribe all kinds of powers are actually just different aspects of the one Stoic god: one of these is being the originator of the all-encompassing plan of the cosmos, another is being a caring and provident guardian of mankind.[1230] Seneca's reference to the efficacy of prayer, however, is part of his attempt to show that Epicurus' idea, that the gods are not provident *at all*, is demonstrably wrong and even ludicrous. This is confirmed by a passage further on in book 4, where Epicurus' claim that we must revere god is ridiculed:

> "You have no reason to stand in awe of him; he has no means of bestowing either blessing or injury; in the space that separates our own from some other heaven he dwells alone, without a living creature, without a human being, without a possession, and avoids the destruction of the worlds that crash around and above him, having no ear for our prayers and no concern for us."[1231]

Even in a society of sages this should not be unusual or strange, Seneca holds, after which follows the passage cited. It is not at all clear that Seneca is here giving his own views on prayer, rather than using common religious practice to hyperbolically state that a reminder of a benefit owed, provided it is given cautiously, is never uncalled for.

[1226] *Ben.* 4.3.

[1227] The list runs from *Ben.* 4.5-4.9.1. Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.130-163.

[1228] *Ben.* 4.7.1.

[1229] *Ben.* 4.7.2: *ex qua ceterae pendent.*

[1230] Cf. *Ben.* 6.23 for a lengthy explication of all the good things we owe to the gods.

[1231] *Ben.* 4.19.2: *[...] non habes quare verearis; nulla illi nec tribuendi nec nocendi materia est; in medio intervallo huius et alterius caeli desertus sine animali, sine homine, sine re ruinas mundorum supra se*

Seneca, then, seeks to ridicule Epicurus' view of god[1232] as absolutely detached from the cosmos by pointing to the widespread practice of (effective) prayer and to the absurdity of revering a god that cannot harm or benefit us.[1233] This polemical context may explain why he appears, at face value, to contradict his own ideas about how the cosmos works. In his appeal to traditional religion as supportive of the Stoic claim of god's providence, and against Epicurus' position, it may seem that he occasionally oversteps Stoic bounds by his claims that, despite his belief that fate steers all, the gods sometimes heed our prayers by providing us with benefits[1234] or keeping us safe from dangers.

Fate and prayer need not be incompatible, however, and here the second important point must be raised, viz. that in several passages Seneca explicitly attempts to reconcile the efficacy of prayer, as well as the preemptive role of divination as discussed at the end of the previous section, with the ineluctability of fate. This attempt is found in book 2 of the *NQ*, in the context of Seneca's discussion of divination. Having just stated repeatedly that fate is immutable and that prayers and sacrifices will not influence it in any way (*NQ* 2.35-36, parts of which are cited *supra*), he announces the following in 2.37:

> "Now I want to support the views of those who believe that lighting can be conjured away and have no doubt that expiations are useful, sometimes to remove the danger, sometimes to mitigate it, sometimes to postpone it. [...] They have this in common with us: namely, that we also believe vows are useful if they do not impair the force and power of fate. For, some things have been left so in dependence[1235] by the immortal gods that they turn to our advantage if prayers are directed to the gods, if vows are undertaken. As a result this is not opposed to fate but is itself in fate."[1236]

---

circaque se cadentium evitat non exaudiens vota nec nostri curiosus. Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 2.20.22ff., where Epictetus lambasts Epicurus for implicitly encouraging impiety.

[1232] See LS, p. 139-49 for the primary texts on and a discussion of Epicurus' theological views. Cf. Festugière (1955), Mansfeld (1999).

[1233] Cf. Cic. *ND* 1.115-24, where the Academic Sceptic Cotta argues that Epicurus' theology is incompatible with and destructive to traditional religion. Cf. Algra (2009a), p. 248: "[...] the Stoics criticized their Epicurean opponents precisely for defending a theology that demolished the basic presuppositions of the tradition, arguing that the Epicureans made traditional cult a pointless exercise in so far as they claimed that the gods have no dealings with our world, nor, in fact, with the universe at large." Cf. Plut. *St. Rep.* 1034C.

[1234] The passage in *Ben.* 4.4.2 clearly suggests that the benefits given are more mundane than the good things asked for in the 'philosophical prayers' identified as self-addressed exhortations: these benefits cannot be gotten from ourselves, but must be provided by the gods. Therefore, they must be indifferents such as health, life and the like.

[1235] Setaioli (2007), p. 361 n. 227, supports the claim of M. Armisen-Marchetti (2000), that *suspensa* here means 'depending upon' or 'connected with', rather than 'undecided' or 'in suspense'. The context, as will become clear, suggests that this claim is true.

[1236] *NQ* 2.37.1-2: *Agere nunc causam eorum volo qui procuranda existimant fulmina, et expiationes non dubitant prodesse aliquando ad summovenda pericula, aliquando ad levanda, aliquando ad differenda. [...]*

With this argument Seneca tries to counter those who would say that, if everything really is fated, as the Stoics say, bad omens or warning signs are of no use, since it is already determined what is going to happen and us making vows or expiations will not affect this in any way. Seneca tackles this problem as follows:

> "Someone says: 'Either it is to be or is not to be. If it is to be it will happen even though you make no vows. If it is not to be it will not happen even though you do make vows.' Such a dilemma is not valid because you omit an alternative between the two: this is to be, but only if vows are made."[1237]

Seneca's argument is not a new one, nor is the argument it is supposed to counter: in his *De Fato*, Cicero discusses the so-called Lazy (or Idle) Argument which was meant to show that Stoic determinism removes our incentive to do anything and thus leads to inactivity and passivity.[1238] The argument in Cicero uses the following example: if it is fated that an ill man will recover (or fated that he will not), he will do so (or not) whether or not he seeks medical aid. Seeking medical aid, therefore, is immaterial to the man's recovery and thus he need not bother doing so.[1239] Chrysippus countered this argument by claiming that if someone is fated to recover, then the necessary steps to produce this effect must be fated as well; in other words, his going to the doctor and receiving treatment are co-fated with his recovery: "You will recover whether you call in a doctor or do not' is fallacious, for calling in a doctor is just as much fated as recovering. These connected events, as I said, are termed by Chrysippus 'co-fated'."[1240]

Hoc habent commune nobiscum quod nos quoque existimamus vota proficere salva vi ac potestate fatorum. Quaedam enim a diis immortalibus ita suspensa relicta sunt ut in bonum vertant, si admotae diis preces fuerent, si vota suscepta; ita non est hoc contra fatum, sed ipsum quoque in fato est.

[1237] *NQ* 2.37.3: *Aut futurum, inquit, est aut non; si futurum est, fiet, etiamsi vota non suspicis; si non est futurum, etiamsi susceperis vota, non fiet. Falsa est ista interrogatio, quia illam mediam inter ista exceptionem praeteris: futurum hoc est, sed si vota suscepta fuerint.* This shows the plausibility of Armisen-Marchetti's and Setaioli's claim referred to above. The things that are to be are dependent (*suspensa*) on other things, in this case the making of vows.

[1238] Cic. *Fat.* 28-29. The argument is also found in Orig. *Cels.* 2.20 (*SVF* 2.957). Cf. Hine (1984), p. 366-79, Bobzien (1998), ch. 5, Broadie (2001), Brennan (2005), ch. 16.

[1239] Cic. *Fat.* 28-9: *Si fatum tibi est ex hoc morbo convalescere, sive medicum adhibueris sive non adhibueris convalesces; item, si fatum tibi est ex hoc morbo non convalescere, sive tu medicum adhibueris sive non adhibueris non convalesces; et alterutrum fatum est; medicum ergo adhibere nihil attinet.* Seneca does not explicitly add the conclusion, viz. that there is no point in making vows (*vota suscipere*) since it does not affect what has been fated; the implicity of this conclusion, however, is apprent from what follows.

[1240] Cic. *Fat.* 30 (*SVF* 2.956): *Sive tu adhibueris medicum sive non adhibueris, convalesces captiosum; tam enim est fatale medicum adhibere quam convalescere. Haec, ut dixi, confatalia ille appellat.* Seneca probably refers to this specific example in 2.38.4: "Thus, although the recovery of good health is owed to (*debeatur*) fate, it is also owed to the doctor because the benefit of fate came to us through his hands." See *infra*.

Seneca, unlike Chrysippus, seems somewhat hesitant to affirm that the events preceding certain fated things are fated as well. After the passage quoted above,[1241] Seneca's interlocutor posits: "This also [...] needs to be included in fate: either that you make vows or you do not."[1242] Seneca replies: "Suppose I yield to you and agree that it is also included in fate that vows are surely to be made. So for this reason they will be made."[1243] Seneca then uses the following two examples to make the same point as Chrysippus:[1244] if a man is fated to become eloquent but can only do so by first becoming a man of letters, then this is also fated; similarly, if a man is fated to become rich but only if he goes to sea, it is also fated that he will go to sea. Seneca continues:

> "I maintain the same principle in regard to expiation. A man will escape danger if he has expiated the threats foretold by divinity. But this is also in fate: that he expiate. therefore, he will expiate."[1245]

Seneca is aware that this leads to another problem: if it is fated that I will beseech the gods to avert the threat of foretold misfortune, then it is not up to me to decide to pray or not: "such reasoning is usually presented to us in order to prove that nothing is left to our will and that all control of action is handed over to fate."[1246] He promises that when he will tackle this problem, he will show "how something may exist in man's power while fate remains undiminished,"[1247] a promise that, unfortunately, he never makes good on.

We may still try and determine what Seneca's solution might have been, however, since in Cicero's *De Fato* there is a parallel to the problem acknowledged by Seneca. In this passage Cicero sketches the dilemma of whether, when all things are fated (as the Stoics hold

---

[1241] From *NQ* 2.37.3.

[1242] *NQ* 2.38.1: *Hoc quoque [...] ipsum necesse est fato comprehensum sit ut aut suscipias vota aut non.*

[1243] *NQ* 2.38.1: *Puta me tibi manus dare et fateri hoc quoque fato esse comprehensum ut utique fiant vota; ideo fient.* The reason for this apparent hesitance, as will become clear, is that asserting that all things are fated leads to other points of criticism.

[1244] Bobzien (1998), p. 204, holds that Seneca's discussion of the problem "goes back to Chrysippus' refutation, although the context seems not early Stoic and there is insufficient evidence for the assumption that Seneca drew directly on Chrysippus."

[1245] *NQ* 2.38.2: *Idem tibi de expiationibus dico: effugit pericula, si expiaverit praedictas divinitus minas; at hoc quoque in fato est, ut expiet; ideo expiabit.* The first person singular here (*dico*) indicates that whereas Seneca first made a show of granting this point to his interlocutor (*puta me tibi manus dare*), he does in fact himself hold to the idea that the necessary preconditions of some fated thing are themselves fated as well.

[1246] *NQ* 2.38.3: *Ista nobis opponi solent, ut probetur nihil voluntati nostrae relictum et omne ius faciendi fato traditum.*

[1247] *NQ* 2.38.3: *quemadmodum manente fato aliquid sit in hominis arbitrio[.]* The same problem is sketched in *De Fato*: right after the passage quoted above (*Fat.* 30), Carneades is said to have rejected Chrysippus' solution by restating the problem as follows (*Fat.* 31): "If everything takes place with antecedent causes, all events take place in a closely knit web of natural interconnexion; if this is true, nothing is in our power (*in nostra potestate*)."

they are), we still can hold people responsible for what they do.[1248] The similarity of this problem to the one in Seneca suggests that it might be helpful to take Chrysippus' answer to this problem into consideration.[1249] In *Fat.* 41-5, Chrysippus' attempt to reconcile fate and responsibility is given: he distinguishes between two kinds of causes: some are 'perfect and principal' (*perfectae et principales*), others 'auxiliary and proximate' (*adiuvantes et proximae*). Roughly put, this last kind brings it about *that* a particular thing happens as a part of fate, while the former determines *how* that particular thing happens. Chrysippus uses the example of a cylinder that, when pushed, will roll forward. Without the push, it could not move at all, but it is its own shape that determines the specific kind of effect the pushing has, viz. that it moves, more specifically rolls.

We can make the same distinction in the case of human action, Chrysippus argues. We cannot control whether or not we receive impressions (*phantasiai*) from the things around us, but we *can* choose whether or not to give assent (*sunkatathesis*) to those impressions: this is "in our power" (*in nostra potestate*)[1250] or "that which depends on us" (*to eph' hêmin*).[1251] That does not mean that this choice is not itself determined as well, but that we actively *make* the decision. In other words, whether or not we are presented with impressions that we have to evaluate is inevitable, but it is our own moral character that determines how we evaluate them (i.e. give assent to them or withhold it). The presence of a particular impression is thus an *auxiliary* cause of what we do, since without it we cannot act; what determines the specific nature of that action, however, is its *principal* or *perfect* cause. Chrysippus does not say that our decision to give assent or not is outside of fate, but that it is primarily caused, not by the fated circumstances, but by our own character. Since it is our moral character that is primarily responsible for what we do, we can and should be held accountable for what we do.[1252]

Seneca might have something similar in mind when he says he will show "how something may exist in man's power while fate remains undiminished (*quemadmodum manente fato aliquid sit in hominis arbitrio*)."[1253] The fact that Seneca says that he will not come up with an answer here makes it difficult to posit this with any certainty, but in what follows this passage there may be a hint that this is indeed what Seneca is thinking about. After saying that he will defer discussing this matter, he claims that in any case, by his rejection of the Lazy Argument, he has shown how "even if the order of fate is unalterable, expiations and conciliations may avert the dangers of omens, because they are not in conflict with fate but are

[1248] Cic. *Fat.* 40. Cf. Görler (1987), Hankinson (1999), Bobzien (1998), ch. 6, Brennan (2005), p. 251-69. The problem is also discussed in Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.2.
[1249] Even more so since Chrysippus' answer addresses the argument put forward by Carneades (see n. 1246), an argument that, as seen, is similar to the one Seneca says he will answer at some other time.
[1250] Cic. *Fat.* 43.
[1251] For a recent discussion of the term *to eph' hêmin* in ancient philosophy see Eliasson (2008).
[1252] Cf. LS p. 393f., Bobzien (1998), p. 255ff., Wildberger (2006), p. 346ff.
[1253] *NQ* 2.38.3.

themselves also in the law of fate."[1254] Seneca's imaginary interlocutor then asks what the use of a soothsayer is, when expiations themselves are fated as well:

> " 'What then', you ask, 'of what use is a soothsayer? In any case it is necessary for me to expiate even though he [the soothsayer] does not advise me to.' "[1255]

It is Seneca's reply to this follow-up question to the Lazy Argument, as it is found in the text,[1256] that is important for the issue at hand:

> "He [the soothsayer] is of this use, that he is a minister of fate. Thus, although the recovery of good health is owed to fate it is also owed to the doctor because the benefit of fate came to us through his hands."[1257]

It may be fated, then, that I will expiate and thus avert a bad omen, but that does not mean that the soothsayer plays no role: his advice to expiate is a relevant cause of me actually expiating in the same sense that the doctor's treatment of my illness is causally relevant to my recovery.[1258]

Seneca's answer clearly shows that he believes that to say that something is both fated *and* attributable to us does not constitute a contradiction. This is rather similar to Chrysippus' defence of the compatibility of fate and responsibility as discussed above. Granted, Seneca does not make any distinction between auxiliary and perfect causes, nor does he judge any causally relevant factor as most important – he just says that the recovery is due to both fate and the doctor; further, Seneca's expression that fate works 'through the hands of the doctor' is not found in what is ascribed to Chrysippus.[1259] The point Seneca makes, however, viz. that the

---

[1254] *NQ* 2.38.3: *si fati certus est ordo, expiationes procurationesque prodigiorum pericula avertant, quia non cum fato pugnant, sed et ipsae in lege fati sunt.* The wording of this conclusive remark neatly mirrors that of the question at the beginning of 2.35.1 with which the problem of fate and prayer was stated: "What use are expiations and precautions if the fates are immutable?" *Expiationes procurationesque quo pertinent, si immutabilia sunt fata?*

[1255] *NQ* 2.38.4: *Quid ergo, inquis, aruspex mihi prodest? Utique enim expiare mihi etiam non suadente illo necesse est.*

[1256] Cf. Brennan (2005), p. 281, for a similar criticism of Chrysippus' reply to the Lazy Argument: "It *looks* as though my recovery is in my control, because it depends on my calling a doctor, and that looks as though it is in my control. But it isn't in my control, any more than the recovery itself; the doctor is just another point on the fixed track. It's just more fated events, from the farthest-distant future up to the next breath I take."

[1257] *NQ* 2.38.4: *Hoc prodest quod fati minister est. Sic cum sanitas debeatur fato, debetur et medico, quia ad nos beneficium fati per huius manus venit.*

[1258] Cf. Epict. *Diss.* 1.17.18 and 1.17.29, where a sacrificer is valued for being instrumental in making god's signs known to us.

[1259] Wildberger (2006), p. 342, suggests that Seneca's expression of fate working 'through' something else (in this case the doctor's hands) is "ein früher Beleg für einen Gedanken, der im 2. Jh. n. Chr. vermutlich von dem Stoiker Philopator zu einer vollständigen Theorie ausgebaut wurde, die zu den Überlegungen Chrysipps zwar nicht in Widerspruch steht, diese aber weiterentwickelt." In this Wildberger agrees with Bobzien (1998), p. 370ff.

fatedness of a certain action does not preclude attributing that action to the one who was fated to perform that action, is similar to what Chrysippus presumably aimed at.

We can now draw certain conclusions and compare them to what others have held Seneca's opinion to be. His efforts to prove that the ineluctability of fate does not make expiation useless, nor the role of the soothsayer superfluous, show that Seneca is concerned to give certain religious rites and practices, such as prayer, a meaningful role. Sevenster holds that "Seneca desires to leave some scope for prayer, but is really unable to do so because he first and foremost wants to hold fast to the idea of the inexorable fulfilment of destiny. [...] Accordingly prayer can be no more than a cog in the tremendous mechanism of ineluctable destiny."[1260] This valuation results from Sevenster's interpretation of Seneca's claim that fate works through the doctor's hands: "even after this answer, it is not clear how he can really believe in man's freedom to pray or commit an act of propitiation and in the god's freedom to hear his prayers."[1261] Sevenster wrongly assumes that when Seneca says that he will at a later time explain how something remains "in man's power (*in hominis arbitrio*)" while fate remains unchanged, he, i.e. Seneca, is worried that "nothing remains of man's freedom to pray, or of the possibility of a genuine answer to his prayers."[1262]

This is also the point where the interpretation of Richards goes astray. According to Richards, Seneca "is at pains to show that divine and human freedom can be reconciled with the unalterable decrees of fate [...], thus hoping to find some scope for genuine prayer. [...] Seneca hopes, and indeed repeatedly emphasizes his belief, to have reconciled the demands of the philosophical side with those of the religious mind, i.e. such as are required to make prayer something real. I mean freedom of man and God [...]."[1263] By holding that Seneca is indeed trying to reconcile fate and petitionary prayer in the ordinary sense of man trying to sway the gods to do something, or refrain from doing something, Richards cannot but conclude that this "precise integration has escaped him [Seneca]."[1264]

Seneca, however, is not interested in any freedom on our part to pray or not, or god's freedom to heed our prayers, since that would be a breach of the chain of fate, which he repeatedly, as seen, he holds to be impossible.[1265] The interpretation of prayer offered above[1266] better fits, and is compatible with, this explicit avowal of the inexorability of fate. Furthermore,

---

[1260] Sevenster (1961), p. 49. Cf. Bovis (1948), p. 205.
[1261] Sevenster (1961), p. 48-9.
[1262] Sevenster (1961), p. 48. It is probable that this interpretation partly rests on Sevenster taking *suspensa* (*NQ* 2.37.2, see above) to mean something like 'undecided' or 'in suspense': "[Seneca] argues, prayers are not unavailing, since there are openings in the chain of events which may be filled in various ways." (p. 47) As shown, this passage is not about the "the chain of events which may be filled in various ways", as Sevenster thinks, but about the co-fatedness of certain things.
[1263] Richards (1964), p. 210.
[1264] Richards(1964), p. 217.
[1265] *NQ* 2.36, cited above.
[1266] Viz., that Seneca tries to show how the inexorability of fate does not render various cult practices irrelevant or meaningless.

the supposition that Seneca's interest is in proving how prayer, divination and expiation may play a meaningful role *even when* all things are fated is strengthened by the fact that Seneca may well have tried to do so by using a variant of the Chrysippean argument that was meant to preserve human responsibility in a fated cosmos, not contingent or free action and choice.

4. Etymology and allegory

Though the evidence is mostly fragmentary, it is quite clear that the early Stoics made serious efforts to interpret the poems of Homer and Hesiod as containing rudimentary versions of Stoic tenets, albeit, as recent studies have shown, in a fragmented, non-systematic way. The Stoics did not believe the poets to have been some sort of proto-Stoics, but to have handed down certain truths and insights that had been discovered in or before their time. The Stoics could justify this idea by referring to how the *prolêpsis* of god had always been available to men, even before there were Stoic philosophers to elucidate and articulate it.[1267] At the same time, the Stoics also held that the pure *prolêpsis* of god had become corrupted through unwarranted additions and superstitions, and thus stood in need of 'cleansing' or redefinition by Stoic philosophy.[1268]

Seneca is very much aware of how this corruptive process has led to wrong and even dangerous misconceptions.[1269] He does not deny that the poets may have been insightful men or even philosophers, but he warns us not to err by retroactively making Homer the progenitor of any specific philosophical school, including Stoicism.

> "It may be, perhaps, that they make you believe that Homer was a philosopher, although they disprove this by the very arguments through which they seek to prove it. For sometimes they make of him a Stoic, who approves nothing but virtue, avoids pleasures, and refuses to relinquish honour even at the price of immortality; sometimes they make him an Epicurean, praising the condition of a state in repose, which passes its days in feasting and song; sometimes a Peripatetic, classifying goodness in three ways; sometimes an Academic, holding that all things are uncertain. It is clear, however, that no one of these doctrines is to be fathered upon Homer, just because they are all there; for they are irreconcilable with one another. Let us grant these men, indeed, that Homer was a philosopher; yet surely he became a wise man before he had any knowledge of poetry."[1270]

[1267] See e.g. Long (1992), Algra (2001). Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.70, see Algra (2007), p. 28f.

[1268] Cic. *ND* 2.70.

[1269] In a passage in *De Vita Beata*, Seneca holds that the silly ideas of the poets (*ineptias poetarum*) can actually be harmful to those who believe them. Depictions of Jupiter as an adulterer, a rapist, a parricide and usurper may cause people to believe that they are therefore warranted to commit crimes as well (*Vita* 26.6). Cf. *Brev.* 16.5 and Fr. 206 Vottero (Lact. *Div. Inst.* 1.16.10).

[1270] *EM* 88.5: *Nisi forte tibi Homerum philosophum fuisse persuadent, cum his ipsis, quibus colligunt, negent. Nam modo Stoicum illum faciunt, virtutem solam probantem et voluptates refugientem et ab*

Seneca's point seems to be that he understands why every school would want to enlist Homer for their own cause, because of his status as a poet; in truth, however, Homer's ideas are of such a mixed and unsystematic nature that no one can claim him for his own. With the last sentence Seneca probably claims, somewhat cryptically, that whatever philosophical value there is in some of the things Homer says is *not* due to his poetical, but his philosophical prowess. Accordingly, and unlike the early Stoics, Seneca does not seem to have put much stock in the philosophical reinterpretation or allegorical reading of what poets like Homer (and Hesiod) have to say on the gods, their attributes and actions. We know that Zeno commented on Hesiod,[1271] and wrote a work called *Homeric Problems*;[1272] Chrysippus worked extensively on giving Stoicized etymologies of, e.g., names of gods and cosmological terms[1273] and wrote a work *On Poems* and *On the Right Way of reading Poetry*. Seneca, when commenting in *De Beneficiis* on how busying ourselves with etymologies and explanations of the three Graces will not help us do the right thing when it comes to receiving or bestowing benefits, criticizes Chrysippus for engaging in such childish activities as well:

> "Chrysippus, too, whose famous acumen is so keen and pierces to the very core of truth, who speaks in order to accomplish results, and uses no more words than are necessary to make himself intelligible - he fills the whole of his book with these puerilities, insomuch that he has very little to say about the duty itself of giving, receiving, and returning a benefit; and his fictions are not grafted upon his teachings, but his teachings upon his fictions."[1274]

This criticism notwithstanding, Seneca does not wholly forbid the use of elements from traditional religion for Stoic purposes, but the important difference is that he does not engage in etymologizations of the names of the traditional gods, but merely allows their use to refer to various aspects of the Stoic god.[1275]

---

honesto ne immortalitatis quidem pretio recedentem, modo Epicureum, laudantem statum quietae civitatis et inter convivia cantusque vitam exigentis, modo Peripateticum, tria bonorum genera inducentem, modo Academicum, omnia incerta dicentem. Adparet nihil horum esse in illo, quia omnia sunt. Ista enim inter se dissident. Demus illis Homerum philosophum fuisse; nempe sapiens factus est, antequam carmina ulla cognosceret.

[1271] See Algra (2001).

[1272] D.L. 7.4 (*SVF* 1.41).

[1273] D.L. 7.200 (*SVF* 2.16) lists a work in 7 books *On Etymological Matters* and one in 4 books on *Points of Etymology*.

[1274] *Ben.* 1.3.8: *Chrysippus quoque, penes quem subtile illud acumen est et in imam penetrans veritatem, qui rei agendae causa loquitur et verbis non ultra, quam as intellectum satis est, utitur, totum librum summ his ineptiis replet, ita ut de ipso officio dandi, accipiendi, reddendi beneficii pauca admodum dicat; nec his fabulas, sed haec fabulis inserit.*

[1275] Cf. D.L. 7.147 (*SVF* 2.1021), where the Stoics are said to have referred to their god with various names (Zeus, Dia, Athena, Hera, Hephaestus, Poseidon, Demeter), establishing such attributions on Stoically useful etymologies (god can be called 'Zeus' because he gives life (*zên*) to all) or on the association of a specific attribute of an Olympian god with an aspect of god (god can be called 'Hephaestus' because of his fiery nature). Cf. Cic. *ND* 2.63-9.

> "It will be right for you to call him Jupiter Best and Greatest, and the Thunderer and the Stayer, a title derived [...] from the fact that all things are stayed by his benefits, that he is their Stayer and Stabilizer. [...] Our school regard him both as Father Liber and as Hercules and as Mercury – Father Liber, because he is the father of all things, he who first discovered the seminal power that is able to subserve life through pleasure; Hercules, because his power is invincible, and whenever it shall have grown weary with fulfilling its works, shall return into primal fire; Mercury, because to him belong reason and number and order and knowledge."[1276]

As was discussed earlier, Seneca often criticizes other Stoics for being overly concerned with intricate and detailed 'frivolities' that may be sophisticated in themselves, but are utterly useless when it comes to having any effect on our moral well-being.[1277] He characterizes bothering oneself with such trifles as typical of the Greeks: an intelligent people, but too smart for their own (or anyone else's) good. He therefore feels justified in criticizing Chrysippus, "a great man, no doubt, but yet a Greek, one whose acumen is so finely pointed that it gets blunted and often folds back upon itself."[1278] His own list of applicable names for god, as cited above, is meant to bring his readers to understand that the Stoic god is of such a nature that "any name that you choose will be properly applied to him if it connotes some force that operates in the domain of heaven."[1279] The overall picture seems to be that Seneca is willing to use names and attributes of the Olympian gods (or heroes, such as Hercules) to clarify certain aspects of the Stoic god, but does not want to lose himself in too much detail or far-fetched etymologizations.[1280]

5. Traditional religion: worship and cult

There is not much evidence on the opinions of the early Stoics on traditional religion as expressed in cult practice and the worship of particular gods. Recent scholarship has shown, however, that despite certain theoretical objections,[1281] they may have been rather accommodating in practice as far as the depiction of gods in statues and their worship in

---

[1276] *Ben.* 4.7.1, 8.1: *Iovem illum Optimum ac Maximum rite dices et Tonantem et Statorem, qui [....] ex eo [...] quod stant beneficio eius omnia, stator stabilitorque est. [...] Hunc et Liberum patrem et Herculem ac Mercurium nostri putant: Liberum patrem, quia omnium parens sit, cui primum inventa seminum vis est vitae consultura per voluptatem: Herculem, quia vis eius invicta sit quandoque lassata fuerit operibus editis, in ignem recessura; Mercurium, quia ratio penes illum est numerusque et ordo et scientia.*

[1277] Chapter 1, section 5.

[1278] *Ben.* 4.1: *magnum mehercules virum, sed tamen Graecum, cuius acumen nimis tenue retunditur et in se saepe replicatur[.]*

[1279] *Ben.* 4.7.2: *Quaecumque voles, illi nomina proprie aptabis vim aliquam effectumque caelestium rerum continentia.*

[1280] *Ben.* 1.4.6: "But those who wish to heal the human soul, to maintain faith in the dealings of men, and to engrave upon their minds the memory of services let these speak with earnestness and plead with all their power; unless, perchance, you think that by light talk and fables and old wives' reasonings it is possible to prevent a most disastrous thing - the abolishment of benefits."

[1281] Clem. *Strom.* 5.12, 76, (*SVF* 1.264 [1]), Plut. *St. Rep.* 1034B (*SVF* 1.264 [2]), cf. *SVF* 1.146.

temples was concerned.[1282] We know next to nothing about the early Stoic views concerning other aspects of cult, such as offerings and specific rites[1283] – our most important source, in fact, is Seneca himself, since the topic recurs throughout his work and we still possess various fragments from his lost *De Superstitione*.[1284]

In this work, Seneca severely criticizes several aspects of traditional religion and cult.[1285] To begin with, the depiction of certain gods in the shape of animals or such forms as one would normally associate with monsters (*monstra*),[1286] e.g., and the added fact that this depiction is done in "images of the cheapest inert material" (*in materia vilissima atque immobili*), does not fit their divine status. Furthermore, the deification of things unworthy of that status is ridiculed.[1287] Seneca further fiercely lambasts rites that involve self-mutilation, self-castration and other cruelty; if a god demands worship of that kind, he is not worthy of any worship and those who perform such rites would normally be considered to be absolutely bonkers, if there were not so many of them (*sanitatis patrocinium est insanientium turba*). Next, Augustine relates, Seneca criticizes certain customary rites that are carried out in Jupiter's temple on the Capitoline hill. There are those who pretend to perform all kinds of services for Zeus, such as keeping him informed about who worships him and what the time is, while others mimic bathing and anointing Jupiter or dressing the hair of Juno and Minerva.

> "There are men who summon the gods to give bond for them, and some who offer them lawyers' briefs and explain their case. An expert leading actor in the mimes,

---

[1282] See Algra (2007), p. 30-2. Cf. *ND* 2.71, where the Stoic spokesman Balbus says that "it is our duty to revere and worship these gods [Ceres, Neptune and others - MvH] under the names which custom has bestowed upon them."

[1283] Epictetus, however, holds that (*Ench.* 31.5) "it is always appropriate to make libations, and sacrifices, and to give of the firstfruits after the manner of our fathers, and to do all this with purity, and not in a slovenly or careless fashion, nor, indeed, in a niggardly way, nor yet beyond our means." Cf. *Diss.* 3.2.4 and 3.7.26, where Epictetus lists religion or piety under the natural duties of man.

[1284] Chapter 6.10 of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* is the most important source, containing lengthy quotations from *De Superstitione*. Other fragments are found in Lactantius' *Divinae Institutiones.*

[1285] In the following, all quotations are taken from Aug. *Civ. Dei* 6.10, unless stated otherwise.

[1286] Cf. *Vita* 26.6, where the poets are criticized for giving wings or horns to Jupiter (referring to the stories of how Jupiter seduced Leda in the form of a swan and Europa as a bull).

[1287] *Pallor*, deified as a god of fear is given as an example: it is a mere physical colouration, not to be counted among the gods. Seneca uses such excessive deification as a foil for philosophical theology: the latter, i.e. philosophical theology, may be thought to posit some outlandish ideas, but these are still more likely to be true than the excessive deifications in traditional religion. An interesting detail here is that Seneca's fictitious interlocutor, having difficulties understanding and accepting philosophical theology, asks (Fr. 66 Vottero) "Should I turn to Plato or the Peripatetic Strato, of which the one makes god to be without a body, the other without a mind (*animo*)?" Seneca can present this as a question that may confound someone, since, from a Stoic point of view, neither should be believed, because god is both corporeal and the soul of the cosmos. See chapter 3, section 2.3.

> now a decrepit old man, used to act a mime each day in the Capitol – as if the gods would enjoy the performance of a player when men had ceased to do so."[1288]

Such rites are perfectly useless, Seneca thinks, but in themselves rather harmless; others are positively indecent, such as those that involve women pretending to be lovers of Jupiter. Despite calling these customary rites "follies" (*dementiae*) and duties assigned to itself by a "deluded madness" (*vanus furor*), Seneca does not actually think it advisable for a Stoic sage to publicly denounce them.[1289] The sage, Augustine takes Seneca to hold, should rather "exclude them from his personal worship, but go through the motions of feigned conformity. For he [Seneca - MvH] says: 'The wise man will observe all these rites as being enjoined by the laws, not as being pleasing to the gods.'"[1290] Several lines later, Seneca is quoted as saying that "as for all this obscure throng of gods, assembled through long years of by ancient superstition, we shall invoke them, but with the reservation in mind that their worship belongs rather to custom than to truth."[1291]

In another passage, however, Seneca seems less tolerant of various traditional practices. The passage is from *EM* 95, where Seneca criticizes customary precepts concerning the worship of the gods as follows:

> "But let us forbid lamps to be lighted on the sabbath, since the gods do not need light, neither do men take pleasure in soot. Let us forbid men to offer morning salutation and to throng the doors of temples; mortal ambitions are attracted by such ceremonies, but god is worshipped by those who truly know him. Let us forbid bringing towels and flesh-scrapers to Jupiter, and proffering mirrors to Juno; for god seeks no servants."[1292]

There is no 'going through the motions' here, no quiet indulgence of what the Stoic knows to be important in a social sense but meaningless from a philosophical point of view. Algra notes that on this point Seneca "does not appear to be fully consistent",[1293] but suggests that this

---

[1288] *[...] sunt qui ad vadimonia sua deos advocent, sunt qui libellos offerant et illos causam suam doceant. Doctus archimimus, senex iam decrepitus, cotidie in Capitolio mimum agebat, quasi dii libenter spectarent quem illi homines desierant.*

[1289] Similarly in *Vita* 26.7-8.

[1290] *[...] eas in animi religione non habeat, sed in actibus fingat. Ait enim: Quae omnia sapiens servabit tamquam legibus iussa, non tamquam diis grata.*

[1291] *Omnem istam ignobilem deorum turbam, quam longo aevo longa superstitio congessit, sic, inquit, adorabimus ut meminerimus cultum eius magis ad morem quam ad rem pertinere.* The latter part of the sentence, after *inquit*, is surely a citation from Seneca. The first part might be Senecan as well, though it could also be a paraphrase by Augustine. Cf. Algra (2007), p. 33.

[1292] *EM* 95.47: *Accendere aliquem lucernas sabbatis prohibeamus, quoniam nec lumine di egent et ne homines quidem delectantur fuligine. Vetemus salutationibus matutinis fungi et foribus adsidere templorum; humana ambitio istis officiis capitur, deum colit qui novit. Vetemus lintea et strigiles Iovi ferre et speculum tenere Iunoni; non quaerit ministros deus.*

[1293] Algra (2007), p. 34.

inconsistency is explicable when we take the different contexts in which the different opinions on the right attitude towards superstition-based customs into consideration. In *EM* 95, Seneca may be taken to discuss what philosophy teaches us about the proper worship of the divine, and this leads to a rather strict censure of tradition; in *De Superstitione*, however, as far as we are able to determine, he is concerned with how one should deal with it in everyday life, adopting a more conciliatory attitude for socio-political reasons.[1294] Even so, Seneca believes that there is a proper way of worshipping god; this kind of worship, which is bound up with the Stoic philosophical life, will be discussed in the following section.

6. The right kind of worship

The passage from *EM* 95 cited above provides a good starting point for Seneca's ideas on this topic. In this passage, he forbids certain religious customs for being utterly useless: god has no need of ceremonial lights, of being greeted in the morning, or of servants that groom him. The god in question here is, of course, the Stoic god: in earlier chapters we have seen that the Stoics held that god meant us to live a life of reason and virtue, that is to say, to live according to the divine part in us, i.e. our soul. It is precisely our commitment to this life of contemplation and understanding of the divine and providently run cosmos and the attainment of perfect rationality in our actions, in other words, the effort to become as much like god as possible, that is, according to Seneca, the only proper way of worshipping the Stoic god.

In the passage cited the list of things that god has no need of is contrasted with his statement that "god is worshipped by those who know him."[1295] Further on, he states the following:

> "Although a man hear what limit he should observe in sacrifice, and how far he should recoil from burdensome superstitions, he will never make sufficient progress until he has conceived a right idea of god, regarding him as one who possesses all things, and allots all things, and bestows them without price."[1296]

[1294] Algra (2007), p. 34-5. This conciliatory attitude, however, may very well not extend over all practices discussed in the passage from *De Superstitione* in Aug. *Civ. Dei* 6.10: Seneca's discussion of rites that involve self-mutilation or other forms of bodily harm is concluded by his judgement that those who perform such rites would be regarded as madmen, if only there were not so many of them. This may explain why the performance of such rites takes place, but it is a far cry from actually condoning it or suggesting that a Stoic sage should take part in them as well.

[1295] *EM* 95.47: *deum colit qui novit.*

[1296] *EM* 95.48: *Audiat licet, quem modum servare in sacrificiis debeat, quam procul resilire a molestis superstitionibus, numquam satis profectum erit, nisi qualem debet deum mente conceperit, omnia habentem, omnia tribuentem, beneficum gratis.*

When trying to honour the gods, all one needs to do is to "be a good man. Whoever imitates them, is worshipping them sufficiently."[1297] Elsewhere Seneca says that philosophy safeguards religion and piety,[1298] and that "worship does not consist in slaughtering fattened bulls, or in hanging up offerings of gold or silver, or in pouring coins into a temple treasury; rather does it consist in a will that is reverent and upright,"[1299] a sentiment that is echoed in a passage from *De Beneficiis*:

> "[T]he honour that is paid to the gods lies, not in the victims for sacrifice, though they be fat and glitter with gold, but in the upright and holy desire of the worshippers."[1300]

In the section on prayer, too, it was shown that Seneca often states that he does not believe the age-old practice of praying to the gods for all kinds of goods to be useful; whatever we really need, he thinks, we can get from ourselves, since we have god within ourselves; as long as this divine part of us is kept pure, we have all we could ever need.[1301] The idea of proper religion as consisting in living according to our divine nature as expressed by Seneca, is also a standard Stoic one. The Stoics held that piety results from knowledge of the gods[1302] and that "the best and also the purest, holiest and most pious way of worshipping the gods is ever to venerate them with purity, sincerity and innocence both of thought and of speech."[1303]

To sum up: Seneca believes that there is only one way to properly venerate and honour god, and that is by trying to be as rational and virtuous as he is. All other forms of worship are useless, because they try to provide god with what he does not need or want, or even harmful, because they lead people to physically hurt or morally debase themselves. Nevertheless, in the interest of social cohesion and continuity of cultural traditions, he is willing to condone certain

---

[1297] *EM* 95.50: *Bonus esto. Satis illos coluit, quisquis imitatus est.* Cf. *Ben.* 4.25.1: "It is our aim to live according to nature, and to follow the example of the gods." Cf. *Ben.* 3.15.4, 7.31.5, where Seneca says that we are imitating god when we generously deal out benefits.

[1298] *EM* 90.3: *Ab hac [philosophia - MvH] numquam recedit religio, pietas, iustitia et omnis alius comitatus virtutum consertarum et inter se cohaerentium.* Cf. *EM* 74.12, *Vit.* 26.7.

[1299] *EM* 115.5: *Colitur autem non taurorum opimis corporibus contrucidatis nec auro argentoque suspenso nec in thensauros stipe infusa, sed pia et recta voluntate.*

[1300] *Ben.* 1.6.3: *[N]e in victimis quidem, licet opimae sint auroque praefulgeant, deorum est honor sed recta ac pia voluntate venerantium.* Cf. 202 Vottero (Lact. *Div. Inst.* 6.25.3).

[1301] Cf. *EM* 41.1, quoted *supra*. See Algra (2007), p. 33-4, for the *religio animi* (personal or private worship and religion), referred to in the fragment from *De Superstitione* in Aug. *Civ. Dei.* 6.10, and expressed in *EM* 41.1, as distinguished from public or state religion.

[1302] Cic. *ND* 2.153: *cognitionem deorum, e qua oritur pietas [....].* See for the Stoic idea of holiness (*hosiotês*) as a science (*epistêmê*): Andron. *De Passionibus* p. 25, 18 Schuchardt (*SVF* 3.273); in Sextus Emp. *M* 9.123 (*SVF* 2.1017) piety (*eusebeia*) is defined as "the science of service to the gods"; cf. Stob. *Ecl.* 2.68, 9 (*SVF* 3.660).

[1303] Cic. *ND* 2.71: *Cultus autem deorum est optimus idemque castissimus atque sanctissimus plenissimusque pietatis ut eos semper pura integra incorrupta et mente et voce veneremur.*

customs and practices and even lets the Stoic sage participate in them, provided this sage remembers that true religion is a matter of the soul.

7. A comparison with Plutarch

At this point it may be worthwhile to compare Seneca's views with those of the late first-century Platonist Plutarch, who wrote a work on superstition that has some interesting parallels with Seneca's opinions. In his *De Superstitione* (*Peri deisidaimonias*) Plutarch discusses two major misconceptions concerning the divine, atheism on the one hand and superstition on the other.[1304] Of these, superstition is much the worse and has in fact, Plutarch argues, given rise to atheism.

Superstition (*deisidaimonia*) wrongly presents the gods as fearful, cruel and resentful beings[1305] and thus causes never-ending misery to those it holds sway over: after all, the gods are thought to be omnipotent and omnipresent, leaving the superstitious man without a safe haven anywhere – even in his dreams he is haunted by his fears of the supernatural. The prospect of death itself offers no relief either, for the superstitious man fears that he will suffer punishment and torment in the underworld, too. Furthermore, because he believes that whatever misfortune he suffers is directly caused by gods that are out to get him, he makes no effort to improve upon his situation or accept help from anyone, lest he angers the gods even more by trying to avoid his just deserts.

This boundless fear of the gods means that the superstitious man actually hates the gods; he is powerless to get his own back, but if he could, he would, just as those who are oppressed by a tyrant would love to get back at him, even while being humble and obeisant. As such, superstition can be regarded as the cause of atheism; after all, it is quite understandable that one would rather believe in no gods whatsoever than in such gods as presented by superstition.[1306] That does not mean that atheism is a good thing; it is simply less of a bad thing than superstition. The truth is that the gods are beneficent and caring; atheism denies that such beings exist and refers all things to the workings of chance and fortune, while superstition misrepresents the gods as maleficent and cruel. In Plutarch's own words:

[1304] See Attridge (1978), p. 73-7 for a discussion of Plutarch's treatise; also Möllering (1963).

[1305] *Superst.* 165B: "Superstition, as the very name indicates, is an emotional idea and an assumption productive of fear which utterly humbles and crushes a man, for he thinks that there are gods, but that they are the cause of pain and injury."

[1306] When describing the atheist position, Plutarch has Epicurus in mind, as is apparent from 165A, where the idea that the cosmos was formed out of atoms and void is taken as a typical atheist view. Cf. 165B, where atheism is said to try and show that we need not fear the gods: this is one of the principal objectives of Epicurus' philosophy.

> "Atheism is insensibility to what is divine, which shows itself in not understanding what is good; superstition an over-sensibility, in suspecting the good to be bad."[1307]

The perverted view of the gods as being non-beneficial and even positively ill-disposed toward us is brought up time and again by Plutarch, and he is clearly exasperated by how superstitious people "conceive their [the gods' - MvH] kindliness to be frightful, their fatherly solicitude to be despotic, their loving care to be injurious, their slowness to anger to be savage and brutal".[1308]

Similar sentiments about the religious perversion that is superstition are found in Seneca as well:

> "Superstition is an insane error; it fears those whom it ought to love; it is an outrage upon those whom it worships."[1309]

And again:

> "No sane man fears the gods; for it is madness to fear what is beneficial, and no one loves those whom he fears."[1310]

Plutarch also shares Seneca's distaste for how superstitious misconceptions of the divine lead to useless and cruel rites and practices, such as "smearing with mud, wallowing in filth, immersions, casting oneself down with face to the ground, disgraceful besieging of the gods, and uncouth prostrations."[1311] Seneca's claim that gods who require their worshippers to mutilate or castrate themselves are undeserving of any worship whatsoever,[1312] is paralleled by the following remark in Plutarch:

> "The ridiculous actions and emotions of superstition, its words and gestures, magic charms and spells, rushing about and beating of drums, impure purifications and

---

1307 Plut. *Superst.* 167E: ἡ μὲν ἀθεότης ἀπάθεια πρὸς τὸ θεῖόν ἐστι μὴ νοοῦσα τὸ ἀγαθόν, ἡ δὲ δεισιδαιμονία πολυπάθεια κακὸν τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὑπονοοῦσα. Cf. 165C: "Atheism is falsified reason, superstition is an emotion engendered from false reason."

1308 *Superst.* 167D: δοξάζουσι φοβερὸν τὸ εὐμενὲς καὶ τυραννικὸν τὸ πατρικὸν καὶ βλαβερὸν τὸ κηδεμονικὸν καὶ τὸ ἀμήνιτον ἄγριον εἶναι καὶ θηριῶδες. Cf. 165C, 166D-E, 167E.

1309 *EM* 123.16: *Superstitio error insanus est; amandos timet; quos colit, violat.* Cf. *Clem.* 2.5.1: "religion honours the gods, superstition wrongs them (*violat*) [...]."

1310 *Ben*. 4.19.1: *Deos nemo sanus timet; furor est enim metuere salutaria, nec quisquam amat, quos timet.* Similar condemnations of superstition are also found in Lucretius; he argues how superstition (*religio*) brings men to do impious things (1.83ff.), and incurs in men an unfounded fear of the gods (5.82-90 = 6.58-66).

1311 *Superst.* 166A: πηλώσεις καταβορβορώσεις βαπτισμούς, ῥίψεις ἐπὶ πρόσωπον, αἰσχρὰς προκαθίσεις, ἀλλοκότους προσκυνήσεις. Cf. 168D-E.

1312 See section 5 *supra*.

> dirty sanctifications, barbarous and outlandish penances and mortifications at the shrines – all these give occasion to some to say that it were better there should be no gods at all than gods who accept with pleasure such forms of worship, and are so overbearing, so petty, and so easily offended."[1313]

There are also differences between the views of the two philosophers, most importantly in the reason why and the extent to which they believe traditional religious customs should be left in peace. Seneca, as shown, pardons certain practices and even allows Stoic sages to participate in them, for society's sake. In themselves, these practices are useless and have nothing to do with proper religion: their value lies solely in their being "enjoined by the laws" (*legibus iussa*) and part of established use (*mos*).[1314] Plutarch also values certain traditions, but he has a different rationale for doing so. After criticizing certain superstitious customs, he claims that to adopt such barbarous ways of beseeching the gods is "to disgrace and transgress the god-given ancestral dignity of our religion."[1315] Plutarch, then, distinguishes between superstitious practices, originating in barbarous cultures and infecting Greek society,[1316] and those that are part of his own established native religion in which he serves as a priest,[1317] which is divinely inspired and of venerable age. The former ought to be rejected, the latter to be preserved and observed.

This may seem to resemble Seneca's viewpoint rather closely, but there is an important difference: whereas Seneca only refers to established custom and the rule of law as reasons for endorsing traditional customs, Plutarch calls his national religion "god-given" or "divine" (*theion*). This means that while Seneca does not appear to believe that traditional customs are themselves in any way related to what is divine,[1318] Plutarch believes them, because of their divine authority, to touch on the truth about the gods. This point will become clearer when we compare another passage in Plutarch with one in Seneca. As said, the latter's sage will

[1313] *Superst.* 171A-B: τῆς δεισιδαιμονίας ἔργα καὶ πάθη καταγέλαστα, καὶ ῥήματα καὶ κινήματα καὶ γοητεῖαι καὶ μαγεῖαι καὶ περιδρομαὶ καὶ τυμπανισμοὶ καὶ ἀκάθαρτοι μὲν καθαρμοὶ ῥυπαραὶ δ' ἁγνεῖαι, βάρβαροι δὲ καὶ παράνομοι πρὸς ἱεροῖς κολασμοὶ καὶ προπηλακισμοί, ταῦτα δίδωσιν ἐνίοις λέγειν ὡς μὴ εἶναι θεοὺς ἄμεινον ἢ εἶναι, τοιαῦτα μὲν δεχομένους τοιούτοις δὲ χαίροντας, οὕτω δ' ὑβριστάς, οὕτω δὲ μικρολόγους καὶ μικρολύπους.

[1314] See section 5 *supra*.

[1315] *Superst.* 166B: καταισχύνειν καὶ παρανομεῖν τὸ θεῖον καὶ πάτριον ἀξίωμα τῆς εὐσεβείας.

[1316] Witness his use, in 166A, of the following line form Euripides: ὦ βάρβαρ' ἐξευρόντες Ἕλληνες κακά (*Trojan Women,* l. 764). In 166B he criticizes the use of "strange names and barbarous phrases" (ἀτόποις ὀνόμασι καὶ ῥήμασι βαρβαρικοῖς).

[1317] Plutarch was an Apollonian priest in Delphi.

[1318] In this, Seneca may be different from the earlier Stoics; cf. Algra (2003a), p. 177-8, who argues that "traditional forms of cult and belief could at least be seen as approximations – however primitive and partial – of that truth [about the gods]" and that "a religious tradition that encompasses at least some elements of the right preconception of the gods could be thought to be better than nothing." Seneca never explicitly denies that the tradition gets anything right concerning the gods, but never acknowledges it either.

observe traditional rites as part of custom, "but not as being pleasing to the gods."[1319] Consider, by contrast, the following passage in Plutarch:

> "The most pleasant things that men enjoy are festal days and banquets at the temples, initiations and mystic rites, and prayer and adoration of the gods. Note that the atheist on those occasions gives way to insane and sardonic laughter at such ceremonies, and remarks aside to his cronies that people must cherish a vain and silly conceit to think that these rites are performed in honour of the gods; but with him no harm is done save this."[1320]

Plutarch continues by arguing that the superstitious man, unlike the atheist, actually suffers during these religious festivities, because even then he fears the wrath of the gods. For our current investigation, however, the important point is that the atheist, even though he is better off than the superstitious man, is nevertheless wrong: he is mistaken in his belief that the various rites and prayers do not honour the gods, because, apparently, they *do* honour the gods.

The difference in their respective valuations of certain traditional religious customs can be explained, or so I believe, not only by referring to Plutarch's priesthood, but also by taking Seneca's and Plutarch's philosophical backgrounds into consideration. As a Stoic, Seneca believes that to a large degree, human beings are capable of knowing god. God, after all, is the rational and formative principle whose immanence and provident activity in the cosmos is manifest to all who pay attention. He has given us a part of himself as our rational soul and thus endowed us with reason, and because of this privileged status, we can comprehend the cosmos and emulate god in rationality and virtue; furthermore, a Stoic knows that this emulation is also the only proper way of worshipping god, since as the rational and virtuous being *par excellence*, he has no need for anything that traditional rites or customs try to bestow upon him.

Plutarch, however, is less certain on such matters. He is a dogmatic Middle-Platonist in so far as he holds that there is a cosmic dualism of good and evil forces at work in the cosmos. But, as has been observed, Plutarch also "exhibits sceptical tendencies when talking about the possibilities of acquiring knowledge about the divine. [...] For Plutarch, there is no fixed and reliable epistemological starting point."[1321] This hesitance of Plutarch also affects his thoughts about the value of traditional religion: recognizing our epistemological limitations concerning the divine, he feels, means that we may sometimes have to fall back on traditional

---

[1319] Aug. *Civ. Dei* 6.10: *non tamquam diis grata.*

[1320] *Superst.* 169D: ἥδιστα δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἑορταὶ καὶ εἰλαπίναι πρὸς ἱεροῖς καὶ μυήσεις καὶ ὀργιασμοὶ καὶ κατευχαὶ θεῶν καὶ προσκυνήσεις. ἐνταῦθα τοίνυν σκόπει τὸν ἄθεον γελῶντα μὲν μανικὸν καὶ σαρδάνιον γέλωτα τοῖς ποιουμένοις καί που παραφθεγγόμενον ἠρέμα πρὸς τοὺς συνήθεις ὅτι τετύφωνται καὶ δαιμονῶσιν οἱ θεοῖς ταῦτα δρᾶσθαι νομίζοντες, ἄλλο δ᾽ οὐδὲν ἔχοντα κακόν.

[1321] Algra (forthcoming), p. 2. Cf. Opsomer (1996), p. 183-5 and (1998).

religion and supernatural explanations.[1322] Opsomer argues that concerning the practice of divination, e.g., "Plutarch's conclusion is that [...] caution is required, and that it is anyhow preferable to observe the old rules and customs."[1323] In this sense, Opsomer claims, Plutarch can say that "the philosophy of the Academy *protects* the traditional faith: suspension of judgment (*epochê*) is connected with *eulabeia pros to theion*[1324] [...] In matters in which absolute certainty is unattainable, man should keep with traditional faith."[1325]

That is not to say that Plutarch rejected any kind of 'philosophical worship' of god as proposed by Seneca. Like Seneca, he believes that we should strive to become like god and try to understand him in order to do so, but he also thinks that traditional religion remains important. As Dillon argues, "intellectual philosophizing – the practice of dialectic and other Platonic methods – is necessary also, but it will not achieve knowledge of God without the observance of a certain way of life",[1326] which includes involving oneself in "the observances of one's religion."[1327] The fact that Plutarch was an Apollonian priest may also have contributed to the emphasis he puts on the reverence for traditional religion: "Possibly Plutarch felt [...] that the correct way to honor the deity was through the forms of ritual traditional to one's culture, but one may detect also in Plutarch [...] a delight in ritual for its own sake, which is only, after all, to put Plutarch in the mainstream of traditional Greek piety[.]"[1328]

To conclude, Seneca and Plutarch both recommend condoning traditional religion and partaking in its rites and customs, but for different reasons. Seneca believes that most traditional ideas about the divine are wrong and most rites, at the very least, are useless. There is a better way of worshipping god, and that is through living the philosophical life; we truly honour god when and if we make efforts to become like him, i.e. when we become perfectly rational and virtuous. Nevertheless, traditional ways of worshipping the gods should be condoned for the benefit of society though certain excessively brutal practices should be forbidden. Plutarch's sceptical attitude towards our capability of truly understanding how the divine should be conceived or worshipped, however, leads him to judge that the tradition, though not without its faults, contains much that is valuable and plausible, on account of its seniority.

[1322] Cf. Algra (fortcoming), p. 2: "These considerations on the epistemological background help to explain several features of Plutarch's thought, such as [...] his general reverence for the religious tradition[.]"
[1323] Opsomer (1996), p. 184.
[1324] I.e. "reverential respect towards the divine."
[1325] Opsomer (1996), p. 183. Cf. Cic. *ND* 3.5-6, where the Academic spokesman Cotta argues that he can be both an Academic sceptic and a priest: he holds the theological theories of the Stoics to be unconvincing, but thinks that traditional religion does not need proof.
[1326] Dillon (1986), p. 216.
[1327] Dillon (1986), p. 217.
[1328] Dillon (1986), p. 217. We may surmise, however, that Plutarch would not accept "the forms of ritual traditional" to *any* culture, but only his own.

8. Conclusion

The Stoics put much effort into defining and defending their position in relation to traditional religion, mythology and various cult practices. As we have seen, they were critical of some aspects of tradition, but more accommodating or even conservative towards others. Seneca, too, has different attitudes towards different aspects of the tradition, and while he agrees with the Stoics on many points, we have also seen that he will not hesitate to disagree with other Stoics when he feels entitled to do so.

In section 2 we found that Seneca, like the earlier Stoics, believes in the efficacy of divination, i.e. the practice of predicting future happenings through the interpretation of various portents and omens, because of the causal interconnection of all that happens. Provided that the omens are rightly interpreted by those skilled in divination, such as haruspices, dream-interpreters and the like, we are able to gain knowledge of what is going to happen and through this knowledge there is even a sense in which we can be said to avert bad things predicted to happen. In order to understand how Seneca tries to reconcile this with the Stoic idea that all things are fated, we had to take his ideas on the efficacy of prayer into consideration (section 3). At first this seemed of little use, as Seneca is often dismissive of those who believe in the efficacy of petitionary prayer; he either rejects it or merely uses it as a metaphor for self-address, believing that we can get the good, i.e. reason and moral virtue, for ourselves instead of waiting for god to come and give it to us. At other times, however, he is more positive and thinks that we can and should pray to obtain certain goods or avert bad things foretold by divination. To avoid having to renege on his belief that fate is unchangeable, Seneca seeks to define prayer not as being outside fate, but as part of fate, and does so, as we have seen, by using a well-known Chrysippean argument.

As was argued in section 4, Seneca does not put much stock in the efforts of the early Stoics to give philosophical reinterpretations or allegorical readings of what poets like Homer (and Hesiod) have to say on the divine. He does allow the use of names of traditional gods to highlight or clarify certain aspects of god, but criticizes Chrysippus for taking such etymologizations too far.

In section 5 we discussed Seneca's opinions on traditional worship and the performance of religious rites. It was argued that as far as the practice of everyday life is concerned, Seneca agrees with what is the probable early Stoic position that traditional rites and worship should be left untouched and even indulged in by a Stoic, as long as he or she remembers that such practices have a mere social role and have nothing to do with what is truly divine. From a philosophical point of view, however, Seneca is more strict and can even deny that various religious practices have any use whatsoever or can even be harmful and should therefore be banned. In its place, as was argued in section 6, Seneca envisions another and proper way of worshipping god, which consists in living our lives rationally and virtuously. In section 7, finally, a comparison was drawn between Seneca's views on superstition and those of Plutarch in *De Superstitione*; the similarities and differences between

the Stoic Seneca and the Middle Platonist (albeit sometimes idiosyncratic) Plutarch illustrate how Stoic and Platonist philosophers can argue much the same point, and at the same time also why they must ultimately part ways with one another.

Overall, we may conclude that Seneca often agrees with the earlier Stoics in being conservative as far as everyday religious practice is concerned, but is more critical when it comes to theory, as witnessed by his rejection of allegorizations of myth and etymologizations of names of traditional gods. Concerning prayer, too, this critical stance is palpable insofar as we see Seneca making an effort to reconcile it with Stoic theory. Finally, we see it in his valuation of traditional worship: Seneca, unlike the earlier Stoics, never indicates that this worship may teach us something truthful about the gods, however partial or small that may be, but only advises to uphold such traditions for socio-political reasons.

Conclusion

The object of this study, as set out in the introduction, has been to gain a better understanding of, first, Seneca's theological views, and second, of the status of these views in relation to those of the earlier Stoics, and in the context of various other factors, such as the views of other schools and the purpose of Seneca's work. This attempt at a better understanding was motivated by the growing scholarly recognition that Seneca is a thinker who should be judged by giving a fair estimation of his philosophical work, not by assuming him to be a representative of the eclectic tendencies associated with philosophy in his day. The rationale for the focus on theology in this study was twofold. First, this alleged eclecticism is often associated with the emergence of Middle Platonism which manifests itself in the increasing prominence of the transcendence of god and the substitution of a contemplative *telos* for an ethical one. Second, there is as yet no systematic study of Seneca's theological views that explicitly considers his doctrinal relation to the earlier Stoics, despite the obvious relevance of theology in Stoicism and Seneca's self-identification as a Stoic.

To come to the most impartial and straightforward interpretation possible, it was deemed sensible to inventory the many relevant passages in Seneca according to certain standard topical categories, and discuss them both in their own context and within a larger synthesis of his views on the particular topic they belong to: these different syntheses make out the various chapters of this study. Having done so, I now turn to review the findings of the various chapters and determine what this method has taught us about Seneca and his relation to earlier Stoicism as far as theology is concerned.

The most important conclusion of this study is that the assumptions of Middle Platonic influence on Seneca's ideas on god were made too rashly. A close examination of the relevant material shows that we need not, and indeed should not, assume that Seneca alternated between Stoic and Platonist views on, e.g., the status of theology, the nature of god, or the human epistemological capabilities concerning the divine. The Stoic view on these topics is actually more complex and subtle than is often acknowledged, and allows for different perspectives and emphases, and already shares much common ground with Platonism. This means that any interpretation of Seneca's views on a particular topic must take this wide range of perspectives and emphases and the affinity with Platonism into account, too, and accordingly must take all the relevant evidence in his works into consideration before passing judgment on individual passages. Once this is established, it can be shown that in the passages under consideration Seneca is simply moving within the doctrinal leeway granted by this complexity, rather than going beyond Stoic parameters.

As a few examples from the preceding chapters will show, we find this conclusion affirmed again and again. In chapter 2, e.g., we have seen that the erroneous conclusion that Seneca occasionally evinces a Middle Platonic rather than a Stoic position on the human *telos*, rests on the mistaken assumption that the Stoics saw physics as merely subservient to ethics. Similarly, chapter 3 showed that in characterizing god as the mind of the cosmos, as being

located in the upper regions of that cosmos, and as the formative principle in all things that itself remains merely intelligible, not sensible, Seneca does not go beyond what we know the early Stoics thought about god, and that accordingly, there is no reason to assume that he tends towards a transcendent view of god. In chapter 7, too, we found that Seneca's recognition of the difficulty of knowing god does not need to be associated with the emergence of Middle Platonic negative theology, but fits in very well with the Stoic acceptance of certain epistemological limitations of man.

Does that mean that Seneca is a docile follower who uncritically sticks to Stoic doctrine? No, for as we have seen in chapter 1, his self-identification as a Stoic does not prevent him from being very protective of his intellectual freedom. Throughout the various chapters of this study, we have seen that his own personal and philosophical concerns play an important role in determining his position on particular topics. His preoccupation with the moral degeneration of his fellow Romans, e.g., probably lessened his expectations on the advancement of knowledge. This moral concern of his occasionally leads to disagreement with earlier Stoics: in chapter 8, e.g., we saw that he rejected etymologizations of divine names and allegorical interpretations of ancient poetry as a waste of time, since they will not help to make us better human beings.

What is most important, however, is that for Seneca the basic Stoic conception of god as the corporeal, immanent and provident principle in the cosmos is never in doubt.

Appendix 1: Epictetus

'E' refers to *Encheiridion*, 'F' to fragments; all other passages are from the *Discourses*. The translation used is that of the Loeb edition, with small changes. The passages have been categorized so as to correspond to the chapters on Seneca's views, i.e. chapters 2 through 8.

2. The status of theology and the human *telos*

1.6.18: "But god has brought man into the world to be a spectator of himself and his works, and not merely a spectator, but also an interpreter."

1.10.10: "I beseech you to learn from Chrysippus what is the administration of the cosmos, and what place therein the rational animal has; and consider also who you are, and what is the nature of your good and evil [...]."

1.12.1: "Concerning gods there are some who say that the divine does not so much as exist; and others, that it exists, indeed but is inactive and indifferent, and takes forethought for nothing; and a third set, that it exists and takes forethought, though only for great and heavenly things and in no case for terrestrial things; and a fourth set, that it also takes forethought for things terrestrial and the affairs of men, but only in a general way, and not for the individual in particular; and a fifth set, to which Odysseus and Socrates belong, who says 'Nor even when I move am I concealed from you.' We must, therefore, first of all enquire about each of these statements, to see whether it is sound or not sound. For if gods do not exist, how can it be an end to follow the gods? And if they exist, indeed, but care for nothing, how even thus will that conclusion be sound? But if, indeed, they both exist and exercise care, yet there is no communication from them to men, - yes, and, by Zeus, to me personally, - how even in this case can our conclusion still be sound? The good and excellent man must, therefore, inquire into all these things, before he subordinates his own will to him who administers the universe, precisely as good citizens submit to the law of the state."

1.20.14ff.: "[...] you will find out that you are far from feeling as you ought about things good and things evil. 'Yes, but this requires much preparation, and much hard work, and learning many things.' Well, what then? Do you expect it to be possible to acquire the greatest art with a slight effort? And yet the chief doctrine of the philosophers is extremely brief. If you would know, read what Zeno has to say and you will see. For what is there lengthy in his statement: 'To follow the gods is man's end, and the essence of good is the proper use of external impressions?' Ask, 'What, then, is god, and what is an external impression? And what is nature in the individual and nature in the universe?' You already have a lengthy statement."

1.26.3: "For if we wish in every matter and circumstance to observe what is in accordance with nature, it is manifest that in everything we should make it our aim neither to avoid that which nature demands, nor to accept that which is in conflict with nature. The philosophers, therefore, exercise us first in the theory where there is less difficulty, and then after that lead us to the more difficult matters; for in theory there is nothing which holds us back from following what we are taught, but in the affairs of life there are many things which draw us away."

1.29.60: "[...] men who are philosophers [...] contemplate the works of nature [...]."
2.2.14: "Where is the nature of good and evil to be found? Where truth also is. Where truth and where nature are, there is caution; where truth is, there is confidence, where nature is."
2.11.6: "The reason [that we talk about good and bad, fortune and misfortune] is that we come into the world with a certain amount of instruction upon this matter already given us, as it were, by nature, and that starting with this we have added thereto our opinion."
2.11.18: "[...] thenceforward, starting with certain principles that are known and clearly discriminated, we may use in the judgement of specific cases an organically articulated system of preconceived ideas."
2.14.10ff.: "May it not be, then, that in our case also it is not sufficient to wish to become noble and good, but that we are under the necessity of learning something first? We seek, then, what this is. Now the philosophers say that the first thing we must learn is this: That there is a god, and that he provides for the universe, and that it is impossible for a man to conceal from him, not merely his actions, but even his purposes and his thoughts. Next we must learn what the gods are like; for whatever their character is discovered to be, the man who is going to please and obey them must endeavour as best he can to resemble them. If the deity is faithful, he also must be faithful; if free, he also must be free; if beneficent, he also must be beneficent; if high-minded, he also must be high-minded, and so forth; therefore, in everything he says and does, he must act as an imitator of god. Where, then, ought I to start? – If you enter upon this task, I will say that in the first place you ought to understand the meaning of terms."
3.13.8: "[...] so ought we also to be able to converse with ourselves, not to be in need of others, not to be at a loss for some way to spend our time; we ought to devote ourselves to the study of the divine governance, and of our own relation to all other things [...]."
3.21.12ff.: " 'But so-and-so lectures; why shouldn't I too?' Slave, these things are not done recklessly, nor at random, but one ought to be of a certain age, and lead a certain life, and have god as his guide [...] a man ought to come also with a sacrifice, and with prayers, and after a preliminary purification, and with his mind predisposed to the idea that he will be approaching holy rites, and holy rites of great antiquity. Only thus do the mysteries become helpful, only thus do we arrive at the impression that all these things were established by men of old time for the purpose of education and for the amendment of our life. But you are publishing the mysteries abroad and vulgarizing them, out of time, out of place, without sacrifices, without purification; you do not have the dress which the hierophant ought to wear, you do not have the proper head of hair, nor head-band, nor voice, nor age; you have not kept yourself purse as he has, but you have picked up only the words which he utters, and recite them."
3.24.94f.: "You came into being, not when *you* wanted, but when the universe had need of you. For this reason the good and excellent man, bearing in mind who he is, and whence he has come, and by whom he was created, centres his attention on this and this only, how he may fill his place in an orderly fashion, and with due obedience to god."

3.26.29f.: “I obey, I follow, lauding my commander, and singing hymns of praise about his deeds. For I came into the world when it so pleased him, and I leave it again at his pleasure, and while I live this was my function - to sing hymns of praise unto god, to myself and to others, be it to one or to many.”
4.1.104: “And as what did [god] bring you into the world? [...] Was it not as one destined to live upon earth with a little portion of paltry flesh, and for a little while to be a spectator of his governance, and to join him in his pageant and holiday?”
4.8.12: [Zeno claims that a philosopher’s principles are] “to understand the elements of reason, what the nature of each one is, and how they are fitted one to another, and all the consequences of these facts.”
F1: “What do I care, says Epictetus, whether all existing things are composed of atoms, or of indivisibles, or of fire and earth? Is it not enough to learn about the true nature of the good and the evil [...] What nature is, and how she administers the universe, and whether she really exists or not, these are questions about which there is no need to go on to bother ourselves.”
F16: “[...] it is not easy for a man to acquire a fixed judgement, unless he should day by day state and hear the same principles, and at the same time apply them to his life.”
E49: “But what is it I want? To learn nature and to follow her. I seek, therefore, someone to interpret her; and having heard that Chrysippus does so, I go to him. But I do not understand what he has written; I seek, therefore, the person who interprets Chrysippus.”

3. God’s nature

1.6.24: “Zeus is [...] present in his work.”
1.14.10: “is he who has created the sun, which is but a small portion of himself in comparison with the whole, and causes it to revolve, is *he* not able to perceive all things?”
2.8.2: “What, then, is the true nature of god? Flesh? Far from it! Land? Far from it! Fame? Far from it! It is intelligence, knowledge, right reason.”
3.24.9: “[...] this cosmos is but a single state, and the substance out of which it has been fashioned is single [...].”
F3: “All things obey and serve the cosmos [...] the cosmos wishes [...] the cosmos is mighty and superior to man and takes good counsel for us [...].”

4. Conflagration

2.1.18: “[...] so that the revolution of the universe may be accomplished.”
3.13.4ff.: “Why, if being alone is enough to make one forlorn, you will have to say that even Zeus himself is forlorn at the conflagration, and bewails himself: 'Wretched me! I have neither Hera, nor Athena, nor Apollo, nor, in a word, brother, or son, or grandson, or kinsman'. There are even those who say that this is what he does when left alone at the conflagration; [...] even as Zeus communes with himself, and is at peace with himself, and contemplates the character of his governance, and occupies himself with ideas appropriate to himself [...].”

3.24.9f.: [we must listen to the Stoics, who say]: “this cosmos is but a single state, and the substance out of which it has been fashioned is single, and it needs must be that there is a certain periodic change and a giving place of one thing to another, and that some things must be dissolved and others come into being, some things to remain in the same place and others to be moved.”

5. God and man

1.1.10: “But what says Zeus? ‘Epictetus, had it been possible I should have made both this paltry body and this small estate of yours free and unhampered. But as it is - let it not escape you - this body is not your own, but only clay cunningly compounded. Yet since I could not give you this, we have given you a certain portion of ourself, this faculty of choice and refusal, of desire and aversion, or, in a word, the faculty which makes use of external impressions.’ ”
1.3.1: “[...] we are primarily begotten of god, and [...] god is father of men as well as of gods [...].”
1.3.3: “[...] inasmuch as these two elements were commingled in our begetting, on the one hand the body, which we have in common with the brutes, and, on the other, reason and intelligence, which we have in common with the gods, some of us incline toward the former relationship, which is unblessed and is mortal, and only a few toward that which is divine and blessed.”
1.6.40: [God is] “good king” and “true father”.
1.9.1: “[...] the kinship of god and men [...].”
1.9.4ff.: “Well, then, anyone who has attentively studied the administration of the universe and has learned that ‘the greatest and most authoritative and most comprehensive of all governments is this one, which is composed of men and god, and that from him have descended the seeds of being, not merely to my father or to my grandfather, but to all things that are begotten and that grow upon earth, and chiefly to rational beings, seeing that by nature it is theirs alone to have communion in the society of god, being intertwined with him through the reason,’ - why should not such a man call himself a citizen of the universe? Why should he not call himself a son of god? [...] to have god as our maker, and father, and guardian [...].”
1.13.3f.: “Slave, will you not bear with your own brother, who has Zeus as his progenitor and is, as it were, a son born of the same seed as yourself and of the same sowing from above [...] they are kinsmen, [...] brothers by nature, [...] the offspring of Zeus.”
1.14.5ff: “[...] but are the plants and our own bodies so closely bound up with the universe, and do they so intimately share its affections, and is not the same much more true of our own souls? But if our souls are so bound up with god and joined together with him, as being parts and portions of his being, does not god perceive their every motion as being a motion of that which is his own and of one body with himself?” [...] “is god not able to oversee all things and to be present with all and to have a certain communication from them all?”
1.14.12ff.: “Yet nonetheless [god] has stationed by each man's side as guardian his particular genius - and has committed the man to his care, - and that too a guardian who never sleeps

and is not to be beguiled. For to what other guardian, better and more careful, could he have committed each one of us? Wherefore, when you close your doors and make darkness within, remember never to say that you are alone, for you are not alone; nay, god is within, and your own genius is within."
1.17.27: "For if god had so constructed that part of his own being which he has taken from himself and bestowed upon us, that it could be subjected to hindrance or constraint either from himself or from some other, he were no longer god, nor would he be caring for us as he ought."
1.19.9: "Zeus has set me free. Or do you really think that he was likely to let his own son be made a slave?"
2.1.17f.: "The paltry body must be separated from the bit of spirit, either now or later, just as it existed apart from it before. [...] For if it be not separated now, it will be later. Why? So that the revolution of the cosmos may be accomplished; for it has need of the things that are now coming into being, and the things that shall be, and the things that have been accomplished."
2.6.26: "For what is a man? A part of a state; first of that state of which is made up of gods and men, and then of that which is said to be very close to the other, the state that is a small copy of the universal state."
2.8.10ff.: [About animals]: "Are not those creatures also works of god? They are, but they are not of primary importance, nor portions of divinity. But you are a being of primary importance; you are a fragment of god; you have within you a part of him. Why, then, are you ignorant of your own kinship? Why do you not know the source from which you have sprung? [...] You are bearing god about with you, you poor wretch, and know it not! Do you suppose I am speaking of some external god, made of silver or gold? It is within yourself that you bear him, and do not perceive that you are defiling him with impure thoughts and filthy actions. Yet in the presence of even an image of god you would not dare to do anything of these things you are now doing. But when god himself is present within you, seeing and hearing everything, are you not ashamed to be thinking and doing such things as these. O insensible of your own nature, and object of god's wrath! [...] The fellow does not know the god within him, this fellow does not know the companion with whom he is setting forth. Nay, can we allow him to say, 'O god, would that I had thee here?' Have you not god there, where you are?"
2.19.26f.: "show me the soul of a man who wishes to be of one mind with god, and never again to blame either god or man, [...] a man who has set his heart upon changing from a man into a god, and although he is still in this paltry body of death, does none the less have his purpose set upon fellowship with Zeus."
3.11.5: 'Zeus, the god of fathers [...] the god of kindred."
3.22.82: "[...] Zeus, who is father of us all."
3.24.3: "[...] as was fitting for him who watches over and protects us like a father [...]."
3.24.16: "[...] all men have ever and constantly the father, who cares for them."
4.1.153: "His true ancestors, indeed, the gods [...]."

4.4.48.: “Are not men everywhere equally distant from god? Do they not everywhere have the same view of what comes to pass?”
4.7.6f.: “[...] reason and demonstration teach a man that god has made all things in the universe, and the whole universe itself, to be free from hindrance, and to contain its end in itself, and the parts of it to serve the needs of the whole. Now all other animals have been excluded from the capacity to understand the governance of god, but the rational animal, man, possesses faculties that enable him to consider all these things, both that he is a part of them, and what kind of part of them he is, and that it is well for the parts to yield to the whole.”
4.7.15: [On what death is:] “the material of which you are constituted [is] restored to those elements from which it came.”
F26: “You are a little soul, carrying around a corpse.”

6. Theodicy

1.1.7ff.: "As was fitting, therefore, the gods have put under our control only the most excellent faculty of all and that which dominates the rest, namely, the power to make correct use of external impressions, but all the others they have not put under our control. Was it indeed because they would not? I for one think that had they been able they would have entrusted us with the others also; but they were quite unable to do that. For since we are upon earth and trammelled by an earthy body and by earthy associates, how was it possible that, in respect of them, we should not be hampered by external things? But what says Zeus? ‘Epictetus, had it been possible I should have made both this paltry body and this small estate of yours free and unhampered. But as it is - let it not escape thee - this body is not your own, but only clay cunningly compounded.’ ”
1.4.2: “For if [someone] avoids anything that is not a matter of free choice, he knows that some time he will encounter something in spite of his aversion to it, and will come to grief.”
1.6.28f.: “Come, have you not received faculties that enable you to bear whatever happens? Have you not received magnanimity? Have you not received courage? Have you not received endurance? [...] Shall I fail to use my faculty to that end for which I received it, but grieve and lament over events that occur?”
1.12.16: “And [god] has ordained that there be summer and winter, and abundance and dearth, and virtue and vice, and all such opposites, for the harmony of the whole [...].”
1.12.25f.: “And will you be angry and peevish at the ordinances of Zeus, which he defined and ordained together with the Fates who spun in his presence the thread of your begetting? Do you no know how small a part you are compared with the whole? That is, as to the body; for as to the reason you are not inferior to the gods, nor less than they; for the greatness of the reason is not determined by length nor by height, but by the decisions of its will.”
1.24.1f.: “It is difficulties that show what men are. Consequently, when a difficulty befalls, remember that god, like a physical trainer, has matched you with a rugged young man. What for? some one says, So that you may become an Olympic victor; but that cannot be done without sweat.”

1.28.26ff.: “Then when women are driven off into captivity, and children are enslaved, and when the men themselves are slaughtered, are not all these things evils? - Where do you get the justification for adding this opinion? Let me know also. - No, on the contrary, do *you* let *me* know where you get the justification for saying that they are not evils? - Let us turn to our standards, produce your preconceptions.”
1.29.47.: “God says: ‘Do I injure any man? Have I put each man's advantage under the control of any but himself?’ ”
2.5.27: “For it is impossible in such a body as ours, in this universe that envelops us, among these fellow-creatures of ours, that such things should not happen, some to one man and some to another.”
3.10.7: “What, then, ought a man to say to himself at each hardship that befalls him? ‘It was for *this* that I kept training, it was to meet *this* that I used to practice.’ ”
3.11.1f.: “There are certain punishments, assigned as it were by law, for those who are disobedient to the divine dispensation. ‘Whoever shall regard as good anything but the things that fall within the scope of his moral purpose, let him envy, yearn, flatter, feel disturbed; whoever shall regard anything else as evil, let him sorrow, grieve, lament, be unhappy.’ ”
3.15.14: “When Galba was assassinated, someone said to Rufus, ‘Is the universe governed *now* by providence?’ But he replied: ‘Did I ever, even in passing, take the case of Galba as the basis for an argument that the universe is governed by providence?’ ”
3.17.1: “Whenever you find fault with providence, only consider and you will recognize that what happens is in accordance with reason.”
3.20.12ff.: “Nay, but bring whatever you will and *I* will turn it into a good. Bring disease, bring death, bring poverty, reviling, peril of life at court [...] ‘What will you make of death?’ Why, what else but make it your glory, or an opportunity for you to show in deed thereby what sort of person a man is who follows the will of nature. ‘What will you make of disease?’ I will show its character, I will shine in it, I will be firm, I will be serene [...].”
3.22.56: “And is he not persuaded that whatever of these hardships he suffers, it is Zeus that is exercising him?”
3.24.19: “In all truth the universe is badly managed, if Zeus does not take care of his own citizens, that they be like him, that is, happy.”
3.24.113: “[God] exhibits me in poverty, without office, in sickness; sends me away to Gyara, brings me into prison. Not because he hates me - perish the thought! And who hates the best of his servants? Nor because he neglects me, for he does not neglect any of even the least of his creatures; but because he is training me, and making use of me as a witness to the rest of men.”
3.26.28: “Does god so neglect his own creatures, his servants, his witnesses, whom alone he uses as examples to the uninstructed, to prove that he both is, and governs the universe well, and does not neglect the affairs of men, and that no evil befalls a good man either in life or in death?”
4.4.30ff: “Now god says to you, ‘Come at length to the contest, show us what you have learned, how you have trained yourself. How long will you exercise alone? Now the time has come for

you to discover whether you are one of the athletes who deserve victory, or belong to the number of those who travel about the world and are everywhere defeated.' [...] 'But I wanted to live a life of peace.' Wail, then, and groan, as you deserve to do. For what greater penalty can befall the man who is uninstructed and disobedient to the divine injunctions than to grieve, to sorrow, to envy, in a word to have no good fortune but only misfortune? Do you not wish to free yourself from all this?"
4.6.5: [It is ineffectual and tedious to] "attempt the very thing which Zeus himself has been unable to accomplish, that is, to convince all men of what things are good, and what evil."
4.11.3ff.: "So true it is that we consider cleanliness to be a special characteristic of man, deriving it in the first instance from the gods. For since they are by nature pure and undefiled, in so far as men have approached them by virtue of reason, just so far are they attached to purity and cleanliness. But since it is impossible for the nature of men to be altogether pure, seeing that it is composed of such material as it is, the reason which they have received from the gods endeavours to render this material clean as far as is possible."
F13: " 'But', says someone, 'I see the good and excellent perishing from hunger and cold.' And do you not see those who are not good and excellent perishing from luxury, and bombast, and vulgarity? [...] Whoever accuses Providence, therefore, because the wicked are not punished, and because they are strong and rich, is acting just as though, when the wicked had lost their eyes, he said they were not being punished because their fingernails were in good condition. Now, as for me, I assert that there is much more difference between virtue and property than there is between eyes and finger-nails."
E27: "Just as a mark is not set up in order to be missed, so neither does the nature of evil arise in the cosmos."

7. Knowledge of god

1.6: "Assuredly from the very structure of all made objects we are accustomed to prove that the work is certainly the product of some artificer, and has not been constructed at random."
1.16: [Epictetus gives a long list of examples of divine care for man]
2.10.3: "[...] you possess the faculty of understanding the divine administration of the world, and of reasoning upon the consequences thereof."
2.14.25ff.: " 'What then, is the universe', they ask, 'and who governs it? No one? Yet how can it be that, while it is impossible for a city or a household to remain even a very short time without someone to govern and care for it, nevertheless this great and beautiful structure should be kept in such orderly arrangement by sheer accident and chance? There must be, therefore, one who governs it. What kind of being is he, and how does he govern it? And what are we, who have been created by him, and for what purpose were we created? Do we, then, really have some contact and relation with him or none at all?' "
2.20.21: "Ah, what a misfortune! A man has received from nature measures and standards for discovering the truth, and then does not go on and take the pains to add to these and to work out additional principles to supply the deficiencies, but does exactly the opposite,

endeavouring to take away and destroy whatever faculty he does possess for discovering the truth."
3.21.12ff.: " 'But so-and-so lectures; why shouldn't I too?' Slave, these things are not done recklessly, nor at random, but one ought to be of a certain age, and lead a certain life, and have god as his guide [...] a man ought to come also with a sacrifice, and with prayers, and after a preliminary purification, and with his mind predisposed to the idea that he will be approaching holy rites, and holy rites of great antiquity. Only thus do the mysteries become helpful, only thus do we arrive at the impression that all these things were established by men of old time for the purpose of education and for the amendment of our life. But you are publishing the mysteries abroad and vulgarizing them, out of time, out of place, without sacrifices, without purification; you do not have the dress which the hierophant ought to wear, you do not have the proper head of hair, nor head-band, nor voice, nor age; you have not kept yourself purse as he has, but you have picked up only the words which he utters, and recite them."
4.1.51: "Seek and you will find. For nature has given you resources to find the truth."
4.1.102: "For where did I get these things when I came into the world? My father gave them to me. And who gave them to him? Who has made the sun, who the fruits, who the seasons, who the union and fellowship of men with one another? And so, when you have received everything, and your very self, from another, do you yet complain and blame the giver, if he take something away from you?"
4.7.6f.: "[...] reason and demonstration teach a man that god has made all things in the universe, and the whole universe itself, to be free from hindrance, and to contain its end in itself, and the parts of it to serve the needs of the whole. Now all other animals have been excluded from the capacity to understand the governance of god, but the rational animal, man, possesses faculties that enable him to consider all these things, both that he is a part of them, and what kind of part of them he is, and that it is well for the parts to yield to the whole."
F16: "[...] it is not easy for a man to acquire a fixed judgement, unless he should day by day state and hear the same principles, and at the same time apply them to his life."
E31: "In piety towards the gods, I would have you know, the chief element is this, to have right opinions about them – as existing and as administering the universe well and justly [...]."

8. Traditional religion and cult

1.16.20: "But as it is, I am a rational being, therefore I must be singing hymns of praise to god."
1.17.18f.: "No more have we need of him who divines through sacrifice, considered on his own account, but simply because we think that through his instrumentality we shall understand the future and the signs given by the gods; nor do we need the entrails on their own account, but only because through them the signs are given; nor do we admire the crow or the raven, but god, who gives his signs through them."

1.17.29: “This is the prophecy for the sake of which I go to this diviner - in other words, the philosopher, - not admiring *him* because of his interpretation, but rather the interpretation which he gives.”
1.19.25: “Now who ever sacrificed as a thank-offering for having had right desire, or for having exercised choice in accordance with nature? For we give thanks to the gods for that wherein we set the good.”
1.22.15f. [If I place the good in what is not under our control] “how shall I any longer be able to perform my duty towards Zeus? For if I sustain injury and am unfortunate, he pays no heed to me. And then we hear men saying, ‘What have I to do with him, if he is unable to help us?’ And again, ‘What have I to do with him, if he wills that I be in such a state as I am now?’ The next step is that I begin to hate him. Why, then, do we build temples to the gods, and make statues of them, as for evil spirits – for Zeus as for a god of fever? And how can he any longer be ‘Saviour,’ and ‘Rainbringer,’ and Fruit-giver?’ And, in truth, if we set the nature of the good somewhere in this sphere, all these things follow.”
2.7: [On divination] “[...] we ought to go to god as a guide, making use of him as we make use of our eyes; we do not call upon them to show us such-and-such things by preference, but we accept the impressions of precisely such things as they reveal us. But as it is, we tremble before the bird-augur, lay hold upon him, and appealing to him as if he were a god, we beg of him, saying: ‘Master, have mercy; grant that I come off safe.”
2.8.26: “For the Zeus at Olympia does not show a proud look, does he? No, but his gaze is steady [...].”
2.16.42f.: [We should] “be bold to look towards god and say: ‘Use me henceforward for whatever you will; I am of one mind with you; I am yours; I crave exemption from nothing that seems good in your sight; where you will, lead me; in what raiment you will, clothe me. Would you have me to hold office, or remain in private life; to remain here or go into exile; to be poor or be rich? I will defend all these your acts before men; I will show what the true nature of each thing is.”
2.18.13: “If you go as much as thirty days without a fit of anger, sacrifice to god.”
2.18.20: “go and offer an expiatory sacrifice, go and make offering as a suppliant to the sanctuaries of the gods who avert evil.”
2.18.29: “Remember god; call upon him to help you and stand by your side, just as voyagers, in a storm, call upon the Dioscuri.”
2.20.23f.: “ ‘The gods do not exist, and even if they do, they pay no attention to men, nor have we any fellowship with them, and hence this piety and sanctity which the multitude talk about is a lie told by impostors and sophists, or, I swear, by legislators to frighten and restrain evildoers.’ Well done, philosopher! You have conferred a service upon our citizens, you have recovered our young men who were already inclining to despise things divine.”
3.1.37: “Nay, but if a raven gives you a sign by his croaking, it is not the raven that gives the sign, but god through the raven.”
3.2.4: [Epictetus has duties] “as a religious man [...].”

3.7.26: "The duties of [...] reverence to god."

3.13.15: "There is no Hades, nor Acheron, nor Cocytus, nor Pyriphlegethon, but everything is filled with gods and divine powers."

3.24.18: "And do you take Homer and his tales as authority for everything? If Odysseus really wept, what else could he have been but miserable?"

3.24.96ff.: [Good man is obedient to god] "Is it your will that I should still remain? I will remain as a free man, as a noble man, as you did wish it; for you have made me free from hindrance in what was mine own. And now have you no further need of me? Be it well with you. I have been waiting here until now because of you and of none other, and now I obey you and depart.' How do you depart? 'Again, as you did wish it, as a free man, as your servant, as one who has perceived your commands and your prohibitions. But so long as I continue to live in your service, what manner of man would you have me be? An official or a private citizen, a senator or one of the common people, a soldier or a general, a teacher of the head of a household? Whatsoever station and post you assign me, I will die ten thousand times, as Socrates says, or ever I abandon it. And where would you have me be? In Rome, or in Athens, or in Thebes, or in Gyara. Only remember me there. If you send me to a place where men have no means of living in accordance with nature, I shall depart this life, not in disobedience to you, but as though you were sounding for me the recall. I do not abandon you – far be that from me! Yet if there be vouchsafed a means of living in accordance with nature, I will seek no other place than that in which I am, or other men than those who are now my associates."

4.4.34: "Nay, the word of Cleanthes is ready at hand, 'Lead thou me on, O Zeus, and destiny.' " [Also in 2.23.42.]

4.10.14ff.: "If death finds me occupied with these matters, it is enough for me if I can lift up my hands unto god, and say: 'The faculties which I have received from you to enable me to understand your governance and to follow it, these I have not neglected; I have not dishonoured you as far as in me lay. Behold how I have dealt with my senses, behold how I have dealt with my preconceptions. Have I ever blamed you? Have I been discontented with any of these things which happen, or wished it to have been otherwise? Have I at all violated my relationship with others? For that you did beget me I am grateful; for what you have given I am grateful also. The length of time for which I have had the use of your gifts is enough for me. Take them back again and assign them to what place you will, for they were all yours, and you gave them to me.' "

F17: "Yet in the world at large we ask the gods for things which they do not give us, and that too when there are many things which they have actually given us."

E31.5: "But it is always appropriate to make libations, and sacrifices, and to give of the firstfruits after the manner of our fathers, and to do all this with purity, and not in a slovenly or careless fashion, nor, indeed, in a niggardly way, nor yet beyond our means."

E32.3: "For if the diviner forewarns you that the omens of sacrifice have been unfavourable, it is clear that death is portended, or the injury of some member of your body, or exile [...]."

E53: “Upon every occasion we ought to have the following thoughts at our command: ‘Lead thou me on, O Zeus, and destiny / To that goal long ago to me assigned. / I’ll follow and not falter; if my will / Prove weak and craven, still I’ll follow on.”

Appendix 2: Marcus Aurelius

The translation used is that of the Loeb edition, with small changes. The passages have been categorized so as to correspond to the chapters on Seneca's views, i.e. chapters 2 through 8.

2. The status of theology and the human *telos*

1.7: "[Marcus has learned] to become aware of the fact that I needed amendment and training for my character; and not to be led aside into an argumentative sophistry; nor compose treatises on speculative subjects.
1.9: [Marcus tries to] "live in accordance with Nature."
1.17.8: "[Marcus thanks the gods] that, when I had set my heart on philosophy, I did not fall into the hands of a sophist, not sat down at the author's desk, or became a solver of syllogisms, nor busied myself with physical phenomena."
2.9: "This must always be borne in mind, what is the nature of the whole universe, and what mine, and how this stands in relation to that, being too what sort of a part of what sort of a whole; and that no one can prevent you from doing and saying always what is in keeping with the nature of which you are a part."
2.16: "The goal for rational beings is to submit themselves to the reason and law of that archetypal city and polity – the universe."
3.1: "[Old age makes it uncertain] whether the mind will remain equally fitted in the future for the understanding of facts and for the contemplation which strains after the knowledge of things divine and human."
3.2: "And so, if a man has sensibility and a deeper insight into the workings of the universe, scarcely anything, though it exist only as a secondary consequence of something else, but will seem to him to form in its own peculiar way a pleasing adjunct to the whole."
3.9: "With that it rests wholly that your ruling reason should never admit any opinion out of harmony with nature, and with the constitution of a rational creature. This ensures due deliberation and fellowship with mankind and fealty to the gods."
3.11: "For nothing is so conducive to greatness of mind as the ability to examine systematically and honestly everything that meets us in life, and to regard these things always in such a way as to form a conception of the kind of universe they belong to."
3.13: "Just as physicians always keep their lancets and instruments ready to their hands for emergency operations, so also do you keep your axioms ready for the diagnosis of things human and divine, and for the performing of every act, even the pettiest, with the fullest consciousness of the mutual ties between these two. For you will never carry out well any human duty unless you correlate it to the divine, nor the reverse."
4.3: "Let your axioms be short and elemental, such as when set before you will at once rid you of all trouble, and send you away with no discontent at those things to which you are returning."

5.3: “Do not you turn your eyes aside, but keep to the straight path, following your own and the universal nature; and the path of these two is one.”
5.9: “What is more delightful than wisdom herself, when you think how sure and smooth in all its workings is the faculty of understanding and knowledge?”
5.16: “A thing is drawn towards that for the sake of which it has been made, and its end lies in that towards which it is drawn and, where its end lies, there lie also its interest and good. The good then, for a rational creature is fellowship with others.”
5.32: “What soul, then, has skill and knowledge? That which knows beginning and end, and the reason that informs all substance, and governs the whole from ordered cycle to cycle through all eternity.”
7.67: “[...] nor because you have been balked in the hope of becoming skilled in dialectics and physics, need you despair of being free and modest and unselfish and obedient to god.”
8.1: “Where then is [the true life] to be found? In doing that which is the quest of man’s nature. How then shall a man do this? By having axioms as the source of his impulses and actions. What axioms? On the nature of good and evil [...].
8.11: “What of itself is the thing in question as individually constituted? What is the substance and material of it? What the causal part? What does it do in the universe?”
8.13: “Persistently and, if possible, in every case test your impressions by the rules of physics, ethics, logic.”
8.26: [Man must] “take a comprehensive view of nature of the universe and all that is done at her bidding.”
8.52: “He that does not know what the universe is knows not where he is. He that does not know the end of its being knows not who he is or what the universe is.”
10.9: [The vices] will day by day obliterate all those holy principles of you, which, as the student of nature, you conceive and accept. [...] [We must find delight in] the knowledge of each separate thing, what it is in its essence, what place it fills in the universe.”
10.11: “Make your own a scientific system of enquiry into the mutual change of all things, and pay diligent heed to this branch of study and exercise yourself in it. For nothing is so conducive to greatness of mind.”
10.16: “Put an end once and for all to this discussion of what a good man should be, and be one.”
10.34: “Even an obvious and quite brief aphorism can serve to warn him that is bitten with the true doctrines against giving way to grief and fear.”
11.1: [The rational soul] “goes about the whole cosmos and the void surrounding it and traces its plan and stretches forth into the infinity of time and comprehends the cyclical regeneration of all things and takes stock of it, and discerns that our children will see nothing fresh, just as our fathers too never saw anything more than we.”
12.29: “Salvation in life depends on our seeing everything in its entirety and its reality, in its matter and its cause: on our doing what is just and speaking what is true with all our soul.”

3. God's nature

4.40: "Cease not to think of the universe as one living being, possessed of a single substance and single soul; and how all things trace back to its single sentience; and how it does all things by a single impulse; and how all existing things are joint causes of all things that come into existence; and how intertwined in the fabric is the thread and how closely woven the web."

6.1: "The universal substance is docile and ductile; and the reason that controls it has no motive in itself to do wrong. [...] all things come into being and fulfil their purpose as it directs."

6.5: "The controlling reason knows its own bent and its work and the matter it works in."

6.40: "In the things which owe their organic unity to nature, the power that made is within them and abides there."

6.42: [God is] "he that controls the whole."

7.9: "For there is both one universe, made up of all things, and one god immanent in all things, and one substance, and one law, one reason common to all to all intelligent creatures, and one truth."

7.23: "The nature of the whole out of the substance of the whole, as out of wax, moulds at one time a horse, and breaking up the mould kneads the material up again into a tree, then into a man, and then into something else."

7.75: "The nature of the whole felt impelled to the creation of the universe."

7.9: There is [...] one god immanent in all things."

8.54: "[...] think also in unison with the all-embracing intelligence. For that intelligent faculty is everywhere diffused [...].

9.37: "What amazes you? The cause? Look fairly at it. What then, the material? Look fairly at that. Apart from these two, there is nothing."

12.10: "See things as they really are, analyzing them into matter, cause, objective."

4. Conflagration

2.14: "[...] all things from time everlasting have been cast in the same mould and repeated cycle after cycle."

5.32: "[...] the reason that [...] governs the whole from ordered cycle to cycle through all eternity."

7.19: "How many a Chrysippus, how many a Socrates, how many an Epictetus time has already devoured!"

9.28: "The same, upwards, downwards, from cycle to cycle are the revolutions of the universe."

10.1: "[...] that perfect being that is good and just and beautiful, the begetter and upholder of all things, that embraces and gathers them in, when they are dissolved, to generate therefrom other like things [...]."

10.7.1: "The parts of the whole – all that nature has comprised in the universe – must inevitably perish, taking 'perish' to mean 'be changed'."

10.7.2: "[...] the reason of the universe, whether cycle by cycle it be consumed with fire or renew itself by everlasting permutations."
11.1: [The rational soul] "comprehends the cyclical regeneration of all things."

5. God and man

2.1: "[Marcus is akin to other men] as partaker of intelligence and a morsel of the divine."
2.2: "This that I am, whatever it be, is mere flesh and a little breath and the ruling reason."
2.4: "Yet now, if never before, should you realize of what universe you are a part, and as an emanation from what controller of that universe you subsist."
2.13: "[Every man must] associate himself with the divine demon in his bosom, and [...] serve it truly."
2.17: "Philosophy [...] consists in keeping the divine demon within pure and unwronged [...] can help us, by letting us keep our "inner demon" pure.
3.3: [On death:] "you have touched land; go ashore; if indeed for another life, there is nothing even there void of gods; but if to a state of non-sensation, you will cease being at the mercy pleasure and pain [...]."
3.3: "[The soul is] intelligence and a divine demon, the [body] dust and putrescence."
3.4.3: [A good man] "is in some sort a priest and minister of the gods, putting to use also that which, enthroned within him, keeps the man unstained by pleasures [...]."
3.5: " [...] the god that is in you [...]"
3.6: "[...] if there appears nothing better than the very demon enthroned within you [...]"
3.7: [Happy is the man who] "has chosen before all else his own intelligence and good demon."
3.12: [You will be happy if you] "keep that divine demon of yours in its virgin state, just as if even now you were called upon to restore it to the giver."
3.16: [A man must not] "sully the divine demon that is enthroned in his bosom."
4.14: "You have subsisted as part of the whole. You will vanish into that which begot you, or rather you will be taken again into its seminal reason by a process of change."
4.21: "If souls outlive their bodies, how does the air contain them from times beyond ken? [...] souls, when transferred into the air, after lasting for a certain time, suffer change and are diffused and become fire, being taken again into the seminal reason of the whole [...]."
4.29: [a man who grumbles about life] "cuts off his own soul from the soul of all rational things, which is but one."
4.41: "You are but a 'little soul bearing up a corpse', as Epictetus said."
5.10: "[...] it is in my power to do nothing contrary to the god and the demon within me."
5.24: "Keep in memory the universal substance, of which you are a tiny part [...]."
5.27: "And he does walk with the gods, who lets them see his soul invariably satisfied with its lot and carrying out the will of that demon, an offshoot of himself, which Zeus has given to every man as his captain and guide – and this is none other than each man's intelligence and reason."

5.33: "What then remains? To wait with a good grace for the end, whether it be extinction or translation."
5.34: "The soul of god and the souls of men and of every rational creature have these two characteristics in common: to suffer no let or hindrance from another, and to find their good in a condition and practice of justice, and to confine their propension to this."
6.24: "Death reduced to the same condition Alexander the Macedonian and his muleteer, for either they were taken back into the seminal reason of the universe or scattered alike into atoms."
7.32: "Of death: either dispersion if atoms, or, if a single whole, either extinction or a change of state."
7.47: "Watch the stars in their courses as one that runs about with them therein."
7.50: [Death:] "either there is a breaking up of the closely-linked atoms or, what is much the same, a scattering of the impassive elements"
8.25: "Bear then in mind that either this your composite self must be scattered abroad, or your vital breath be quenched, or be transferred and set elsewhere."
8.45: "Take me up and cast me where you will. For even there will I keep my demon gracious [...]."
8.58: "Dread of death is a dread of non-sensation or new sensation. But either you will feel no sensation, and so no sensation of any evil; or a different kind of sensation will be yours, and so the life of a different creature, but still a life."
9.9: "All that share in a common element have an affinity for their own kind. [...] So then all that shares in the universal intelligent nature has as strong an affinity towards what is akin, aye even a stronger. [...] But in things still higher a sort of unity in separation even exists, as in the stars. Thus the ascent to the higher form is able to effect a sympathetic connexion even among things which are separate."
10.6: "Whether there be atoms or a nature, let it be postulated first, that I am a part of the whole universe controlled by nature; secondly that I stand in some intimate connexion with other kindred parts."
10.7.2: "For either there is a scattering of the elements out of which I have been built up, or a transmutation of the solid into the earthy and of the spiritual into the reason of the universe, whether cycle by cycle it be consumed with fire or renew itself by everlasting permutations."
10.38: "Bear in mind that what pulls the strings is that hidden thing within us: *that* makes our speech, *that* our life, *that*, one may say, makes the man. Never in your mental picture of it include the vessel that overlies it nor these organs that are appendages thereof. They are like the workman's adze, only differing from it in being naturally attached to the body."
11.3: "What a soul is that which is ready to be released from the body at any requisite moment, and be quenched or dissipated or held together!"
11.20: "Your soul and all the fiery part that is blended with you, though by nature ascensive, yet in submission to the system of the universe are held fast here in your compound personality."

12.2: "For only with the intellectual part of himself is [god] in touch with those emanations only which have welled forth and been drawn off from himself into them."
12.3: "You are formed of three things in combination – body, vital breath, intelligence."
12.26: "[...] each man's intelligence is god and has emanated from him."

6. Theodicy

2.3: "Full of providence are the works of the gods, nor are fortune's works independent of nature or the woven texture and interlacement of all that is under the control of providence. Thence all things are derived; but necessity too plays its part and the welfare of the whole universe of which thou art a portion. But good for every part of nature is that which the nature of the whole brings about, and which goes to preserve it."
2.11: "[The gods] have put it wholly in man's power not to fall into evils that are truly such."
5.8: "For, in fine, there is one harmony of all things, and just as from all bodies the universe is made up into such a body as it is, so from all causes is destiny made up into such a cause. [...] Let us then accept fate, as we accept the prescriptions of Asclepius. And in fact in these, too, there are many 'bitter pills', but we welcome them in hope of health. Take much the same view of the accomplishment and consummation of what nature approves as of your health, and so welcome whatever happens, should it even be somewhat distasteful, because it contributes to the health of the universe and the well-faring and well-doing of Zeus himself. For he had not brought this on a man, unless it had brought welfare to the whole. [...] even what befalls each individual is the cause of the well-faring, of the consummation and by heaven of the very permanence of that which controls the universe."
5.22: "That which is not hurtful to the community cannot hurt the individual."
6.36: "All things come from that one source, from that ruling reason of the universe, either under a primary impulse from it or by way of consequence. And therefore the gape of the lion's jaws and poison and all noxious things, such as thorns and mire, are but after-results of the grand and beautiful. Look not then on these as alien to that which you reverence, but turn your thoughts to the one source of all things."
6.43: "Does the sun take upon himself to discharge the functions of the rain? Or Asclepius of the Fruit-bearer? And what of each particular star? Do they not differ in glory yet cooperate to one end?"
6.44: "But if the gods have taken no counsel for me individually, yet they have in any case done so for the interests of the universe, and I am bound to welcome and make the best of those things also that befall as a necessary corollary to those interests."
7.14: "But I, if I do not consider what has befallen me to be an evil, am still unhurt."
8.35: "[...] this nature moulds to its purpose whatever interference or opposition it meets, and gives it a place in the destined order of things, and makes it a part of itself [...]."
8.46: "Nothing can befall a man that is not a contingency natural to man. [...] common nature brings you nothing you cannot bear."

8.50: " 'The gherkin is bitter.' Toss it away. 'There are briars in the path.' Turn aside. That suffices, and you need not add 'Why are such things found in the world?' For you would be a laughing stock to any student of nature; just as you would be laughed at by a carpenter and a cobbler if you took them to task because in their shops are seen sawdust and parings from what they are making. And yet *they* have space for the disposal of their fragments; while the universal nature has nothing outside herself; but the marvel of her craftsmanship is that, though she is limited to herself, she transmutes into her own substance all that within her seems to be perishing and decrepit and useless, and again from these very things produces other new ones; whereby she shows that she neither wants any substance outside herself nor needs a corner where she may cast her decaying matter. Her own space, her own material, her own proper craftsmanship is all that she requires."

8.55: "Taken generically, wickedness does no harm to the universe, and the particular wickedness does no harm to others. It is harmful to the one individual alone, and he has been given the option of being quit of it the first moment he pleases."

9.1.3: "Moreover he that dreads pain will some day be in dread of something that must be in the world."

9.4: "The unjust man is unjust to himself, for he makes himself bad."

9.13: "Why, what evil can happen to you if you yourself now do what is congenial to your nature, and welcome what the universal nature now deems well-timed, you who are a man intensely eager that what is for the common interest should by one means or another be brought about."

9.16: "Not in being acted upon but in activity lies the evil and the good of the rational and civic creature, just as his virtue too and his vice lie in activity and not in being acted upon."

9.35: "Loss and change, they are but one. Therein does the universal nature take pleasure, through whom all things are done now as they have been in like fashion from time to time everlasting; and to eternity shall other like things be. Why then do you say that all things have been evil and will remain evil in the end, and that no help has after all been found in gods [...]?"

9.38: "If he did wrong, with him lies the evil."

9.42: "[...] put this question at once to yourself: 'can it be than that shameless men should not exist in the world?' It cannot be. Then ask not for what cannot be. For this man in question also is one of the shameless ones that must needs exist in the world."

10.6: "[...] I shall not be displeased with anything allotted me from the whole. For what is advantageous to the whole can in no wise be injurious to the part."

10.20: "What the universal nature brings to every thing is for the benefit of that thing, and for its benefit when she brings it."

10.33.4: "[...] remember that nothing that harms not the city can harm him whom nature has made a citizen."

12.5: "How can the gods, after disposing all things well and with good will towards men, ever have overlooked this one thing, that some of mankind, and they especially good men, who have as it were the closest commerce with the divine, and by devout conduct and acts of

worship have been in the most intimate fellowship with it, should when once dead have no second existence but be wholly extinguished? But if indeed this be haply so, doubt not that they would have ordained it otherwise, had it needed to be otherwise. For had it been just, it would also have been feasible, and had it been in conformity with nature, nature would have brought it about. Therefore from its not being so, if indeed it is not so, be assured that it ought not to have been so."
12.12: "Find no fault with gods for what is the course of nature, for they do no wrong voluntarily or involuntarily [...]."
12.26: "In taking umbrage at anything, you forget this, that everything happens in accordance with the universal nature; and this, that the wrong-doing is another's."

7. Knowledge of god

2.11: "But if indeed there are no gods, or if they do not concern themselves with the affairs of men, what boots it for me to live in a universe empty of gods or empty of providence? Nay, but there *are* gods, and they *do* concern themselves with human things."
4.27: "Either there is a well-arranged order of things, or a maze, indeed, but not without a plan."
5.10: "Things are in a sense so wrapped up in mystery that not a few philosophers, and they no ordinary ones, have concluded that they are wholly beyond our comprehension: nay, even the Stoics themselves find them hard to comprehend. Indeed every assent we give to the impressions of our senses is liable to error, for where is the man who never errs?"
6.10: "Either a medley and a tangled web and a dispersion abroad, or a unity and a plan and a providence."
6.44: "If the gods have taken counsel about me and the things that befall me, doubtless they have taken good counsel. For it is not easy even to imagine a god without wisdom. And what motive could they have impelling them to do me evil?"
7.50: "[...] either there is a breaking up of the closely-linked atoms or, what is much the same, a scattering of the impassive elements."
9.39: "Either there is one intelligent source, from which as in one body all other things proceed [...] or there are atoms, and nothing but a medley and a dispersion."
10.26: "Muse then on these things that are done in such secrecy, and detect the efficient force, just as we detect the descensive and the ascensive none the less clearly that it is not with our eyes."
12.14: "There must be either a predestined necessity and inviolable plan, or a gracious providence, or a chaos without design or director."
12.28: "If any ask, 'Where have you seen the gods or how have you satisfied yourself of their existence that you are so devout a worshipper?' I answer: in the first place, they are even visible to the eyes. In the next, I have not seen my soul either, yet I honour it. So then from the continual proofs of their power I am assured that gods also exist and I reverence them."

8. Traditional religion and cult

1.16.3: [Marcus is grateful for his father's] "freedom from superstition with respect to the gods [...]."
3.4: "For the fate which is allotted to each man is swept along with him in the universe as well as sweeps along with it."
3.4: [The good man] "is in some sort a priest and minister of the gods."
9.1-3: "Injustice is impiety. [...] And the liar too acts impiously with respect to the same goddess. [...] Again he acts impiously who seeks after pleasure as a good thing and eschews pain as evil."
3.26: "Everything that befalls was from the beginning destined and spun for you as your share out of the whole."
5.7: "A prayer of the Athenians: 'Rain, rain, o dear Zeus, upon the corn-land of the Athenians and their meads.' Either pray not at all, or in this simple and frank fashion."
5.33: "Reverence the gods and praise them, do good unto men."
6.30: "Revere the gods, save mankind."
9.40: "Either the gods have no power or they have power. If they have no power, why pray to them? But if they have power, why not rather pray that they should give you freedom from fear of any of any of these things and from lust for any of these things and from grief at any of these things rather than that they should grant this or refuse that. For obviously if they can assist men at all, they can assist them in this. But perhaps you will say: 'The gods have put this in my power.' Then is it not better to use what is in your power like a free man than to concern yourself with what is not in your power like a slave and an abject? And who told you that the gods do not cooperate with us even in the things that are in our power? Begin at any rate with prayers for such things and you will see. One prays: 'How may I lie with that woman!' You: 'How may I not lust to lie with her!' Another: 'How may I may be quit of that man!' You: 'How may I not wish to be quit of him!' Another: 'How may I not lose my little child!' You: 'How may I not dread to lose him!' In a word, give your prayers this turn, and see what comes of it."
10.5: "Whatever befalls you was set in train for you from everlasting, and the interplication of causes was from eternity weaving into one fabric your existence and the coincidence of this event."

Bibliography

Primary sources

Basore, J.W. (1928), *Seneca: Moral Essays*, vol. I-III, Loeb Classical Library, London: Heinemann

Brok, M.F.A. (1995), *L. Annaeus Seneca: Naturwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft

Cooper, J.M., (1997), *Plato: Complete Works*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company

Corcoran, Th.H. (1971), *Seneca: Naturales Quaestiones*, vol. I-II, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press

Edelstein, L./Kidd, I.G. (1989), *Posidonius, Vol. I: The Fragments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Gummere, R. (1962-1970), *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, vol. I-III,

Haines, C.R. (1930), *Marcus Aurelius*, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press

Hine, H. (1984), *An edition with commentary of Seneca Natural questions*, book two, New York: Ayer

Hine (1996), L. Annaei Senecae Naturalium quaestionum libros, Stuttgart-Leipzig: Teubner

Oldfather, W.A. (1925), *Epictetus: The Discourses as Reported by Arrian*, vol I-II, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press

Reynolds, L.D. (1965), *L. Annaei Senecae Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Vottero, D. (1998), *Lucio Anneo Seneca: I Frammenti*, Bologna: Pàtron

Secondary sources

Algra, K.A. (2000), “The Treatise of Cleomedes and its Critique of Epicurean Cosmology”, in Erler, M. (ed.), *Epikureismus in der späten Republik und der Kaiserzeit*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, p. 164-89

Algra, K.A. (2001), “Comments or Commentary? Zeno of Citium and Hesiod’s *Theogonia*”, *Mnemosyne* 54, p. 562-81

Algra, K. (2003a), “Stoic Theology”, in: Inwood, B. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 153-78

Algra, K.A. (2003b), “Book Notes: Hellenistic Philosophy and Some Science”, *Phronesis* 48, p. 71-88

Algra, K.A. (2004), “Eternity and the Concept of God in Early Stoicism”, in Riel, G. van/Macé, C. (eds.), *Platonic Ideas and Concept Formation in Ancient and Medieval Thought*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, p. 173-90

Algra, K.A. (2007), *Conceptions and Images: Hellenistic Philosophical Theology and Traditional Religion*, Mededelingen van de Afdeling Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 70 no.1, Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen

Algra, K.A. (2008), “Epictetus and Stoic Theology”, in: Scaltsas, Th./Mason, A.S. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Epictetus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 32-55

Algra, K.A. (2009a), “Stoic Philosopical Theology and Graeco-Roman Religion”, in: Salles, R. (ed.), *God and Cosmos in Stoicism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press p. 224-51

Algra, K.A. (2009b), “Stoics on souls and demons: Reconstructing Stoic demonology”, in: Frede, D./Reis, B. (eds.), *Body and Soul in Ancient Philosophy*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, p. 359-87

Algra, K.A. (2009c), “Cosmologie et Théologie”, in: Gourinat, J.-B./Barnes, J. (eds.), *Lire les Stoïciens*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 151-69

Annas (1993), *The Morality of Happiness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Annas, J. (2007), "Ethics in Stoic Philosophy", *Phronesis* 52, p. 58-87

Barnes, J. (1989), "Antiochus of Ascalon", in: Griffin, M./Barnes, J. (eds.), *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 51-96

Barnes, J. (1991), "The Hellenistic Platos", *Apeiron* 24, p. 118-23

Barnes, J. (1997), *Logic and the Imperial Stoa*, Leiden: Brill

Barnes, J. (2009), *Grammaire, rhétorique, épistémologie et dialectique*, in: Gourinat, J.-B./Barnes, J. (eds.), *Lire les Stoïciens*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 135-49

Bees, R. (2004), *Die Oikeiosislehre der Stoa. I. Rekonstruktion ihres Inhalts*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann GmbH

Bènatouïl, T. (2007), *Faire Usage: la Pratique du Stoïcisme*, Histoires des doctrines de l'antiquité classique 35, Paris: Vrin

Berno, F.R., (2003), *Lo specchio, il vizio e la virtù. Studio sulle* Naturales Quaestiones *di Seneca* (Testi e manuali per l'insegnamento universitario del latino 79), Bologna: Pàtron Editore

Betegh, G. (2003), "Cosmological Ethics in the *Timaeus* and Early Stoicism", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 24, p. 273-302

Betegh, G. (2006), "Greek Philosophy and Religion", in: Gill, M.L./Pellegrin, P. (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 625-39

Bickel, E. (1960), "Senecas Briefe 58 und 65. Das Antiochus-Posidonius-Problem", *Rheinisches Museum* 103, p. 1-20

Bobzien, S. (1998), *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Boeri, M.D. (2009), "Does Cosmic Nature Matter? Some Remarks on the Cosmological Aspects of Stoic Ethics", in: Salles, R. (ed.), *God and Cosmos in Stoicism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bonazzi, M. (2007), “Eudorus of Alexandria and Early Imperial Platonism”, in: Sorabji, R./Sharples, R.W. (eds.), *Greek and Roman Philosophy, 100 BC-200 AD,* BICS, Suppl. 94, London: Institute of Classical Studies, p. 365-77

Bonazzi, M. (2008), “Towards Transcendence: Philo and the Renewal of Platonism in the Early Imperial Age”, in: Alesse, F. (ed.), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy*, Studies in Philo of Alexandria 5, Leiden: Brill, p. 233-51

Bonhöffer, A. (1894), *Die Ethik des Stoikers Epictet*, Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke

Bovis, A. de (1948), *La Sagesse de Sénèque*, Paris: Aubier

Boyle, A.J. (2008), “Seneca and Renaissance Drama: Ideology and Meaning”, in: Fitch, J.G. (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Seneca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 386-418

Brenk, F.E. (2005), “Plutarch’s Middle-Platonic God: About to Enter (or Remake) the Academy”, in: Hirsch-Luipold, R. (ed.), *Gott und die Götter bei Plutarch: Götterbilder – Gottesbilder – Weltbilder*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, p. 27-50

Brennan, T. (2005), *The Stoic Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Brittain, Ch. (2001), *Philo of Larissa: Last of the Academic Sceptics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Broadie, S. (2001), “From Necessity to Fate: A Fallacy?”, *The Journal of Ethics* 5, p. 21-37

Burton, H.F. (1909), “Seneca’s Idea of God”, *The American Journal of Theology* 13, vol. 1, p. 350-69

Castagna, L. (2000) Vecchiaia e morte del mondo in Lucrezio, Seneca e san Cipriano, Aevum Antiquum 13, p. 239-63.]

Caduff, G.A. (1986), *Antike Sintflutsagen* (Hypomnemata 82), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Chaumartin, F.-R. (1993), “Sénèque et le platonisme (à propos des lettres 58 et 65), in: Dixsaut, M. (ed.), *Contre Platon*, vol. 1: *LePlatonisme dévoilé*, Paris:Vrin, p. 103-15

Chaumartin, F.-R. (1996), "La Nature dans les *Questions Naturelles* de Sénèque, in: Lévy, C. (ed.), *Le Concept de Nature à Rome: La Physique*

Codoñer, C. (1989), "La physique de Sénèque: ordonnance et structure des *Naturales Quaestiones*", *ANRW* 2.36.3, p. 1779-1822

Colish, M.L. (1985), *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. I. Stoicism in Classical Latin Literature*, Leiden: Brill

Conradie, I.M. (2010), *Seneca in his cultural and literary context: Selected moral letters on the body*, Utrecht (diss.)

Cooper, J. (1995), "Eudaimonism and the Appeal to Nature in the Morality of Happiness: Comments on Julia Annas' *The Morality of Happiness*", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (3), p. 587-99

Cooper, J. (1998), "Posidonius on Emotions", in: Engberg-Pedersen, T./Sihvola, J. (eds.), *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p. 71-111

Cooper, J. (2004), "Moral Theory and Moral Improvement: Seneca", in Cooper, J., *Knowledge, Nature and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 309-34. First published in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 19 (2003), p. 57-84

Degl' Innocenti Pierini, R. (1984), "Seneca emulo di Ovidio nella rappresentazione del diluvio universale", *Atene e Roma* 29, p. 143-61

Denyer, N. (1985), "The case against divination: an examination of Cicero's de Divinatione", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 211 (= new series no. 31), pp. 1-10

Dillon, J. (1977), *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, London: Duckworth

Dillon, J. (1988), ""Orthodoxy" and "Eclecticism": Middle Platonists and Neo-Pythagoreans", in: Dillon, J./Long, A., *The Question of Eclecticism: Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Dillon, J. (2002), "Plutarch and God: Theodicy and Cosmogony in the Thought of Plutarch", in: Frede, D./Laks, A. (eds.), *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath*, Leiden: Brill

Dillon, J. (2003), *The Heirs of Plato*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Dillon, J. (2008), "Philo and Hellenistic Platonism", in: Alesse, F. (ed.), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy*, Studies in Philo of Alexandria 5, Leiden: Brill, p. 223-32

Dobson, J.F. (1918), "The Posidonius Myth", *Classical Quarterly* 12, p. 179-95

Donaldson, J.W. (1875), *The theatre of the Greeks: a treatise on the history and exhibition of the Greek drama, with a supplementary treatise on the language, metres, and prosody of the Greek dramatists*, London

Donini, P. (1979), "L'eclettismo impossibile. Seneca e il platonismo medio.", in: Donini, P./Gianotti, G., *Modelli filosofici e letterari. Lucrezio, Orazio, Seneca*, p. 149-300

Donini, P. (1982), Le scuole, l'anima, l'impero: La filosofia antica da Antioco a Plotino, Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier

Dörrie, H./Balthes, M. (1996), *Der Platonismus in der Antike*, Band 4, Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog

Dragona-Monachou, M. (1973), "Providence and Fate in Stoicism and Prae-Neoplatonism: Calcidius as an authority on Cleanthes' theodicy (*SVF* 2, 933)", *Filosofia* 3, p. 262-300

Dragona-Monachou, M. (1976), *The Stoic Arguments for the Existence and the Providence of the Gods*, Athens

Eliot, T.S. (1927), "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation", in: *Selected Essays*, 3rd enlarged edition (1951), London: Faber and Faber Ltd.

Eliasson, E. (2008), *The Notion of* That Which Depends On Us *in Plotinus and Its Background*, Leiden: Brill

Elliott, A.G., (1985), "Ovid and the Critics: Seneca, Quintilian, and "Seriousness"", *Helios* 12, p. 9-20

Engberg-Pedersen, T. (1986), "Discovering the good: *oikeiôsis* and *kathêkonta* in Stoic ethics", in: Schofield, M./Striker, G. (eds.), *The norms of nature: studies in Hellenistic ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 145-83

Erler, M. (2002), "*Homoiosis Theoi* and Epicurean Self-Cultivation", in Frede, D./Laks, A. (eds.), *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath*, Leiden: Brill, p. 159-81

Festugière, A.J. (1955), *Epicurus and his gods* (transl. by C.W. Chilton of *Èpicure et ses dieux* (1946)), Oxford: Blackwell

Fillion-Lahille, J. (1984) *Le De ira de Seneque et la philosophie stoicienne des passions*, Paris: Klincksieck

Frede, M. (1999), 'Epilogue', in: Algra K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Frede, M. (1987), "The Original Notion of Cause", in: Frede, M., *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, p. 125-50

Frede, M. (1987b), "Numenius", *ANRW* 2.36.2, p. 1034-75

Frede, D. (2003), "Stoic Determinism", in: Inwood, B. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Frede, M. (2005), "La theologie stoïcienne", in: Romeyer-Dherbey, G./Gourinat, J.-B. (eds.), *Les Stoiciens*, Paris: Vrin

Fresie, H. (1989), "Die Bedeutung der Epikur-Zitate in den Schriften Senecas", *Gymnasium* 96, p. 532-56

Fuhrer, Th. (2000), "Seneca. Von der Diskrepanz zwischen Ideal und Wirklichkeit", in: Erler, M./Graeser, A. (eds.), *Die Philosophen des Altertums. Vom Hellenismus bis zur Spätantike. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt: uitgever, p. 91-108

Furley, D. (1999), "Cosmology", in: in: Algra, K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 412-51

Gauly, B.M. (2004), Senecas Naturales Quaestiones: Naturphilosophie für die römische Kaiserzeit (Zetemata 122), Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck

Gersh, S. (1986), *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition* (2 vol.) Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press

Gigon, O. (1991), "Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones*", in: Grimal, P. (ed.), *Sénèque et la prose latine* (Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique), Geneva: Fondation Hardt p. 313-39

Gill, Ch. (2003), "The School in the Imperial Period", Inwood, B. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 33-58

Glucker, J. (1978), *Antiochus and the Late Academy*, Göttingen

Görler, W. (1987), " 'Hauptursachen' bei Chrysipp und Cicero? Philologische Marginalien zu einem vieldiskutierten Gleichnis (De fato 41-44)", *RhM* 130, p. 254-74

Grant, R.M. (1952), *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought*, Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company

Graver, M. (2007), *Stoicism and Emotion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Gregory, A. (2000), *Plato's Philosophy of Science*, London: Duckworth

Griffin, M.T. (1972), "The Elder Seneca and Spain", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 62, p. 1-19

Griffin, M.T. (1976), *Seneca: a Philosopher in Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Griffin, M.T. (2008), "Imago Vitae Suae", in: Fitch, J.G. (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Seneca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 23-58

Grimal, P. (1989), "Sénèque et le stoïcisme romain", *ANRW* 2.36.3, p. 1962-92

Gross, N. (1989), *Senecas Naturales Quaestiones: Komposition, Naturphilosophische Aussagen und ihre Quellen*, Wiesbaden-Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag

Guida, A. (1981), "Aristotele e un presunto lapsus di Seneca", *Giornale Italiano di Filologia* 33, p. 69-81

Hachmann, E. (1995), *Die Führung des Lesers in Senecas Epistulae morales*, Münster: Aschendorff

Hachmann, E. (1996), "Die Spruchepiloge in Senecas Epistulae Morales", *Gymnasium* 103, p. 385-410

Hadot, I. (1969), *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung*, Berlin: De Gruyter

Hadot, P. (1968), *Porphyre et Victorinus*, *Vol. I*, Paris: Études Augustiennes

Hadot, P. (1995), *Philosophy as a way of life. Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Oxford: Blackwell

Hahm, D. (1977), *The Origins of Stoic Cosmology*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press

Hankinson, R.J. (1988), "Stoicism, science, and divination" in: Hankinson, R.J. (ed.), *Method, Medicine and Metaphysics*, Studies in the Philosophy of Ancient Science, *Apeiron* suppl. vol. 21, p. 123-60

Hankinson, R.J. (1998a), *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Greek Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hankinson, R.J. (1998b), *Galen: On Antecedent Causes. Edited with an introductin, translation and commentary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hankinson, R.J. (1999), "Explanation and Causation", in: Algra, K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 479-512

Haynes, R.P. (1962), "The Theory of Pleasure of the Old Stoa", *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 83, no. 4, p. 412-9

Heinemann, I. (1921-8), *Poseidonios; metaphysische Schriften*, Breslau: Marcus

Hijmans, B. (1972), "Two such opposed kings...", *Theta-Pi* 2, p. 40-59

Holler, E. (1934), *Seneca und die Seelenleitungslehre und Affektpsychologie der Mittelstoa*, Kallmünz: Michael Lassleben

Horst, P.W. van der/Mansfeld, J. (1974), *An Alexandrian Platonist against dualism*, Leiden: Brill

Hutchinson, G.O. (1993), *Latin Literature from Seneca to Juvenal. A critical study*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Ierodiakonou, K. (1993), "The Stoic Division of Philosophy", *Phronesis* 38, p. 57-74

Inwood, B. (1993), "Seneca and Psychological Dualism", in Brunschwig, J./Nussbaum, M. (eds.), *Passions & Perceptions: Studies in the Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind. Proceedings of the fifth Symposium Hellenisticum*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Also in Inwood (2005), p. 23-64

Inwood, B. (2002), "God and Human Knowledge in Seneca's *Natural Questions*", in Frede, D./Laks, A. (eds.), *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath*, Leiden: Brill, p. 119-57

Inwood, B. (2005), *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Inwood, B. (2007a), *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Inwood, B. (2007b), "Seneca, Plato and Platonism: the case of *Letter* 65", in: Bonazzi, M./Helmig, Ch. (eds.), *Platonic Stoicism – Stoic Platonism: The Dialogue between Platonism and Stoicism in Antiquity*, Leuven: Leuven University Press

Inwood, B. (2009), "Why Physics?", in: Salles, R. (ed.), *God and Cosmos in Stoicism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Kahn, Ch.H. (1997), “Greek Religion and Philosophy in the Sisyphus Fragment”, *Phronesis* 42, p. 247-62

Kahn, Ch.H. (2001), *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: a Brief History*, Indianapolis: Hackett

Kerferd, G.B. (1978), “The Origin of Evil in Stoic Thought”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 60, p. 482-94

Lapidge, M. (1973), “Ἀρχαί and στοιχεῖα: A Problem in Stoic Cosmology”, *Phronesis* 18, p. 240-78

Lapidge, M. (1978), “Stoic Cosmology”, in: Rist, J.M. (ed.), *The Stoics*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Lapidge, M. (1989), “Stoic Cosmology and Roman Literature, First to Third Century A.D.”, *ANRW* 2.36.3, p. 1379-1429

Larson, V.T. (1992), “Seneca and the Schools of Philosophy in Early Imperial Rome”, *Illinois Classical Studies* XVII.1, p. 49-56

Lee, Ch. (2002), *Oikeiosis: Stoische Ethik in naturphilosophischer Perspektive*, Freiburg: Alber

Lesher, J.J. (1999), “Early Interest in Knowledge”, in: Long, A.A. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 225-49

Levy, F. (1928), “Der Weltuntergang in Senecas naturales quaestiones”, *Philologus* 83, p. 459-66

Limburg, F.J.G. (2007), Aliquid ad Mores: The prefaces and epilogues of Seneca’s Naturales Quaestiones, Leiden

Long, A.A. (1968), “The Stoic Concept of Evil”, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 18, p. 329-43

Long, A.A. (1976), “Heraclitus and Stoicism”, in: *Philosophia* – Yearbook of the Research Center for Greek Philosophy at the Academy of Athens 5/6 (1975/6), p. 132-53

Long, A.A. (1982), *Soul and Body in Stoicism*, Phronesis 27, p. 34-57

Long, A.A. (1986), *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1974), London: Duckworth

Long, A.A. (1992), "Stoic Readings of Homer", in: Lamberton, R./Keaney, J.J. (eds.), *Homer's Ancient Readers. The Hermeneutics of Greek Epic's Earliest Exegetes*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 41-66

Long, A.A. (1996), "Stoic Eudaimonism", in: Long, A.A., *Stoic Studies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 179-201. First published in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1989), p. 77-101

Long, A.A. (1997), "Lucretius on Nature and the Epicurean Self", in: Algra, K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *Lucretius and his Intellectual Background*, Amsterdam: KNAW, p. 125-39

Long, A.A. (1999), "Stoic Psychology", in: Algra, K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 560-84

Long, A.A. (2002), *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Long, A.A. (2006), "The Stoics on World-Conflagration and Everlasting Recurrence", *From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 256-82. First published in Epp, R.H. (ed.) (1985), *Spindel Conference 1984: Recovering the Stoics*, The Southern Journal of Philosophy 23, Supplement, p. 13-37

Long, A.A. (2009), "Seneca on the Self: Why Now?", in: Bartsch, S./Wray, D. (eds.), *Seneca and the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 20-36. First published in Long, A.A. (2006), *From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 360-76

Long, A.A./Sedley, D.N. (1987), *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vol., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Mader, G. (1983), "Some Observations on the Senecan Götterdämmerung", *Acta Classica* 26, p. 61-71

Mansfeld, J. (1979), “Providence and Destruction of the Universe in Early Stoic Thought”, in: Vermaseren, M.J. (ed.), *Studies in Hellenistic Religions*. Brill: Leiden

Mansfeld, J. (1983), “Resurrection Added: The *interpretatio christiana* of a Stoic Doctrine”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 37, p. 218-233

Mansfeld, J. (1988), “Compatible Alternatives: Middle Platonist Theology and the Xenophanes Reception”, in: Broek, R. van den *et al.* (eds.), *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World*, Leiden: Brill, p. 92-117

Mansfeld, J. (1992), “A Theophrastean Excursus on god and nature and its aftermath in Hellenistic thought”, *Phronesis* 37, p. 314-35

Mansfeld, J. (1992b), *Heresiography in Context: Hippolytus' Elenchos as a Source for Greek Philosophy*, Leiden: Brill

Mansfeld, J. (1999), “Theology”, in: Algra, K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 452-78

Maurach (1981), Review of Donini (1979), *Gnomon* 53, p. 77-9

Mazzoli, G. (1989), “Le ‘Epistulae Morales ad Lucilius’ di Seneca. Valore letterario e filosofico”, *ANRW* 2.36.3, p. 1823-77

McDiarmid, J.B. (1940), “Theophrastus on the Eternity of the World”, *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 71, p. 239-47

McNeely, T. (2004), Proteus unmasked: sixteenth-century rhetoric and the art of Shakespeare, Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press

Miola, R.S. (1992), *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Motto, A.L. (1966), “Seneca on Trial: The Case of the Opulent Stoic”, *The Classical Journal* 61, p. 254-8

Natali, M. (1992), “Gli influssi del platonismo sul neostoicismo senecano”, *RFN* 84, p. 494-514

Natali, M. (1994), "Tra stoicismo e platonismo: concezione della filosofia e del fine ultimo dell'uomo in Seneca", *RFN* 86, p. 427-47

Norden, E. (1956[4]), *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft

Opsomer, J. (1998), *In Search of the Truth. Academic Tendencies in Middle Platonism*, Brussel: KAWLSK

Parroni, P. (2000), "Le *Naturales Quaestiones* fra scienza e morale", in: Parroni, P. (ed.), Seneca e il suo tempo. Atti del convegno internazionale di Roma – Cassino, 11-14 nov. 1998, Roma: p. 433-44

Pfeffer, F. (1976), *Studien zur Mantik in der Philosophie der Antike*, Meisenheim: Hain

Pohlenz M. (1970), *Die Stoa: Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung*, 4th ed. (1st ed. 1948), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Ramelli, I./Konstan, D., *Hierocles the Stoics:* Elements of Ethics, *Fragments, and Excerpts*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature

Rawson, E. (1985), *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic*, London: Duckworth

Renehan, R. (1964), "The Collectanea Alexandrina Selected Passages, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 68, p. 375-88

Richards, W.J. (1964), *Gebed by Seneca, die Stoïsyn: 'n Godsdiens-historiese studie met verwysing na aanrakingspunte in die Voorsocratici*, Groningen: V.R.B.

Rist, J.M. (1969), *Stoic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Roskam, G. (2005), *On the path to virtue : the Stoic doctrine of moral progress and its reception in (Middle-)Platonism*, Leuven: Leuven University Press

Runia, D. (1986), *Philo of Alexandria and the* Timaeus *of Plato*, Leiden: Brill

Runia, D. (1991), "Witness or Participant? Philo and the Neoplatonic Tradition", in: Vanderjagt, A./Pätzold, D. (eds.), *The Neoplatonic Tradition: Jewish, Christian and Islamic Themes*, Cologne: Dinter, p. 36-56

Runia, D. (2002), "The beginnings of the end: Philo of Alexandria and Hellenistic Theology", in: Frede, D./Laks, A. (eds.), *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath*, Leiden: Brill

Scarpat, G. (1970), *La Lettera 65 di Seneca*, 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1965), Brescia: Paideia

Schrijvers, P.H. (1990), "Douleur, où est ta victoire? A propos de la lettre 78 de Sénèque", *Mnemosyne* 43, p. 374-94

Sedley, D. (1989), "Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World", in: Griffin, M./Barnes, J. (eds.), *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Sedley (1999), "The Ideal of Godlikeness", in: Fine, G. (ed.), *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Sedley (1999b), "Hellenistic Physics and Metaphysics", in: Algra, K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 355-411

Sedley, D. (2002), "The Origins of Stoic God", in: Frede, D./Laks, A. (eds.), *Traditions of Theology: Studies in Hellenistic Theology, its Background and Aftermath*, Leiden: Brill

Sedley, D. (2005), "Stoic Metaphysics at Rome", in: Salles, R. (ed.), *Metaphysics, Soul and Ethics in Ancient Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Sedley (2007), *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Setaioli, A. (2000), "Seneca e l'oltretomba", in: Setaioli, A., *Facundus Seneca: Aspetti della lingua e dell'ideologia senecana*, Bologna: Pàtron, p. 275-323. First published in *Paideia* 52 (1997), 321-67

Setaioli, A. (2007), “Seneca and the Divine: Stoic Tradition and Personal Developments”, *International Journal of the Classic Tradition* 13, p. 333-68

Sevenster, J.N. (1961), *Paul and Seneca*, Leiden: Brill

Schofield, M. (1980), “Preconception, Argument, and God”, in: Schofield, M. *et al.* (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Schofield, M. (1983), “The Syllogisms of Zeno of Citium”, *Phronesis* 28, p. 31-58

Schofield, M. (1999), “Academic Epistemology”, in: Algra, K.A. *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 323-51

Sharples, R.W. (1994), “Plato, Plotinus, and Evil”, *BICS* 39, p. 171-77

Sharples, R.W. (1996), *Stoics, Epicureans and sceptics: an introduction to Hellenistic philosophy*, London: Routledge

Sharples, R.W. (1998), “Strato”, in: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 161-4

Sijl, C. van (2010), *Stoic Philosophy and the Exegesis of Myth*, Utrecht (diss.)

Stahl, G. (1960), *Aufbau, Darstellungsform und philosophischer Gehalt der Naturales Quaestiones des L.S. Seneca*, Kiel: Christian Albrechts Universität

Stahl, G. (1964), “Die ‘Naturales Questiones’ Senecas: Ein beitrag zum Spiritualisierungsprozess der römischen Stoa”, *Hermes* 92, p. 425-54

Steiner, H. (1914), *Theodizee bei Seneca*, Erlangen: Universitätsbuchdruckerei

Tarrant, H. (2007), “Antiochus: A New Beginning?”, in: Sorabji, R./Sharples, R.W. (eds.), *Greek and Roman Philosophy, 100 BC-200 AD,* BICS, Suppl. 94, London: Institute of Classical Studies, p. 317-32

Theiler, W. (1930), *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus*, (Reprint 1964), Berlin/Zürich: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung

Tieleman, T.L. (1996), *Galen and Chrysippus on the soul : argument and refutation in the "De placitis" books II-III*, Leiden: Brill

Tieleman, T.L. (2002), "Zeno and Psychological Monism: Some Observations on the Textual Evidence", in: Scaltsas, Th./Mason, A.S. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Zeno*, Larnaca, p. 185-219

Tieleman, T.L. (2003), *Chrysippus' On Affections. Reconstruction and Interpretation*, Leiden: Brill

Tieleman, T.L. (2007), "Onomastic Reference in Seneca", in: Bonazzi, M./Helmig, Ch. (eds.), *Platonic Stoicism – Stoic Platonism: The Dialogue between Platonism and Stoicism in Antiquity*, p. 133-48

Tieleman, T.L. (2007b), "Panaetius' Place in the History of Stoicism", in: Ioppolo, A.M./Sedley, D.N. (eds.), *Pyrrhonists, Patricians, Platonizers: Hellenistic Philosophy in the Period 155-86 B.C.* Proceedings of the Tenth Symposium Hellenisticum, Napoli: Bibliopolis

Todd, R. (1976), "The Four Causes: Aristotle's Exposition and the Ancients", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, p. 319-22

Todd, R. (1989), "The Stoics and their Cosmology in the first and second centuries A.D.", *ANRW* 2.36.3, p. 1365-78

Trapp, M. (2007), "Neopythagoreans", in: Sorabji, R./Sharples, R.W. (eds.), *Greek and Roman Philosophy, 100 BC-200 AD,* BICS, Suppl. 94, London: Institute of Classical Studies, p. 347-63

Trillitzsch, W. (1962), *Senecas Beweisführung*, Berlin

Verbeke, G., "Les Stoïciens et le progrès de l'histoire", *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 62, p. 5-38.

Volk, K. (2002), *The Poetics of Latin Didactic: Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, Manilius*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Volk, K. (2006), "Cosmic Disruption in Seneca's *Thyestes*: Two Ways of Looking at an Eclipse", in Volk, K./Williams, G. (eds.), *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry and Politics*, Leiden: Brill

Volk, K. (2009), *Manilius and his Intellectual Background*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Waiblinger, F.P. (1977), *Senecas Naturales Quaestiones: Griechische Wissenschaft und Römische Form*, München: C.H. Beck

Watling, E.F. (1966), *Seneca: Four Tragedies and Octavia*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books

White, N. (1985), "The Role of Physics in Stoic Ethics", in: Epp, R.H. (ed.), *Spindel Conference 1984: Recovering the Stoics* (*The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23, Suppl.), p. 57-74

Whittaker, J. (1973), "Neopythagoreanism and the Transcendent Absolute", *Symbolae Osloenses* 48, p. 77-86

Whittaker, J. (1975), "Seneca, *Ep*. 58, 17", *Symbolae Osloenses* 50, p. 143-8

Wicke-Reuter, U. (2000), *Göttliche Providenz und menschliche Verantwortung bei Ben Sira und in der frühen Stoa*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter

Wildberger J. (2006), Seneca und die Stoa: Der Platz des Menschen in der Welt, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter

Zambon, Marco (2006), "Middle Platonism", in: Gill, M.L./Pellegrin, P. (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 561-76

Zeller, E. (1909), *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung.* (used is a reprint from 1963), Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung

Abbreviations

Modern

EK	Edelstein, L./Kidd, I.G. (1972), *Posidonius*, *vol. 1: The Fragments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
LS	Long, A.A./Sedley, D.N. (1987), *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vol., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
SVF	Arnim, H. von (1903-5), *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, Leipzig

Seneca

EM	*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*
NQ	*Naturales Quaestiones*
Ben.	*De Beneficiis*
Prov.	*De Providentia*
Const.	*De Constantia Sapientis*
Ira	*De Ira*
Clem.	*De Clementia*
Marc.	*De Consolatione ad Marciam*
Vita	*De Vita Beata*
Otio	*De Otio*
Tranq.	*De Tranquillitate Animi*
Brev.	*De Brevitate Vitae*
Polyb.	*De Consolatione ad Polybium*
Helv.	*De Consolatione ad Helviam*

Ancient

Aug. *Civ. Dei*	St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*
Cic.	Marcus Tullius Cicero
Acad.	*Academica*
Div.	*De Divinatione*
Fat.	*De Fato*
Fin.	*De Finibus*
Leg.	*De Legibus*
ND	*De Natura Deorum*
Off.	*De Officiis*
Rep.	*De Republica*
Tusc.	*Tusculanae Disputationes*
Clem. *Strom.*	Clement, *Stromateis*
DK	Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*
D.L.	Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*
Eusebius *Pr. Ev.*	Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*
Epict.	Epictetus
Diss.	*Discourses*
Ench.	*Encheiridion*
Epicurus *KD*	*Kuriai Doxai*
Lucr. *DRN*	Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*
MA	Marcus Aurelius, *Meditationes*

Orig. *Cels.*	Origen, *Contra Celsum*
Plut.	Plutarch
St. Rep.	*De Stoicorum Repugnantiis*
Comm. Not.	*De Communibus Notitiis contra Stoicos*
Sextus Emp.	Sextus Empiricus
M	Adversus Mathematicos
PH	*Purrhôneioi Hupotupôseis*
Stob. *Ecl.*	Stobaeus, *Eclogae*

Index Locorum Potiorum

Alexander Lycopolis
*De Plac. Man.*19.2-4 p. 93

Arius Didymus
fr. 29 Diels p. 93

Augustine
Civ. Dei 6.10 p. 217-18

Aulus Gellius
Noct. Att. 7.1.10-11 p. 149, 163

Cicero
Acad. 2.127 p. 55
Div. 1.118 p. 198
Div. 1.125 p. 198
Div. 2.130 p. 196
Fat. 28-30 p. 209
Fat. 40-5 p. 211
Fin. 3.73 p. 43
Fin. 4.11-12 p. 44
ND 2.13-15 p. 15
ND 2.70 p. 20
ND 2.88 p. 17
ND 2.153 p. 140
ND 3.92 p. 161
Off. 1.13 p. 45
Rep. 6.9ff. p. 138

Diogenes Laertius
D.L. 7.55-6 p. 75
D.L. 7.87-8 p. 43, 114
D.L. 7.134 p. 70
D.L. 10.37 p. 56

Epictetus
Diss. 1.14.12-14 p. 116
Diss. 3.13.4-7 p. 94
Ench. 31.5 p. 18

Galen
PHP 5.6.4 p. 115

Lucretius
DRN 1.72.7 p. 138
DRN 2.1044ff. p. 138

Marcus Aurelius
Med. 5.10 p. 190
Med. 9.40 p. 20

Plato
Tim. 75a-c p. 149
Tim. 90a p. 115
Tim. 90c p. 115

Plutarch
Comm. Not. 1067A p. 102
Comm. Not. 1075E p. 16
St. Rep. 1035C p. 9, 41
St. Rep. 1047C p. 190
St. Rep. 1050F p. 105, 149
Superst. 167E p. 222

Seneca
Ben. 1.3.8 p. 215
Ben. 1.6.3 p. 220
Ben. 2.29.2 p. 162
Ben. 2.29.3 p. 163

Ben. 2.29.5 p. 163
Ben. 2.29.6 p. 125
Ben. 3.5.1 p. 178
Ben. 4.4.2 p. 206
Ben. 4.7.1 p. 79, 216
Ben. 4.8.1 p. 216
Ben. 4.19.1 p. 222
Ben. 4.23.4 p. 80, 186
Ben. 7.1.6 p. 50
Brev. 14.2 p. 38
Brev. 19.1-2 p. 59, 176
EM 9.16 p. 94
EM 10.4 p. 206
EM 24.18 p. 127
EM 31.6 p. 152
EM 31.8-10 p. 49
EM 31.10 p. 182
EM 36.10 p. 129
EM 41.1 p. 205
EM 41.1-2 p. 113
EM 41.2 p. 182
EM 41.3 p. 171
EM 41.5 p. 132
EM 41.8-9 p. 58
EM 53.11 p. 154
EM 57.8 p. 122
EM 58.24 p. 92
EM 58.26 p. 36, 51
EM 58.27 p. 139
EM 65.2 p. 66, 160
EM 65.3 p. 67
EM 65.4 p. 71
EM 65.10 p. 67, 191
EM 65.15 p. 53, 191
EM 65.16-18 p. 136
EM 65.19 p. 54, 175
EM 65.23-4 p. 69, 160
EM 66.3 p. 155
EM 66.12 p. 113
EM 68.2 p. 143
EM 71.13 p. 92
EM 71.13-14 p. 128
EM 71.16 p. 107, 127
EM 73.6 p. 168
EM 73.16 p. 118
EM 76.9 p. 112
EM 79.12 p. 131
EM 82.6 p. 50
EM 82.8 p. 49
EM 85.30 p. 152
EM 88.5 p. 214
EM 89.16 p. 47, 73
EM 90.28-9 p. 174
EM 90.29 p. 78
EM 90.44 p. 103
EM 92.30 p. 79
EM 93.9 p. 176
EM 93.10 p. 127
EM 94.4 p. 49
EM 94.45 p. 58
EM 94.47-8 p. 59
EM 94.56 p. 142
EM 95.10-12 p. 175
EM 95.12 p. 48
EM 95.37 p. 49
EM 95.47 p. 218
EM 95.48 p. 219
EM 95.50 p. 101, 159, 220
EM 95.61 p. 185
EM 95.64 p. 61

EM 102.2 p. 125
EM 102.21-9 p. 122-3
EM 106.4 p. 74
EM 106.7-8 p. 74
EM 106.10 p. 74
EM 107.10-11 p. 204
EM 110.2 p. 159
EM 110.8-9 p. 59
EM 115.5 p. 220
EM 117.1 p. 76
EM 117.2-3 p. 75
EM 117.5 p. 76
EM 117.6 p. 16, 129, 171
EM 117.7 p. 77
EM 117.9-10 p. 77
EM 117.13 p. 75
EM 117.19 p. 59, 175
EM 121.3 p. 49
EM 121.12 p. 191
EM 123.16 p. 222
EM 124.14 p. 154
EM 124.19-20 p. 153
Helv. 6.7-8 p. 132
Helv. 8.3 p. 73
Helv. 8.4-6 p. 144
Helv. 9.2 p. 144
Helv. 11.7 p. 123
Helv. 20.2 p. 123
Ira 1.6.5 p. 37
Ira 2.27.1 p. 166
Marc. 18.2 p. 142
Marc. 21.6 p. 203
Marc. 24.5 p. 123, 131
Marc. 25.1-3 p. 131
Marc. 26.7 p. 101, 121, 124
NQ 1.Praef.1 p. 186
NQ 1.Praef.2 p. 53
NQ 1.Praef.3 p. 61, 173
NQ 1.Praef.5-6 p. 54
NQ 1.Praef.7 p. 60
NQ 1.Praef.11-12 p. 136
NQ 1.Praef.12-13 p. 86
NQ 1.Praef.13-14 p. 84
NQ 1.Praef.14-15 p. 172
NQ 1.Praef.16 p. 160
NQ 1.3.9 p. 184
NQ 1.3.10 p. 185
NQ 2.13.3-4 p. 82
NQ 2.32.3 p. 199
NQ 2.33 p. 201
NQ 2.35.1-2 p. 203
NQ 2.36 p. 203
NQ 2.37.1-2 p. 208
NQ 2.37.3 p. 209
NQ 2.38.2 p. 210
NQ 2.38.4 p. 212
NQ 2.45.2 p. 79, 166
NQ 2.46 p. 200
NQ 2.59.1-2 p. 51
NQ 2.59.11 p. 108
NQ 3.Praef.10 p. 60
NQ 3.Praef.18 p. 56
NQ 3.12.1-2 p. 93
NQ 3.25.11 p. 182
NQ 3.27-30 p. 95-109
NQ 4B.13.1-2 p. 56
NQ 5.18.5 p. 154
NQ 6.2.9 p. 108
NQ 6.3.1 p. 165
NQ 6.3.4 p. 52
NQ 6.4.1-2 p. 52
NQ 6.32.1 p. 51
NQ 7.1.6 p. 81
NQ 7.25.1-2 p. 191

NQ 7.25.7 p. 188
NQ 7.29.3 p. 179
NQ 7.30.3-4 p. 84, 180, 183
NQ 7.30.5-6 p. 189
Otio 4.2 p. 176
Otio 5.1 p. 58
Otio 5.3-4 p. 143
Otio 5.5-6 p. 186
Otio 5.6-8 p. 58
Otio 5.7 p. 181
Polyb. 9.2-3 p. 126
Polyb. 9.7 p. 123
Polyb. 9.8 p. 132
Prov. 2.1 p. 153
Prov. 2.4 p. 156
Prov. 3.1 p. 158, 166
Prov. 4.5 p. 157
Prov. 4.7 p. 158
Prov. 5.8 p. 161, 167
Prov. 5.9 p. 160, 162, 164
Prov. 6.1 p. 152
Prov. 6.2-3 p. 165
Prov. 6.6 p. 158

Sextus Empiricus
M 9.71-3 p. 133
M 9.75 p. 67

Simplicius
In Ar. Phys. 181.22-30 p. 30

Samenvatting

Deze studie wil een systematisch overzicht verschaffen van de theologische opvattingen van de Romeinse Stoïcijn Lucius Annaeus Seneca, en tevens deze opvattingen beschouwen tegen de achtergrond van het theologisch gedachtegoed van de vroegere Stoïcijnen en dat van andere scholen, met name het Platonisme. Hiermee wil deze studie aansluiten bij, en een bijdrage leveren aan, de hernieuwde waardering die Seneca momenteel onder veel geleerden van de antieke wijsbegeerte geniet. In toenemende mate wordt hij gezien als een denker wiens werken een onbevooroordeelde bestudering behoeven en ook verdienen, in plaats van beschouwd te worden als ofwel een kritiekloos navolger van de Stoïsche leer, ofwel een representant van bepaalde veronderstelde eclectische tendenzen in zijn tijd. De keuze voor theologie als thema hangt hiermee samen: ten eerste wordt dit vermeende eclecticisme vaak verbonden met de opkomst van het Midden-Platonisme, waarvan de theologische ideeën op belangrijke punten onverenigbaar zijn met die van de Stoa; ten tweede is er, de hernieuwde aandacht voor Seneca ten spijt, gebrek aan een systematisch overzicht van zijn theologische gedachtegoed en de relatie daarvan tot dat van de vroegere Stoïcijnen, ondanks de evident prominente plaats van de theologie in het Stoïcisme en Seneca's zelf-identificatie als Stoïcijn.

Teneinde een zo onbevooroordeeld mogelijke interpretatie te geven, is gekozen om de vele relevante passages in het werk van Seneca thematisch te ordenen, en ze zowel in de eigen context te bespreken als in die van een bredere synthese van zijn opvattingen over een bepaald thema van de theologie: deze verschillende syntheses beslaan ieder één van de hoofdstukken 2 tot en met 7, terwijl in het eerste hoofdstuk de benodigde achtergronden voor de studie van Seneca's opvattingen worden geschetst.

In het eerste hoofdstuk wordt vooreerst een historisch overzicht gegeven van de verschillende opvattingen over hoe Seneca's filosofische positie, zowel in het algemeen als specifiek wat de theologie betreft, zich verhoudt tot die van zijn Stoïsche school en die van andere filosofische stromingen, met name het Platonisme. Vervolgens worden de verschillende achtergronden geschetst waartegen de interpretatie van Seneca's theologie gestalte kan krijgen: ten eerste wordt de Stoïsche theologie op hoofdpunten besproken, en ten tweede wordt uiteengezet hoe de theologische opvattingen van het Platonisme zich tot aan Seneca's tijd hebben ontwikkeld. Ten slotte worden Seneca's eigen opvattingen omtrent zijn filosofische loyaliteit besproken.

In het tweede hoofdstuk wordt vastgesteld welke rol Seneca voor de theologie in gedachten heeft. Conform de Stoïsche indeling van de filosofie rekent Seneca de theologie tot de fysica, dat wil zeggen dat deel van de filosofie dat zich bezighoudt met de bestudering van de natuur in de brede zin van het woord. Hij benadrukt vaak dat zonder een juiste opvatting over de kosmos, namelijk als rationeel geordend en door god provident gestuurd, wij niet deugdzaam en gelukkig kunnen worden: met andere woorden, dat fysica, theologie incluis, ten dienste staat van de ethiek. In veel andere passages stelt hij echter dat de bestudering van de kosmos

een inherente waarde heeft, die haar nut voor de ethiek overstijgt. Sommige geleerden menen dat we in Seneca zelfs twee onderling tegenstrijdige modellen vinden ten aanzien van de rol van fysica en theologie enerzijds en ethiek anderzijds: een Stoïsch model dat fysica als dienstbaar aan het ethische doel (*telos*) van de mens ziet, en een Platoons model dat de fysica, en met name theologisch-speculatieve contemplatie, als superieur aan de ethiek beschouwt. Deze interpretatie is echter niet houdbaar, omdat aangetoond kan worden dat Seneca en de vroegere Stoïcijnen ethiek en fysica beide zien als integraal onderdeel van het rationele en deugdzame leven, dat wil zeggen het 'leven in overeenstemming met de natuur'. In verschillende contexten kan wel een andere nadruk gelegd worden, maar Seneca deelt het Stoïsche standpunt dat streven naar morele perfectie en begrip van de goddelijke kosmos twee kanten van dezelfde medaille zijn.

Het derde hoofdstuk wil duidelijkheid verschaffen over Seneca's opvattingen omtrent de aard van god en hoe hij zich verhoudt tot de kosmos. Seneca laat zich weinig uit over de specifieke aard van god, maar aangetoond kan worden dat hij, evenals de vroegere Stoïcijnen, van mening is dat er twee lichamelijke principes zijn waaruit alle andere dingen bestaan, te weten god en materie. Vanwege de passiviteit van de materie, en haar ontvankelijkheid voor de vormende activiteit van god, kan deze laatste ook wel beschouwd worden als de ultieme en enige oorzaak van de kosmos en al wat daarin is. Als creatief en vurig pneuma dat de materie doordringt en vormgeeft maakt god ieder ding tot wat het is, of dat nu een boom is, een mens, of zelfs één van de hemellichamen. In al deze dingen en in de gehele kosmos is god dus aanwezig, maar hij is niet overal in die kosmos op dezelfde manier aanwezig. Verschillende passages maken duidelijk dat ook hier Seneca de Stoïsche opvatting volgt: god is in grotere mate aanwezig in de hemellichamen en bovenste regionen van de kosmos.

Door god expliciet in deze hogere sferen te localiseren en hem te karakteriseren als het intellect van de kosmos, heeft Seneca sommigen tot de veronderstelling gebracht dat hij neigt naar een Midden-Platoonse opvatting van god als een puur intelligibel wezen dat de kosmos transcendeert. Nadere bestudering van het bronnenmateriaal laat echter zien dat deze conclusie niet gerechtvaardigd is, en dat Seneca's opvattingen niet verder gaan dan die van de vroegere Stoïcijnen.

Een kenmerkend leerstuk van de Stoïsche theologie is dat de kosmos waarin wij leven periodiek door vuur verteerd zal worden tijdens de zogenaamde conflagratie (*ekpurôsis*), om vervolgens door god uit deze vurige toestand weer opnieuw gevormd te worden: deze vernietiging en herschepping van de kosmos door god is een zich tot in de eeuwigheid herhalend cyclisch proces. In hoofdstuk 4 wordt aangetoond dat Seneca deze doctrine onderschrijft en, eveneens in overeenstemming met de vroegere Stoïcijnen, de conflagratie ziet als het logische en natuurlijke gevolg van hoe god als vurig pneuma de kosmos doordringt en vormgeeft. Meer opvallend en problematisch is zijn veronderstelling dat naast de periodieke conflagratie de aarde op gezette tijden volledig door water zal worden overspoeld. Deze

veronderstelling, uiteengezet in het derde boek van de Naturales Quaestiones, heeft geen antecedent in onze bronnen over de vroegere Stoa, en is volgens sommigen ook incompatibel met het Stoïsche wereldbeeld. Het wordt niet geheel duidelijk hoe Seneca de vloed gelijk kan stellen aan de conflagratie als een natuurlijk gevolg van hoe de kosmos in elkaar zit, maar hij stelt niettemin expliciet dat deze vloed, evengoed als de conflagratie, onderdeel is van het goddelijke plan met de wereld.

De voorbestemdheid van de vloed lijkt moeilijk te rijmen met Seneca's opvatting dat de vloed als een straf voor de morele slechtheid van de mens gezien kan worden, die gevolgd wordt door een nieuwe en moreel nog onbedorven generatie mensen. Voor de Stoïcijnen is straf echter niet per se incompatibel met het goddelijk plan: god straft evenwel niet willekeurig of om het straffen zelf, maar altijd met het oog op wat het beste is voor de kosmos als geheel; sommige beschrijvingen van de conflagratie suggereren eveneens dat de vertering van alles door het goddelijk vuur gezien kan worden als een terugkeer naar een moreel betere toestand van de kosmos. Het feit dat Seneca dit morele aspect meer benadrukt dan andere Stoïcijnen kan verklaard worden door zijn preoccupatie met de morele verloedering van zijn medemens.

In het vijfde hoofdstuk wordt ingegaan op Seneca's denkbeelden over de menselijke ziel. Seneca deelt het Stoïsche standpunt dat de menselijke ziel een op zichzelf bestaand deel van het goddelijke pneuma is; door de specifieke aard van dit pneuma is de menselijke ziel rationeel, en de mens moet dan ook leven in overeenstemming met de rationele aard van zijn of haar ziel. Omdat deze ziel niet alleen verantwoordelijk is voor onze rationaliteit, maar ook het principe van leven en cohesie is in ons, kan zij volgens de Stoa enige tijd blijven voortbestaan nadat ze bij de dood van het lichaam gescheiden wordt, maar nooit langer dan tot de volgende conflagratie, waarbij immers alles in vuur opgaat. Seneca is onzekerder dan de vroegere Stoïcijnen op dit punt: hij is zich bewust van de wijdverspreide hoop op een hiernamaals en deelt die hoop ook, en vaak lijkt hij ook de Stoïsche opvatting over het voortbestaan van de ziel in de kosmos te delen. Tegelijkertijd twijfelt hij ook vaak hieraan en houdt hij het voor mogelijk dat de ziel uiteenvalt bij de scheiding van het lichaam. Seneca heeft op dit punt geen eensluidend oordeel geveld.

Wat wel duidelijk wordt is dat volgens Seneca, *als* er een voortleven van de ziel is, dit voorgesteld moet worden als een gelukzalig leven waarbij de ziel opstijgt naar de bovenste regionen van de kosmos, waar de hemellichamen zich bevinden, en waar de ziel ook haar oorsprong heeft. Met name op dit punt lijkt Seneca verder te gaan dan de oudere Stoïcijnen, die meenden dat de ziel niet oorspronkelijk uit de hemel stamt, maar pas bij de geboorte ontstaat. Toch moeten we hier niet een al te groot verschil veronderstellen, omdat ook de Stoïcijnen konden stellen dat, in overdrachtelijke zin, de menselijke ziel van goddelijke origine is, omdat het ziels-pneuma van ieder mens, dat van generatie op generatie wordt doorgegeven, uiteindelijk zijn oorsprong vindt in de goddelijke zaad-principes (*spermatikoi logoi*) waaruit de eerste mensen ontstonden.

Seneca stelt echter ook dat de ziel al tijdens het leven verlangt naar die goddelijke oorsprong, en dus haar bestaan in het lichaam wil overstijgen. Sommigen menen, op basis van dit idee, dat we in Seneca een Platoonse interpretatie van de ziel vinden, volgens welke deze naar een oorspronkelijk transcendente toestand streeft. Deze interpretatie is echter niet houdbaar: ten eerste is het idee van een 'zielsvlucht' naar het hogere een gemeenplaats in de antieke filosofie, ten tweede wordt aangetoond dat Seneca weliswaar gebruik maakt van het Platoonse beeld van een ziel die in het lichaam gevangen zit en naar transcendentie streeft, maar alleen als metafoor: datgene waar de ziel volgens Seneca naar streeft is namelijk niet transcendentie, maar studie en contemplatie van de kosmos, en dan met name het goddelijkste deel daarvan, zoals de hemellichamen.

In hoofdstuk 6 worden Seneca's opvattingen over het kwaad besproken: als Stoïcijn is Seneca van mening dat wij in een mooie en provident gestuurde kosmos leven, ja zelfs de best mogelijke kosmos. Hij moet dan ook uitleggen hoe het kan dat er zoveel kwaad in die mooie kosmos lijkt te zijn: waarom er honger is en ziekte en waarom mensen elkaar zoveel ellende aandoen. Het antwoord van Seneca, en hierin volgt hij de Stoïsche lijn, valt in twee delen uiteen.

Ten eerste is er het zogenoemde 'morele kwaad', dat wil zeggen het kwaad dat mensen zelf aanrichten. God is niet verantwoordelijk voor dit kwaad, maar wijzelf: god heeft ons een rationele ziel gegeven, en het is aan ons om die rationaliteit te perfectioneren en deugdzaam, oftewel moreel goed, te worden. De keuze om moreel goed te worden impliceert echter ook de mogelijkheid moreel slecht te worden: die keuze is echter aan ons, en god kan daar niet verantwoordelijk voor worden gehouden. Ten tweede moet het 'kosmische kwaad' verklaard worden: hoe zijn ziekte, pijn en dood te rijmen met de goddelijke providentie? Volgens de Stoïcijnen is al dit lijden geen echt kwaad, want het enige kwaad is het morele kwaad waar we zelf verantwoordelijk voor zijn, maar dat betekent niet dat het lijden geen verklaring behoeft. De verschillende verklaringen die dan gegeven worden hebben één eigenschap gemeen, en dat is dat ze vooropstellen dat god gelimiteerd is in wat hij kan doen, en dus niet een kosmos kon scheppen waarin er geen lijden is. Seneca erkent dit ook, maar er wordt wel gedacht dat hij op dit punt de Platoonse verklaring, volgens welke gods creatieve vermogen door de weerbarstige materie wordt tegengewerkt, verkiest boven de Stoïsche, die de beperkingen toeschrijft aan het feit dat god bepaalde logische en fysische wetten in acht moet nemen. Nadere bestudering van het relevante materiaal in Seneca geeft echter aan dat het waarschijnlijker is dat hij niet gelooft dat materie god kan hinderen in zijn creativiteit, omdat materie eigenschapsloos is: in hoofdstuk 3 werd reeds vastgesteld dat materie volgens Seneca wel één van de twee ontologische principes is, maar geen oorzaak. Evenals de andere Stoïcijnen is hij van mening dat god zelf beperkt is in zijn kunnen: hij kan bijvoorbeeld een dier snel maken, of sterk, maar kan die twee eigenschappen niet in dezelfde mate combineren. De mens heeft het best mogelijke van god gekregen, dat wil zeggen rationaliteit, maar die gift gaat gepaard met onze relatieve lichamelijk zwakte en vatbaarheid voor ziektes en wat dies meer zij.

Een bepaalde mate van lijden is dan ook onvermijdelijk voor een ieder van ons, denkt Seneca, en daarom laat god bepaalde deugdzame mensen extreem veel lijden. Door hun standvastigheid en onverstoorbaarheid ten aanzien van dit lijden dienen ze als voorbeeld voor ons allen, zodat ook wij ons eigen lijden leren accepteren als onderdeel van hoe god de kosmos op de best mogelijke manier ingericht heeft. De mens, als klein onderdeel van die kosmos, kan en zal dus weleens minder prettige dingen meemaken, die echter altijd voor het grotere goed zijn, oftewel het goede van de kosmos als geheel.

In hoofdstuk 7 wordt onderzocht in hoeverre de mens volgens Seneca in staat is om god te kennen. In hoofdstuk 2 werd vastgesteld dat hij, evenals de oudere Stoïcijnen, van mening is dat een basaal inzicht in de kosmos als provident door god gestuurd eenvoudig te verkrijgen is uit de ervaring van de wereld om ons heen. Seneca beargumenteert het bestaan van god en zijn providente aard dan ook nauwelijks, omdat hij dit eigenlijk als evidente zaken beschouwt. We zagen echter ook dat de Stoa andere aspecten van het goddelijke moeilijker te begrijpen achtte en de bestudering hiervan, die soms vergeleken wordt met een inwijding in mystieke kennis, voorbehield aan vergevorderden in de Stoïsche leer.

Ook Seneca maakt deze vergelijking met mystieke kennis en ziet het nastreven van dit soort theologische kennis als iets wat de mens van nature doet en wat integraal onderdeel is van het rationele en gelukkige leven (zoals ook in hoofdstuk 2 werd aangetoond); in veel van de passages waar dit gesteld wordt neemt hij dan ook expliciet of impliciet aan dat wij deze kennis ook kunnen verkrijgen, mits we daar ons best voor doen. In andere passages lijkt hij echter te twijfelen aan de menselijke epistemologische vermogens, en dan met name ten aanzien van het goddelijke. Vooral in het zevende boek van de *Naturales Quaestiones* lijkt dit het geval te zijn, en hier wordt dan ook door sommige geleerden de invloed van het Midden-Platonisme vermoedt. Seneca zou hier niet langer het epistemologisch optimisme van de Stoïcijnen uitdragen, maar neigen naar een pessimisme ten aanzien van de menselijke kennis van god, een pessimisme dat samenhangt met het in Seneca's tijd steeds meer aan invloed winnende Midden-Platoonse beeld van god als een transcendente entiteit die het menselijk begrip te boven gaat. Het blijkt echter dat deze conclusie niet gerechtvaardigd is en dat de passages waarin Seneca lijkt te twijfelen aan ons vermogen god te kennen in het licht van de volgende drie overwegingen gelezen dienen te worden.

Ten eerste maakt Seneca onderscheid tussen de zintuigen enerzijds en het denken anderzijds als bron van kennis: daar waar hij meent dat god niet door ons gekend kan worden, zoals in boek 7 van de Naturales Quaestiones, doelt hij specifiek op de ontoereikendheid van de zintuigen; met de geest kan god namelijk wel gekend worden. Ten tweede meent Seneca dat, omdat bepaalde aspecten van het goddelijke (zoals bijvoorbeeld de banen van kometen en andere hemellichamen) nu eenmaal moeilijk of helemaal niet waarneembaar zijn, onze kennis hierover gering is en verder ontwikkeld dient te worden. Hij gelooft dat die vooruitgang in kennis er ook is, en dat latere generaties meer zullen weten en begrijpen dan de zijne, maar tegelijkertijd ziet hij hier ook praktische bezwaren, zoals de korte levensduur van mensen en de

morele verloedering die kennisontwikkeling in de weg staat. Ten derde is het misleidend om een zogenaamd Midden-Platoons pessimisme tegenover een Stoïsch optimisme te stellen: ook de vroegere Stoa erkent dat het menselijk kenvermogen in zekere zin gelimiteerd is. Door de polemiek met andere scholen, en dan met name de Sceptische Academie, kon hier minder aandacht aan gegeven worden dan bij latere Stoïcijnen als Seneca het geval is, maar dat neemt niet weg dat ook de oudere Stoïcijnen van mening waren dat de Stoïsche wijze niet alles weet.

In het achtste en laatste hoofdstuk wordt bekeken hoe Seneca's opvattingen over god van invloed zijn op zijn standpunten ten aanzien de traditionele religie en godsdienst. Globaal gezien kunnen we stellen dat de Stoa kritisch kon zijn over bepaalde aspecten van deze traditie, en dan met name de theoretische grondvesten ervan, maar ten opzichte van andere aspecten, en dan vooral de religieuze praktijk, meer behoudend was.

Wat betreft de kunst van het voorspellen van de toekomst (*divinatio*) deelt Seneca de Stoïsche opvatting dat dit een zinvolle bezigheid is. Al wat gebeurt is namelijk onderdeel van het lot (*fatum*), d.w.z. een oorzakelijke keten die zijn oorsprong heeft in gods onveranderlijke plan voor de kosmos, en dat betekent dat alles om ons heen ook een oorzaak is voor wat komen gaat. Provident als hij is, heeft god ervoor gezorgd dat wij deze causale structuur van de kosmos kunnen doorgronden en dus feitelijke toestanden in het heden kunnen begrijpen en uitleggen als voortekenen van toekomstige gebeurtenissen. Volgens Seneca kunnen we met behulp van deze kennis van wat komen gaat zelfs voorspelde slechte dingen vermijden. Hoe hij dit meent te kunnen rijmen met het idee van het onveranderlijke *fatum* hangt samen met zijn ideeën over de effectiviteit van gebed. Seneca staat vaak afwijzend tegenover zogenaamd 'petitionair' gebed, dat wil zeggen gebed waarmee god om een gunst gevraagd wordt, juist omdat het *fatum* onveranderlijk is en god dus niet op andere gedachten gebracht kan worden. Toch zijn er ook passages waarin hij aangeeft dat we wel degelijk gebed en voorspelling kunnen gebruiken om goede dingen te verkrijgen en slechte te vermijden, en hij denkt deze opvatting met het idee van het *fatum* te kunnen verzoenen door gebed en voorspelling onderdeel te maken van dit *fatum*.

Seneca is het verder met de Stoïcijnen (en de meeste andere antieke filosofen) eens dat de traditionele godsdienstige gebruiken en riten zoveel mogelijk gedoogd moeten worden; daar waar de oude Stoa echter meende dat deze gebruiken in een beperkte mate recht deden aan god, zegt Seneca daar niets over en benadrukt hij alleen hun sociaal-politieke relevantie. De enig juiste manier om god te vereren is door te proberen net zo rationeel en deugdzaam te worden als hij. Eenzelfde scepsis ten aanzien van traditionele opvattingen ligt vermoedelijk ten grondslag aan Seneca's afwijzing van de pogingen van onder meer Zeno en Chrysippus om filosofische herinterpretaties te geven van mythologische verhalen zoals die door dichters als Homerus en Hesiodus werden doorgegeven.

Ten slotte worden Seneca's opvattingen over religie en bijgeloof vergeleken met die van de Platonist Plutarchus: beiden zien bijgeloof als een geperverteerde vorm van religie, die de meest basale eigenschap van de goden, hun welgezindheid, tot haar tegenovergestelde

ombuigt en de goden als kwaadwillend en wraakzuchtig beschouwt. Plutarchus is van mening dat om van deze perversie verschoond te blijven men vast moet houden aan de traditionele Griekse gebruiken: die geven ons namelijk een betrouwbaar houvast ten aanzien van het goddelijke; Seneca is, als Stoïcijn, ervan overtuigd dat de filosofie ons inzicht kan geven in de aard van het goddelijke en dat we de traditie daarvoor niet nodig hebben.

Over het geheel genomen kunnen we stellen dat Seneca vaak het Stoïsche conservatisme ten aanzien van de religieuze praktijk deelt, maar meer dan de oudere Stoïcijnen kritisch is over bepaalde theoretische aspecten van die religie, zoals blijkt uit het afwijzen van allegorie en etymologizering van godennamen en zijn vermoedelijke opvatting dat de traditionele verering van de goden alleen om sociaal-politieke redenen, en niet om inhoudelijke, nuttig kan zijn.

De belangrijkste conclusie van deze studie is dat Seneca's theologische opvattingen als overeenkomstig die van de vroegere Stoïcijnen mogen worden beschouwd, en dat een in het verleden vaak gebezigde veronderstelling, dat Seneca onder een sterke Midden-Platoonse invloed stond, als overhaast en ongefundeerd moet worden bestempeld. Het is niet zo dat hij een kritiekloos volger van vastgeroeste doctrines is: hij behoudt zich het recht voor om zijn eigen accenten te leggen en ook die aspecten van de Stoïsche leer te bekritiseren die volgens hem niet bijdragen aan een beter begrip van het goddelijke en ons dus geen betere mensen kunnen maken. De Stoïsche opvatting van god als het lichamelijke, immanente en providente principe in de kosmos staat voor hem echter nooit ter discussie.

Acknowledgements

It is often acknowledged by authors of a doctoral thesis that they could not have written it without the aid, advice and support of others. My case is no different, and I would like to mention those people that I owe a debt of gratitude. Before doing so, I think it appropriate to point out that they, and many others I do not mention by name, have not merely enabled the writing of this thesis, but made it into a positively pleasurable and memorable experience.

First of all I would like to thank my promotor, Keimpe Algra, for allowing me to partake in his research project, which was generously supported by NWO, and for supervising my work on this thesis. His knowledge of Stoicism in general and its theology in particular, as well as his philosophical acuity, have been indispensable. My co-promotor, Teun Tieleman, also deserves my thanks for his supervision during the first years as a PhD-student, and for carefully reading my work and offering many suggestions to improve it. I further thank Prof. Paul Ziche for the many helpful comments and corrections, and Jaap Mansfeld and Jan van Ophuijsen for their sage advice whenever I asked for it.

I am also grateful to all the people at the Department of Philosophy for creating the stimulating study and work environment I have enjoyed for over 14 years now. In particular, I would like to thank my colleagues of the history of philosophy section for their congeniality and their support: Claartje van Sijl, Irene Conradie, Albert Joosse, Frederik Bakker, Anna Ntinti, Marnix Hoekstra, Erik-Jan Bos, Mark Aalderink, Robin Buning, Thijs de Beus, Jetze Touber and Thomas Fossen (even though he is concerned with legitimacy rather than history). Irene and Mark deserve special thanks for guiding me through the alien worlds of layouts and cover designs.

I would further like to thank all the people I met through and in the study program of the national research school OIKOS and the activities of the Centre for Ancient Philosophy (CAW): I am grateful for all I learned in those communities of people sharing the same interests and passion for antiquity.

My family and friends I thank for their support and interest during the whole writing process. I am grateful to my parents Leo and Nellie, my brother Kees and sister Stineke, for their encouragement and belief that I could actually pull this off. My wife Titia, finally, deserves my utmost gratitude for all she has given me: her love, determination, and courage have always been an inspiration.

Curriculum Vitae

Maarten Stijn Adriaan van Houte werd geboren op 13 mei 1979 te Waarde. Hij behaalde zijn VWO-diploma in 1996 aan het Buys Ballot College te Goes. In dat jaar begon hij aan de opleiding Wijsbegeerte aan de Universiteit Utrecht, en studeerde daar in 2004 af bij de vakgroep Geschiedenis van de Filosofie, met een scriptie over Heraclitus en de Milesische natuurfilosofen. Gedurende zijn studie was Maarten werkzaam als assistent bij het Descartes-project van prof. dr. Theo Verbeek en als redactie-assistent van prof. dr. Keimpe Algra bij het tijdschrift *Phronesis*. In 2004 begon hij als promovendus aan de Universiteit Utrecht, bij het NWO-project *Stoicism in Context*, onder leiding van prof. Algra. Sinds 2009 werkt hij als junior-docent bij het Departement Wijsbegeerte aan de Universiteit Utrecht.

Quaestiones Infinitae

PUBLICATIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

VOLUME 20. H.H.A. VAN DEN BRINK, The Tragedy of Liberalism (dissertation), 1997.

VOLUME 21. D. VAN DALEN, Torens en Fundamenten (valedictory lecture), 1997.

VOLUME 22. J.A. BERGSTRA, W.J. FOKKINK, W.M.T. MENNEN, S.F.M. VAN VLIJMEN, Spoorweglogica via EURIS, 1997.

VOLUME 23. I.M. CROESE, Simplicius on Continuous and Instantaneous Change (dissertation), 1998.

VOLUME 24. M.J. HOLLENBERG, Logic and Bisimulation (dissertation), 1998.

VOLUME 25. C.H. LEIJENHORST, Hobbes and the Aristotelians (dissertation), 1998.

VOLUME 26. S.F.M. VAN VLIJMEN, Algebraic Specification in Action (dissertation), 1998.

VOLUME 27. M.F. VERWEIJ, Preventive Medicine Between Obligation and Aspiration (dissertation), 1998.

VOLUME 28. J.A. BERGSTRA, S.F.M. VAN VLIJMEN, Theoretische Software-Engineering: kenmerken, faseringen en classificaties, 1998.

VOLUME 29. A.G. WOUTERS, Explanation Without A Cause (dissertation), 1999.

VOLUME 30. M.M.S.K. SIE, Responsibility, Blameworthy Action & Normative Disagreements (dissertation), 1999.

VOLUME 31. M.S.P.R. VAN ATTEN, Phenomenology of choice sequences (dissertation), 1999.

VOLUME 32. V.N. STEBLETSOVA, Algebras, Relations and Geometries (an equational perspective) (dissertation), 2000.

VOLUME 33. A. VISSER, Het Tekst Continuüm (inaugural lecture), 2000.

VOLUME 34. H. ISHIGURO, Can we speak about what cannot be said? (public lecture), 2000.

VOLUME 35. W. HAAS, Haltlosigkeit; Zwischen Sprache und Erfahrung (dissertation), 2001.

VOLUME 36. R. POLI, ALWIS: Ontology for knowledge engineers (dissertation), 2001.

VOLUME 37. J. MANSFELD, Platonische Briefschrijverij (valedictory lecture), 2001.

VOLUME 37A. E.J. BOS, The Correspondence between Descartes and Henricus Regius (dissertation), 2002.

VOLUME 38. M. VAN OTEGEM, A Bibliography of the Works of Descartes (1637-1704) (dissertation), 2002.

VOLUME 39. B.E.K.J. GOOSSENS, Edmund Husserl: Einleitung in die Philosophie: Vorlesungen 1922/23 (dissertation), 2003.

VOLUME 40. H.J.M. BROEKHUIJSE, Het einde van de sociaaldemocratie (dissertation), 2002.

VOLUME 41. P. RAVALLI, Husserls Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität in den Göttinger Jahren: Eine kritisch-historische Darstellung (dissertation), 2003.

VOLUME 42. B. ALMOND, The Midas Touch: Ethics, Science and our Human Future (inaugural lecture), 2003.

VOLUME 43. M. DÜWELL, Morele kennis: over de mogelijkheden van toegepaste ethiek (inaugural lecture), 2003.

VOLUME 44. R.D.A. HENDRIKS, Metamathematics in Coq (dissertation), 2003.

VOLUME 45. TH. VERBEEK, E.J. BOS, J.M.M. VAN DE VEN, The Correspondence of René Descartes: 1643, 2003.

VOLUME 46. J.J.C. KUIPER, Ideas and Explorations: Brouwer's Road to Intuitionism (dissertation), 2004.

VOLUME 47. C.M. BEKKER, Rechtvaardigheid, Onpartijdigheid, Gender en Sociale Diversiteit; Feministische filosofen over recht doen aan vrouwen en hun onderlinge verschillen (dissertation), 2004.

VOLUME 48. A.A. LONG, Epictetus on understanding and managing emotions (public lecture), 2004.

VOLUME 49. J.J. JOOSTEN, Interpretability formalized (dissertation), 2004.

VOLUME 50. J.G. SIJMONS, Phänomenologie und Idealismus: Analyse der Struktur und Methode der Philosophie Rudolf Steiners (dissertation), 2005.

VOLUME 51. J.H. HOOGSTAD, Time tracks (dissertation), 2005.

VOLUME 52. M.A. VAN DEN HOVEN, A Claim for Reasonable Morality (dissertation), 2006.

VOLUME 53. C. VERMEULEN, René Descartes, Specimina philosophiae: Introduction and Critical Edition (dissertation), 2007.

VOLUME 54. R.G. MILLIKAN, Learning Language without having a theory of mind (inaugural lecture), 2007.

VOLUME 55. R.J.G. CLAASSEN, The Market's Place in the Provision of Goods (dissertation), 2008.

VOLUME 56. H.J.S. BRUGGINK, Equivalence of Reductions in Higher-Order Rewriting (dissertation), 2008.

VOLUME 57. A. KALIS, Failures of agency (dissertation), 2009.

VOLUME 58. S. GRAUMANN, Assistierte Freiheit (dissertation), 2009.

VOLUME 59. M. AALDERINK, Philosophy, Scientific Knowledge, and Concept Formation in Geulincx and Descartes (dissertation), 2010.

VOLUME 60. I.M. CONRADIE, Seneca in his cultural and literary context: Selected moral letters on the body (dissertation), 2010.

VOLUME 61. C. VAN SIJL, Stoic Philosophy and the Exegesis of Myth (dissertation), 2010.

VOLUME 62. J.M.I.M. LEO, The Logical Structure of Relations (dissertation), 2010.

VOLUME 63. M.S.A. VAN HOUTE, Seneca's theology in its philosophical context (dissertation), 2010.