

## **Sons of the Earth: Are the Stoics Metaphysical Brutes?**

**Katja Maria Vogt**

The Stoics have sometimes reminded scholars of a group of people in Plato's *Sophist*, to whom Plato gives the telling name Sons of the Earth.<sup>1</sup> These Sons of the Earth are proponents of a worldview that recognizes only bodies as existent, and Plato hesitates even to call them philosophers, so lowly and brutish does he find their perspective. The Stoics, as I shall argue, are sophisticated Sons of the Earth. They hold that god, the soul, and every state of the soul (such as wisdom or foolishness), as well as every movement of the soul (such as impressions, assents, and impulses, including emotions), are corporeal. Their focus on corporeals, I think, is fundamental to their whole philosophical outlook. Not only is it relevant to physics, ethics, and logic. It also explains why the Stoics do not have the kind of theory that, with respect to Plato and Aristotle, we call metaphysics. And further, it explains how human agency is a topic in physics. A core Stoic thesis about bodies is that only bodies can be causes. What is more, there is in fact only one cause: the corporeal god, the universe's reason. Stoic corporealism is thus intimately tied to their theories of causality and agency. Stoic corporealism is an account of the most basic workings of a perfectly reasonable universe.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Brunschwig's seminal paper 'The Stoic Theory of the Supreme Genus and Platonic Ontology' ['Supreme Genus'], in id., *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1994), 92-157; originally published as 'La théorie stoïcienne du genre supreme et l'ontologie platonicienne,' in J. Barnes and M. Mignucci (eds.), *Matter and Metaphysics* (Napoli, 1988), 19-127.

My paper begins with a preliminary outline of some key premises of Stoic physics (section 1). The bulk of the paper is devoted to the question of how the Stoic focus on corporeals in physics relates to Stoic ontology (sections 2 and 3), and theory of agency (section 4).<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Corporeals

Here is a sketch of some key claims in Stoic physics.<sup>3</sup> According to the Stoics, there are two principles which together constitute physical reality: that which acts and that which is acted

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<sup>2</sup> In the course of my argument, I shall refer to Plato's *Sophist*, *Philebus*, and *Phaedo*. With respect to Stoic physics, the *Timaeus* has been discussed widely. D. Sedley, 'The Origins of Stoic God,' in D. Frede and A. Laks (eds.), *Traditions in Theology [Theology]*, (Leiden, 2002), 41-83; D. Frede, 'Theodicy and Providential Care in Stoicism,' in *Theology*, 85-117; M. Frede, 'La Théologie Stoïcienne' [Théologie'], in G. Romeyer Dherbey and J.-B. Gourinat (eds.), *Les Stoïciens* (Paris, 2005), 213-232; G. Reydam-Schils, *Demiurge and Providence, Stoic and Platonist Readings of Plato's 'Timaeus'* (Turnhout, 1999). I hope to supplement these discussions by drawing on other Platonic dialogues. I should add that, in general, I do not suggest that any Platonic dialogue is a *source* for the Stoics. Rather, I work with the hypothesis that the Stoics read Plato's dialogues philosophically.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I am primarily concerned with the early Stoics (I shall not attempt to distinguish between the views of the early Stoic philosophers). For a more detailed account of the central issues, see S. Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998), 16-21. Cf. also K. Algra, 'Stoic Theology,' in *Companion to the Stoics*,

upon, in other words, god and matter, the active and the passive principle.<sup>4</sup> Both are everlasting, ungenerated and indestructible.<sup>5</sup> Qua being corporeals, they are three-dimensional and offer resistance.<sup>6</sup> Matter, the passive principle, is entirely unqualified, but at every given point in time inseparably connected to some quality or other.<sup>7</sup> It is through the active principle, which pervades matter, that bodies are individuated and qualified.<sup>8</sup> Matter is divisible, but does not by itself divide up into parts. It is because matter is subject to various ways of being qualified by the active principle that there are compounds, namely the

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153–178, and M. White, ‘Stoic Natural Philosophy (Physics and Cosmology),’ in

*Companion to the Stoics*, 124–152.

<sup>4</sup> See DL 7.134 (= SVF 2.300, part, 2.299 = LS 44B).

<sup>5</sup> DL 7.134; SE M 9.75-6 (= SVF 2.311 = LS 44C); Calcidius 292 (= SVF 1.88, part = LS 44D); Calcidius 293 (= LS 44E).

<sup>6</sup> On corporeals being three-dimensional, see DL 7.135 (= SVF 3 Apollodorus 6, part = LS 45E). On resistance, cf. Galen, *On Incorporeal Qualities* (SVF 2.381 = LS 45F). It is difficult to know whether the Stoics agreed on corporeals offering resistance (see note 37 below). Cf. Brunschwig, ‘Metaphysics,’ 210-11. Cf. also J. Cooper, ‘Chrysippus on Physical Elements’ [‘Physical Elements’], in R. Salles (ed.), *God and the Cosmos in Stoicism* (Oxford, forthcoming), esp. notes 10 and 11.

<sup>7</sup> I am leaving aside questions about world-conflagration. “At every given point in time” here means “at every given point in time while the world is in existence.”

<sup>8</sup> 7.134; Calcidius 292; Calcidius 293. Cf. M. Frede on differences and similarities between the Stoic notion of matter, and the notion of matter in Plato’s *Timaeus* (‘Théologie,’ 219-221).

elements and eventually ordinary bodies. A corporeal, according to the Stoics, is that which can act or be acted upon, where ‘or’ should be understood as ‘and-or.’ Matter is corporeal insofar as it can be acted upon. God is corporeal insofar as he can act. Compounds are corporeal insofar as they can act and be acted upon.

God and matter, and the compounds of god and matter are bodies.<sup>9</sup> But not everything that we need to refer to in a comprehensive theory of reality is a body. Such a theory must include incorporeals, for physics needs to apply to place, time, and the void. A causal relationship, for the Stoics, is a three-place relation: a corporeal acts on another corporeal, and the effect is a predicate.<sup>10</sup> For example, a knife acts on a piece of paper (both knife and paper being bodies), the effect of which is that the paper is ‘being cut’ (a predicate). It is in the context of classifying this predicate that Cleanthes introduces the term *lekton* (Clement,

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<sup>9</sup> While it is well attested that for the Stoics god and the soul are corporeal, this is not entirely undisputed. A key piece of testimony, DL 7.134, describes the two Stoic principles—god, the active principle, and matter, the passive principle—as *sômata*, bodies or corporeals. However, the very ideas that are preserved in DL 7.134 are also presented in a Renaissance source (*Souda*). Here, god and matter are said to be incorporeals (*asômatous*). Yet another text seems to say that the Stoics call god matter. From Calcidius, we learn that for the Stoics, god is that which is matter or an inseparable quality of matter (294 and 289 = SVF I 87). Cf. M. Frede’s discussion of these issues (‘Théologie’, 213 ff.).

<sup>10</sup> SE M 9.211; SE PH 3.14; Clement *Strom.* 8 9, 26.

*Strom.* VIII, 9, 26).<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to the Stoics, there are god and matter, and compound bodies, and there are incorporeals—place, time, void, and sayables. The supreme genus, under which these fall, is ‘somethings.’

The Stoic notion of corporeals covers corporeals that are rather different from each other: god, matter, and compounds of god and matter. Among such compounds, we should distinguish the elements (already qualified), soul in the sense of fiery breath, ordinary objects, and the world as a whole. Note that this conception of corporeals is far removed from any conception that begins from a distinction between body and soul. Intuitively speaking, we might say that for the Stoics, reason, or soul, makes all compounds, including ordinary objects and the universe as a whole, into ‘ensouled bodies.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Frede, ‘The Original Notion of Cause’ [‘Cause’], in id., *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minnesota, 1996), 125-150 at 137.

<sup>12</sup> Plato’s *Philebus* forms an interesting basis for comparison. The *Philebus* contains a brief account of a certain view of the universe—a view that takes the universe to be ordered and guided by reason (28d-30e). The main point of the passage is to establish the claim that reason is a cause, a view to which the Stoics certainly subscribe. Many details of this brief excursus into natural philosophy sound entirely Stoic—but, of course, other details do not. In particular, according to this passage, *nous*, *phronêsis*, and *sophia* govern the universe (the Stoics speak of *logos*). However, what is particularly interesting about *Philebus* 28d-30e is this: it is considered an implication of the view that reason regulates everything that reason, or soul, puts together fire, earth, water and air so as to make *ensouled* bodies out of them. Human beings are ensouled bodies, and the world as a whole is an ensouled body.

The Stoics think that for something to be a cause, it must be a body, and it must be active.<sup>13</sup> Thus there is only one cause, the active principle.<sup>14</sup> Compounds are causes by virtue of being pervaded by the active principle. It is the activity of god that makes compounds active causes. Let us look more closely at how this works. God, or the active principle, can be said to be the soul of the world in two ways.<sup>15</sup> Strictly speaking, god is reason, that is, the soul in the sense of the commanding-faculty of the world.<sup>16</sup> In a wider sense, god can be identified

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<sup>13</sup> SE M 9.211; Seneca, *Ep.* 65, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Seneca writes: “But what we are now looking for is a primary and generic cause. This should be simple, since matter too is simple. Do we ask what cause is? To be sure, it is reason in action (*ratio faciens*), i.e., god. For all those things you people have cited are not many distinct causes; rather, they depend on one, the active cause.” (*Letter* 65.12; tr. Inwood). All translations from Seneca’s *Letters* in this paper are from B. Inwood, *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters [Letters]* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.23-5, 28-30 (= LS 47C) and Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.39 (= SVF 2.1077, part, = LS 54B). Cf. DL 7.147 (= SVF 2.1021, part, = LS 54A). God is the power that pervades the cosmos (SE M 9.75-6); he is the manufacturer of the world-order (DL 7.137).

<sup>16</sup> See Aetius 4.21.1-4 (=SVF 2.836, part, = LS 53H) for the identification of soul and commanding-faculty, and DL 7.134 for the thesis that god is reason (*logos*) in matter. From the perspective of the Stoics, whether one acknowledges the power of god does not depend on viewing god as a non-physical entity. Rather, everything depends on whether one is committed to viewing reason, god, and providence as causes. On the differences between

with the soul understood as breath (*pneuma*), which emerges from the commanding-faculty, and sustains the world as a whole. This fiery breath is the instrument by which reason exerts its regulative force.<sup>17</sup> Reason and soul constitute thus one *kind* of causal agent, which works by permeating and governing everything. Soul in the wider sense, soul as breath, sustains a compound, be it the cosmos or a plant, an animal or a human being.<sup>18</sup> It is due to differences in the composition of this fiery breath that there are different kinds of beings—stones, plants, animals, and human beings.<sup>19</sup> These parts of the cosmos are held together and individuated by the specific ways in which breath pervades them.<sup>20</sup> Human beings are pervaded with the kind of breath that constitutes a rational soul, animals with the kind of

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Stoic and Epicurean views, cf. A. A. Long, ‘Chance and laws of nature in Epicureanism’ [‘Epicureanism’], in id., *From Epicurus to Epictetus* (Oxford, 2006): 157-177.

<sup>17</sup> This is how J. Cooper explains the relationship (‘Physical Elements’). Long discusses this distinction with a view to human beings (‘Soul’).

<sup>18</sup> SE M 7.234 (=LS 53F); Calcidius 220 (= SVF 2,879, part, = S 53G).

<sup>19</sup> Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1053F-1054B (=SVF 2.449, = LS 47M); Galen, *Medical introduction* 14.726,7-11 (=SVF 2.716, part, = LS 47N); DL 7.138-9 (= include SVF 2.634, = LS 47O); Philo, *Allegories of the laws* 2.22-3 (=SVF 2.458, part, = LS 47P); Philo, *God’s immutability* 35-6 (=SVF 2.458, part, = LS 47Q).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander, *On mixture* 22325-36 (=SVF 2.441, part, = LS 47L); DL 7.138-9; Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 2.4 (=SVF 2.802, = LS 47R); Simplicius, *On Aristotle’s Categories* 214,24-37 (=SVF 2.91, part, = LS 28M).

breath that constitutes an animal's soul, and so on.<sup>21</sup> The particular way in which things move is explained by the way in which they are pervaded by breath. What is kept together as a particular in the weakest sense, such as logs and stones, can only be moved from the outside. Plants and animals are sustained by breath in a way that gives them a 'nature' or soul. Plants have 'natures'; they move 'out of themselves' (in the movement of growth). Animals, having souls, move 'by themselves.' Rational beings (including human beings) are pervaded by breath in the highest sense—they have reason, and they move through the activities of reason.<sup>22</sup>

For the Stoics, the universe is a large living being, the movements of which are to be understood as the movements of a rational living being. The universe is a living being in the most literal sense: it is an agent, and its movements are actions.<sup>23</sup> If we take this claim seriously, it fundamentally upsets our view of what we and other particulars in the universe

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. Colvin, 'Heraclitus and Material Flux in Stoic Psychology,' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2005), 257–272.

<sup>22</sup> Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2-3 (=SVF 2.988 = LS 53A).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.58 (= LS 53Y): "Just as other natural substances are each generated, made to grow and sustained by their own seeds, so the nature of the world has all the movements of volition, impulses, and desires which the Greeks call *hormai*, and exhibits the actions in agreement with these in the way that we ourselves do who are moved by emotions and sensations."



are.<sup>24</sup> Roughly speaking, we and other ordinary bodies must at once be explained as parts of a whole, and as compounds and cohesive items. The Stoics need a force which runs through everything and gives corporeal particulars their specific cohesion, so that they are, at least in some sense, one, but which also runs through everything in such a way that it connects particular things as parts of one whole.<sup>25</sup> God, and by extension the world's soul, is this force.

## **2. The *Sophist*: Body versus being**

Let me stand back now from the details of the topic and ask, in very broad terms, what is the significance for Stoic theory in general of the fact that they make the notion of corporeals so central to their philosophy. In order to do so, I turn to a passage from Plato's *Sophist*, the so-called Battle of the Giants (245e6-249d5).<sup>26</sup>

Plato presents two parties as fighting against each other, the so-called Friends of the Forms, and the Sons of the Earth. The Sons of the Earth have traditionally reminded scholars of the earthly Titans in Hesiod's *Theogony*, who fight against the heavenly Olympians, as well as

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<sup>24</sup> On human beings as fellow-parts of the universe, see my *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City* (Oxford, 2008), Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>25</sup> On the way in which human beings and other entities are 'unified', cf. Long, 'Soul.'

<sup>26</sup> The early Stoics (or at least their founder, Zeno, who spent extended times as a student at Plato's Academy) were probably sophisticated readers of Plato's dialogues. Many details in Stoic philosophy—down to the wording of examples—suggest a close Stoic study of at least some of Plato's dialogues.

of the Stoics. The Stoics may appear to be wedded to a similarly lowly perspective as Plato's Sons of the Earth—a perspective that, by focusing on corporeals, misses out on all the better things, the immaterial and transcendent entities that figure in other ancient theories.

The two core claims of the Sons of the Earth are:

- only that which can be touched is (246a7-b2),
- body and being are the same (246b1).

The Sons of the Earth, however, are described as so brutish that—according to the Eleatic Stranger—it is impossible even to ask for an account of their claims (246c-d). For this reason, the Eleatic Stranger and his interlocutor decide to put their questions to tamed Sons of the Earth. The tamed Sons of the Earth insist that, since only what is corporeal is, the soul must be corporeal. But they hesitate when asked whether they think that justice and wisdom exist. Surely these things seem neither visible nor tangible. However, they can be present in one person and not present in another person, and therefore it seems that they *are*. Thus the tamed Sons of the Earth are at a loss. They cannot say that things such as justice and wisdom are not, but they also do not have the nerve to say that they are bodies. They apparently admit that both corporeals and incorporeals *are*. Accordingly, they have to face the question of what it means that they both are, that is, they have to give a new account of being (rather than stick with their initial claim that body and being are the same). The Eleatic Stranger offers them such a new account (246e-247e). Whatever has some power or capacity (*dunamis*), be it the power to act or the power to be acted upon, is. Being is power. The tamed Sons of the Earth accept this account.

Before he offers this new account of being, the Eleatic Stranger stresses that the *real* Sons of the Earth, the brutish ones, would happily agree that things such as wisdom are bodies. For them, only what they can touch with their hands is. The Stoics, I think, are untamed, but sophisticated, Sons of the Earth. They are untamed insofar as they do not hesitate to describe the soul and its states, such as wisdom, as corporeal, and they insist that only corporeals exist. But they are sophisticated insofar as they revise the Sons of the Earth's brutish notion of corporeality, which hinges on the properties of visibility and tangibility.<sup>27</sup>

Most importantly, the Stoics are unlike the tamed Sons of the Earth insofar as they do not accept the view that being is power.<sup>28</sup> The Stoic theory involves the view that everything that is, namely bodies, has the capacity to cause effects or to undergo them. Therefore, scholars have traditionally thought that we can safely ascribe to them the view that being is

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<sup>27</sup> Insofar as they hold on to any significant notion of tangibility, they think of bodies as offering resistance. Cf. Brunschwig, 'Metaphysics,' 210-11.

<sup>28</sup> While much of my discussion is in agreement with Brunschwig ('Supreme Genus' and 'Metaphysics'), I disagree with him on this point. As I hope to show, this is an important point, for it means that the Stoic position is not primarily an account of being. I take it that Brunschwig has convincingly defeated a view that I am not even discussing—the view (introduced into the debate by Zeller) that the early Stoics considered 'being' the highest genus, and that only later Stoics introduced the claim that 'somethings' is the highest genus. If Zeller's reconstruction were right, then my interpretation would be entirely misguided. I agree with Brunschwig that the early Stoics already considered 'somethings' the highest genus.

power. However, insofar as the Stoics agree that being is power, they do not hold this as a view that they put forward as their answer to the question “what is being?” Rather, it is one that they hold in the course of explaining bodies and causality. (The tamed Sons of the Earth need to revise their initial view, that body and being are the same, because they have allowed the Eleatic Stranger to ascribe the view to them that both corporeals and incorporeals *are*. The Stoics, however do *not* say that corporeals and incorporeals are. Rather, they say of both that they are somethings. The Stoics are thus not in the position that the tamed Sons of the Earth are in—they do not have to explain a notion of being that would figure in a claim that corporeals and incorporeals are.)

The Sons of the Earth look at the earth; they concern themselves with the earth. So do the Stoics. They conceive of physics—of a theory of causality and of the corporeal principles—as an account that provides us with a deep understanding of reality. It is therefore important that we do not describe the Stoic theory as starting from the idea that being is power. The Stoics do not take themselves to be, first and foremost, engaged in the study of being. They take themselves to be engaged in the study of nature—and accordingly, the study of causation, bodies, reason, and so on. The Stoics do not have the kind of theory that aims to answer the question “what is being?” as it is posed in Plato’s *Sophist*, and as it already has some ancestry when Plato discusses it. The Platonic study of being is tied to a certain conception of the relationship between physics and what we would call metaphysics, and it is this conception that the Stoics do not share. The Stoics see physics as offering the

most basic explanation of reality; and bodies represent the first of five topics that the Stoics think physics must cover.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, it is a difficult question whether we should ascribe any metaphysical theory to the Stoics at all. This is, of course, in some sense up to us, for it depends on how we choose to understand the word ‘metaphysics,’ a word that no ancient philosopher of the classical period used. Brunschwig suggests that there are two ancient senses of ‘metaphysics’ available, both of them associated with Aristotle, that can be employed to provide an interpretative account of certain aspects of Stoic philosophy.<sup>30</sup> First, we might want to use the term metaphysics as referring to a science of first principles and first causes. Brunschwig suggests that all five topics of Stoic physics deal with “primary entities”: (1) bodies, (2) principles, (3) elements, (4) gods, and (5) limit, place and void. Insofar as they do, we could describe discussion of them as the kind of metaphysics that studies first principles and first causes.<sup>31</sup> What speaks in favor of this proposal is that readers of ancient philosophy are familiar with such a notion of metaphysics; so, the anachronism of using an Aristotelian conception might, if openly acknowledged, be helpful. However, what may speak against it is that it makes less visible the difference between Stoic philosophy on the one hand, and the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition on the other. Insofar as it is an aim of interpretation to

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<sup>29</sup> DL 7.132 (= LS 43B). This division is called a ‘specific’ division: (1) bodies, (2) principles, (3) elements, (4) gods, (5) limits, place, and void. There is also a ‘generic’ division, which is threefold: (1) the world, (2) elements, (3) the study of causes.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Brunschwig (‘Metaphysics,’ 206-9).

<sup>31</sup> Brunschwig (‘Metaphysics,’ 208).

highlight the specific nature of a theory, and its differences to other theories, we might hesitate. The Stoics draw a sharp distinction between causes and principles (only one of the principles, the active principle, is a cause), and a conception of metaphysics that associates both closely is therefore alien to their theory. Further, it is not clear that describing the five topics of physics as concerned with primary entities does not to some extent presuppose that, after all, the relevant framework is one that studies being, and accordingly different kinds of beings (entities).

Readers of Aristotle might further think that metaphysics could be understood as the study of being *qua* being, and this kind of study might also be called ontology. Of course, the Stoics do not use Aristotelian notions. But as Brunschwig notes, the Stoics engage in the ontological classification of the items they discuss throughout their philosophy. In logic, they point out that impressions are corporeal and *lekta* incorporeal; in ethics, they explain that wisdom is corporeal, while ‘being wise’ (a predicate) is incorporeal; and so on. Insofar as the Stoics highlight these issues, we might say that discussions of this kind in physics, ethics, and logic add up to a Stoic ontology.<sup>32</sup> However, it is important to describe this in a sufficiently weak manner. While many Stoic discussions are adequately called ‘ontological,’ it is not clear that they are motivated by the question of what it means to say of any object that it is. This would again be a study that can ultimately be described as the study of ‘what is’ (even if not as the study of being in a Platonic sense), understood as a study that goes beyond physics in offering some kind of deeper understanding of reality. I thus suggest that we should be more cautious than Brunschwig is. The fact that we have occasion to speak of

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<sup>32</sup> This is what Brunschwig suggests (‘Metaphysics,’ 209).

‘Stoic metaphysics’ is largely the result of us, or later philosophers, viewing the Stoics through the lens of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Talk about ‘Stoic ontology’ is clearly more directly rooted in the texts. But even here, it seems important to keep in mind that we are not referring to a theory that is separate from particular investigations in physics, logic, and ethics, or that would offer a deeper understanding of reality than these disciplines do.

### **3. Somethings, being, and not-being**

Suppose my suggestion is right, and the Stoics aim to turn away from a conception of philosophy according to which there is a science that studies ‘what is,’ and that thereby gives us, in some sense, the deepest or most fundamental understanding of reality. If this is what the Stoics do, then it would appear that they could take one of their philosophical motivations from a thesis raised in Plato’s *Sophist*: that the notion of being is equally puzzling as the notion of not-being, even though it might at first seem much more obvious that the latter notion is problematic (245e). Scholars have long supposed that the Stoics studied the *Sophist* in detail. If this is so, then it seems as if this point might have caught their interest. In other words, a philosophy which aims to get away from the question “what is being?” as the framing question of philosophy might also aim to escape from the inherited framework of philosophical theories that start out from a *distinction* between being and not-being.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. D. Sedley, ‘Stoic Metaphysics in Rome,’ in R. Salles (ed.), *Metaphysics, Soul, and Ethics in Ancient Thought* (Oxford, 2005), 117-142, 118.

The Eleatic Stranger argues that, if we can refer to something as something (*ti*), it is (237d).<sup>34</sup> Clearly, the Stoics do not accept this argument.<sup>35</sup> Quite the contrary, their highest genus, ‘somethings,’ is genuinely the supreme genus; ‘what is’ is not an even higher genus. The Eleatic Stranger makes the above point in the context of considerations about not-being. Not-being, according to the discussion in the *Sophist*, is perplexing since we can talk about it. If we talk about it, then surely it seems that we refer to something (*ti*). But this seems implausible, given that what is not is not (237b-e). The Stoic theory does not encounter the familiar problems about not-being, because it does not operate with a distinction between being and not-being. Only corporeals exist, but this does not translate into the claim that incorporeals *are not*.<sup>36</sup> While the Stoics assign a different ontological status to bodies, incorporeals, and concepts, they do not say of anything that it is not, or is nothing.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. the famous discussion at the end of Rp. V, where the question of what *doxa* refers to comes up. It is impossible that *doxa* refers to nothing, so it must refer to something (*ti*) (478b). But in this passage, it is not inferred that therefore it refers to what is.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Brunschwig (‘Supreme Genus,’ 118). As Brunschwig discusses, it is noteworthy that Plato, when he introduces the distinction between being and becoming, does not say that there is a higher genus, which then divides up into what is and what becomes. *Timaeus* 27d has been discussed as a passage that the Stoics might have read or misread in this fashion, so that they would actually be taking their notion of ‘something’ from Plato. However, this view implies an inaccurate reconstruction of the Stoic theory. Cf. Brunschwig (‘Supreme Genus,’ 117-118).

<sup>36</sup> Rather, they *subsist* (*huparchein*). Galen, *On medical method* 10.155,1-8 (SVF 2.322 = LS 27G). There are many difficult questions here about the precise interpretation of this notion,



Inwood writes that in “the mainstream Stoic theory, ‘what is’ is simply identified with ‘body’ so that ‘what is not’ must be identified with ‘the incorporeal’”.<sup>38</sup> However, this inference should be resisted. It is not irrelevant whether we describe the early Stoics’ first distinction as one between corporeals and incorporeals, then adding that only corporeals exist, or as a distinction between what is and what is not. The first way of presenting the doctrine can be gathered from Sextus Empiricus, who quotes just the bare outline of the Stoic theory—the supreme genus ‘somethings,’ the distinction between bodies and incorporeals, and the list of incorporeals—combined with a passage in Alexander of

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questions that go beyond this paper. The crucial point for our purposes is that the Stoics characterize incorporeals, concepts, and so on, without drawing on a distinction between being and not-being.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Brunschwig (‘Metaphysics,’ 213-227). The ontological status of concepts is particularly difficult; see Brunschwig (‘Metaphysics,’ 220-227) and Victor Caston, (‘Something and Nothing: The Stoics on Concepts and Universals,’ *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1999), 145-213). Brunschwig argues that concepts are ‘not-somethings’, while Caston argues that they are ‘non-existent somethings’. I cannot enter here into the difficult questions involved. The disagreement between Brunschwig and Caston arises from concerns about the Stoic attitude to Platonic Forms and universal concepts. For the purposes of my argument, it only matters that the Stoics do not employ a category of nothingness or not-being when they describe the ontological status of concepts.

<sup>38</sup> Inwood, *Letters*, 122.

Aphrodisias, who says that the Stoics ‘legislate’ that ‘existent’ is only said of bodies.<sup>39</sup> The second way of portraying things is Seneca’s, and, insofar as we think that he is describing the early theory that we are concerned with here, it is misleading.

Inwood presents the above view in his commentary on Seneca’s *Letter 58*. In this letter, Seneca disagrees with a different Stoic view (note that this different Stoic view is also not the ‘orthodox’ early Stoic view that is the subject of this paper). Outlining his own position, Seneca writes “I divide ‘what is’ into these species: things are corporeal or incorporeal; there is no third possibility.” (58.14) That is, Seneca begins from the supreme genus ‘what is,’ and takes the position that both corporeals and incorporeals are. Seneca thus departs in a fundamental way from earlier Stoic philosophy. According to Inwood, Seneca’s division is not orthodox, but is “compatible with the key tenets of Stoic corporealism”.<sup>40</sup> If what I have argued is persuasive, it is not. For a key tenet of Stoic corporealism would be that philosophy does not begin with the question “what is being?” This, however, is precisely the kind of philosophy that Seneca aims to revive in *Letter 58*. Seneca *frames* his investigation in *Letter 58* as an investigation into being. Interestingly, he takes it that he must make a case for this. At the beginning of the letter, Seneca talks about ways in which the Latin language is impoverished, not having words for this or that. These reflections lead up to the complaint that two rather central notions of Greek philosophy, *ousia* and *to on*, have no obvious Latin counterpart. This may appear to be philosophically harmless. Seneca often reflects on how

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<sup>39</sup> SE M 10.218 = SVF 2.331 = LS 27D; *On Aristotle’s Topics* 301, 19-25 = SVF 2.329 = LS 27B.

<sup>40</sup> Inwood, *Letters*, 122.

technical philosophy may or may not be, and a roundabout way of approaching metaphysical questions could be a version of this.<sup>41</sup> But at this particular point, Seneca seems to be doing more: he is setting his philosophizing into the framework of the study of being, and he is aware that he needs to do some explaining. Seneca assumes that the addressee of his letter—or for that matter, his reader—will push him, and ask what he intended with his lengthy introduction about the defects of the Latin language. The purpose, he says, was that *he wants* to discuss *essentia*, and as it turns out, even more so ‘what is’ (*to on*) (58.17). His discussion of ‘what is’ turns immediately to Plato, and then Seneca develops his position on ‘what is’ as the highest genus. I suggest that Seneca’s *Letter 58*, which has always been considered a key piece of testimony on Stoic ontology, testifies to the point that I am trying to show—that, from the point of view of Stoic philosophy, it is a substantive question whether one should frame one’s investigations in terms of an inquiry into being (and that the early Stoic answer to this question is ‘no’).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Inwood, *Letters*, Introduction and commentaries throughout.

<sup>42</sup> Seneca’s argument is not yet complete when he is done with the issues about terminology, with explaining his supreme genus, and with comparing it to the older Stoic one. He turns to six Platonic uses of ‘what is’ (16-22), and then to the question of why these technicalities are even relevant (25-34). In between, he offers an analysis of why Plato would not say that the objects of sense-perception ‘are’ in the strict sense (22-24). This discussion becomes Seneca’s resource for defending his interest in the Platonic notion of being; this, to him, is the salutary side of Platonism. Plato’s metaphysics, as Seneca portrays it, has a truly important implication: that the body and its perceptions, ailments as well as pleasures, in fact do not exist. This idea can be put to work in our strategies of dealing with the burdens

In commenting on his own position regarding the supreme genus, Seneca says that, since we never run into a distinction between ‘what is’ and ‘what is not,’ there is no need to move to a *higher genus* than ‘what is,’ and thus no need to move on to what other Stoics considered the supreme genus, ‘somethings.’ Seneca here implies that one might move to ‘somethings’ as the highest genus in order to capture both what is and what is not. But this is not how the Stoics introduce ‘somethings’ as the highest genus. Seneca goes on to say that there is a different Stoic view, one that he rejects: that the primary genus is ‘something’ (58.15). He continues: “I will add an account of why they think so. They say, ‘in nature, some things are, some are not’” (58.15).<sup>43</sup> That is, Seneca now explicitly ascribes to some other Stoics a distinction between what is and what is not. We need not enter here into the question of

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of human life. Perhaps this contributes to Seneca’s reasons for reviving the project of the study of being within Stoicism: that if we adopted this Platonic framework of investigation, we might be able to integrate, at least to some extent, the idea that some things exist to a lesser degree. As if he were a mild-natured therapist, Seneca calls the Forms Plato’s “personal baggage” (58.18). He almost makes the Forms look like an eccentric aberration within a philosophy, namely Platonism, which is on the whole rather useful. But of course, Seneca knows as well as we do that this would miss the point of Plato’s metaphysics.

<sup>43</sup> And further: “[...] but nature embraces even those things which are not and which occur to the mind (such as Centaurs, Giants, and whatever else is shaped by an erroneous thought process and begins to take on some appearance, although it does not have reality).” (58.15) There are difficult questions here regarding the reasoning that Seneca ascribes to the Stoics (cf. Inwood, *Letters*, 120-123, and Brunschwig, ‘Metaphysics,’ 220-222).

whom precisely it is that Seneca refers to. Rather, we should note that the early Stoics do not operate with a distinction between being and not-being. Insofar as Seneca ascribes this distinction to them, his account is misleading.

Why is this important? For the purposes of his own position, Seneca thinks he can begin with the notion of what is, and never get to the notion of what is not. This proposal, I think, is in disagreement with Plato's point in the *Sophist*: that the notion of being is as complicated as that of not-being and intimately tied to it. According to the *Sophist*, we inevitably have to face the well-known difficulties about not-being if we frame philosophy as the study of being. While it is impossible to know whether the early Stoics shared this concern, it seems conceivable to me that they did. Their turn away from the question "what is being?" involves, I think, the further move of not making a distinction between being and not-being central to their theory.

#### **4. One cause of all movement**

According to my interpretation so far, the Stoics are Sons of the Earth in the metaphorical sense that they look at the earth and think that the most basic account that philosophy can offer is an account that explains the physical universe. Within this physical universe, movement is pervasive. Its explanation lies in one unified account: god is the cause of movement. Human action must fit into this unified account. In the remainder of this paper, I shall explore this idea further—that Stoic philosophy identifies, in some sense, *one* cause for all movements of and within the universe.

The claim that there is *one* cause for all movement, including agency, can also be found in Plato's *Phaedo*, as a view that Socrates puts forward. While it is difficult to assess the extent to which the Stoics might have engaged with the *Phaedo*, it is plausible to assume that, in particular, Platonic passages about Socrates' biography are of great interest to them.<sup>44</sup>

In *Phaedo* 95c-99d, Plato presents a piece of Socratic pseudo-biography. Socrates, sitting in his prison-cell waiting for the execution of his death sentence, tells his friends about his intellectual development. When he was young, he was interested in the theories of the natural philosophers. It seemed to him that their project—figuring out the causes of generations and destructions—was important. However, he did not like their views; they talked about water and fire and so on. Only one of them seemed to have a more promising idea. Anaxagoras said that mind (*nous*) was the cause of things. Socrates began to read his writings, since this sounded right. But what a disappointment! Once Anaxagoras got into more detail, he talked about the same kinds of things as all the rest of the natural philosophers: things like water and fire.

Socrates thinks that this is obviously false. The cause of him sitting in his prison cell waiting for the deadly drink (even though he could have escaped), he says, resides in his mind, and in the fact that this is what he considers best. The cause of him sitting in his cell, he says, is

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<sup>44</sup> For discussion of the Stoics' engagement with Plato's *Phaedo*, cf. D. Sedley, 'Chrysippus on psychophysical causality' ['Causality'], in J. Brunschwig and M. Nussbaum (eds.), *Passions and Perceptions* (Cambridge 1993), 313-331. Sedley argues that the *Phaedo* was crucial for the Stoic picture of Socrates, as well as relevant to Stoic thought about causality.

not to be found in an analysis of what goes on in his sinews and bones. That he has sinews and bones is a necessary condition for him sitting there, but it is not its cause. In a remarkable way, Socrates links the explanation of human action to the explanation of generations and destructions in the cosmos. He wants one kind of explanation for both: *nous*.

There are many ways in which the Stoics would disagree with Socrates' account in the *Phaedo*, and even more so, with other ideas put forward in this dialogue. Most obviously, the Stoics reject Platonic Forms. Similarly important, the Stoics discuss *logos* as the cause, not *nous*, a difference that would deserve detailed discussion.<sup>45</sup> And further, Stoic theory of motivation and agency gives a different role to the good than is envisaged in Socrates' autobiographical remarks. However, one prominent feature of Socrates' remarks formulates a challenge that the Stoics take up: that we are to find *one* kind of cause for all movements in the universe. This is a remarkable proposal, and the fact that the Stoics endorse it is central to their theory. Reason (*logos*), or god, for them is the one cause of all movement, human action and the movements of the universe. But if that is the type of explanation one wants for everything, then everything must be permeated with reason, and soul. And if everything is to be permeated with soul, one needs to come up with a theory of soul occurring in degrees—since, obviously, bodies move in rather different ways. This is precisely the Stoic picture.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> I am grateful to John Cooper for emphasizing this point in his comments on an earlier version of this paper, presented at the APA at Baltimore 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2-3 (= SVF 2.988, part = LS 53A), see above Section 1.

The Stoic commitment to the view that reason is the cause is, strange as this may sound to the ears of the Platonist, key to understanding their notion of corporeals. Part of the Socratic intuition is that there is only one kind of cause. It is not as if, on some level, there is mind as a cause, and on a different level of explanation, sinews and bones are causes. That we have sinews and bones is merely a necessary condition for the cause—mind—being able to be a cause (99a-b). The way in which mind is a cause must explain Socrates' sitting in his cell. If this is part of the point, and if it is, on the other hand, hard to dispute that if he moved his bones he would be standing up and walking, then a way must be found in which walking or sitting is directly caused by mind (or, as the Stoics will say, reason). And this is only possible, from the point of view of the Stoics, if soul (understood as an extension of reason) physically pervades the human body. It is in these terms that we can understand what may otherwise appear a rather odd bit of testimony, a passage that relates an internal Stoic dispute about walking:

Cleanthes and his student Chrysippus did not agree on what walking is. Cleanthes says that it is *pneuma* extended from the leading part of the soul all the way to the feet, while Chrysippus says that it is the leading part of the soul itself. (Seneca, *Letter* 113, tr. Inwood)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Inwood (*Letters*, 285-6) for a brief discussion and reference to earlier discussions of this passage. These earlier discussions focus on the context in Seneca's letter, that is, on the idea that the soul is an animal (which raises the difficult question of whether or how it is a distinct animal within the animal that the person is).



This dispute mirrors the distinction between the two senses in which the Stoics speak of god. The same distinction applies to the human soul. According to Cleanthes, it is soul in the sense of breath that moves the legs. According to Chrysippus, the leading part of the soul, reason, moves the legs. Why would Chrysippus take this apparently more extreme view? Of course, we can only speculate. A possible reason is this. If we want to emphasize the point that it is reason's assent that sets off the impulse to action, so that reason is the cause of action, then we might want to focus on the fact that reason *governs* its extensions. When Socrates moves his legs, this may involve not only his reason in the strict sense, but also the breath that extends throughout his legs. But this breath is governed by reason, and thus is ultimately reason that moves Socrates' legs.

Again, we do not know whether or to what extent the early Stoics engaged with the *Phaedo*. But we can imagine the disagreement between Cleanthes and Chrysippus coming up in response to Socrates' case.<sup>48</sup> Could there be a more enigmatic example for the discussion of agency than Socrates' decision not to escape from prison, even though he was given the opportunity? Socrates' sitting or walking is far from a trivial case. To walk, in Socrates' case, would be to accept the offer to escape the death penalty.

Most importantly, Cleanthes' and Chrysippus' explanations of agency both honor Socrates' challenge, as formulated in the pseudo-autobiographical digression in the *Phaedo*. They

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<sup>48</sup> On Socrates, and Socrates' death, as an example that figures in Stoic thought, cf. Sedley 'Causality' (316-318).

offer explanations of action that fit into general accounts of the generations and destructions in the universe. They both hold that, in a particular action, it is an agent's reason that causes his movement. But the agent's reason is really only part of the universe's reason, which is the cause of all movement in it.<sup>49</sup> Stoic thought about bodies, thus, is immediately tied to Stoic thought about reason. I hope this adds strength to my thesis that, while the Stoics are Sons of the Earth, they are sophisticated Sons of the Earth. Their philosophy begins from a complex notion of corporeals, one that is intimately tied to the Stoic conception of reason.

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<sup>49</sup> I am greatly indebted to audiences at Michigan and Baltimore for comments, as well as to the extremely helpful notes of the journal's referee. One of the two central contentions of my paper—that the early Stoics do not frame philosophy as the study of being—received much valuable feedback from Victor Caston. At the APA at Baltimore 2007, John Cooper commented on my paper. He generously gave me a written version of his comments, many of which touch on the same point, as well as on my proposal that the Stoics engage with Plato's *Phaedo*. I have benefited enormously from his comments, as well as from discussion during and after the session at Baltimore.

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