Purgare Terras: The Moral Meaning of the Stoic *Ekpyrosis* in Seneca

The relationship between between Stoic ethics and Stoic cosmology has been a contentious subject in the history of scholarship. Traditionally, scholars have been hard pressed to see any necessary connection between Stoicism's highly eccentric conception of the physical world and its more broadly palatable principles of moral evaluation, supposing, as Dirk Baltzy puts it, "that Stoic moral philosophy largely floats free from Stoic metaphysics, and especially from Stoic theology."[1] This conundrum arises from an apparent tension at the core of Stoic principles. As Julia Annas sums up the issue, "it is quite unclear how cosmic nature *could* provide the foundations for Stoic ethics in particular, or help in any way to produce its distinctive theses" since, for the Stoics, virtue is the only thing necessary for happiness, and knowledge of the cosmos "cannot at all alter the content of that thought."[2] Moreover, the abiding influence of Stoic ethics upon thinkers and even entire intellectual traditions with cosmologies radically opposed to Stoicism seems itself to be a testament to the easy separation between the former and the latter.

In recent years, however, significant effort has been made to revise this conventional assessment by scholars working across disciplines. Articles and entire monographs have been dedicated to demonstrating the interpenetration of Stoic ideas at every level of analysis.[3] As perhaps the most eminent Stoic philosopher, Seneca has not been left out of this holistic reevaluation process. His understudied tragedies as well as his *Natural Questions* have been brought into conversation with his moral essays and

[1] Baltzy 2019: n5
[2] Annas 1993:164-165
[3] See, for example, Boeri 2009; White 1985; Annas 2007 (revised from her earlier understanding); Betegh 2003; Bobzien 1997

epistles.[4] In 2006, a group of classicists and philosophers even dedicated an entire volume to the task of "seeing Seneca whole."[5]

In this paper, I wish to contribute to this trend by analyzing the Stoic psychical doctrine of the *ekpyrosis*—the natural and periodic self-destruction of the cosmos by fire—in light of Senecan moral psychology. Contrary to the assertions of traditional scholarship that "there seems to be no reason within Stoic doctrine which would require a periodic purification and regeneration of the universe," for Seneca at least, the nature and function of cosmic destruction is not at all isolated from ethical concerns, but springs directly from his understanding of moral and psychological healing through the process of purgation.[6] Across the entirety of Seneca's corpus, the *ekpyrosis* and related apocalyptic events are consistently portrayed in terms, imagery, and metaphors that directly parallel his depiction of the process of personal moral reformation and psychological therapy, suggesting that the same dynamics which govern his understanding of intimate personal behavior reflect his larger conception of the workings of the cosmos as a whole.

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At the beginning of his *Consolation to Marcia* on the recent death of her son, Seneca offers to the daughter of the historian Aulius Cremutius Cordus a psychological methodology that would make modern therapists question his competency as a counselor.

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[4] Williams 2012; Rosenmyer 1989
[5] Volk and Williams 2006
[6] Lapidge 1978: 181. Long 1985: 13-37 sums up the state of scholarship on the *ekpyrosis* at his time of writing: "Can that master of dialectic [Chryssipus] have seriously indulged in speculations, not to say firm doctrines, so bizarre, so incrusted with mythology, so apparently pointless or ridiculous either as science or as protreptic for the rationally based moral life?" This leads Long to offer his own defense of the internal coherence of the doctrine within the Stoic system, but whereas he sees it as "an inevitable consequence of mainstream Stoic thinking on causation, time, physical process and theology," I maintain that it is more closely tied to Stoic moral psychology.

Whereas most of those who wish to bring comfort to an aggrieved person "proceed gently and ply with soft words (*Alii itaque molliter agant et blandiantur Marc* 1.5)" in recognition of the sensitivity of their subject, Seneca announces that he will do exactly the opposite.[7] Instead of downplaying Marcia's sufferings, he intends to bluntly remind her of all of her previous misfortunes (*antiqua mala in memoriam reducam*) and to cast them in the most hideous possible light, pledging to continue this process even, if need be, against her own will (*si minus, vel invita*).

Lest the recipient of the letter immediately burn the document in horror, Seneca is quick to explain himself. He will not adopt such a practice because he is callous or sadistic, but rather because he cares about Marcia's well-being all too much (1.8):

> Quemadmodum omnia vitia penitus insidunt, nisi, dum surgunt, oppressa sunt, ita haec quoque tristia et misera et in se saevientia ipsa novissime acerbitate pascuntur et fit infelicis animi prava voluptas dolor. Cupissem itaque primis temporibus ad istam curationem accedere. Leniore medicina fuisset oriens adhuc restringenda vis; vehementius contra inveterata pugnandum est. Nam vulnerum quoque sanitas facilis est, dum a sanguine recentia sunt; tunc et uruntur et in altum revocantur et digitos scrutantium recipiunt, ubi corrupta in malum ulcus verterunt. Non possum nunc per obsequium nec molliter adsequi tam durum dolorem; frangendus est.

> Just as all vices become deep-rooted unless they are crushed when they spring up, so, too, such a state of sadness and wretchedness, with its self-afflicted torture, feeds at last upon its very bitterness, and the grief of an unhappy mind becomes a morbid pleasure. And so I should have liked to approach your cure in the first stages of your sorrow. While it was still young, a gentler remedy might have been used to check its violence; against inveterate evils the fight must be more vehement. This is likewise true of wounds—they are easy to heal while they are still fresh and bloody. When they have festered and turned into a wicked sore, then they must be cauterized and, opened up to the very bottom, must submit to probing fingers. As it is, I cannot possibly be a match for such hardened grief by being considerate and gentle; it must be crushed.

[7] Unless otherwise noted, all Latin translations are my own.

Here, in perhaps the most graphic and disturbing description in his oeuvre, Seneca sums up his own philosophy of moral and psychological healing through the process of purgation.[8] Indeed, throughout his corpus, Seneca develops a comprehensive medical analogy to illustrate the nature, proliferation, and eventual elimination of evil. Evils of all kinds—whether stemming from vice or simple misfortune—are compared to diseased and infected bodily tissue that must be dug up at the root and burned away completely to restore the body to health. All remedies that fall short of complete eradication of this contagion are not only ineffective but counterproductive; instead of actually mending the wound, they only allow it to fester. The task of a proper moral counselor (likened to a physician) therefore, is to deal as harshly with his patient as the total elimination of the malady demands. "It is a poor physician that lacks faith in his ability to cure (*mali mediei est desperare, ne curet*)," and the good doctor ought not to merely placate the afflicted but to "wrestle with their troubles (*luctetur cum vitiis Clem* 17.2)." In *De Beneficiis*, he elaborates on this idea (6.15.2):

> Itaque medico, si nihil amplius quam manum tangit et me inter eos, quos perambulat, ponit sine ullo adfectu facienda aut vitanda praecipiens, nihil amplius debeo, quia me non tamquam amicum videt, sed tamquam imperatorem.
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> If, therefore, a physician does nothing more than feel my pulse and put me on the list of those whom he visits in his rounds...I owe him nothing more than his fee, because he views me, not as a friend, but as a commander.

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[8] Seneca uses exactly same tactic in the *ad Helviam* (2.2-3), although he is a bit less gruesome with his own mother: omnia proferam et rescindam, quae iam obducta sunt. Dicet aliquis: 'Quod hoc genus est consolandi, obliterata mala revocare et animum. suarum conspectu conlocare vix unius patientem?' Sed is cogitet, quaecumque usque eo perniciosa sunt, ut contra remedium convaluerint, plerumque contrariis curari. Omnis itaque luctus illi suos, omnia lugubria admovebo; hoc erit non molli via mederi, sed urere ac secare. "I shall expose and tear open all the wounds that have already closed over. But someone will say: 'What sort of consolation is this, to recall ills that are blotted out and to set the mind, when it is scarcely able to bear one sorrow, in full view of all its sorrows?' But let him reflect that whenever diseases become so malignant that they grow strong in spite of treatment they are then commonly treated by opposite methods. And so to the stricken mind I shall exhibit all its distresses, all its garbs of woe; my purpose will be not to heal by gentle measures, but to cauterize and cut."

At the heart of the analogy lies Seneca's Stoic convictions about the material nature of evil and the radical interconnectedness of all things. Baltzy observes that for the Stoics, the entirety of the cosmos is conceived of as one organic and material body at once synonymous with both Nature and God.[9] Everything from the flitting passions of a single individual to the rotational axes of planets are conceived of as interconnected 'parts' of this body, which relate intimately to each other in a relationship of universal *sympatheia*.[10] As Chrysippus has it, "A drop of wine penetrates the whole ocean" (*SVF* 2.479-80). While *sympatheia* is responsible for binding the particles of the universe together harmoniously, it is also responsible for disturbing and polluting them, a distinctively negative form of the relationship that serves as the very premise of Senecan tragedy.[11] In fact, from the time of Posidonius, the Greek Stoics used a special term, *krasis* (Latin: *contagio*), to refer to this harmful subdivision of the concept.[12] Moreover, it is no coincidence that we should find Seneca using the language of disease specifically to describe the functioning of sympathetic *krasis*. For in fact, as Thomas G. Rosenmeyer points out, the concept itself seems to have arisen in the context of Hippocratic medicine.[13]

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[9] Baltzy 2019: n3
[10] Rosenmyer 1989: 107-112
[11] So Ker 2011: xxxii, "The world of Senecan tragedy is dominated by the interior moral landscape of the characters as they make misguided judgments about what is most valuable. It is equally defined, however, by the cosmic sympathy of the whole universe, as internal passions and crimes unleash the infernal forces of the underworld…or provoke unusual events such as omens or eclipses at the level of nature writ large." See also Trinacty 2015: 36.
[12] Rosenmyer 1989: 110-117, esp. 112: "*Sympatheia* inspires both jubilant praise of the organic beauty of the order created by the divinity and grisly catalogues of that order gone wrong…when one constituent of the cosmos is disturbed or off balance, the whole world, because of the total interconnectedness, is affected. As one of the texts (*SVF* 2.1013) puts it: "if a person is cut in his finger, the whole body suffers."
[13] Ibid, 111, quotes Hippocrates' *On Nourishment*: "There is one confluence, one common vitality, and all things are in sympathy within the human body."

In applying this Stoic metaphysical insight to the moral sphere, Seneca is adamant about the impossibility of merely containing passions and vices. "No matter how small these evils are," he tells Lucilius in Letter 85, "they grow greater. That which is harmful never keeps within bounds. No matter how trifling diseases are at the beginning, they creep on apace; and sometimes the slightest augmentation of disease lays low the enfeebled body! (*Adice nunc, quod ista, quamvis exigua sint, in maius excedunt. Numquam perniciosa servant modum. Quamvis levia initia morborum serpunt et aegra corpora minima interdum mergit accessio* 85.12)."[14] Although he touches upon the contagious nature of evil in almost every work, Seneca develops the point most extensively in *De Ira*, an moral treatise which advances into a profound meditation on the nature of evil, and where this most dangerous of passions is likened to a hostile army overlooking the walls of a fortified city (1.8.2):

> In primis, inquam, finibus hostis arcendus est; nam cum intravit et portis se intulit, modum a captivis non accipit. Neque enim sepositus est animus et extrinsecus speculatur adfectus, ut illos non patiatur ultra quam oportet procedere, sed in adfectum ipse mutatur ideoque non potest utilem illam vim et salutarem proditam iam infirmatamque revocare. Non enim, ut dixi, separatas ista sedes suas diductasque habent, sed affectus et ratio in melius peiusque mutatio animi est.
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> The enemy, I repeat, must be stopped at the very frontier; for if he has passed it, and advanced within the city-gates, he will not respect any bounds set by his captives. For the mind is not a member apart, nor does it view the passions merely objectively, thus forbidding them to advance farther than they ought, but it is itself transformed into the passion and is, therefore, unable to recover its former useful and saving power when this has once been betrayed and weakened. For, as I said before, these two do not dwell separate and distinct, but passion and reason are only the transformation of the mind toward the better or the worse.

[14] In Letter 18.15, Seneca compares the passions to a wildfire: Nam etiam maximum solida non receperunt; rursus arida et corripi facilia scintillam quoque fovent usque in incendium. Ita est, mi Lucili, ingentis irae exitus furor est. "For solid timbers have repelled a very great fire; conversely, dry and easily inflammable stuff nourishes the slightest spark into a conflagration. So it is with anger, my dear Lucilius; the outcome of a mighty anger is madness."

Understood in light of the aforementioned context of Stoic metaphysics, when he refers to the 'spread' or 'growth' of evils, Seneca is not speaking in a simply metaphorical or even primarily psychological sense, but is referring at the most general level to a literal accumulation of material evils. In Letter 106, Seneca clearly affirms his acceptance of the Stoic tenet that "emotions are bodily things (*adfectus corpora sint*)" which contain the power to "change the tones and shapes of substances (*quae colorem habitumque corporum mutant*)," and that, "therefore, so is evil (*ergo et malitia* 106.5-7)." Consequently, when he says in the above letter that "the mind is not a member apart (*neque enim sepositus est animus*)" from the body and that "it is itself transformed into passion (*sed in adfectum ipse mutatur*)," this applies not only to persons themselves but can be equally implied to mean that the individual mind is ontologically coterminous with the universal body of Nature. The cosmos as a whole is fundamentally altered by personal emotions and actions, which is why, as he also states sharply in *De Ira*, the anger that starts at dinner tables and in royal bedchambers can lay low entire civilizations and physical environments (1.2.2):

> Aspice nobilissimarum civitatum fundamenta vix notabilia; has ira deiecit. Aspice solitudines per multa milia sine habitatore desertas; has ira exhausit. Aspice tot memoriae proditos duces mali exempla fati; alium ira in cubili suo confodit, alium intra sacra mensae iura percussit.
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> Behold the most glorious cities whose foundations can scarcely be traced—anger cast them down. Behold solitudes stretching lonely for many miles without a single dweller—anger laid them waste. Behold all the leaders who have been handed down to posterity as instances of an evil fate—anger stabbed this one in his bed, struck down this one amid the sanctities of the feast.

Given the physical aggregative effect of moral and psychological evil, it is even more imperative that such a pestilence be utterly eviscerated at the source, for "to combine the sick with the healthy is to spread disease (*initium morbi est aegris sana*

miscere Tranq. 7.4)" not only internally or even between persons, but throughout the universe itself.[15] At the level of our daily interactions with others, this means that we must take the *public* responsibility, when we come across people disposed toward evil, to "strike home, keep at them, and charge them with this duty [i.e. of reforming their lives], dropping all double meanings, syllogisms, hair-splitting, and the other side-shows of ineffective smartness (*Hunc illorum adfectum cum videris, urge, hoc preme, hoc onera relictis ambiguitatibus et syllogismis et cavillationibus et ceteris acuminis inriti ludicris Ep.* 108.12)"; a responsibility which stems from our recognizition that their faults are a danger not only to themselves but to their entire environment. On the plane of personal moral introspection, it manifests itself as an obligation to "as far as possible, prove yourself guilty, hunt up charges against yourself; play the part, first of accuser, then of judge, only last of intercessor (*Ideo quantum potes, te ipse coargue, inquire in te; accusatoris primum partibus fungere, deinde iudicis, novissime deprecatoris. Aliquando te offende Ep*. 29.10)." Such an understanding is even strikingly manifested in the language of expiation in Seneca's tragedies. So, for example, in the *Phoenissae*, after Oedipus has discovered the gravity of his crime and attempts to flee from it by blinding himself and going into exile, he is left with the palpable sense that his evil still remains,

[15] Contra Konstan 2015: 183, who argues that "the chief object of Seneca's teaching was to help people rid themselves of passions that were destructive of their own peace of mind and of social ties in general." While not denying that these were real goals of Seneca's moral psychology, I maintain that its more overarching purpose is a metaphysical one: Seneca is concerned above all with literally decontaminating the universe of evil. The fact that he thinks of passions as physical things which spread like disease is why he can protest vehemently against Aristotle's so apparently level-headed call for the moderation of emotions. Modicus affectus nihil aliud quam malum modicum est "Moderate passion is nothing other than a moderate evil" (*De Ira 3.10.4*), and by its nature evil is unable to remain static. See also, e.g. *De Ira* 3.42.1-2: Careamus hoc malo purgemusque mentem et exstirpemus radicitus, quae quamvis tenuia undecumque haeserint renascentur, et iram non temperemus, sed ex toto removeamus—quod enim malae rei temperamentum est? "Let us be freed from this evil, let us clear it from our minds and tear it up by the roots, for if there should linger the smallest traces, it will grow again; and let us not try to regulate our anger, but be rid of it altogether—for what regulation can there be of any evil thing?"

that "I am still burdening this earth (*ego hoc solum premo*)" and infecting the air "with my pestilential mouth (*has ego auras ore pestifero traho*)" before recognizing that "the evil is embedded in me (*inhaeret nefas*)" and that the only hope for its destruction is his own complete annihilation (*Phoen*. 219-231).[16] Similarly, in the *Hercules Furens*, after killing his wife and children in a fit of madness, Hercules comes to the conclusion that the only way to restore order to the world is his own purgative death by fire: "I am eager to purge the earth (*purgare terras propero HF* 1279)." Indeed, Seneca is so insistent about the inveterate and contaminative nature of evil that at times he seems pessimistic about the efficacy of philosophical instruction itself in cases where the instructed person has not been thoroughly detoxified from a particularly noxious strain of the virus: "Not even the power of universal philosophy, though it summon all its strength for the purpose, will remove from the soul what is now a stubborn and chronic disease (*Ne ipsa quidem universae philosophiae vis, licet totas in hoc vires suas advocet, duram iam et veterem animis extrahet pestem Ep*. 94.24)."[17]

[16] Compare Oedipus' command to his daughter with the language Seneca uses to refer to Marcia's psychological purgation and the intractable nature of *vitia*. Whereas his daughter foolishly if innocently believes that her father might simply change his way of thinking (sed flecte mentem) and cast off his evils with a "sturdy resolve" (magno robore), Oedipus knows that the gravity of his crime demands something far more severe. His body is so contaminated that it must be totally and gruesomely destroyed, so that the evil within might be extirpated at the root; 231-2: inhaeret ac recrudescit nefas subinde "the evil is embedded in me and breaks forth repeatedly"; lines 89-90: Unica Oedipodae est salus non esse salvum "The one safety for Oedipus is not to be saved"; lines 159-165: effringe corpus corque tot scelerum capax evelle, totos viscerum nuda sinus;fractum incitatis ictibus guttur sonetlaceraeve fixis unguibus venae fluant. aut derige iras quo soles: haec vulnerarescissa multo sanguine ac tabe inriga; hac extrahe animam duram, inexpugnabilem. "Break open my body and tear out this heart, capable of so many crimes, lay bare all my coiling guts; smash my throat with forceful blows so it chokes, or implant your nails to tear my veins so they flood. Or else direct your anger as before; pull open these wounds, drench them with blood and gore, and by this route drag out this tough and impregnable life."

[17] So, also in Letter 94.6: ipsa removenda sunt, non praecipiendum quod fieri illis manentibus non potest. "The faults themselves must be removed, and precepts should not be given which cannot possibly be carried out while the faults remain."

As we have seen, intrinsically bound up with this purgative process is often, unfortunately, an intense amount of suffering, the terrible reality of which Seneca does not at all downplay. "When the cure is foul, being healed is repugnant (*Ubi turpis est medicina, sanari piget*)" laments Creon in the *Oedipus* (517). Twice, Seneca will note that poisons have often indirectly served as remedies (*De Ira* 1.12.6; *Ben* 2.18.8). In *De Ira*, he even relates the harrowing account of a great physician who could only cure the beautiful daughter of a king (whose family refused to see her mutilated by the knife) through the deceptive action of concealing his lance within a sponge (3.39.4). In the end, however, "no treatment seems harsh if the result is salutary (*nec ulla dura videtur curatio, cuius salutaris effectus est* 1.5.3)." Although "for the sake of being cured the sick sometimes have their bones scraped and removed, and their veins pulled out, and sometimes members are amputated which could not be left without causing destruction to the whole body, ills are sometimes for the good of those to whom they come (*Sed si cogitaveris tecum remedii causa quibusdam et radi ossa et legi et extrahi venas et quaedam amputari membra quae sine totius pernicie corporis haerere non poterant, hoc quoque patieris probari tibi, quaedam incommoda pro is esse quibus accidunt Prov*. 3.2-3)." As was observed regarding the good and bad doctor in *De Beneficiis*, the willingness to countenance effective, albeit harsh, restorative measures, is ultimately a sign of the deepest love and friendship. "To every form of punishment will I resort," he can proclaim boldly, "but only as a remedy (*Omne poenae genus remedi loco admoveo De Ira* 1.16.2)."

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After piling up Marcia's misfortunes and analyzing them against the backdrop of classical history, Seneca's letter takes a sharp and unexpected cosmological turn. While the abundantly attested fact that Fortune is fickle in even the most exalted of human lives should cause her to see how familiar is her own situation, the fundamental reason why Marcia should not mourn her own evils is much larger than that. Her son's death is to be welcomed above all because "the compass of eternity is greater than that of the world, since the world renews itself over and over within the bounds of time (*si omni tempori comparetur, cuius maior est mensura quam mundi, utpote cum ille se intra huius spatium totiens remetiatur Marc*. 21.2)." A few chapters later, Seneca will make clear that in speaking of this restorative process, he has in mind nothing other than the Stoic doctrine of the apocalypse, culminating in the destruction of all things by means of the *ekpyrosis* (26.6) .

> Nam si tibi potest solacio esse desideri tui commune fatum, nihil quo stat loco stabit, omnia sternet abducetque secum vetustas...Totos supprimet montes et alibi rupes in altum novas exprimet; maria sorbebit, flumina avertet et commercio gentium rupto societatem generis humani coetumque dissolvet; alibi hiatibus vastis subducet urbes, tremoribus quatiet et ex infimo pestilentiae halitus mittet et 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.

> For if the common fate can be a solace for your yearning, know that nothing will abide where it is now placed, that time will lay all things low and take all things with it...It will level whole mountains, and in another place will pile new rocks on high; it will drink up seas, turn rivers from their courses, and, sundering the communication of nations, break up the association and intercourse of the human race; in other places it will swallow up cities in yawning chasms, will shatter them with earthquakes, and from deep below send forth a pestilential vapour; it will cover with floods the face of the inhabited world, and, deluging the earth, will kill every living creature, and in a huge conflagration it will scorch and burn all mortal 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 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.

At the most general level, Seneca is here deploying a strategy common to all of his *Consolationes*: by calling the bereaved outward to a cosmic perspective, he is able to radically relativize their own paltry human misfortunes, which simply pale in comparison with the amount of destruction that Nature is capable of unleashing.[18] Yet given the central motif of healing through purgation in the *ad Marciam*—and the function that this process plays in Seneca's larger metaphysical conception of evil—his calls attention to the *ekpyrosis* at this point in the letter arguably takes on a far more particularized significance. For just as Marcia's wounds will be healed through pain and purified through cauterization, thus does the universe heal itself by means of a of burning fire "in order that it may begin its life anew (*quo se mundus renovaturus extinguat*)."

That Seneca should compare Marcia's own redemptive suffering to Nature's process of self-regeneration is not surprising. For in fact, in the various references to the *ekpyrosis* and its accompanying apocalyptic events throughout the Senecan corpus, these phenomena are consistently described in a manner remarkably consonant with the ways in which the process of personal moral and psychological healing is depicted. Indeed, in Seneca's fullest account of the apocalypse, presented in the *Natural Questions*, the universe's destruction is explicitly tied to the moral cleansing of evil from the universe's body. The end will come, not, as others have imagined, in accordance with a certain convergence of stars or planets, but "when it seems best to god for the old things to be

[18] Most interpreters tend to focus exclusively on this relativizing aspect of the cosmological turn. So Wilson 2014: 70, argues that "Seneca here works to redirect Marcia's attention away from her son and toward her other relationships [i.e. her relationship toward the cosmos.]" Hine 2014: 4, goes so far as to say that, at this point in the letter, "Marcia fades into the background as Seneca addresses a generalized male audience, to show that the work is not simply a work of private, personal condolence." On my reading, however, Seneca calls attention to the *ekpyrosis* precisely in order to compare its dynamics and function to Marcia's own process of psychological healing.

ended and better things to begin (*cum deo visum ordiri meliora vetera finiri QNat.* 3.28.7)," a time when men have grown so morally corrupt as to pass into the savagery of wild animals (*feris, in quarum homines ingenia transierant* 3.30.7). The purpose of this annihilation should be no mystery to one equipped with a proper understanding of the infectious nature of evil: "so that all may be generated from the beginning again, new and innocent, and no tutor of vice survives (*ut de integro totae rudes innoxiaeque generentur nec supersit in deteriora praeceptor* 3.29.5)." Moreover, the catharsis in the process will once again be compared to bodily diseases and sores: "Just as a disease corrupts healthy bodies and as sores infect the adjacent areas, so all that is closest to the liquifying soil will wash away and dissolve and finally run off (*Quemadmodum in morbum transeunt sana et ulceri vicina consentiunt, ut quaeque proxima terris fluentibus fuerint, ipsa eluentur stillabuntque, deinde decurrent et* 3.29.7)." In fact, Seneca will even go so far as to liken the flood that precedes the conflagration to human sweat and diarrhea (3.30.4):

> Quemadmodum corpora nostra deiectu venter exhaurit, quemadmodum in sudorem eunt vires, ita tellus liquefiet et, aliis causis quiescentibus, intra se quo mergatur inveniet.

> Just as the stomach drains our bodies through diarrhea, and just as our energy goes off in sweat, so the earth will become liquid and, with no other contributory causes, it will find within itself the means of its own inundation.

Although Seneca addresses the topic most extensively in the *Natural Questions*, he refers directly or indirectly to the morally purgative nature of the ekpyrosis in several other works, especially the tragedies. So in the *Thyestes*, the extreme gravity of the main character's crime of eating his own children itself initiates the cosmos' self-destruction mechanism, as Thyestes himself proclaims, "If I would bury my sons as father and commit them to the final fire, I must be burned up (*si natos pater humare et igni tradere extremo volo ego sum cremandus Thy.*1090-93)." In the *Octavia*, a tragedy about Nero's divorce

and exile of his first wife Claudia Octavia, this connection between ethics and cosmology takes on a politically subversive tone, as the protagonist Octavia begs heaven's rulers to "heap fire on the monstrous head of this evil emperor (*utinam nefandi principis dirum caput obruere flammis caelitum rector paret* 227-28)"—a judgement which the character of Seneca himself in turn predicts of his entire wicked age (391-97; 429-34):

> Qui si senescit, tantus in caecum chaos casurus iterum, nunc adest mundo dies supremus ille, qui premat genus impium caeli ruina, rursus ut stirpem novam generet renascens melior, ut quondam tulit iuvenis, tenente regna Saturno poli...Collecta vitia per tot aetates diu in nos redundant; saeculo premimur gravi, quo scelera regnant, saevit impietas furens, turpi libido Venere dominatur potens, luxuria victrix orbis immensas opesiam pridem avaris manibus, ut perdat, rapit.
>
> If the heavens are growing old, doomed despite their immensity to fall back into blind chaos, we are now approaching that final day which will crush this sacrilegious race beneath the collapsing sky. That will allow a reborn and better cosmos to bring forth once again a new progeny, such as it bore in youth when Saturn held the throne of heaven….The vices accumulated over time, over so many ages, are flooding out over us; we are burdened by an oppressive era in which crime reigns, unrighteousness runs mad, lust rules, gaining power through sexual degradation, and triumphant extravagance has long been plundering the world's immense resources with greedy hands, in order to squander them.

Most remarkably, in the *Phaedra*, the philosopher even equates that "sacred fire (*sacer est ignis*)" with the love of God itself: "Nature asserts her power over all. Nothing is immune, and hatred vanishes when love commands; inveterate anger yields to that fire (*Vindicat omnes natura sibi, nihil immune est, odiumque perit, cum iussit amor; veteres cedunt ignibus irae* 353-55)." Additionally, intimations of the *ekpyrosis* may perhaps also be gleaned behind the numerous general references to the healing function of fire in Seneca's writings. At one point in the *Consolation to Marcia*, for example, Seneca the surgeon tells Marcia that he is not the only doctor who operates harshly, but this is even how Nature herself brings us to health: "With violence, insult, and cruelty she will maltreat our bodies. Some she will burn with fire, applied either to punish or to heal (*Corporibus nostris*

impotenter, contumeliose, crudeliter abutetur. Alios ignibus peruret vel in poenam admotis vel in remedium 10.6).” In Letter 50, he tells Lucilius that although it is easier and far preferable to “mold and reconstruct our souls before they are hardened by depravity (*ante animum nostrum formare incipimus et recorrigere, quam indurescat pravitas eius*)” nevertheless, in the same way as “heat unbends curved beams…I do not despair even of a hardened wrongdoer (*Sed nec indurata despero... curvatas trabes calor explicat* 50.6).”

As we have seen by now, against the claims of earlier scholars that the doctrine of the *ekpyrosis* was a simply cosmological doctrine, with no intrinsic connection to the larger ethical foundations of the Stoic system, for Seneca, the moral function of the conflagration arises directly and necessarily from the metaphysical nature of evil. When the material universe has become thoroughly polluted by the accumulated material evils of humanity (*collecta vitia per tot aetates diu in nos redundant*), which include everything from intentional crimes to simple psychological anxieties, the destruction of its own corrupted substance is the universal body’s natural detoxification mechanism. The reason why this process must be cyclic is because moral innocence never lasts for very long: “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 (*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 NatQ* 3.30.8).” The fact that the the cosmos should perish in fire specifically is also well-accounted for in both moral and metaphysical terms. For the Stoics, fire is the simplest element and utter simplicity is in turn the most perfect state of *sympatheia*, since it is

nothing other than the act of divine self-contemplation.[19] As Seneca himself comments on this state of absolute perfection, which he compares with the tranquility of the sage, "It will be like that of Jupiter, who, when the world has been dissolved, the gods have been indistinguishably reunited, and nature is inactive for a while, finds a resting place within himself, given over to his own thoughts (*Qualis est Iovis, cum resoluto mundo et dis in unum confusis paulisper cessante natura adquiescit sibi cogitationibus suis traditus* Ep. 19.16)." In fact, as Jaap Mansfield points out, given this conception, it is "not so much the destruction of the universe which has to be vindicated as its generation."[20]

Yet even given this abundant Stoic precedent, it must be stressed that Seneca's conception of the *ekpyrosis* is ultimately a highly unique expression of his own philosophical creativity. While earlier Stoics like Chrysippus might have linked the phenomenon with the catharsis of physical evil in general, all of the evidence suggests that Seneca was the first (and only) Stoic author to draw it so closely to moral evil, and to align the dynamics of the purgative process so strongly with the tenets of Stoic moral psychology.[21]

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[19] Mansfield 1979: 160-61;177-180: "Total conflagration is a form of apotheosis."

[20] Ibid., 160.

[21] Mader 1983: 61-71, presents a detailed analysis of both Seneca's precedents and how he uniquely adapted the doctrine: "the process which leads to cosmic destruction is motivated primarily by ethical factors, and in this respect Seneca was breaking new ground vis-à-vis his Stoic predecessors." On this, see also Williams 2012: 127-128.

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Postscript: Reception of the Senecan *Ekpyrosis*

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395): Catechetical Oration Ch 8

But since it [i.e. the soul], too, has to be freed by some remedy from the stains contracted through sin, on this account the medicine of virtue in this present life has to be applied to it to heal these wounds. But if it remains unhealed, provision has been made for its cure in the life to come.

Now there are differences in bodily ailments, some of them readily responding to treatment, others with more difficulty. In the latter case knives, cauteries, and bitter medicines are used to remove the sickness which has attacked the body. Something similar, in reference to the healing of the soul's sickness, is indicated by the future judgment. To thoughtless persons this is a threat and a harsh means of correction, so that by fear of a painful retribution we may be brought to our senses and flee evil. The more thoughtful, however, believe it to be a healing remedy provided by God, who thus restores his own creation to its original grace. Those who, by excisions or cauteries, remove moles and warts which have unnaturally grown on the body do not benefit and heal the patient painlessly, although they do not use the knife to hurt him. In the same way, whatever material excrescences have hardened on the surface of our souls, which have become fleshly through their association with the passions, are, at the time of judgment, cut off and removed by that ineffable wisdom and power of Him who (as the gospel says) heals the sick. For 'those who are well,' it says, 'do not need a doctor, but those who are sick' (Matt 9:12).

Now the excision of a wart causes a sharp pain in the surface of the body, since an unnatural growth on a nature affects the subject by a kind of sympathy. There arises an unexpected union between what is our own and what is foreign to us, so that we feel a stinging pain when the unnatural excrescence is removed. In the same way, due to the fact that the soul has developed a great affinity for evil, it pines and wastes away, being convicted of sin, as prophecy somewhere says (Ps. 39:11). Because of its deep kinship with evil, there necessarily follow unspeakable pangs, which are as incapable of description as the nature of the blessings we hope for. Neither the one nor the other can be put into words nor have we an inkling of either.