

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

The relationship between Stoic ethics and Stoic cosmology has been a contentious one 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 of Stoic metaphysics, and especially from Stoic theology."<sup>i</sup> This conundrum arises from an apparent tension at the heart of Stoic principles. As Julia Annas sums up the problem, "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."<sup>ii</sup> 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 of the former from the latter.

In recent years, however, significant effort has been made to revise this conventional approach by scholars working across disciplines. Articles and entire monographs have been dedicated to demonstrating the interpenetration of Stoic ideas at every level of analysis.<sup>iii</sup> 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 epistles.<sup>iv</sup> In 2006, a group of classicists and philosophers dedicated an entire volume to the task of "seeing Seneca whole."<sup>v</sup>

In this paper, I wish to contribute to this trend by analyzing the Stoic physical 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.<sup>vi</sup> 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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<sup>i</sup> Baltzy 2019: n5

<sup>ii</sup> Annas 1993:164-165

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, Boeri 2009; White 1985; Annas 2007 (revised from her earlier understanding); Betegh 2003; Bobzien 1997

<sup>iv</sup> Williams 2012; Rosenmeyer 1989

<sup>v</sup> Volk and Williams 2006

<sup>vi</sup> 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 incrustated 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 with Stoic moral psychology.