THE ORIGIN OF EVIL IN STOIC THOUGHT

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The origin of evil was not a new problem when Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, came to Athens about 312 B.C. Plutarch, writing around the end of the first century A.D., in his treatise On Isis and Osiris (369e-371b) was able to offer a whole doxography of opinions on the question going back to the Presocratics and beyond. While part of what he has to say is fanciful there can be no doubt that from Plato onwards the Archē Kakōn was the subject of much anxious consideration, and Plotinus felt the need to discuss Πόθεν τὰ κακὰ at some length in the eighth treatise of his first Ennead composed in the third century A.D. For the Christian si deus bonus est unde malum has remained a source of difficulty down to the present day, and we can sympathize with Maximus of Tyre (Oratio XLI) when he expressed the wish that Alexander the Great had concerned himself with some really worthwhile question, such as what is the source and cause of things that are evil, when he visited the shrine of Zeus Ammon in North Africa, instead of being content to ask about his own father and the source of the Nile.

Before considering what the Stoics had to say, it will be convenient to list the main kinds of answer that might be given to the question what is the source of evil. First of all it is possible to deny that there is any such problem or that the problem has any meaning at all. One way of doing this is simply to deny the...

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1 The substance of this article was given as a lecture in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 14th December 1977.


3 Throughout this paper I treat the question "what is the source of evil" in quite general terms and as meaning essentially the same as the question "why things are evil", the question "why does evil occur" and the question "why are evil actions committed".
existence of evil. If there is no such thing as evil, then the question of its source or origin simply does not arise. On such a view what is usually called evil is merely an illusory appearance of evil, not something real or actual. All that actually exists is good. An even more radical approach would be to maintain not only that evil does not exist but that good does not exist either. If there is no such thing as good and no such thing as evil, then the question of the origin of evil is not only pointless, but perhaps even meaningless as well, if e.g. the very terms good and evil have no meaning.

Still other possibilities are to suppose that while evil exists it exists without reason or cause of any kind,\(^1\) or that it has no one cause or reason but a multiplicity of causes. Historically, however, the question has tended to be discussed, and was certainly so discussed in the ancient world, primarily on the basis that evil exists and that the problem is to search for and if possible discover one single source for evil. To the question so formulated there were (and are) perhaps only three possible kinds of answers that can be given:

1. There might be a single positive source for everything that is evil in the universe. If such a source is set in opposition to a second principle that is a source of what is good, the result is a dualism of good and evil, each seen somehow as positive forces working against each other.

2. There might be, not a positive force for evil, but only a force for good, and then in addition to it some principle or factor which blocks or stands in the way of good, resisting good not by striving positively against it, but simply standing in its way by some kind of passive inertia which results in the failure of good and so in the occurrence of evil.

3. There might be only one force, the force making for good, which is not opposed either by a positive force for evil or by any principle of inertia, but which somehow, of itself and as part of its own striving for good, on occasion produces evil, either because what it produces is imperfectly or incompletely good, or because

\(^1\) This may be something which St. Augustine contemplated (De Civ. Dei, xii. 6-7) in the passion of his rejection of Manichaeism, though he may have preferred a Stoic position.
its own uncontrolled activity has the capacity of being bad as well as good.

When we turn to the Stoa we find that the kind of answer they could give was virtually dictated to them in advance by the physical and metaphysical principles of their own systematic view of the world. These principles excluded absolutely and completely any dualistic view, and made it also virtually impossible for them to accept an inertial view as a solution to the problem. They were in consequence left only with the third of the three approaches mentioned above, and I believe that there is no reason to doubt that this was the path which in fact they followed.

I begin by summarizing familiar material. Stoic physics posited two *Archai* or principles referred to respectively as the active principle and the passive principle. Both principles are material and corporeal, and they are so closely related to each other that they can be spoken of as constituting a single entity or concept with two aspects and natures. All change and all activity is due to and caused by the active principle. More than this, the passive principle in itself lacks any quality or shape—these also are the product of the active principle. Apart from the two material principles nothing else exists—everything is either a blending of active and passive principles, or a state or condition of these principles (cf. SVF, ii. 319–20). The active principle is divine and good. As it is the source of all change and of all states and conditions there is no other source for any change or condition, yet as it is itself good it is difficult to understand how evil can arise.

The difficulty resulting for the Stoics was seized upon, naturally enough, by Plutarch who in his *De Stoicorum Repugnantiiis* was concerned to show that Stoic doctrines were shot through and through at every point by inconsistencies and self-contradictions. On the present occasion he supports his charges by direct quotations from Chrysippus which are indeed amply

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1 For references see the passages in J. Von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (hereafter cited as SVF), ii. 299–328, and for a recent discussion see M. Lapidge, *Phronesis*, xviii (1973), 240–78.

ORIGIN OF EVIL IN STOIC THOUGHT

reflected in the tradition as a whole. First at 1050a (= SVF, ii. 937) he quotes from Chrysippus’ work On Nature where it is said that “no particular thing, not even the slightest, can come about otherwise than in conformity with universal nature and its reason” (trans. Cherniss). It is clear from what precedes in Plutarch that “what happens” is here to be taken to include all states and conditions of things. In other words, there is only one source for everything, namely the Divine Logos which is the active principle. But this principle is itself good. Therefore it follows that the principle of good produces evil. This is not only hard to believe but seems to conflict with other passages in Chrysippus’ writings already quoted by Plutarch, namely De Stoic. Rep., 1049e = SVF, ii. 1125:

and yet Chrysippus himself states in his work concerning Decision, and again in the second book on the Gods that for the divinity to become an accessory to shameful things is not reasonable, for just as law could not become accessory to illegality or the gods to ungodliness so it is reasonable for them not to be accessories to anything shameful either.

Plutarch is thus able to draw the kind of conclusion he is looking for—the Stoics contradict themselves—there is a fundamental inconsistency in their doctrine.

This is the problem which I want now to consider. It is, of course, possible that Plutarch is right, that the Stoics were merely muddled and inconsistent on this point. But there has been something of a revolution in Stoic studies during the last thirty years. This has led to a much greater respect for the power and consistency of Stoic thought in general, and we ought perhaps now to be less ready lightly to accept charges of inconsistency brought against them than seemed appropriate to earlier generations. In particular we ought first to consider rather carefully whether there is any way of resolving an alleged inconsistency before we accept it as an established fact. Here it must be admitted that earlier attempts are not very encouraging. Pohlenz speculated1 that Zeno began with a kind of dualism which enabled irrational movements in the soul to conflict with rational movements, and that this was abandoned in a kind of revision carried through by Chrysippus on the basis of his own strongly monistic psychology. But Cicero (Acad. Post., i. 38 = SVF, i. 207) is

1 See e.g. Die Stoa, i. 142 ff., resuming earlier studies.
evidence that Zeno rejected any doctrine of different parts or areas of the soul, and we have no evidence of any disagreement between Chrysippus and Zeno on this matter. Cleanthes seems to have written a kind of dramatic dialogue or argument between the Logos and the Thumos in the soul (SVF, i. 570), but Zeller is probably right in treating this as no more than a rhetorical figure on Cleanthes' part. More important than the weakness of the evidence is the fundamental difficulty that would result if the conflict were assigned, as it never is in the sources, to two ultimate conflicting principles constituting a full-scale dualism. What we should rather suppose is that we have in all such cases rather conflicts at subordinate levels, between subordinate and derived forces. Such conflicts were of course never denied by Stoics, and though they raise difficulties they do not of themselves require an ultimate dualism for their explanation. No more plausible is the suggestion found in one ancient source only, that the Stoics found a principle of evil in the Necessity implanted in matter (SVF, ii. 1136; cf. Pohlenz, Die Stoa, ii. 57). To this Plutarch's reply (1076c = SVF, ii. 1168) is decisive: "for matter has not of itself brought forth what is evil, for matter is without quality and all the variations that it takes on, it has got from that which moves and fashions it. That which moves and fashions it, however, is the reason existing in it, since its nature is not to move or fashion itself." There is no Necessity implanted in matter, or if there is, on the Stoic view it comes from God and not from matter.

So I conclude that Plutarch was right in the way in which he posed the problem—if there is any explanation to be given by the Stoics for the source of evil it must lie neither in a dualist nor in an inertial theory, but within the active principle, i.e. within the very principle of good itself. If Plutarch's strictures are to be avoided it will only be by showing how such a view is in fact possible without blatant internal contradiction. What

1 Philosophie der Griechen, iii. 1.4 203 n. 1.

2 One may feel confident that this must also have been the explanation of the phauloi daimones of Chrysippus for which see SVF, ii. 1101–5, cf. D. Babut, Plutarque et le stoicisme (Paris, 1969), pp. 437–40.

3 In due course Plotinus would argue (Enn., i. 8. 10) that matter was evil just because it was without quality, but this is not a Stoic doctrine.
follows is, I believe, to some extent new, but I would suggest that it both accords with basic Stoic doctrines and has also rather considerable support in texts that have been transmitted to us. The problem has often been posed on the assumption that there are two questions involved rather than one, namely what is the source of the evil manifesting itself in the individual soul (moral evil), and what is the source of evil in the universe as a whole (cosmic evil). It is probable that for the Stoics there was no real distinction to be drawn between either the sources or the nature of the evil involved in the two cases. But the approach has some convenience in our approach to the relevant texts and I begin with the problem of evil in the individual person.

All changes or kinēseis and all states or hexeis in all things spring according to the Stoics from the activity of the divine active principle. The movement in space, e.g. of a stone, which is an inanimate object, comes to it from outside itself, as, for example, when it is picked up and thrown (cf. SVF, ii. 979). But the state or condition of a stone comes to it from its own nature within itself (SVF, ii. 716) and inanimate objects such as fire or springs of water may also have a source of motion within themselves (SVF, ii. 988). The same principle of Nature or Physis seems to be responsible internally not merely for this kind of movement, but also for the growth of plants, which are explicitly said not to possess souls (SVF, ii. 708, 710, 714, 988). Living animals are distinguished by the presence of souls as well as Natures, and as a result, in addition to all the kinds of change already mentioned, they are capable of two further kinds of movement or change. The first of these is that associated with the experience of sense-perceptions—Kinēseis kāta Phantasian, and the second is known as a Hormē or "impulse to action" (SVF, ii. 714).

It is with the doctrine of Hormai or impulses that I am now primarily concerned. While the movement associated with a Phantasia is regarded as a movement in which, at least initially, the soul is passive (SVF, i. 66, cf. 484), a Hormē is a movement of the soul towards something (SVF, iii. 169). Its normal starting

1 An impulse away from something, an "avoiding movement" is an Aphormē—its analysis is parallel with that for the Hormē.
point is indeed a *Phantasia* or sense-impression of something, and in the case of irrational animals the animal in question tends simply to be carried along together with its sense-impression, so that it acts on the basis of it forthwith. A similar stage is passed through by human children (cf. Cicero, *De Fin.*, v. 41–42), but in the case of human beings this stage is succeeded by one in which we have the power to choose between sense-impressions and are not simply carried along into action by them (*SVF*, ii. 714). As is well known, the whole moral development of a human being rests for the Stoics upon an increasing power to discriminate between impulses, choosing to follow some and restrain or reject others, until the final state of complete rationality is achieved and the man who was previously a "bad" man, however much progress he was making, undergoes a transformation which makes him into a "wise" man.¹

The wise man never acts irrationally in anything which he does, he acts always in accordance with Nature and with Reason. Conversely the "bad" man not infrequently acts irrationally to various degrees, and when he does so his actions are governed by irrational Hormai or impulses, which impulses are known as *Pathē* or "passions". It should therefore be clear that the explanation of the Stoic doctrine of moral evil is to be sought in the right understanding of the Stoic doctrine of the *Pathē.*² It is worth noting first of all that *Pathē* are not found in inanimate objects, nor are they found in irrational animals (*SVF*, iii. 462) nor in children (*SVF*, iii fin., 477)—they occur only in human beings (*SVF*, iii. 426). We are fortunate to have both a series of definitions of what a *Pathos* is, repeated frequently in the ancient sources, and also quite full explanations of what is meant by these definitions. A *Pathos* is a Hormai and so a movement of a soul towards something, but it is an irrational movement of the soul, disobedient to reason and as such contrary to nature (*SVF*, iii. 378). It is also called a *Ptoia* of the soul, meaning disturbance and so called, we are told, after the (rushing) flight

¹ I have tried to discuss some aspects of this development under the general heading of *Oikeiosis* in an earlier paper, "The Search for Personal Identity in Stoic Thought," published in this *BULLETIN*, lv (1972–73), 177–96.

² By far the best treatment remains that by A. Bonhöffer, *Epiktet und die Stoa*, Untersuchungen zur stoischen Philosophie (Stuttgart, 1890), pp. 232–316.
of birds (SVF, i. 205) when frightened and moving away randomly (SVF, iii. 476), rendered in Latin by *perturbatio*. A *Pathos* is a violent movement (SVF, iii. 384, 386). Finally and most enlighteningly, a *Pathos* is defined as a *Hormê pleonazousa*, that is a *Hormê* in a state of *Pleonasmos* (SVF, i. 205, 206; iii. 377, 378, 384, 391, 479).

The essential feature of *Pleonasmos* is "going too far" or overshooting the mark, and we are told rather a lot about it in a series of passages in Galen which to a surprising extent are based on direct quotations from Chrysippus (SVF, iii. 462, 476, 478, 479, 480). From these passages we learn that it involves being carried along or carried away, that it involves "going beyond the proper and natural symmetry of the *Hormai*". It is compared to breaking into a run instead of walking—in the case of walking or for that matter in the case of standing the movement of the limbs is accommodated in an appropriate way to the *Hormê*, whereas in running the movement of the limbs is excessive in relation to the impulse and once it has begun it cannot easily be changed, i.e. it is not possible to stop suddenly or change direction (see especially SVF, iii. 462, p. 114. 1–17), one is carried on further (than one may wish) and is not in control of the movement.

The importance of the doctrine of *Pleonasmos* was recognized by Robert Philippson in 1937. He rightly stressed also the violent and unrestrained aspect of the *Hormê pleonazousa*. But in one respect it has now been shown, I believe, that he was mistaken. Philippson believed that the violent nature of the *Hormê* was due to an excessive tension or *tonos* in the soul. For the Stoics quite the opposite was the case. Elsewhere (SVF, ii. 876) Galen had argued that it is in those in whom the vital tension is weak that strong passions are found, whereas if the tension is strong the passions are small in extent, and this is

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1 This is in itself sufficient to refute the doctrine of K. Reinhardt, *Poseidonios*, 276, according to which Galen reports the views, not of Chrysippus but merely of Poseidonius.
supported by other texts. For Chrysippus there was an analogy between soul and body. Corresponding to the slackness and to the tension found in the body on various occasions, there is a slackness—Atonia—and a state of tension—Eutonia—to be found in the soul (SVF, iii. 473), not related to bodily tension but quite independent in its functioning. When there is a good state of tension in the soul—Eutonia—a man judges rightly and does well. But when the tension has given way—endontos tou tōnu—reason is disobeyed and the nature of passion is made plain.

The implications are, I believe, both clear and intelligible. Hormai or impulses are movements of the soul towards objects or objectives. Without the restraint of reason they become excessive movements—pleonazousai, but a right state of tension in the soul prevents Pleonasmos in a Hormē. Without Pleonasmos a Hormē is not a Pathos, but, at least in itself, is a fully rational impulse to action of the kind found only in the Sophos or wise man. The Stoic term for these is not Pathē but Eupatheiai (SVF, iii. 431, 432). It will be convenient to consider a particular example which happens to be of considerable interest. Within the general area of Desire, the Stoics contrasted Epithumia with Orexis (SVF, iii. 442). Epithumia is a Pathos and as such is irrational. It is consequently found only in the phaulos or unwise man. Orexis on the other hand is found only in the wise man (SVF, iii. 441, 438). It comes under the general heading of rational impulse (SVF, iii. 169) and is directed towards things that are naturally necessary (SVF, iii. 442). Galen twice quotes a precise definition from Chrysippus (SVF, iii. 463, 464): it is a rational impulse (Hormē) towards something which pleases to the right degree—epi ti hoson chrē hēdon. Now “to the right degree or amount” excludes “to excess”. Orexis is contrasted with Epithumia because Epithumia as a passion “goes too far”—it is pleonazousa, and consequently seeks more than is appropriate, it overshoots the mark. On the other hand Orexis excludes all Pleonasmos.

There are many problems as yet inadequately explored in the

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1 In SVF, iii. 431 and 432 Boulēs is the term used for Orexis.
2 In a third passage, SVF, iii. 441, the meaningless hēdontos must be emended, probably to hēdon autōi.
Stoic classifications of Pathē and Eupatheiai. But the basic contrast is clear in each case—the Pathē are irrational whereas the Eupatheiai are fully in accordance with reason. What is important for our present purposes however is this—the Hormē which constitutes a Pathos is the same Hormē, not a different one, when it constitutes a Eupatheia. Moral evil arises when a Hormē is pleonazousa. In other words it arises from an impulse towards what is good which is insufficiently restrained and goes too far. Evil arises from within good and no further principle has to be introduced to account for it.

Here an objection must be considered. If Hormai are in need of restraint by an imposed restrictive tension, are there not two forces involved, that which is restrained and that which does the restraining? In that case have we not simply reintroduced a dualism within the soul? This was the Platonist model, and Galen, to whom we owe so much of our information about the doctrine of Pleonasmos, argues that in fact this must be the case (cf. passages given in SVF, iii. 462). But he knows that this is not what Chrysippus says, only, he asserts, what he ought to have said. For the Stoics all Hormai were movements within the Hegemonikon, the rational and controlling function of the soul (cf. SVF, ii. 837). This carries with it the consequence that Pathē also are movements of the Hegemonikon, since they are Hormai, albeit pleonazousai. This is clearly the position taken by Chrysippus, as Galen was aware. I take it also as now established, and not in need of further argument, that there is no substantial difference on this matter between Chrysippus and Zeno, the founder of Stoicism.¹

Both Zeno and Chrysippus associated Pathē with judgements, or more strictly with wrong judgements. These judgements are themselves Kinēseis and Hormai and are all cases of the Hegemonikon disposed in a particular way (SVF, iii. 378). It is clear from the texts that the Hegemonikon was material and corporeal, namely Pneuma itself (the usual view cf. SVF, ii. 96) or

¹ For a balanced statement on this question see J. Rist, Stoic Philosophy (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 25-36.
something closely resembling it (Cleanthes, SVF, i. 484). *Pneuma* was for the Stoics a blend of fire and air (SVF, ii. 310, 442, 786) equated with the principles of hot and cold (SVF, ii. 841). It is *fed* and nourished by air drawn in when we breathe (SVF, ii. 782, 783), and it is held together in a state of tension (SVF, ii. 441, 785). The tension is not static, however, but is itself a kind of movement, not from one place to another, but a kind of vibration (cf. SVF, ii. 451, 453). It is within this kind of context that we must understand the concept of *Pleonasmos*. A *Hormē* which goes too far is inconsistent with the achievement of the right kind of tension, *Eutonia*. Moral progress for the Stoics, which progress culminates in the achievement of wisdom, involves the progressive elimination of *Pleonasmos* and the achievement of a "smooth flow" of life and of impulses (*Euroia biout*—SVF, iii. 4, 16, 73) and a freedom from *Pathē* (SVF, iii. 144).

Before the conversion to wisdom has been achieved however, a rational animal can be, and unfortunately not infrequently is, diverted and turned aside from the path of reason (SVF, iii. 479 and 476, p. 126, 31–32) and this diversion involves one or more *Hormai* becoming subject to *Pleonasmos*. There are two sources for this turning aside from reason (SVF, iii. 228): the persuasiveness of external pursuits, and listening to those people with whom we are associated. This has led some scholars to maintain, quite wrongly, that evil behaviour comes from without.¹ The correct view is clearly expressed in the sources—external things are not in our power, but it is our function to use them in one way or another, well or badly, and for this we have received *Logos* (Reason) to enable us to judge which way we are to act (SVF, ii. 990). As Origen moralistically reports (SVF, ii. 988):

> When a woman attracts a man who has decided to be continent and urges him to act contrary to his decision, she is not the complete and sufficient cause of his setting aside his resolution. For since he is quite satisfied with the excitement and allure of pleasure and since he is unwilling to look at it resolutely and confirm his decision, it is he who commits the excess. Another man in the same situation may have more learning and experience—the excitement and stimuli occur for him also but his reason which has been strengthened to a greater degree, trained with practice and confirmed by philosophic doctrines to what is right, or at least nearly so confirmed, drives back the stimuli and frees him from the desire.

¹ So L. Edelstein, *The Meaning of Stoicism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 55: "It is the spell cast over us by things that turns us into sinners".
I turn next to the question of cosmic evil. The first step taken by the Stoics when confronted with the occurrence of evils—*kaka*—in the universe as a whole, as distinct from bad actions by human beings, was to do what they could to reduce the extent of the problem. As is well known, the wise man is not affected by evils from without (*SVF*, iii. 567–81), but this is because they cannot affect the (physical) disposition of his soul, not because external evils do not exist. Even internally there are only two or three things that can interrupt the wisdom and smooth flow of life of the wise man, and as might be expected these are all physical events coming from outside the soul itself, but operating inside the body—drunkenness, excess of black bile (*SVF*, iii. 237), and the taking of drugs and medicines (*SVF*, iii. 238). We may conclude then that external evils are not evils for the wise man, because they do not affect him. But this does not mean that they are not evils, and they do in fact affect men who are not wise. Fundamentally the Stoics accepted the fact of cosmic evil—natural disasters do occur, and they are bad. But the explanation, as with moral evil in the individual, is to be sought in their relation to the divine logos which is the active principle. Ultimately, natural evils possess their own rationality (*SVF*, ii. 1181, with Plut., *De Comm. Nat.*, 1065b).1

Sometimes the evil or bad aspect is seen as incidental to what is good or necessary—so the bones of the head were said by Chrysippus to be very slender and small. This is advantageous—presumably either to enable the brain to move, or perhaps to facilitate eating and facial expressions, we are not told—but it has what we would call the unfortunate side-effect, that the head is easily injured by blows (*SVF*, ii. 1170). In other cases the evils are needed as punishments for the guilty, and are merely incidentally unfortunate for those not guilty. In still other cases, while the evil is great, it is an inescapable consequence of something which is good. So a snake’s poison or a hyena’s bile may be needed for some medical processes (*SVF*, ii. 1181), bugs are

1 For discussion see A. A. Long, “The Stoic Concept of Evil”, *Philosophical Quarterly*, xviii (1968), 330 ff., and Cherniss’s notes in his edition of Plutarch, *Moralia*, xviii. 2 (London, 1976). There is acute difficulty over the correct reading in the text, but this fortunately does not affect the overall interpretation, which is determined by the context.
useful in waking us up, and mice make us put things away carefully (SVF, ii. 1163). In general it was maintained, not altogether convincingly, that without evil it would not be possible to have good, on the grounds that each logically implied the other (SVF, ii. 1169).¹

All these attempts to limit the scope and range of natural evils do no more than just that—there can be no denial, nor did the Stoics attempt to deny, that in the physical world evils do occur and occur frequently. The starting point for an attempt to understand the Stoic explanation should perhaps be two remarkable statements by Plutarch which show that the Stoics supposed that when the cosmic cycle led to the universal conflagration or ecpyrosis no evil whatever remains and the whole is then (at that time) prudent and wise—see SVF, ii. 606 together with the statement in De Comm. Not., 1065b, not in SVF, that whenever Zeus, having reduced all matter to himself, becomes one and abolishes the remaining differences, then there being nothing evil present, it follows, so Plutarch says, that there is nothing good either.² In other words, the elimination of cosmic evil at the ecpyrosis is treated as parallel to what happens at the conversion of the individual man into the Stoic sage—in each case wisdom is achieved, and evil comes to an end (cf. SVF, ii. 1065).

The physical details of the earlier stages of the cosmic cycle leading up to the ecpyrosis are obscure. But we do have clear evidence that the doctrine of Tonos or tension applied not only within the souls of individuals, but also to the universe as a whole (SVF, ii. 448, 546 and 444). This means that we may reasonably conjecture that evil at the cosmic level was understood by the Stoics as the product of the same state of affairs as in the individual soul, namely variation in tension. In the universe as a whole, as in the individual, all states and all changes and developments are produced by the one divine active principle, which is rational and good, and it is from within this principle, not from outside it, that all failures, inadequacies and bad things and events arise.

¹ See on this point Cherniss's note d on Plutarch, De St. Rep., 1066e.
² This is, of course, merely Plutarch's own objection. On the Stoic view, unmixed good did succeed the ecpyrosis.