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## SCPTICISM ABOUT GODS IN HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY\*

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Philosophical theology offered the ancient sceptic, Academic or Pyrrhonist, a target which was tailor-made to his methods of argumentative counter-attack in the interests of “suspension of judgement” (*epochê*). His principal opponents, the Stoics, had marshalled a battery of formal proofs concerning the existence and nature of the gods; and formal proof, or the detection of weaknesses in it, was grist to the sceptic’s mill.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Stoics were in fundamental disagreement with the Epicureans over theology, disagreement of a kind that the sceptic relished. Without exerting himself, he could begin a refutative routine, as Sextus Empiricus does in *Pyrrhōneioi Hupotupōseis* [hereafter *PH*] 3.2-4, by first invoking disagreements on god’s nature: is god corporeal or incorporeal, anthropomorphic or some other form, in spatial location or not, within the world or outside it? If such foundational questions cannot be settled, how, asks Sextus, can we even get a conception (*ennoia*) of god? People say [e.g., Epicureans] that god should be considered that which is imperishable and blessed.<sup>2</sup> But consider what different schools understand by divine blessedness, and basic disagreement surfaces again: is divine blessedness displayed in the rational order pervading the entire world, as Stoics maintain? Or should one opt for the Epicurean conception of gods who are quite detached from the world and who provide no occupation for themselves or for anything else?

These Pyrrhonian manoeuvres are scarcely food for deep philosophical thought. Their simplicity, none the less, is beguiling and effective. Sextus is quite right to highlight the radical discrepancy between Stoic and Epicurean theologies; quite right, I mean, if what interests us is the grounding of religious belief in compelling reasons. His challenge may be generalized as follows: can either school, or any other theological system, make a reasoned case stand its ground against either the divergence of other purportedly reasonable theories, or against the rebuttals that each school’s particular theological doctrines invite?

The doctrinaire theologies of the Hellenistic philosophers fuelled scepticism in this technical sense. But scepticism conceived more generally—the man in the street’s agnosticism, bewilderment, or disenchantment with

traditional gods and goddesses—fuelled Stoicism and Epicureanism themselves. Theology is central to both philosophies. The very first of Epicurus' *Kuriai Doxai* includes the concept of god as “the blessed and imperishable” (τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον) which I cited from Sextus; the pride of place [280] assigned to this “key doctrine” is the clearest possible mark of its importance for the Epicureans. Chrysippus held that theology should be ranked as the “final” division (the τελευταί, as he punningly called it) of “physical theorems,” which in turn are the final or crowning part of philosophy itself (Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugnantibus* [hereafter *St. rep.*] 1035A). Both schools would be grossly misunderstood if we took their theological theses to be adventitious or some kind of sop to conventional expectations. They should be regarded, rather, as minimalist (in the Epicurean case) and maximalist (in Stoicism) answers to deeply-rooted worries, intellectual, emotional, and ethical, that were part of Hellenistic consciousness.

I emphasize this point because it is misunderstood by as fine a scholar as F. W. Walbank, who writes:<sup>3</sup>

For many the decline in confidence in the city-gods meant a growth of scepticism, though this was frequently disguised. The philosophers, for example, were mostly agreed in not rejecting “the gods” outright. Thus the Stoics under Zeno and Chrysippus ... glorified wisdom ... but Cleanthes, in a famous hymn, identified the Stoic “principle” with Zeus, and Epicurus, while arguing that the gods were unconcerned with human affairs, is careful not to reject their existence or to discourage paying due rites to them. These attempts to fit the gods into new philosophical patterns reveal the embarrassment of the philosophers and lead to the taking up of anomalous positions.

Walbank appears to be saying that Stoic and Epicurean philosophers were crypto-sceptics, who adopted uncomfortable theological positions as some kind of compromise. The correct view, in my opinion, is quite the reverse. Stoic and Epicurean theologies, for all their differences, blend tradition and rational innovation, and they do so in ways that are designed to provide content to religious sensibility without recourse to the crudities and superstitions that had discredited the gods in the eyes of many. As to the philosophical sceptic, what he attacks in the doctrines of his rivals is not, or not primarily, the traditional features of the gods that the doctrinaire schools retain, but the rational innovations—the attempt to justify theological doctrines by appeal to experience, conceptual analysis, and argument. Sextus Empiricus characterizes the sceptic as one who may be in a safer position than other philosophers: he abides by local traditions in saying that gods exist and in worshipping them. His refusal to commit himself is a philosophical attitude (*Adversus Mathematicos* [hereafter *M.*] 9.49), albeit one that enables him to conduct his life equably and uncontroversially.<sup>4</sup> Related points are made by Cotta, the sceptical spokesman of Cicero's *De natura deorum*, 3.5-6, and on behalf of the

Academic Carneades (ibid., 3.44). Even the official sceptics, then, make no profession of seeking to undermine religious beliefs outside a specific dialectical context. Their object is not to induce atheism, but to show that, for every argument concluding to the existence of gods, an argument of equal strength can be advanced on the opposite side (Sextus, *M.* 9.137). The sceptic intends to [281]leave himself and his audience in a position whereby they neither affirm nor deny the existence of gods.

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Stoic theology, since it is so much richer and more ambitiously defended than Epicurean, will principally occupy me here, as it does Sextus. Every one of his eighteen arguments in *M.* 9.138-81 concluding that gods do not exist employs at least one premise that Stoics are presumed to accept. Thus he appropriates the standard Academic strategy of showing that the Stoics can be refuted by means of their own doctrines.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that Sextus and his sources intend their sceptical arguments to address Stoicism exclusively. As presented, these arguments are quite general in their scope and will take in any philosophers or persons who hold, as the Stoics did, that gods are animate beings, etc. The point is rather that the Stoics are the primary target of these arguments. This is proved by material in the arguments which derives from specific Stoic doctrines.<sup>6</sup> It seems equally clear that the Epicureans are not a primary target of these arguments. In his survey of philosophers' views on theology, Sextus briefly refers to Epicurus as someone reputed to include god only in addressing the "many" (9.58; cf. Cicero *ND* 1.123), but who dispenses with god so far as the nature of things is concerned. Subsequently, in dismissing the proposition that god has organs of speech he mentions Epicurus' "mythologizing" (*M.* 9.178); and that is all we hear about Epicurus in Sextus' most extended treatment of theology. For his refutations of the Stoics Sextus draws, perhaps entirely, on the earlier Academic tradition.<sup>7</sup> This is clear from a comparison with Cicero's material in *ND* 3.29-34. And, notwithstanding Cotta's criticisms of the Epicureans in *ND* 1.57-124, it seems unlikely that Carneades himself wasted much time on them.

In fact, from the Stoic perspective, Epicureans and sceptics constitute something of an unholy alliance. Velleius prefaces his account of Epicurean theology in *ND* 1.18-41 with just the kind of dismissive doxography that the sceptics themselves liked to give. His detailed criticisms of such philosophers as Anaxagoras, Xenophanes, Empedocles and Plato, as well as the Stoics, include technical objections that the sceptics themselves used in their own arguments: for instance, "An infinite god would be insentient" (*ND* 1.26, cf. Sextus, *M.* 9.149); "The elements earth, air, fire and water are insentient" (*ND* 1.29; cf. Sextus, *M.* 9.181). Sextus uses an Epicurean analysis of pleasure as the absence of pain in one of his many arguments which turn the Stoic concept of virtue against their concept of god (*M.* 9.165-66).<sup>8</sup> Velleius expresses his strong approval of Cotta's criticism of the Stoics at *ND* 3.65, though it should be noted that Cotta had used Stoicism against Velleius in parts of his refutation of

Epicureanism (*ND* 1.66, 121). By presenting little of their theology in the form of arguments, the Epicureans offered the sceptics a less challenging target than the Stoics. For their part, the Epicureans could not fail to applaud the kind of arguments Cotta, and presumably Carneades, used against Stoic teleology, providence, and the world-animal.

Epicurean theology, as I have said, was minimalist. But at least Stoics and Epicureans were agreed on one basic attribute of divinity—beatitude, or supremely perfect life. The question at issue between them was the nature of [282]the being or beings which qualified for this attribute. To put it another way, where in the world or out of it should we look for a nature that answers to this preconception (*prolēpsis*)?

To understand the Stoics' theological arguments, and the sceptical criticism these evoked, the first point to stress is their thesis that the world itself is god. The Stoics, as I understand them, were not concerned in their arguments to prove the existence of god, as quasi-missionaries converting the heathen. They take the existence of god to be self-evident to anyone who has directed his eye to the order of the heavens (*Cicero ND* 2.4). Any such person, they presume, already “preconceives by a definite notion of the mind that god is such as to be first, a living being, and second, pre-eminent in the whole of nature.” Balbus, Cicero's Stoic spokesman, then adds: “I see nothing that I would rather fit to this preconception and notion of ours than, in the first instance, this very world, which, as being unsurpassable in excellence, I hold to be a living being and god” (2.45). As Malcolm Schofield has well observed,

[the Stoics, in their formal arguments, are best] interpreted as taking it to be evident that God exists, and as addressing themselves to the man who asks: where in the world can I find the blessed, *immortal*, sentient, rational, beneficent animal which I know God to be? They undertake to prove to this man that, if he will only grant [certain propositions about rationality, animate existence and sentience]..., he must accept that the world itself is just such a rational, sentient animal.”<sup>9</sup>

(I shall come back to “immortal” [emphasis mine] shortly.)

It is significant that the four theological syllogisms of Zeno, reported by Cicero (*ND* 2.20-22), all establish conclusions about the world: that it is rational, animate, sentient, and wise. The burden of proof, as the Stoics saw it, was on their claim that the world has the attributes of divinity. We need not ask here why this thesis was so cardinal to Stoicism.<sup>10</sup> Suffice it to say that its anti-Epicurean tenor is perspicuous. The Stoics' arguments refute, by implication, the concept of a mechanistic Epicurean world with its godless causes and absence of immanent rationality and providence. Anti-Epicurean comments abound in Book 2 of Cicero's *De natura deorum*.<sup>11</sup>

Animal or animate, sentient, and supremely excellent or virtuous—these are the basic attributes of divinity, according to the Stoic preconception, which they seek to prove hold good of the world. We are now in a position to

consider how the sceptics develop arguments that reach the devastating conclusion that gods with such attributes do not exist! I will work first from Sextus Empiricus, since his account is fuller than Cicero's.

The logical form of Sextus' arguments, as normally, is Stoic, with the inferences taking the form of *modus ponens* or *modus tollens*. Schematically, they can be represented thus (omitting the few arguments which start from a disjunctive premise):

1. If P, then Q.
2. If Q, then R.
3. If R, then S.
- [283]4. But not-S.
5. Therefore not-P.

Substitute for P, "gods exist," for Q, "gods are animals," for R, "gods are sentient," and for S, "gods are perishable." The standard argument in Sextus' collection then takes the form: "(1) If gods exist, they are animals. (2) If they are animals, they are sentient. (3) If they are sentient, they are perishable. (4) But they are not perishable. (5) Therefore they do not exist." Sextus plays variations on the premises of this argument and may present it in a more truncated or more expanded form, but his basic strategy is clear. He offers the Stoics premises about divine attributes which they are committed to accepting. He then argues that these attributes, for reasons that he adduces, imply perishability. Hence god's existence implies his perishability. But god is not perishable. Therefore he does not exist.

Let me illustrate by translating one argument in full (*M.* 9.146-47).

1. If god is sentient, he is modified (*ἐτεροιοῦται*).
2. If he is modified, he is susceptible to modification and change.
3. Being susceptible to change, he will in fact be also susceptible to change for the worse.
4. If so, he is also perishable.
5. But it is certainly absurd to say that god is perishable.
6. Therefore it is also absurd to claim that he exists.

This argument is typical. For his first premise, Sextus states a Stoic thesis concerning *aisthêsis*—its involving modification.<sup>12</sup> He then infers that sentience as so conceived implies perishability.

To take another example, consider the argument which starts from god's being "all-virtuous." If so, Sextus argues, god has "greatness of soul" (*megalopsuchia*). But, by its Stoic definition, *megalopsuchia* is "knowledge that creates superiority to contingencies."<sup>13</sup> In that case, god's possession of *megalopsuchia* implies that there are contingencies to which he is superior. But this in turn implies that god experiences contingencies that disturb him. In which case, god will be perishable (*M.* 9.161).

There are many details in these arguments which deserve comment.<sup>14</sup> But here I focus on the one which is decisive and puzzling in a way that, so far as I

am aware, has not been noticed. The anti-Stoic tenor of these arguments is obvious. Their crucial step, as I have indicated, is the inference from a Stoic attribute of god to god's perishability. Now whatever we may think of Sextus' logic, one would suppose, in the absence of contrary evidence, that Stoics should be highly embarrassed by this inference. Sextus, at an early stage in his routine, notes that god's perishability is contrary to "the common conception" (*M.* 9.143), and the Stoics' own appeals to common conceptions were notorious. The Epicureans regarded the imperishability of god as his cardinal attribute along with blessedness; it is a feature of our preconception of him. Was it not the same in Stoicism?

Malcolm Schofield<sup>15</sup> refers to the passage in Cicero *ND* 2.45 where Balbus reports the Stoics' "preconception" of god. Schofield takes it that the Stoics *en bloc* have a preconception of god which agrees with that of the man in the [284]street, who regards immortality and beneficence as two of the attributes of god, and that the Stoics undertake to prove that the world has these attributes. But Balbus actually says nothing explicitly about immortality or beneficence. He specifies only two attributes—"animate" and "outstandingly excellent in the whole of nature" (*animans, deinde ut in omni natura nihil eo sit praestantius*).

A few lines later, Balbus retorts to Epicurus as follows:

He will never shift me from the point he approves himself—for he holds that gods exist because there must be some outstanding nature better than anything else. But for sure nothing is better than the world. Nor can it be doubted that something animate and sentient and rational and intelligent is better than anything that lacks these features. Thus it turns out that the world is animate, sentient, intelligent and rational. From which it follows that the world is god.

Not a word here about immortality. Running through the earlier arguments of Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus, I find it neither assumed nor proved that what is divine must be immortal or imperishable. The arguments all turn on the animation, sentience, intelligence and excellence of god, with the object of showing that these are properties of the world. I cannot think that the glaring omission of imperishability is inadvertent. If, as an explanation of its absence, we take imperishability to be implicit in "outstanding excellence," why are rationality and virtue singled out and made explicit?

Now another puzzle. The origin of Sextus' arguments goes back to Carneades.<sup>16</sup> But, as reported in Cicero, Carneades' arguments do not, like those of Sextus, start from the premise, "If gods exist, they are F," and conclude that gods do not exist. In fact, god or gods are not mentioned as such in any of Carneades' arguments. The conclusion of all his arguments in *ND* 3.29-34 is that no body or living thing is everlasting. That constitutes a proof of the gods' non-existence only on the unstated assumption that gods, if they existed, must be *living bodies that are everlasting*. Carneades' arguments start from such premises as, "Every living thing is naturally sentient," "Every living thing must

feel pleasure and pain,” and conclude that sentience etc. implies non-everlastingness. It is left to the reader to infer that the non-everlastingness of living bodies renders it impossible that there be gods.

The premises of Carneades’ arguments introduce attributes of living bodies that the Stoics take to apply to the world, and therefore to god: e.g., susceptibility to change, sentience, appetite. He could take it that Stoics, and informed members of his audience, would recognize the Stoa as his principal target, even though his arguments are formulated in highly general terms. It seems, then, that his dialectical strategy is as follows: Stoics must surely accept the common conception of gods as everlasting or immortal; but as conceived by the Stoics, god, i.e. the world, is not everlasting or immortal; therefore, god, as conceived by the Stoics, does not exist. This simple strategy will account for the absence of any explicit conclusion concerning the non-existence of the gods: if nothing like a Stoic god can be everlasting or immortal, nothing like a Stoic god can exist.

[285]But if this is the correct interpretation of Carneades’ arguments, puzzlement intensifies. Sextus and Carneades, it seems, seek to discomfit the Stoics by showing that their theology is radically incoherent and self-contradictory. Their sceptical arguments presume that the Stoics want to retain the common conception of god as immortal or everlasting and to combine this with a set of divine attributes that are inconsistent with immortality and everlastingness. If that presumption were unequivocally correct, the Stoics would be exposed as absurdly simpleminded. Yet, as we have seen, immortality and everlastingness are notably absent from the Stoic proofs of the world’s divinity in Cicero, *De natura deorum*, and from Balbus’ account of the Stoic preconception of god. Are the sceptics, then, guilty of *ignoratio elenchi*? How did individual Stoics view immortality or everlastingness as a divine attribute?

At *ND* 2.85 Balbus says: “[The world’s coherence] must be either everlasting in the very same structure that we see, or certainly very long-lasting, enduring for a virtually unmeasurable time.” Balbus treats these alternatives as insignificantly different. But they are not. Before the second century B.C., the orthodox Stoic view, the view of Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus, whose arguments for the world’s divinity are recorded in *De natura deorum*, was Balbus’ second alternative: our world is not everlasting; it will eventually end in the “conflagration” (*ekpurôsis*).<sup>17</sup>

In order to reconcile the conflagration with their doctrine that our world and certain of its constituents are divine, the founding fathers of Stoicism were compelled to reject immortality or indestructibility as a necessary attribute of god. Plutarch seizes on this point for one of his most virulent objections to Stoicism:

One might perhaps chance upon barbaric and savage tribes that have no conception of god, but not a single man has there been who having a conception of god did not conceive



him to be indestructible and everlasting. At any rate, those who have been called atheists, Theodorus and Diagoras and Hippo and their like, did not venture to say of divinity that it is subject to destruction but did not believe that there is anything indestructible, preserving the preconception of god while not admitting the existence of what is indestructible. Chrysippus and Cleanthes, however, who in theory have, so to speak, filled full of gods heaven, earth, air and sea, have held that none of all these many is indestructible or everlasting except Zeus alone, in whom they consume all the rest. ... They ... state expressly that all the other gods have come into being and will be destroyed by fire.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere (*St. rep.* 1052A) Plutarch quotes this excerpt from Book 3 of Chrysippus' *On gods*:

Corresponding to a difference of constituent principle some [gods], therefore, are said to be subject to generation and to destruction and others to be unsubject to generation. ... For sun and moon and the rest of the gods, since they have a similar principle of constitution, are subject to generation, [286]but Zeus is everlasting. ... Similar assertions will be made about decaying ... for the [rest of the gods] are subject to destruction but the parts of [Zeus] are indestructible.

For Chrysippus, then, this world is divine, but it is not everlasting. Zeus, the "active principle" of the universe, *is* everlasting, but he is not simply coextensive with this world.<sup>19</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Since Chrysippus rejected indestructibility or everlastingness as a necessary attribute of god(s), he presumably did not regard it as part of the Stoic preconception of divinity. That fits the account of this preconception reported by Balbus in Cicero *ND* 2. 45, and discussed above. It should now be clear that the sceptics, in fastening upon the perishability or non-everlastingness of gods with Stoic attributes, cannot be attacking the theology of Chrysippus directly. Were that so, they would certainly be guilty of *ignoratio elenchi*. A philosopher who allows some gods to be perishable would escape unscathed from arguments that deduce gods' non-existence from their perishability.

It is true that Zeus, whom Chrysippus regarded as an exceptional deity in his everlastingness, falls within the scope of Carneades' arguments since they conclude that *no* living body can be everlasting. But a moment's reflection on that observation shows why Carneades' arguments would be paradoxical if Chrysippus himself were their target. With the exception of Zeus, every god including the present world is non-everlasting according to Chrysippus. Yet the only gods whose existence is undermined by Carneades' arguments are everlasting ones.

What we need, to account for the prevailing tenor of the sceptic critique, is a Stoic of suitable date who differed from Chrysippus in insisting upon

indestructibility as a necessary attribute of god. Plutarch, in the very context of *De stoicorum repugnantis* where he criticized Chrysippus, as cited above, provides the ideal candidate—Antipater of Tarsus, head of the Stoa in the middle of the second century B.C., and the school's principal defender against Carneades.

Plutarch, continuing his criticism of Chrysippus, writes (*St. rep.* 1051E):

One may say, however, that no one supposes god to be subject to destruction and generation. Not to mention any of the others, Antipater of Tarsus in his book *On the gods* writes word for word as follows: "As a preliminary to the whole discourse we shall take a concise reckoning of the clear apprehension which we have of god. Well then, we conceive god to be an animate being, blessed and indestructible and beneficent towards men." Then, explaining each of these predicates, he says: "Moreover, all men hold them to be indestructible." In that case, Chrysippus is not one of Antipater's "all men."

A plausible philosophical debate now suggests itself. Chrysippus, and perhaps his Stoic predecessors, entertained the notion that some gods are perishable. This flew in the face of popular religious tradition, but it was unavoidable if the Stoics were to accommodate the gods of that tradition—sun, [287]moon, etc.—within a world which had a beginning and an end. For complex reasons, the early Stoics rejected the Aristotelian conception that our world is everlasting.

Doubts about the conflagration, however, and hence the present world's eventual destruction, began with Diogenes of Babylon, Chrysippus' successor as head of the Stoa. Philo of Alexandria, who reports this (*De aeternitate mundi* 76-77), adds: "Boethus of Sidon and Panaetius ... gave up the conflagrations and regenerations, and deserted to the holier doctrine of the entire world's indestructibility." In other words, what underlies Balbus' bland disjunction, "everlasting or very long-lasting," is actually a radical difference of opinion between early and later Stoics on the question of the world's destructibility.

In all probability, it was the dialectic of Carneades which prompted later Stoics to diverge from Chrysippus on this point. No direct testimony to this effect survives, but a passage of Cicero's *Academica* (2.119), which may well go back to Carneades, pits the Aristotelian conception of an everlasting world against the Stoic conflagration. Nor is it difficult to imagine Carneades anticipating Plutarch in ridiculing the very notion of perishable gods and prompting Diogenes of Babylon's doubts about the conflagration. Along comes Antipater, Diogenes' successor. Faced with Carneades' presumed critique of perishable gods, he formulates a preconception of god, as reported by Plutarch, whereby imperishability is a necessary attribute. Now the sceptical arguments of Carneades and Sextus fall into place, and avoid *ignoratio elenchi*.

Antipater's god, as Plutarch reports, is an animate *and* imperishable being. That is precisely the conjunction which the sceptical arguments maintain to be untenable.

Since Antipater held god(s) to be imperishable, we might suppose that he too rejected the doctrine of the cosmic conflagration. Yet, he is included along with Zeno, Chrysippus and Posidonius as a Stoic who discussed "the generation and destruction of the world" (Diogenes Laertius 7.142). "Discussed," of course, need not imply "defended." According to Diogenes Laertius it was in Book 10 of his *On the world* that he dealt with this subject. This contrasts with Chrysippus and Posidonius, who dealt with it in "first" books (D.L. *loc. cit.*), and may cast doubt on Antipater's defence of the thesis. However that may be, Antipater would have egregiously contradicted himself if he had treated the world as both divine and destructible.

\* \* \* \* \*

We have seen that the sceptics infer perishability of gods, and therefore their non-existence, from their having such attributes as sentience, appetition and virtue. Although Chrysippus differed from Antipater over the issue of imperishability as essential to anything divine, he would certainly have agreed with Cicero's Balbus in saying: "The world-nature has all the motions of volition and impulses and desires, which the Greeks call *hormai*, and acts in agreement with these just like ourselves who are moved by our minds and senses" (ND 2.58). In other words, the Stoics' world-animal, though not anthropomorphic in body, is so in mind.

Perhaps the chief strength of the sceptical arguments we have been studying is to suggest that the Stoics have not faced up to the difficulty of [288]treating the world as divine in the sense of its being like a superlative human being. The more we think of the world in this way, the less it may appear to satisfy conceptions of god, as generally understood. This explains, I take it, why the sceptics seek to infer perishability from the very attributes—sentience, virtue, etc.—which the Stoics adduce as evidence of the world's divine life. Although that strategy applies to Antipater rather than Chrysippus, sceptics could say that Chrysippus is in even worse trouble. Like Antipater he is committed to treating the world as unacceptably anthropomorphic, and he does not even attempt to accommodate imperishability as an essential feature of anything divine. Thus he has signally failed to adduce empirical evidence that the world satisfies our intuitions of the perfection characteristic of a god.<sup>20</sup>

To all this, if I were Chrysippus, I should reply as follows: "It is true that our world, on my view, is not literally everlasting. But its life is so immensely long and stable that we are not impressed by the way you sceptics focus upon its perishability. Nor are we impressed by your manner of inferring perishability from such attributes as sentience and virtue. We do indeed attribute these latter features to the world, and claim that they are essential to anything divine. But nothing in our philosophy commits us to the view that the world-animal's sentience or virtue implies its perishability in the manner you maintain. As for everlastingness in general, why should we take this to be a

necessary attribute of divinity? Supreme goodness and happiness, which we take to be divine attributes, do not depend, in our view, upon an infinite lifetime. In alerting our audience to the world's divinity, we are directing their attention to a being which, in our judgement, is worthy of all the aesthetic, intellectual and ethical evaluation it would be reasonable to ascribe to a god. In retrospect we Stoics acknowledge that it was unwise to try to prove theological propositions *more geometrico*.<sup>21</sup> But though we made ourselves vulnerable in that way, we are not inclined to amend our theology. After all, as the most modern thinkers say, theological argument is designed to make it *more probable than not* that god exists and has a certain kind of nature. If you are so sure of being able to refute us, why do you find it necessary to produce such a plethora of arguments? We conclude that you don't know of one which is decisive."<sup>22</sup>



## NOTES

\*This paper is offered to Tom Rosenmeyer as a small token of affection and admiration. Anyone who finds it remote from his omnivorous interests should consult his absorbing new book, *Senecan Tragedy and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley 1989).

1. On Stoic theology the most detailed and well-documented study is M. Dragona-Monachou, *The Stoic Arguments for the Existence and Providence of the Gods* (Athens 1976).

2. Sextus' *φασί* at *PH* 3.4, ἀλλ' ἀφθαρτόν τι, φασί, καὶ μακάριον ἐννοήσας, τὸν θεὸν εἶναι τοῦτο νόμιζε, should be interpreted quite generally. Knowingly or not, however, he is actually repeating Epicurus almost verbatim, cf. *Ep. Men.* 123, πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶιον ἀφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ [289] τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη. R. G. Bury (Loeb ed. *ad loc.*) glosses *φασί*, "i.e. the Stoics and Epicurus, cf. § 219 *infra*." But *PH* 3.219 refers only to Epicurus. For reasons that will be given below, ἀφθαρτος is not an essential attribute of god in the early Stoic formulation of that preconception.

3. F. W. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World* (London 1981) 218-19.

4. This, of course, is a posture adopted by the Pyrrhonian sceptic quite generally: cf. *PH* 1.23-24.

5. Notice that Sextus begins his anti-theological section by explicitly elaborating the Stoic argument which concludes that the world is an animal, *M.* 9.138. His set of 18 arguments can be indexed as follows: 1-4 (*M.* 9.138-47) infer perishability from god's (= animal's) sentience; 5 (*M.* 9.148) starts from the premise, "If anything divine exists, it is either limited or unlimited," and 6 (*M.* 9.151) and 18 (*M.* 9.180) from the premise, "If ..., it is either a body or incorporeal"; 7-15 (*M.* 9.152-76) all take their material from the Stoic conception of virtue or specific virtues, and often exploit the Stoics' own exclusion of any state intermediate between virtue and vice; 16-17 (*M.* 9.178-79) pin the Stoics on a dilemma about god's powers of speech (cf. Cicero *ND* 2.148 for Stoic treatment of discourse as "divine"). Carneades is named by Sextus at *M.* 9.140; his arguments, outlined at Cicero *ND* 3.29-34, correspond to those in Sextus numbered above as

follows: with 1-4, cf. *ND* 3.29, 32-34; with 6 and 18, cf. *ND* 3.29, 34. Cicero records nothing of Carneades corresponding to Sextus 7-15.

6. See supra n. 5.

7. For this strategy, cf. the classic study by P. Couissin, “Le stoicisme de la Nouvelle Académie,” *Revue d’histoire de la philosophie* 3 (1929) 241-76, reprinted in English transl. in M. F. Burnyeat, ed., *The Sceptical Tradition* (Berkeley 1983) 31-64; and for discussions of its use, see A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge 1987) I.257-58, 446-47, 456-60.

8. Sextus is dismissing a Stoic line of defence—that god can acquire a concept of pain without experiencing pain. He then says: “This is naive. For, in the first place, it is impossible to get a concept of pleasure without having experienced pain” [cf. Calcidius *In Tim.* 165 = *SVF* 3.229 for Stoic vulnerability to this point] and continues *κατὰ γὰρ τὴν παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγούντου ὑπεξαίρεσις συνίστασθαι πέφυκεν* [sc. ἡδονή]. This is a variation of Epicurus *KD* 3: ὄρος τοῦ μεγέθους τῶν ἡδονῶν ἢ παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγούντου ὑπεξαίρεσις. Sextus goes on: “Secondly if this is conceded, it follows yet again that god is perishable, εἰ γὰρ τῆς τοιαύτης διαχύσεως δεκτικός ἐστι, καὶ τῆς ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον μεταβολῆς ἔσται δεκτικός ὁ θεὸς καὶ φθαρτός ἐστιν. Bury [Loeb ed.] translates, “If he is receptive of such a collapse.” No: *διάχυσις* means “diffusion,” and is an Epicurean term for pleasure = absence of pain spreading all over the body. (For the term so used, cf. Plutarch *Contra beat.* 1092D, Alexander *Quaest.* 4.241, 12.) Sextus’ argument is this: if god is capable of experiencing pleasure (= removal of all pain)—εἰ ... *διαχύσεως* ... ἐστι—he will *also* (καὶ, omitted by Bury’s transl.) be susceptible to change for the worse, i.e., pain replacing pleasure.

9. “Preconception, Argument, and God,” in M. Schofield *et al.*, eds., *Doubt and Dogmatism* (Oxford 1980) 302. The great merit of Schofield’s paper is his demonstration that the Stoics, in their more careful procedures, used *prolēpsis*, one of their criteria of truth, as the basis for their claims of what a divine nature consists in: “The philosopher should begin by consulting our common preconception of God, and then inspect the world to find the candidate which best answers to that preconception. Stoic theology not only starts with appeals to the preconception of God; it constitutes nothing but an increasingly profound and elaborate attempt to articulate the structure of rational argument (and so the rational structure of the world) which reinforces confidence in that preconception” (305).

[290]10. The answer, in essence, has to do with the theological underpinnings of their ethical theory; see my paper, “Stoic eudaimonism,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1988) 77-101.

11. Cf. *ND* 2.46-49, 59, 76, 82, 93, 160-62, and Plutarch *Comm. not.* 1075E.

12. For *ἐτεροίωσις* and *ἀλλοίωσις* in Stoic theory of sense-perception, cf. *SVF* 2.55-56.

13. Sextus does not cite the Stoics for this definition of *megalopsuchia*, but it is almost verbatim equivalent to the Stoic definition recorded by Diogenes Laertius 7.93 (*SVF* 3. 265).

14. They are treated only cursorily in the standard histories of ancient scepticism by V. Brochard, *Les sceptiques grecs* (2nd ed., Paris 1929) and M. Dal Pra, *Lo scetticismo greco* (2nd ed., Rome/Bari 1975), and I know of no other discussions.

15. Schofield (supra n. 9) 301.

16. See supra n. 5.

17. For discussion, cf. J. Mansfeld, “Providence and the destruction of the universe in early Stoic thought,” in M. J. Vermaseren, ed., *Studies in Hellenistic religions* (Leiden 1979) 129-88, and A. A. Long, “The Stoics on world-conflagration and everlasting

recurrence,” *Spindel Conference 1984: Recovering the Stoics* (*Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23 [1985]) 13-58. Balbus, speaking as a post-Panaetian Stoic in Cicero *ND* 2, does refer a number of times to the *aeternitas* of the world or the celestial bodies (36, 43, 54); he speaks of human happiness as equal to that of the gods in everything except immortality (153); and he says that an argument of Zeno’s proving that the world is rational can also be used to prove its being *aeternum* (21). But, as I noted above, Balbus displays his amateurishness as a philosopher in his indifference to whether the world is truly everlasting or only immeasurably long. His untechnical references to *aeternitas* tell us nothing about early Stoicism.

18. *Comm. not.* 1075A-C, transl. H. Cherniss, Loeb ed. (the following excerpts from Plutarch are also from Cherniss’ translation). Philo of Alexandria also criticizes the implications of *ekpurōsis* for the perishability of gods: *Aet. mundi* 47. See *SVF* 2.625 for a doxographical account of *ekpurōsis*, which explains that it is only “the gods not subject to destruction” (θεοὺς τοὺς μὴ ὑποκειμένους τῇ φθορᾷ) who have foreknowledge of what will happen in successive cosmic cycles.

19. For evidence and discussion of Zeus as the world’s “active principle,” cf. Long and Sedley (*supra* n. 7) section 44. Chrysippus’ precise position on the world’s destructibility is more complex than Plutarch’s criticisms indicate, though this does not affect points I have made above. For Chrysippus, “our world” is a temporally finite structure, but it is also one of an infinite series of identical worlds, separated from one another by an infinite sequence of “conflagrations.” The conflagration will destroy “our world,” but it will not destroy the *κόσμος simpliciter*, since, during the conflagration, the *κόσμος* is coextensive with everlasting Zeus. See texts of Long and Sedley (*supra* n. 7) section 46, and the discussions in Mansfeld and Long as cited *supra* n. 17.

20. Cf. Philo in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, H. D. Aiken, ed. (New York 1975) 16: “But as all perfection is entirely relative, we ought never to imagine that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being, or to suppose that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature.... He is infinitely superior to our limited view and comprehension, and is more the object of worship in the temple than of disputation in the schools.” At Cicero *ND* 3.38 Cotta, probably drawing on Carneades, offers the Stoics a somewhat similar argument: we cannot assign to god any of the virtues, as defined by Stoics, since they are not compatible with a divine nature. Yet a god that lacks virtue is inconceivable.

21. Cf. Balbus’ remarks on the vulnerability of Zeno’s syllogisms, the doctrinal content of which escapes Academic criticism when expounded *uberius et fusius* (Cicero [291]*ND* 2.20). For a fine discussion of Zeno’s dialectical purposes in formulating such arguments, cf. M. Schofield, “The syllogisms of Zeno of Citium,” *Phronesis* 28 (1983) 31-58.

22. The brevity of this paper prevents me from any consideration of Carneades’ use of the sorites in his arguments against Chrysippus’ appropriation of popular polytheism. The subject has been treated in two outstanding papers: J. Barnes, “Medicine, Experience and Logic,” in J. Barnes *et al.*, eds., *Science and Speculation* (Cambridge 1982) 24-68, and M. F. Burnyeat, “Gods and Heaps,” in M. Schofield and M. Nussbaum, eds., *Language and Logos* (Cambridge 1982) 315-34.