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# Determinism and Divine Intervention: Divine Punishment in Stoic Theology

*Maarten van Houte*

## 1 Introduction

In ancient Greek and Roman religion, it was mostly taken for granted that gods could, and would, punish the wicked for their transgressions. Many philosophers who held the cosmos to be providently ordered (Plato is the prime example) subscribed to a version of this idea. Stoic natural theology and determinism, however, do not seem to leave much room for the idea of god or gods actively intervening in human affairs and inflicting impromptu punishment on criminals and vicious people. There is evidence, however, that suggests that certain Stoics did in fact hold that God can, and will, punish vicious people. It is this apparent tension between various aspects of Stoic theology that I will try to shed some light on in this paper. In what follows, I will argue that the Stoic conceptualization of divine punishment was meant to reinforce their claim that God is provident and beneficent towards all human beings. Like his namesake of traditional religion, the Stoic Zeus ensures no one can do evil with impunity, but he does more: his chastisements benefit all of us, even the ones being punished, and thus serve to bring about a morally better cosmos.

First, I will say something about divine judgement in Greek religion (section 2), then briefly discuss how this topic is taken up by various Presocratic philosophers and Plato (section 3). In section 4 I will try to reconstruct the Stoic position based on the relatively scanty evidence we have, and will conclude with a brief reflection on the rationales behind this arguably rather convoluted theory in section 5.

## 2 Divine Judgement in Traditional Greek Religion

Most of us tend to feel that good deeds should be rewarded and that bad deeds deserve punishment. However well-run and fair a society's legal system may be, it is never infallible: a crime may go undetected, lawyers and judges may

be corrupt or incompetent, etc. As a result, some (or many) bad deeds will go unpunished. Bearing in mind such failings of human justice, a religious society may call on divine justice to pick up the slack and ensure, because of a god's (or the gods') omniscience and power, that such deeds do not go unpunished after all. In ancient Greek culture, as far as we can tell from the extant literary evidence, it was generally held that the gods take notice of human affairs and punish those who do wrong, and that they should do so.<sup>1</sup>

Though there is some disagreement between scholars when it comes to Homer (or the Mycenaean culture he describes), there seems hardly any doubt that in the archaic period, "we move towards a view of the gods as omniscient moral scrutineers. It becomes their specific task to watch over – and to punish – the improprieties of mankind."<sup>2</sup> Hesiod claims that Zeus punishes wrongdoers and that even mighty rulers cannot carry on with their wicked ways with impunity, Zeus having in his service no less than 30,000 daemons (ἄθάνατοι φύλακες) who keep a close eye on human affairs.<sup>3</sup> Solon, too, affirms that Zeus sees all (13.25–28) and that ill-gotten gains ultimately have to be paid for (13.7–13).<sup>4</sup>

A correlate of this view of the gods as powerful and omniscient arbiters is that they are now also expected to preserve justice and punish wrongdoers. When they appear not to do so, i.e., when bad people prosper and flourish and do not pay for their crimes, the divine judgement is sometimes criticized or called into question. The poet Theognis, e.g., expresses his surprise that Zeus, despite being "lord over all" and knowing "the mind and heart of very man," apparently does not care whether we do the right thing or not, even allowing the wicked to thrive and the just to live in poverty.<sup>5</sup> Several passages in Euripides' tragedies convey the sentiment that divine retribution may be arbitrary

1 See Mackenzie (1981) 90; Saunders (1991) 33–34. Both works give an extensive overview of ancient Greek ideas on penology, with Saunders devoting a separate chapter to divine punishment (Chpt. 2 'Anxieties and Surrogates,' 33–76).

2 Mackenzie (1981) 92. In this work Mackenzie (now McCabe) holds that in the Homeric epics, there is *revenge* and *recompense* rather than punishment, and the gods do not operate as more or less impartial arbiters of human behavior. See e.g., 86–92. Saunders (1991) 21–32, disagrees and asserts (34) that "[t]here is plenty of evidence [...] in the *Odyssey* and in the *Iliad* [...] for the role of the gods in punishing offenders [...]." Much of their disagreement rests on differing definitions of punishment; Mackenzie, e.g., does not deny that the gods can and will intervene in human affairs, such as Apollo answering Chryses' prayer for vengeance when Agamemnon has carried off the priest's daughter Chryseis (see 71–72).

3 Hes. *Op.* 237–263.

4 For other examples in these authors and others, and further discussion, see Mackenzie (1981) 92–94 and 109; Saunders (1991) 39–49 and Griffiths (1990) 48–65.

5 Theogn. 373–387 (transl. Gerber 1999). See Mackenzie (1981) 110–111.

and unreliable,<sup>6</sup> and Sophocles' plays suggest that despite divine punishment of hubris and other wrongdoing, human life is unfair and unwarranted suffering unavoidable.<sup>7</sup>

The famous Sisyphus fragment shows that there was also scepticism about, or outright rejection of, the idea that there are gods who watch and judge everything we do.<sup>8</sup> This idea, the fragment states, is nothing more than a fabricated story, made up by a clever man who sought to deter the wicked when the laws no longer did. Observing that human laws are an effective deterrence to overt violence and crime, but not to covert misdeeds, this so-called clever man started telling tales about all-powerful beings perceiving and marking our every thought and act, even those that escape human scrutiny. This deterrent effect on wannabe criminals might be beneficial, but the story is a lie all the same (i.e., the gods do not actually exist or, if they do, they do not judge human behaviour).

Mackenzie distinguishes two possible counters to such scepticism about, or criticism of, the gods as custodians of justice in this life.<sup>9</sup> The first is to argue that divine punishment will be inflicted post-mortem. Bad people may flourish here and now, but they will ultimately pay the price for their crimes. Already in Homer, but more frequently in later poets and possibly in mystery cults as well, we find references to the post-mortem judgement of human souls by divine arbiters and the punishment of those who have misbehaved in life.<sup>10</sup> The second counter consists in shifting the punishment to the descendants of the wrongdoer; even though these have not done anything wrong themselves, they are guilty by association (family ties) and will suffer for their progenitor's offences. This argument then, like the first, accepts that the flourishing

6 See Saunders (1991) 50–51.

7 See Mackenzie (1981) 112; Haigh (1896) 171: "He [Sophocles] cannot shut his eyes to the fact that, while crime is punished, innocence is not always protected, and suffering and misfortune often overtake the guiltless."

8 The fragment, cited in *S.E. M* 9.54 (DK 88B25), is named after the satyr-play by Euripides which is its probable origin. See Kahn (1997) for a discussion of its origins and background.

9 Mackenzie (1981) 92–94.

10 A famous example, e.g., is Tantalus' everlasting punishment for serving up his own son Pelops to the gods in a stew. See Saunders (1991) 53–61, for a discussion of various conceptions of post-mortem judgement and punishment (e.g., by and through reincarnation). Griffiths (1990) 53–57 and Saunders (1991) 63, discuss the role of the Erinyes or Furies as agents of divine retribution not only during life, but after death as well. Both Saunders (1991) 55 and Mackenzie (1981) n. 111, however, state that the extant evidence leaves it uncertain how wide-spread the belief in such post-mortem punishment actually was.

of many bad people is hard to deny, but maintains that divine justice will ultimately prevail.<sup>11</sup> Also, the prospect of children or grandchildren suffering for their sins might have a deterrent effect on prospective criminals.

These arguments for the efficacy of divine justice may accommodate the apparent fact that crime often goes unpunished, but they have problems of their own: in contrast to direct divine punishment, post-mortem punishment is not readily verifiable and does not give as much satisfaction – one has to *believe* that the culprit will someday get his just deserts. The punishment of offspring, meanwhile, still lets the wrongdoer off easy, and may seem both too late and unfair.<sup>12</sup>

To sum up, divine judgement and punishment seems to have been a vexed issue for the ancient Greeks: they hoped and expected the gods to persecute and punish wrongdoers, especially those who escape human justice, but they were often frustrated as well at the apparent tardiness or absence of divine intervention and the prospering of many such wrongdoers.

### 3 The Presocratics and Plato on Divine Punishment

Divine punishment (and its problems) became a topic of interest in ancient philosophy as well. It is not very prevalent in Presocratic philosophy, as far as we can tell, since the early thinkers typically employ a concept of the divine that seems to leave little room for any close scrutiny of human behaviour. Several Presocratics do actually claim that a cosmic justice is safeguarded by the divine principle or ἀρχή: Anaximander, e.g., says that change between opposites happens “according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of time,”<sup>13</sup> while Heraclitus claimed the ongoing strife between opposites to be just and this

11 See, e.g., Sol. 13.29–32 (Gerber 1999): “But one man pays the penalty at one, another later, and if they themselves escape the penalty and the pursuing destiny of the gods does not overtake them, it assuredly comes at another time; the innocent (ἀναίτιοι) pay the penalty, either their children or a later progeny.” Similarly, in Theogn. 197–208. The argument reappears in later antiquity as well, e.g., in Plutarch’s *De sera numinis vindicta*. See also n. 34 below.

12 See, e.g., Theogn. 731–742. Solon, too, says that such punishment targets ‘the innocent’ (see n. 11). See Bonazzi (2019) for a discussion of Solon’s views on divine punishment (pp. 9–11, specifically address the issue of the innocent paying the price for their ancestors’ crimes).

13 DK 12B1. All translations of Presocratics taken from Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983), unless otherwise indicated.

cosmic justice itself to be inviolable,<sup>14</sup> and other early thinkers had similar ideas about justice on a cosmic scale.<sup>15</sup>

Their focus on cosmogony and cosmology often leaves it unclear if, and how, this divine justice is upheld on a *human* level.<sup>16</sup> One of the most explicit thinkers here is probably Empedocles, who holds that souls could be punished by ‘the gods’ by being subjected to a long-lasting cycle of reincarnations, but even here much remains rather vague.<sup>17</sup> All in all, it seems that most of these early philosophers claimed some kind of divine administration of the cosmos, but were not particularly concerned with the harmonization of this cosmic governance with local injustice.

There can be little doubt, however, that this was a major concern for Plato. Although he is very reluctant to commit himself to any detailed and elaborate cosmology, his dialogues always convey a moral certainty that the cosmos is well-run and providently administered by the gods. This divine providence entails that, in general, virtue will be rewarded and vice will be punished. As we have seen, there had always been some doubts in antiquity about this rather traditional idea, and in the fifth century, many sophists openly challenged the view that being just and law-abiding is the best choice for us.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his dialogues, Plato confronted this sophistic challenge in order

14 DK 22B80: “It is necessary to know that war is common and right is strife (δίκην ἔρις)” and DK 22B94: “Sun will not overstep his measures; otherwise the Erinyes, ministers of justice, will find him out.”

15 According to a report in Aetius, Parmenides called the “goddess that steers” (δαίμονα κυβερνήτιν) the cosmos ‘justice’ (Δίκη) as well (DK 28A37).

16 Xenophanes is a good example: he famously derided the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic gods of Greek traditional religion (DK 21B1, 14, 15, 16), claiming about the “one god, greatest among gods and men” (DK 21B23) that “all of him sees, all thinks, and all hears.” (DK 21B24) This seems very close to how Hesiod, Solon and others describe Zeus’ omniscience (see sect. 2 above), but we simply do not know if Xenophanes held that his god observed and judged human behaviour in the same way Zeus was supposed to do. Another example: while Heraclitus appears to have held that there is a post-mortem reward for certain souls, viz. the souls of slain warriors and others who die ‘good’ deaths (see DK *Fr.* 22B24, 25 and 63), the fragments are very obscure and do not say anything about post-mortem punishment of other souls.

17 DK 31B15. Recent scholarship has argued that the Pythagoreans did not regard reincarnation as punishment: see Zhmud (2012) 232–233 and Pellò (2018).

18 In the first two books *Republic*, Plato discusses such views: Thrasymachus’ praise of injustice (*R.* 1.343c–344c), and the contract theory, presented by Glaucon and Adeimantus, that characterizes justice not as a good but as a lesser evil and claims that the life of the unjust person is easy and comfortable (*R.* 11.358b–367e). See also Antiphon, *P. Oxy.* 9.1364+3647 (*Fr.* 46a in Graham 2010, 812–813).

to defend the superiority of justice and virtue; taking the *Republic* as our guide here, we can distinguish two kinds of argument he employs.

In the first two books of the *Republic*, Socrates is presented with this problem, viz. that the unjust life seems much more attractive than the just life; the unjust person is rich and famous and need not fear the gods, because he can easily placate them with massive offerings and sacrifices (see n. 18 for the passages). Socrates ultimately replies to this challenge in two different ways:

(1): In book nine, based on his conception of the tripartite soul, he tries to convince us that the life of the unjust person is inherently worse than that of the just person: an unjust person is all torn up within himself, divided, and so injustice is its own worst enemy. Such a person may seem to be happy and prosperous, but is in fact in utter misery, since his tripartite soul is in complete disarray, there being (using Plato's own metaphor) a constant civil war between the many-headed beast, the lion and the little man in his head. According to this view, vice is its own punishment, since the vicious person suffers exactly *because of* his own vicious character, while virtue is its own reward, since a harmonious soul is a happy soul. We might call this the 'philosophical' incentive to motivate people to behave.<sup>19</sup>

(2) For those who are not convinced by this argument about the inherent disadvantage of injustice, Plato also points to the bad consequences of it. Here he uses an argument familiar from traditional religion, viz., that the souls of the vicious will be punished after death. The famous Myth of Er in book ten of the *Republic* (10.614–621) provides an account of what just and unjust people might find waiting for them after they die: the just people go to a heavenly place, while the unjust have to suffer the things they inflicted upon other people, but then ten times over, for a period of a thousand years (or even longer), and other dialogues have similar myths.<sup>20</sup>

According to most of these Platonic eschatological myths, this punishment involves both the infliction of pain and, subsequently, reincarnation into a body that befits the vicious lifestyle of the one punished.<sup>21</sup> In *Phaedo* Socrates suggests that gluttons, drunkards and thugs will become asses or something

19 In *Timaeus* Plato argues that this virtuous life brings the most supreme happiness, as it assimilates our soul to the divine order of the cosmos; Pl. *Ti.* 90a–d.

20 These myths (in *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus* and *Laws*), like the one of Er, describe the post-mortem fate of human souls: invariably, those who have done wrong in life suffer punishment after death, whether they got away with their crimes during life or not. See Mackenzie (1981) 179–206 and Saunders (1991) 196–211 for summaries of these myths.

21 Many elements of these myths, such as the reincarnation of human souls, are very similar to what we find in Pythagoreanism and (other) mystery religions. It seems likely that

similar, while tyrants and robbers are reborn as wolves or other predatory animals, and in *Phaedrus* he tells us that the more vicious and ignorant a soul is, the worse its next embodied life will be: a sophist, a tyrant or even an animal.<sup>22</sup> Souls can also improve, however, through their punishments and reincarnations, and might ultimately escape the cycle of death and rebirth altogether.<sup>23</sup> The mechanism of reincarnation allows Plato to address two concerns: firstly, it guarantees that injustice will be punished and secondly, this punishment (post-mortem suffering and/or reincarnation into a 'deserved' life-form) is *reformatory* and thus beneficial, which fits Plato's view of the gods as solely the causes of *good things* (the θεός ἀνάιτιος principle<sup>24</sup>). We might call this the 'eschatological' incentive to get people to behave.

To conclude, Plato seems intent on emphasizing that divine providence guarantees that we all get what we deserve and that it pays to be good and virtuous (or at least, to make efforts to become good and virtuous): the philosophical argument shows that justice is *inherently* better than injustice, the eschatological argument that justice will have better *consequences* than injustice. The post-mortem punishment inflicted on those who misbehave does not fall outside the scope of this providence, for it is always aimed at reformation and thus improvement of the one being punished. Even when this is no longer possible, i.e., when someone is beyond redemption and his annihilation is the only option left, this is still a beneficial outcome, as it prevents further harm to others, may deter wannabe criminals from a life of vice and may even benefit the culprit himself.<sup>25</sup> When we turn to the Stoics in the next section, we will see the same idea recurring: what God does is always beneficial, either to the individual or group being punished or to the rest of society (or to both).<sup>26</sup>

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Plato has borrowed from these earlier traditions, but an estimation of their influence on his thought falls outside the scope of this paper.

22 Pl. *Phd.* 81d–82a, and *Phdr.* 248a ff.

23 See e.g., Pl. *Phd.* 81a and 84a–b, where it is said that a philosopher's soul will enjoy eternal bliss among the gods.

24 Pl. *R.* 379b–c and 617e.

25 Here I follow Sorabji (1980) 288ff., who also lists many passages in support of the view that Plato had a reformist view of punishment. See also Mackenzie (1981), esp. 214–216 and Saunders (1991) Chpt. 5, 6 and 16.

26 I will not discuss other major schools, such as the Peripatetics and Epicureans, since their systems involve little to no involvement by the gods in the administration of justice to human beings. The Epicureans, of course, rejected the whole notion of divine providence (including punishment of the wicked) and this view will be briefly discussed in what follows.

#### 4 The Stoics on Divine Punishment

The Stoics, as is well known, claimed the goodness of the cosmos and the providential administration of it by God. Philosophical opponents, such as Epicureans or Sceptics, tried to undermine this claim by pointing to the apparent abundance of imperfections and 'things wrong' with the cosmos. Disease, earthquakes, floods, dangerous animals, war, human beings doing terrible things to one another: if this is truly the best possible cosmos, as the Stoics claimed, why did God not prevent these bad things, this evil, from happening? To face these challenges, the Stoics came up with a pretty elaborate theodicy (i.e., a justification of why such things happen, and an exculpation of God from any guilt), which boils down to the following: the only real evil is moral vice and we ourselves are responsible for it. God gave us the means to become virtuous and our abusing these means is not his responsibility. Other so-called evils or bad things, such as natural disasters, are not really evil at all, and our suffering from them is the non-intended yet unavoidable consequence of bringing about the best possible cosmos.<sup>27</sup>

Another aspect of theodicean problems is the same one Plato (and in general, anyone asserting divine providence) had to face, viz. that of people doing bad things with impunity: if God is good and just and cares for his creation, why does he not do a better job of chastising the vicious? In the third book of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* the Sceptic Cotta provides a list of good people that have suffered for no good reason, then another list of bad people that got away with murder or other crimes and he concludes as follows:

[J]ust as a household or a state appears to lack all rational system and order if in it there are no rewards for right conduct and no punishments for transgression (*supplicia peccatis*), so there is no such thing at all as the divine government (*divina moderatio*) of the world if that governance makes no distinction between the good and the wicked. (Cic. *N.D.* 3.85; transl. Rackham 1951)

We have just seen that Plato has two answers to this: the philosophical one (vice is its own punishment) and the eschatological one (vicious people will suffer postmortem punishment). It seems obvious, however, that the second Platonic option is not really available to the Stoics, since their metaphysics and cosmology leaves no room (figuratively and literally) for an afterworld where

27 See e.g., Long (1968), Kerferd (1978), Wicke-Reuter (2000) 36–50, Algra (2014), esp. 123–126.

souls go to be judged. Nonetheless, most Stoics hold that souls can survive death, i.e., the separation from the body: according to Chrysippus, only the souls of the sages will survive until the next conflagration, while Cleanthes held that all souls will do so.<sup>28</sup> Stoics of the Imperial era are rather hesitant about the afterlife of the soul, with Seneca and Marcus Aurelius often saying that death means that the soul is either snuffed out or changed for the better – this better condition probably being that the soul will soar up and live happily among the heavenly bodies.<sup>29</sup>

One might consider this post-mortem survival of the soul to have served a moral purpose as well, even when there is no afterworld: live virtuously, and you will be rewarded with continued (and happy) existence right up until the next conflagration. But, first, there is hardly any evidence that the Stoics actually *did* use this theory to give us an incentive to live well (and remember that according to Cleanthes, *all* souls will survive); and second, it seems that the worst that could happen to the souls of bad people is that they fall apart (i.e., are destroyed) as soon as they are separated from the body, or at least soon after this separation.<sup>30</sup> Stoic theory thus seems to leave no room for post-mortem punishment of the souls of the wicked, and some Stoics even explicitly reject it.<sup>31</sup>

The only apparent evidence to the contrary is found in two puzzling passages in Lactantius' *The Divine Institutions*.<sup>32</sup> Lactantius' testimony seems to be of questionable value, however: (1) it is not corroborated by any other source

28 D.L. 7.157 (*SVF* 1.522, 2.811), Ar. Didym. *Fr.* 39 Diels (*SVF* 2.809).

29 I agree with Rist (1989) 2004, based on the findings of Hoven (1971), that “it is clear that no single position can be affirmed as Seneca’s consistent view.” Seneca is clearly attracted by the idea of an afterlife of the soul, putting it to good use for consolatory purposes (e.g., *Marc.* 24.5, *Polyb.* 9.7, *Helv.* 11.7), but it seems safest to assume that he never fully committed to it, seeing it as a ‘beautiful dream’ (*bellum somnium*) as he puts it in *Ep.* 102.2. Epictetus favours the idea that when we die we simply (and entirely) dissolve into our constitutive elements (*Diss.* 3.13.14–15, 1.9.10–17); as to Marcus, in 4.21 he mentions the Chrysippean position, but in many other passages (e.g., 5.33, 6.24, 7.32 and 8.25) he simply says that death is either a change (μετάστασις) or extinction (σβέσις). See Hoven (1971) for an overview of the various Stoics’ opinions on the afterlife, and Algra (2009) for a discussion of these matters in the context of Stoic demonology.

30 As said, later Stoics such as Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius consider this swift destruction (through disintegration of its constitutive πνεύμα) as a very real possibility for *all* souls, not just those of non-sages.

31 See e.g., Sextus Empiricus (S.E. *M* 9.71) and Seneca (Sen. *Ep.* 24.18, 82.16 and *Marc.* 19.4).

32 In Lact. *Inst. Div.* 7.7 (transl. Fletcher 1995) he says that “Zeno the Stoic taught that there were infernal regions, and that the abodes of the good were separated from the wicked; and that the former enjoyed peaceful and delightful regions, but that the latter suffered punishment in dark places, and in dreadful abysses of mire”; again, in 7.20 he claims that

(though this by itself is not enough to reject it, of course); (2) implying that souls can move downwards (into “infernal regions,” “dreadful abysses of mire”) after death contradicts Stoic physics, according to which souls, consisting of πνεῦμα, are light and will move upwards;<sup>33</sup> (3) it seems to fit Platonic (rather than Stoic) eschatology, being reminiscent of, e.g., the myths in the *Phaedo* and book ten of the *Republic*. It is not unlikely that Lactantius here confuses Platonic and Stoic teachings, since in *Inst. Div.* 3.18 he certainly, and erroneously, attributes the Pythagorean (and probably Platonic) doctrine of the transmigration of souls to the Stoics.<sup>34</sup>

So, leaving the option of post-mortem punishment aside, let us turn to the first one: the idea that, just as virtue is its own reward, vice is its own punishment. In other words, the punishment for what bad people do does not *follow* as a consequence, but is *inherently* bound up with doing bad things; when you are vicious, you suffer from it yourself. This is the kind of punishment of the wicked that we find in the works of several Stoics, who often formulate this point in theological terms. That is, they explicitly say that such self-inflicted punishment is precisely how divine providence has ordained things to be.<sup>35</sup> Vicious people thus do not get away with impunity, but suffer ‘divine punishment’ *more Stoico*: we find this idea expressed by e.g., Epictetus (1) and Cicero (2):

(1) There are certain punishments (κολάσεις), assigned as it were by law, for those who are disobedient to the divine dispensation. ‘Whoever shall

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according to the Stoics the souls of good men will have a blissful existence after being separated from the body at death, but that the souls of those who have become enslaved to the desires and lusts of the body will suffer because of this too-close association with the body.

33 S.E. *M* 9.71.

34 Lact. *Inst. Div.* 7.20, e.g., reads like a paraphrase of Pl. *Phd.* 81e. See Colish (1985) 11: 44 for a discussion of these passages, and Doignon (1977). An erroneous attribution of ideas from the Platonist tradition to the Stoics may also explain Cic. *N.D.* 3.90, where the Stoics are said to have claimed that divine punishment may be visited upon the children or grandchildren of the wicked, even when these escape punishment themselves. Since (a) this passage is part of the Sceptic criticism of Stoic theology, (b) we have no other evidence to support this claim, and (c) it is an argument actually used by Platonists such as Plutarch (see Berg 2014), I regard this as a mistaken ascription to the Stoics.

35 In other words, the Stoics made explicit what in Plato’s dialogues was only said *implicitly*. The difference here is explained clearly by Frede (2003) 104: “Since the Stoics conceive of their divine power as an all-pervasive *pneuma*, the main distinction between their position and Plato’s consists in the fact that Stoic providence is an immanent principle in all of nature. It is not confined to the divine souls of the heavenly bodies that somehow or other (Plato is silent as to the ways and means) also care about smaller matters.”

regard as good anything but the things that fall within the scope of his moral purpose (προαίρεσις), let him envy, yearn, flatter, feel disturbed; whoever shall regard anything else as evil, let him sorrow, grieve, lament, be unhappy.' (Epict. *Diss.* 3.11.1f.)<sup>36</sup>

(2) And there will be, as it were, one common teacher and ruler over all, God, who is the author, initiator, and judge of this law [i.e., natural law – MvH]. Whoever seeks to disobey it flees from himself and rejects the nature of man. And on this account, he will suffer the severest punishment, even if he otherwise escapes what are regarded as punishment. (Cic. *Rep.* 3.22.33)<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the wicked and decadent only *seem* to be better off than virtuous people; being vicious, they do not recognize that only virtue and reason are truly good – instead, they erroneously value indifferent things like wealth and power to be good and other indifferent things like illness and poverty to be really bad. Consequently, they will suffer from all kinds of emotions and their souls will be in constant turmoil.<sup>38</sup> This is also the point that Seneca makes in *De Providentia* when he says that we would be wrong to think that lazy and rich vicious people are doing well. Those who seem to lead easy lives are actually worse off, because their souls are in a bad way:

Those you regard as fortunate, could you only see them in their hearts, not as they meet the eye, are wretched, dirty, ugly, and, like the walls of their own homes, decorated only on the outside; such felicity is not long-lasting or genuine (*solida et sincera felicitas*): it is plaster-work, and thinly applied at that (*crusta est et quidem tenuis*). (Sen. *Prov.* 6.4; transl. adapted from Davie/Reinhardt 2007)

It is in this sense, I think, that Seneca speaks of divine punishment. In letter 95 he talks about the gods sometimes punishing people through what we may call 'alleged benefaction.'<sup>39</sup> People wrongly judge the wealth and comfort of

36 See also Epict. *Diss.* 4.5.10: "injustice in itself is a great injury to the unjust man."

37 Cf. Marc. Aur. 9.4: "He that does wrong, does wrong to himself (ἀμαρτάνει). The unjust man (ἀδικῶν) is unjust to himself, for he makes himself bad (κακόν)." See also 4.26.

38 See e.g., Epict. *Fr.* 13 (Stob. 1.3.50).

39 Sen. *Ep.* 95.50 (trans. Graver/Long): "They [the gods] do not dispense or contain anything bad (*malum*); but they do reprove and restrain some people, impose penalties on them, and sometimes punish them while appearing to do them good (*castigant quosdam et*

bad people to be truly valuable and a gift from the gods; in other words, this is the by now familiar misconception that vice is actually more profitable than virtue. It is not, Seneca says, and this becomes most apparent when things start to go wrong, as they must in our mortal lives:

Those, however, whom he seems to favour, whom he seems to spare, he is really keeping soft against ills to come. For you are wrong if you suppose that any one is exempt from ill. Even the man who has prospered long will have his share some day; whoever seems to have been released has only been reprieved. (Sen. *Prov.* 4.7)

Confronted with illness, destitution, dishonour etc., such seemingly fortunate people will not be able to cope, as their souls are bad and irrational, and their wealth and fame turn out to be no more than 'thinly applied plasterwork' that cover up their vicious core: it is in this sense they can be said to be punished – their misery directly results from their vicious character.

To be clear: I do not think that Seneca believes the gods to actually intervene by handing out wealth and fame as poisoned chalices to vicious people. Rather, he makes the same point as Epictetus in the passages quoted above: given the Stoic value-system, vice implies misery for the vicious person, which is why Stoics like Epictetus or Seneca can characterize this as a divine law or deed.<sup>40</sup>

If all this is correct, it seems to be a nice Stoic solution to the problem posed by their critics, viz. that bad people can do whatever they like with impunity, and thus, that there is something seriously wrong with the providentialist world view of the Stoics. The solution is that because vice is its own punishment, bad people do *not* get away with what they do.<sup>41</sup> Even better, only they themselves suffer from their own viciousness (because their soul is in a bad way), while their so-called victims are not really harmed at all.<sup>42</sup>

There is more, however, since there is some evidence that several Stoics also recognized what appears to be a more traditional form of divine punish-

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*coercent et inrogant poenas et aliquando specie boni puniunt).*" Seneca may actually be distinguishing different kinds of punishment here; see n. 61 below.

40 Sen. *Ep.* 110.2 makes the same point.

41 On this point, then, the Stoics are in full agreement with Plato's claim in the *Republic*: injustice (vice) is inherently worse than justice (virtue), since the souls of the vicious are in a wretched state.

42 See Marc. Aur. 8.55: "Taken generically, wickedness does no harm to the universe, and the particular wickedness does no harm to others. It is harmful to the one individual alone, and he has been given the option of being quit of it the first moment he pleases." See also Sen. *Ben.* 7.7.3–4 and *Ira* 2.30.2.

ment, viz. God ‘intervening’ in the cosmos in order to punish vicious people. According to Plutarch, e.g., Chrysippus claimed that god might send plagues or famine as punishment for the wicked. I give two relevant passages in full, as they contain much of interest:

T1 Yet, having thus disparaged Plato’s words, in other places again he [Chrysippus] praises and frequently quotes these lines of Euripides:

*In fact there are, though one deride the words,  
Zeus and the gods, who mark our mortal woes;*

and similarly, in the first book concerning Justice he quotes these verses of Hesiod’s,

*Zeus from the heavens inflicted a grievous calamity on them,  
Plague and famine at once; and the populace utterly perished,*

and then says that the gods do these things in order that from the chastisement of the wicked the rest of mankind may take warning and be less inclined to attempt any similar misdeed.<sup>43</sup>

T2 Nevertheless, he [Chrysippus] says that god chastises vice and does many things with a view to chastisement of the wicked. For instance, in the second book on the Gods he says that inconvenient things (δύσχηστα) do sometimes happen to the virtuous not as they do to the base for their chastisement but in the course of other arrangements (κατ’ ἄλλην οἰκονομίαν), as happens in cities; and again he puts it in these words: “First, evils are to be understood after the fashion of what has been said before; and then it must be understood that these things are dispensed according to the reason of Zeus either with a view to chastisement or in the course of other arrangements the nature of which is relative to the universe as a whole.”<sup>44</sup>

Plutarch, of course, is often highly polemical in reporting Chrysippus’ position, but these passages do suggest that Chrysippus indeed held that God could, and sometimes would, inflict punishment on vicious people; the important

43 Plut. *St. Rep.* 1040B–C (transl. Cherniss 1976).

44 Plut. *St. Rep.* 1050D–E (transl. Cherniss 1976).

point being that such punishment, apparently, is something different from the self-inflicted punishment we saw earlier. In other words, it is not just another instance of the general 'law' (in Epictetus' words) that whoever is vicious suffers exactly because of that, but seems to be punishment more directly aimed at the wicked by God himself.

Further evidence on this kind of divine punishment is scarce, but Stobaeus has preserved an excerpt from Hierocles (a Stoic from the second-century CE) that says something very similar. I give the relevant passage in full:

T3 But in fact one must not overlook this either: that even if the gods are not responsible for evils (*κακῶν*), they nevertheless inflict some things of this kind on some people and wrap those who deserve them in both bodily and external defects, not because they practice malevolence or because they spitefully believe that a human being should suffer but rather as a form of chastisement (*ἐν τρόπῳ κολάσεως*). For just as famines and droughts and also floods and earthquakes and every such thing mostly occur because of other, physical causes (*δι' αἰτίας ἐτέρας τινὰς φυσικωτέρας*), but sometimes are also caused by the gods (*ἔστι δ' ὅτε καὶ ὑπὸ θεῶν*), when it is time for the faults of many people to be chastised publicly and collectively, in the same way the gods make use of (*χρῶνται*) bodily and external defects against a single person too, for his chastisement, to be sure, but also for his conversion (*ἐπιστροφή*) and a better choice (*προαίρεσις*) than his other [choices].<sup>45</sup>

At first sight, this god-inflicted punishment may seem out of place in Stoic theory, for at least three different reasons. (1) The Stoics held that God does no harm, and whereas the vicious person is responsible for his or her self-inflicted punishment (as described above), God surely is actively involved here in causing all kinds of suffering. (2) The Stoic deterministic world view (i.e., theory of fate) does not seem to leave much, if any, room for the idea of God actively intervening in human affairs and inflicting impromptu punishment on criminals and vicious people. (3) The inevitability that innocent people will be collaterally affected by some of these punishments seems hard to reconcile with the Stoic idea of divine providence.

In what follows, however, I will try to show how (at least some of) the Stoics may have conceptualized this god-inflicted punishment in order to accommodate it within their system; 'may,' because the extant evidence is scarce and

45 Hierocl. *ap. Stob.* 1.3,54, from *How should one behave toward the gods?* (transl. Konstan/Ramelli 2009).

sometimes rather indirect, and often allows no more than tentative conclusions. Even so, I submit the following interpretation renders the Stoic theory of divine punishment coherent in itself and congruous with Stoic theory in general, and takes the three considerations above into account.<sup>46</sup>

To start with (1): The Stoics do indeed claim that God does no harm, but within the Stoic value system that means that God does not cause *moral* evil (i.e., vice), which is the only real evil or harm. As we have already seen, this is something we are responsible for, not God: he does not make us vicious, we do that ourselves. The god-inflicted punishment, in line with this Stoic value system, seems to be restricted to the sphere of indifferent things, such as pain and death caused by earthquakes, disease, famine, bodily harm and disfigurement. In other words, punishing vicious people by inflicting pain, hardship or even death on them is not a problem *per se*, as long as this punishment is not meted out because of something vicious in God (e.g., criminal neglect or spitefulness); and as one would expect, the Stoics emphasize that such punishment actually is not an argument *against*, but *for* God's providence and beneficence.

The primary goal or function of this punishment, viz., does not seem to be retribution, but rather reformation or deterrence or both.<sup>47</sup> The first passage in Plutarch (T1) says that, according to Chrysippus, the purpose of having bad people perish through famine or plague is to warn other people off vice. Similarly, when Hierocles (T3) says that the gods sometimes chastise large groups of people 'publicly,' we may surmise that this public display is meant to deter other people from becoming vicious as well. Now clearly, dying in a flood or famine or earthquake cannot be meant to reform the bad people (since they are dead), but other people might benefit from their deaths, by being motivated to change their lives for the better. Hierocles also says that God may punish an individual in order to convert or reform him (i.e., goad him towards a more virtuous life),<sup>48</sup> but also "for his chastisement"; since he has just distinguished chastisement (*κόλασις*) from malevolence and the wish to see human beings suffer, I suggest that 'chastisement' refers to the deterrent effect of punishment on others who witness its infliction. So, I think that the Stoics were careful to characterize this punishment as part of divine providence: even

46 See Merz and Tieleman (2008) 115–116 for a brief, but clear, discussion of certain aspects of this topic.

47 Hierocles is explicit about this: the gods punish the wicked, "not because they practice malevolence, or because they spitefully believe that a human being should suffer but rather as a form of chastisement." (As cited above in T3.)

48 See also Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* 35, where (Stoic) punishment is described as 'improvement' or 'correction' (*ἐπιανόρθωσις*).

when God punishes us, he is beneficent and benevolent.<sup>49</sup> His punishment always brings about a better cosmos, since either a bad person will change his ways, and/or (when he and other bad people perish through the punitive measures) *other* people will change their ways for the better. In other words, such punishment does not threaten the Stoic claim that everything that God does is beneficial.<sup>50</sup>

(2) Even though this God-inflicted punishment is specifically aimed at the wicked, it cannot be an *ad hoc*, ‘on the spot’ divine intervention that is somehow not a part of fate, which would be impossible.<sup>51</sup> In other words, it *has* to be part of fate in order to make sense within Stoic metaphysics, and Hierocles at least hints at this, when he says that “changelessness and firmness too was one of the virtues, and it is reasonable that this provides among the gods too the stability and immovability of what they have once decided [about chastisement (κόλασις)].”<sup>52</sup> There is nothing in the evidence that suggests otherwise, and one would have expected Plutarch, e.g., to have picked up on such an inconsistency if he could have. Furthermore, there is corroborating evidence: according to Alexander of Aphrodisias, e.g., the Stoics explicitly claimed punishment to be part of fate,<sup>53</sup> and in Diogenes Laertius we find the following famous passage: “We are told that he was once chastising a slave for stealing, and when the latter pleaded that it was his fate to steal, ‘Yes, and to be beaten too,’ said Zeno.”<sup>54</sup> So, even though this kind of punishment is traditionally seen

49 The Stoic philosopher Cornutus (first-century CE) affirms this in his characterization of the Erinnyes in *Greek Theology* 10 (transl. Boys-Stones 2018): “These goddesses are holy and kindly; for nature’s benevolence toward men has also provided for the punishment of wickedness.”

50 As seen above (see sect. 3 above) Plato made the same point. Also, In *Quaest. Rom.* 276f–277a, Plutarch claims that the Stoics held “that evil spirits stalk about whom the gods use as executioners and avengers upon unholy and unjust men.” Algra (2009) 384, suggests that this is probably a Plutarchean construct, and the evidence I have just discussed about god-inflicted punishment being beneficial corroborates this.

51 See e.g., Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.125–126. Seneca (*Prov.* 5.8, transl. Davie/Reinhardt 2007) explicitly claims God does not deviate from fate: “[T]he great creator and ruler of the universe himself wrote fate’s decrees, it is true, but he follows them; he obeys forever, but made his decrees only once (*semper paret, semel iussit*).”

52 Hierocles *ap.* Stob. 1.3.54, from *How should one behave toward the gods?* (transl. Konstan/Ramelli 2009).

53 Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* 35 and 37 reports on the Stoic defense of the compatibility of fate with the meaningful use of such terms as wrong and right, praise and blame, reward and punishment (and correction).

54 D.L. 7.23. Further on (7.123, transl. Hicks 1972) Diogenes also reports that Stoic sages “are not pitiful and make no allowance for anyone; they never relax the penalties fixed by the

as inflicted by an interventionist god, the Stoics would have been able to characterize it as part of fate all the same.

(3) When we come to the apparent problem of collateral damage, it is important to realize that it is not just pertinent to this god-inflicted punishment. We know that Stoic theodicy claims that in the interest of the cosmos as a whole, the occurrence of natural disasters, diseases, hardship, pain and death is unavoidable. God does not *want* to kill or hurt people that suffer from such events, but human suffering (with regard to indifferent things like our body and material possessions) is sometimes an unavoidable side effect of God's providential work, in the same sense that the fragility of the human skull is a non-intended side-effect of its excellent functionality.<sup>55</sup> In the texts cited above (T2 and T3), Plutarch and Hierocles mention this point as well, and argue that such non-intended and non-deserved suffering can result from God inflicting punishment on those who *do* deserve it, just as it can result from what needs to happen for the welfare of the cosmos as a whole.<sup>56</sup>

Now that this has been clarified, the question does arise in what sense exactly earthquakes, plagues and the like, as well as individual sufferings, are a part of fate, i.e., whether they always serve *one* purpose or can occasionally serve a *dual* purpose. To phrase it differently: are disasters and hardships that happen for punitive purposes always numerically different disasters and hardships from the ones that serve a cosmological purpose, or are they (or can they be) the same? If they are different, some disasters happen for cosmological purposes, others for moral purposes; and if they can be the same, then *all* disasters and hardships happen for cosmological purposes, and some of those also serve a moral purpose – viz. when, as Hierocles puts it “it is time for the faults of many people to be chastised publicly and collectively.” In that way, God could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak: the cosmos as a whole benefits from the relevant physical changes of the cosmos, and human beings benefit from the moral goading they get, either by suffering from the disasters themselves or by seeing others suffer from them. From the perspective of Stoic

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laws, since indulgence and pity and even equitable consideration are marks of a weak mind, which affects kindness in place of chastising. Nor do they deem punishments too severe.” See Rist (1969) 83 on the Stoic position on punishments in general: “[...] the Old Stoics seem to have thought that they [punishments] have two functions, as retribution and as a warning to other people.”

55 This example as used by Chrysippus (who borrowed it from Plato *Ti.* 75a–c) is found in Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 7.1.10–11 (*SVF* 2.1170). See also Plut. *St. Rep.* 1051C, and Marc. Aur. 2.3, 6.36, 6.44 and especially 8.50.

56 Which is what I take the words “other arrangements the nature of which is relative to the universe as a whole” in T2 to refer to.

sages, all of this makes perfect sense and does not tell against God's providence: even if they should die from a disaster that improves the cosmos itself and maybe even their fellow human beings, they will happily approve of that.

Now, I think that the Chrysippean text referred to by Plutarch in T2 can be read in this way, and the Hieroclean text as well, although one could have wished the evidence to have been a bit more explicit.<sup>57</sup> There is another parallel, however, in Philo of Alexandria's *On Providence* (first-century CE). He was not a Stoic, of course, but his ideas on theodicy seem to be taken largely from Stoic stock.<sup>58</sup> The following passage is from a fragment of his *On Providence* preserved in Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* (from around 300 CE):

41. And why should we wonder that God uses tyrants to sweep away the wickedness which has spread through cities and countries and nations? For often instead of employing other ministers He effects this by Himself by bringing famine or pestilence and earthquake, and all the other divine visitations whereby great bodies of people perish in huge numbers every day and a large part of the world is desolated for His purpose of promoting virtue. [...] 53. Earthquakes, pestilence, thunderbolts and the like though said to be visitations from God are not really such. For nothing evil at all is caused by God, and these things are generated by changes in the elements. They are not primary works of nature but a sequel of her essential works, attendant circumstances to the primary. (Philo. *Provid.* 41 and 53; ap. Eus. *PE* 8.14)<sup>59</sup>

Clearly 53 seems to contradict 41, in denying what 41 claims, viz. that God *does* inflict famine and pestilence upon sinners. Philo may be inconsistent here, of course, but it would be a massive slip-up, considering that the passages are rather close together. A more plausible interpretation is offered by Colson in his notes to the Loeb-translation, when he says that "though earthquakes, pestilences etc., are in themselves incidental consequences they may still be employed by God as a means of chastisement."<sup>60</sup> I agree, and argue that this may well have been the view of Hierocles and Chrysippus: many natural disasters or other 'inconveniences' (δύσχηρηστα) have to happen anyway, for the good of the cosmos, and now and then God, never letting an opportunity go to waste, uses these inconveniences for punitive purposes also.

57 Of course, I acknowledge that the texts *can* also be read as indicating a numerical distinction between 'cosmic' happenings and punitive ones.

58 See e.g., Runia (2017) and Frick (1999) 189ff.

59 Transl. Colson (1941).

60 Colson (1941) 546.

This interpretation of divine justice, both the self-inflicted and the god-inflicted punishment, would allow the Stoics to claim that God's providence is not threatened by the apparent prospering of vicious people. Scarce though the evidence may be, it seems as if the Stoics (or at least some of them) argued that God could and sometimes would punish the wicked by inflicting disasters or hardships on them.<sup>61</sup> Of course, they knew very well this did not happen always (as shown by the use of 'sometimes' by both Chrysippus and Hierocles in T<sub>2</sub> resp. T<sub>3</sub>), but they could hold that this was not necessary either. The self-inflicted punishment already guarantees that all vicious people are miserable, while the god-inflicted punishment shows that God's wisdom and providence does not let go any opportunity go to waste to benefit the cosmos and human beings at the same time.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Finally, one might ask *why* we find these two kinds of divine punishment in Stoicism, and I have two answers to that. First, this can be explained when we take into account that Stoic theology defies simple classification: it is multifaceted in the sense that the Stoic god has different aspects. So, their theology is *pantheistic* or even a form of *religious naturalism* when they characterize God as the immanent and formative principle of the cosmos, but *theistic* when they call him Zeus and a caring father who is beneficent and provident towards mankind and watches over us. The 'wickedness is its own punishment'-variant fits the pantheistic view, the 'God chastises bad people' the theistic one.<sup>62</sup>

So, the first answer is that Stoic theology itself is flexible enough to allow these two kinds of punishment. The second has to do with *why*, even when their theology allows this, the Stoics would *want* to have these two kinds. The Stoics' own theistic perspective on God as the caring and beneficent father of all is important here. The Stoic Zeus, even more than the Zeus of traditional religion, could not be expected to spare the rod and spoil his children, and through his punishments, he actually shows his care for the cosmos, as "the system constituted of gods and human beings."<sup>63</sup> Moreover, I suggest that many Stoics felt that while 'wickedness as its own punishment' is fine as a philosophical solution to the problem of the apparent flourishing of unjust

61 Sen. *Ep.* 95.50 (see n. 39 above) may well be a reference to both kinds of punishment: *castigant quosdam et coercent et inrogant poenas* to the God-inflicted kind and *aliquando specie boni puniunt* to the self-inflicted kind.

62 See Chrysippus' citation of Euripides' and Hesiod's lines about the punishing Zeus in T<sub>1</sub>.

63 Diog. Laert. 7.138.

people, it might not be potent enough to satisfy the *communis opinio* that the wicked should also suffer in a more (pleasingly) physical and conspicuous way. This was not a new problem, as Plato was confronted with it as well: he tried to convince us that the life of the unjust person is *inherently* worse than that of the just person, but for those who are not convinced by this argument about the inherent disadvantage of injustice, he also threatened with fire and brimstone in the afterlife. The Stoics, of course, could not accommodate such post-mortem punishment in their (meta)physics, but I have argued that they *did* try and salvage a form of divine punishment as it was known from traditional religion in their own way.<sup>64</sup>

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