

The Sacrifice of a “Stoic Metaphysics”

The Stoics set out a sophisticated and detailed hierarchy of the world and its contents which may seem, at first blush, to be “metaphysical”. At the same time, Stoic philosophy is characterized by a preoccupation with physics and the earthly world – a project which may be understood as “anti-metaphysical”. Is there, then, such thing as a “Stoic metaphysics?” I will argue that we are better served answering “no”, because positing a Stoic metaphysics requires a tenuous mapping between the notion of “being” in Aristotelian ontology and in Stoic ontology. Insisting on such a mapping, I claim, comes at the sacrifice of denying certain strong positions of Stoic ontology, in particular that “something” is the highest genus. First, I will present the question of Stoic metaphysics as an interpretative debate over the relation between the Stoics and the giants in Plato’s *Sophist*. Next, I discuss Jacques Brunschwig and Katja Vogt’s respective arguments for and against a Stoic metaphysics in terms of interpretative positions on the *Sophist*. Thirdly, I attempt to show that Brunschwig’s argumentation demands a notion of “being” which is at the same time Aristotelian and Stoic, and that the only way for him to accept that is to sacrifice “something” as the highest genus in Stoic philosophy. Lastly, I suggest that the basic insight of Brunschwig’s argument can be recovered in Vogt’s treatment of the Stoic god as the one cause of all movement.

I. Untamed or Tamed: The Stoics in the *Sophist*

In Plato’s *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger paints a battle between the “giants” and the “gods” over the question of being and non-being. From the beginning, the inquiry into being is established to be as vexing as the notoriously paradoxical inquiry into non-being: “saying what *that which is* is isn’t a bit easier than saying what *that which is not* is”.¹ The “untamed” giants are earthly brutes: for

¹ Plato, *Sophist*, 267.

something to *be*, it must be tangible and graspable. The gods, on the other hand, posit that only nonbodily forms can be. Interestingly, the untamed giants are portrayed even as disdainful of the very question of being presented by the Eleatic Stranger, much more so than the gods:

And if any of the others say that something without a body is, they [the untamed giants] absolutely despise him and won't listen to him anymore... It's easier to talk with the ones who put being in the forms. They're gentler people. It's harder – and perhaps just about impossible – with the ones who drag everything down to body by force. It seems to me that we have to deal with them this way... by making them actually better than they are.²

Initiating this process of making the untamed giants “actually better than they are,” the Eleatic Stranger poses a challenge. Virtue and justice are not material, graspable bodies. However, they clearly can be and cease to be in the soul. Therefore, the untamed giants must accept that either virtue and justice are graspable bodies or that they do not exist, both of which seem absurd.

Theaetetus suggests that the giants would be “ashamed” and indecisive towards this choice. These giants, the Eleatic Stranger says, are no longer untamed giants but rather “tamed” giants. Untamed giants would easily consider virtue and justice to be graspable bodies. Tamed giants, the Eleatic Stranger proposes, might reconcile their indecision by understanding being as causal capacity, the *dunamis* proposal: “a thing really is if it has any capacity at all, either by nature to do something to something else or to have even the smallest thing done to it.”³ Armed with this criterion, the tamed giants express a view of being and non-being which the Eleatic Stranger seems more content with.

The Stoics seem to reclaim the giants' earthly outlook: the “‘existent’ is said only of bodies,”⁴ and “body is what has threefold extension – length, breadth, and depth.”⁵ They also seem to take up the *dunamis* proposal: “Zeno... [thought] that it was totally impossible that something

² Plato, *Sophist*, 267-268.

³ Plato, *Sophist*, 269.

⁴ Alexander, *On Aristotle's Topics* 301, 19-25 (SVG 2.329) – Long & Sedley 27B.

⁵ Diogenes Laertius, 7.135 (SVF 3 Apollodorus 6, part) – Long & Sedley 45E.

incorporeal should be the agent of anything, and that only a body was capable of acting or of being acted upon.”⁶ Therefore, for the Stoics, “conventionally” incorporeal objects such as soul, god, and virtue are actually corporeal because they act upon other bodies or are acted upon by other bodies.⁷ All bodies in the world are made and shaped by the mixing of an active principle (reason, god), which only acts and is never acted upon, with a passive principle (matter, unqualified substance), which is only acted upon and never acts.⁸ God is the self-moving power which sets matter into motion and creates the world-order, such that the ‘world’ (*kosmos*) may be understood as god itself.⁹ However, the Stoics also admit four incorporeals – void, place, time, and sayables (*lekta*) – which are not bodies because they lack causal capacity, but which are conditions for body. Therefore, the highest genus of the Stoic system is not “being”, which would apply only to corporeals, but rather “something”, which encompass both corporeals and incorporeals.¹⁰

One productive path of investigation on the question of Stoic metaphysics is to understand the Stoic project in relation to the two positions set forth by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*: the untamed and the tamed giants. The untamed giants are stubbornly hostile to the very question of being and non-being, but the tamed giants are drawn into it. If the Stoics are argued to be tamed giants, then it seems that the Stoics do have a metaphysics.

II. The Debate on Stoic Metaphysics

Jacques Brunschwig argues that we can identify two senses of a Stoic “metaphysics”. In the first sense, “metaphysics” is a subfield of physics. The Stoics divided physics into a “specific”

⁶ Cicero, *Academica* 1.39 (SVF 1.90) – Long & Sedley 45A.

⁷ See Nemesius L&S 45 C&D for a proof of soul as a corporeal.

⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors* 9.332 (SVG 2.524, part) – Long & Sedley 44A; Diogenes Laertius 7.134 (SVG 2.300, part, 2.99) – Long & Sedley 44B.

⁹ Diogenes Laertius 7.137 (SVG 2.526, part) – Long & Sedley 44F.

¹⁰ Seneca, *Letters* 58.13-15 (SVG 2.332, part) – Long & Sedley 27A.

division and a “generic” division. The specific division has five topics: bodies; principles; elements; gods; and limits, place, and void; all of which are, Brunschwig writes, abstract and empirically inaccessible parts of physics. The generic division, on the other hand, has three topics: world, elements, and the search for causes, all of which are concrete and empirically accessible parts of physics. Therefore, if we take “metaphysics” to be the study of *a priori* principles and causes, this “specific” division of physics may be called a “Stoic metaphysics”. Katja Vogt writes that such an interpretation may be helpful, but casts doubt on the utility of such an interpretation beyond a limited connection. Brunschwig reads each of the five topics in the specific division as more fundamental or “first”, but this seems to presuppose a metaphysical project concerned with studying being.

Generally speaking, the topics in the ‘specific’ division clearly share a common feature: all of them are in some sense primary. Bodies, we shall see, are the only genuinely existent beings; principles... are the primary factors of reality as a whole; elements are the first and simplest cosmic products of their interplay; gods are the most perfect beings; and limits, place, and void are the primary conditions without which the existence and interaction of bodies would be neither possible nor intelligible.¹¹

To justify the “firstness” of a topic, Brunschwig draws a connection between that topic and being/bodies. This shows that, for Brunschwig, the “primary entities” already are being/bodies. Therefore, in Vogt’s view, Brunschwig may be begging the question. However, this is not the main site of disagreement between Brunschwig and Vogt: Brunschwig does not spend much space defending it, nor Vogt much space criticizing it; it is accepted under highly limited terms.

The main disagreement between Brunschwig and Vogt can be understood as a difference in how they understand the Stoics in relation to the giants in the *Sophist*. Brunschwig treats the Stoics as tamed giants, whereas Vogt believes they are untamed (but sophisticated) giants. The

¹¹ Jacques Brunschwig, “Stoic metaphysics” (in Brad Inwood (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 208.

Eleatic Stranger makes clear that their dialogue in the *Sophist* is an attempt to work out plausible positions on the question of being and non-being. The tamed giants are “tamed” because their position has, under the Eleatic Stranger’s guidance, been drawn into the coordinates of being and non-being. On the other hand, the untamed giants are “untamed” precisely because they resist this interpellation. While Brunschwig believes that the Stoics as tamed giants are invested in this question of being and non-being (and therefore that there is a Stoic metaphysics), Vogt believes that the Stoics as untamed giants reject thinking in terms of this very question (and therefore that there is no Stoic metaphysics). Both Brunschwig’s second and more significant sense of Stoic metaphysics and Vogt’s objection to it “fall out” of these positions.

In Brunschwig’s second sense, “metaphysics” is a study of the world across (or “above”) the threefold division of philosophy into logic, physics, and ethics.¹² The Stoics were concerned with understanding not only physical objects but also ethical objects such as virtue and justice and logical objects such as quantifiers and propositions. If we follow Aristotle and take metaphysics to be the study of “being *qua* being”, or ontology, then it seems that the Stoics indeed set forth such an ontology which provides a particular understanding of every sort of object as that sort of object. In his reading of Stoic ontology, then, Brunschwig aims to show that the Stoics took a general approach to investigating the being of objects, beyond merely physical objects which “be” in the basic sense of graspability, characterizing the basis of being in terms of the *dunamis* criterion. Brunschwig begins by tracing the Stoic treatment of bodies the position of the giants in the *Sophist*. The Stoics, Brunschwig says, mix body as a resistant physical substance – the earthly position of the untamed giants – with body as causal capacity, the “taming” suggestion.¹³ The Stoics are tamed giants insofar as they adopt the *dunamis* criterion to expand a limited, untamed understanding of

¹² Aetius 1, Preface 2 (SVF 2.35) – Long & Sedley 26A; and Diogenes Laertius 7.39-41 – Long & Sedley 26B(1).

¹³ Brunschwig, “Stoic metaphysics”, 210.

objects which be into a general ontology: while the untamed giants “reduce... the class of genuinely existent beings to ordinary bodies like tables or trees,” the Stoics “enlarge the class of corporeal existent beings to imperceptible entities.”¹⁴ They are not hostile to the question of being and non-being, like the untamed giants are, but rather seek to set forth their ontology as an answer.

Interestingly, the Stoics allow for incorporeals into their ontology. Each of these incorporeals are necessary for the existence of bodies, Brunschwig writes, but they are not themselves bodies because they fail to satisfy the *dunamis* requirement. In such an ontology, it seems that the supreme genus can no longer be “being” but rather “something”. This appears to be a point of discomfort for Brunschwig, who advocates for an alternative ontology in which being is the highest genus on the basis of paradoxes produced by placing something as the highest genus. Therefore, for Brunschwig, the project of uncovering Stoic metaphysics is about identifying and centering the Stoic concern for the question of being, just as the Eleatic Stranger’s taming of the giants was about making their position intelligible in terms of being and nonbeing.

For Vogt, however, the Stoics are not tamed giants but rather untamed, precisely because they are disposed against formulating their philosophy in these terms. The Stoics insist that only corporeals exist, and therefore willingly accept – just as the untamed giants do – that the soul, its states, and other “conventionally incorporeal” items are corporeals. Although one can pick out a study of “being *qua* being” from the artifacts of Stoic philosophy, Stoic philosophy is not driven by an effort to produce an ontology which will show the nature of being. Vogt begins by returning to the paradox of non-being in the *Sophist*: we can think and talk about non-being, so surely non-being is something, which suggests paradoxically that it is. Given that the Stoics appear to have inherited the *dunamis* criterion from the *Sophist*, surely they would also have faced these problems

¹⁴ Brunschwig, “Stoic metaphysics”, 211.

of being and non-being. But the Stoics avoid this, Vogt asserts, precisely because their system is not fundamentally concerned with the question of being. Because being/bodies is a subgenus of something, what is something does not need to be (a body). Although the Stoics do center causal capacity in relation to corporeality, making them “sophisticated” untamed giants, the Stoics were not interested in translating corporeality to being and incorporeality to non-being.

III. Aristotelian or Stoic? “Being” in Brunschwig’s Argument

Following Vogt’s recommendation that “we should be more cautious than Brunschwig is,”¹⁵ I will revisit Brunschwig’s argument. I will identify and probe what I see as a fundamental tension in Brunschwig’s mapping from Aristotelian metaphysics onto Stoic philosophy. The tension hinges, I claim, on two dimensions of “being” – the properties which characterize existence, and occupying the highest genus in ontology – which are aligned in Aristotelian ontology but unaligned in Stoic ontology.

Brunschwig introduces metaphysics as ontology in the Aristotelian sense of “being *qua* being”, writing that “the purpose is not to study some privileged objects but rather to study any and every object from a certain point of view (*qua* being’), and also *qua* such and such type of being.”¹⁶ However, an immediate ambiguity arises: when we take the Aristotelian notion of “being *qua* being” and apply it to the Stoic context, are we referring to “being” in the Aristotelian or Stoic sense of the word? For Aristotle, being is the highest genus; metaphysics can be understood as “ontology” precisely because being (*onta*) is fundamental. If we are to take the quality of “being the highest genus” as the salient dimension of being, then ontology as the study of “being *qua* being” in the Aristotelian sense maps to ontology as the study of “something *qua* something” in the Stoic

¹⁵ Katja Maria Vogt, “Sons of the Earth: Are the Stoics Metaphysical Brutes?” (*Phronesis*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 2009), 145.

¹⁶ Brunschwig, “Stoic metaphysics”, 209

sense. Since “something” is the highest genus for the Stoics, a Stoic ontology would seek to capture the nature of all things from the highest genus downwards, just as Aristotle does in his ontology. However, for the Stoics, “being” is a subgenus under “something”; what is important about being, if we are to take it to be important to the Stoics at all, is that it is tied to causal capacity. If we take “causal capacity” as the salient dimension of being, then ontology as the study of “being *qua* being” in the Aristotelian sense maps to ontology as the study of “things with causal capacity *qua* their causal capacity” in the Stoic sense. Since the Stoics say that all and only things with casual capacity are corporeals, Stoic ontology is really “corporeals *qua* corporeals”.

If we map “being *qua* being” for Aristotle to “something *qua* something” for the Stoics, Stoic ontology studies all somethings, including corporeals and incorporeals. However, if we map it to “corporeals *qua* corporeals”, incorporeals are excluded from Stoic ontology. Therefore, considering different dimensions of “being” produces two different Stoic ontologies. In Aristotelian ontology, being as the conditions for existing and being as the highest genus coincide, but this is not the case for the Stoics.

something					
corporeals (being)			incorporeals		
substrate	qualified	...	void	place	...

Grey: “being” as causal capacity, mapped to “corporeals” (Stoic). Grey and white: “being” as highest genus, mapped to “something” (Aristotelian).

Which of these two ontologies does Brunschwig use? Initially, it appears that he understands “being” as causal capacity, associating “being” with existence, body, and corporeality. It follows, then, that Stoic ontology as “corporeals *qua* corporeals” excludes incorporeals.

Brunschwig acknowledges this, writing that “the most prominent feature of Stoic ‘onto-logy’ is that, *stricto sensu*, it is limited to bodies: it recognizes only bodies as genuinely existent beings.”¹⁷

However, in the following section, Brunschwig asserts that “paradoxically, their ‘ontology’ allows for a number of items which are not *onta* but which are not nothing either: although incorporeal, they are ‘something’.”¹⁸ Only one of the two Stoic ‘ontologies’ admits incorporeals: that is, the one formed by mapping “being *qua* being” for Aristotle to “something *qua* something” for the Stoics. Brunschwig may understand Stoic ontology as admitting incorporeals because a study of “corporeals *qua* corporeals” does not seem broad enough to cover all of the important ‘metaphysical’ issues that the Stoics discussed. At the same time, Brunschwig treats Stoic ontology as “corporeals *qua* corporeals”, and understandably so, given the centrality of corporeality to Stoic philosophy. His discussion of bodies focuses on their causal capacity, and his discussion of incorporeals focuses on the absence of features which demonstrate causal capacity. Therefore, Brunschwig wants to have his cake – a general ontology which encompasses both corporeals and incorporeals – and to eat it – by treating the *onta* in “ontology” as corporeality.

Brunschwig attempts to address this difficulty by challenging the “standard division” of “something” as the supreme genus, above corporeals/body/being and incorporeals. This is precisely the point upon which Vogt responds to (although not directly to Brunschwig). Seneca’s positioning of corporeal and incorporeal below being, which Brunschwig cites as evidence against the standard *divisio*, is “misleading”¹⁹ for Vogt. For Vogt, Seneca incorrectly attempts to shirk the problem of non-being while centering question of being. To reiterate the Eleatic Visitor’s comment that “saying what *that which is* is isn’t a bit easier than saying what *that which is not* is”²⁰:

¹⁷ Brunschwig, “Stoic metaphysics”, 210

¹⁸ Brunschwig, “Stoic metaphysics”, 213.

¹⁹ Vogt, “Are the Stoics metaphysical brutes?”, 147.

²⁰ Plato, *Sophist*, 267.

once we have entertained the question of being, we are mired in difficulties we cannot turn our backs towards, including the paradox of non-being. Brunschwig no doubt has responses to Vogt's objection; these are outside the scope of this paper.

Nevertheless, my argument has been as follows. If we understand "Stoic metaphysics" as ontology in the Aristotelian sense of "being *qua* being", then we need to be clear about exactly what "being" means in the Stoic context. Interpreting "being" as either the highest genus or the criterion characterizing existence - both important dimensions for the Aristotelian sense of "being" - produces different Stoic ontologies. To defend the notion of a Stoic metaphysics, one must defend this mapping; and to defend this mapping, one must defend "being" as the supreme genus in Stoic philosophy. We will leave this turf for proponents of a Stoic metaphysics to battle, but I do not think it is incorrect to suggest that this is much more contested and shaky turf than the initial question of a "Stoic metaphysics" might suggest. The ambiguity in mapping "being" to Stoic philosophy may also provide positive support for Vogt's insistence on the Stoics as untamed giants. If the Stoics as giants are seduced into being tamed and accepting the Eleatic Stranger's "reforms", they will face fundamental conflicts between the primacy of being inscribed in the very question of being and non-being against their own unique understanding of "being" as below "something".

IV. Recovering the General "Point of View"

However, this reduction from the question of a Stoic metaphysics to the question of the highest genus does not deny all of Brunschwig's argument. Without making attachments to a strict notion of ontology, Brunschwig's general (although admittedly weakened) insight is that the Stoics systematically investigated "any and every object from a certain point of view".²¹ Although this

²¹ Brunschwig, "Stoic metaphysics", 209

“point of view” may not be ontological, Brunschwig’s analysis clearly points towards *some* general point of view extending to objects across all three divisions of philosophy. Brunschwig passingly mentions the Stoic gods when he suggests that the Stoics put theology into physics.²² But perhaps there is more to the Stoic gods for Brunschwig’s own purposes than Brunschwig lets on: maybe we can recover some sense of the spirit of Brunschwig’s analysis in Vogt’s focus on god in Stoic philosophy. The Stoics, Vogt says, believe that there is “*one* kind of cause for all movements in the universe.”²³ Reason, as the active principle, permeates all of the universe with soul, and all bodies owe their not-being-inert-matter to this one cause of movement. God, therefore, is not limited to or especially more ‘at home with’ any one particular partition of philosophy, but rather operates across it. Consider the following example, adapted from Vogt: a warrior drives his spear into an opposing warrior. We might separate the possible causes: perhaps it is in physics, in which the muscles in the warrior’s body tighten and move in a certain way; or perhaps it is in ethics, in which *nous* takes on an ethical orientation and actualizes it in the world. But god as the one cause of movement allows us to understand how the animating force of *pneuma* might spread both through the mind and the body. But gods also help us understand the significance of the incorporeals, because the incorporeals outline and structure the world, and god *is* the world.²⁴ For instance, it is reported that Chrysippus says “every single thing moves and exists in accordance with time.”²⁵ Long and Sedley interpret this to mean that “God, the world’s active principle, is not a timeless being but a continuously self-moving agent.”²⁶ God, then, helps us develop an account of the relation between corporeals and incorporeals: god is “in” or “of” time and god breathes life into bodies, and it is in

²² Brunschwig, “Stoic metaphysics”, 208.

²³ Vogt, “Are the Stoics metaphysical brutes?”, 151.

²⁴ Cicero, *On the nature of the gods* 1.39 (SVG 2.1077, part) – Long & Sedley 54B.

²⁵ Stobaeus 1.106, 5-23 (SVG 2.509) – Long & Sedley 51B.

²⁶ Long, A. A.; Sedley, D. N.. *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1, Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary* (p. 457). Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.

this way that bodies are situated in time. Because god is the world for the Stoics, perhaps that “certain point of view” Brunschwig seeks to study “any and every object from a certain point of view” should not be *onta* but *logos*.

V. Conclusion

Do the Stoics have a metaphysics? The two immediate answers – ‘yes’ and ‘no’ – have correlates in understanding the Stoic project as aligned either with the tamed or untamed giants, respectively. The tamed giants modify their position to be intelligible on the question of being and non-being, while the untamed giants deny the centrality of this question entirely. The act of mapping the Aristotelian notion “being *qua* being” onto Stoic philosophy requires choosing to understand “being” in two ways which are complementary in Aristotelian ontology but different in Stoic ontology. Vogt’s proposal that we recognize the Stoics as moving away from a focus on the *onta* as primary avoids this problem. Ultimately, rather than probing the Stoics for a metaphysics, we might probe them for an account of god, which may deliver on many of the features we might want in a metaphysics but which remains faithful to the Stoic project.

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