

Stoics and Epicureans on the End of the World

1. Stoic Cosmophthory (-φθόρα, 'destruction'): some basic principles

Key Tenets: *ekpyrosis* (conflagration), *apokatastasis/diakosmesis* (reconstitution)

§1.1 Aristocles, qu. in Eusebius, *Evangelical Preparation* 15.14.2 = *SVF* 1.98 (part) = LS 46G:
At certain times the entire world is subject to conflagration, and is then reconstituted afresh (ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ κατὰ τινὰς εἴμαρμένους χρόνους ἐκπυροῦσθαι τὸν σύμπαντα κόσμον, εἴτ' αὖθις πάλιν δισκοσμεῖσθαι). But the primary fire is as it were a sperm which possesses the principles of all things and the causes of past, present and future events...
In this way everything in the world is excellently organised as in a perfectly ordered society (καθάπερ ἐν εὐνομωτάτῃ τινὶ πολιτείᾳ).

Controversies: cause and predicted date of occurrence, state of new world-order, role of god, ethics of destruction

§1.2 Alexander Lycopolis 19.2-4 = LS 46I (not in *SVF*):

The argument of Zeno of Citium, who states that the 'all' will be subject to conflagration (τὸ πᾶν ἐκπυρωθήσεται): 'Everything which burns and has something to burn will burn it completely; now the sun is a fire and will it not burn what it has? (πᾶν τὸ καῖον ἔχον <ὅτι> καύσει. καὶ ὁ ἥλιος πῦρ ἐστὶν καὶ ὃ ἔχει οὐ καύσει;) From this he concluded, as he supposed, that the 'all' will be subject to conflagration.

§1.3 Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions* 1077E = LS 280 (not in *SVF*):

Chrysippus says that Zeus and the world are like a man and providence like his soul, so that when the conflagration comes, Zeus, being the only imperishable one among the gods, withdraws into providence (ὅταν οὖν ἡ ἐκπύρωσις γένηται, μόνον ἄφθαρτον ὄντα τὸν Δία τῶν θεῶν ἀναχωρεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν πρόνοιαν) whereupon both, having come together, continue to occupy the single substance of aether.

§1.4 Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.14 = *SVF* 1.1052 (part) = LS 46H:

The god of the Stoics, in as much as he is a body, sometimes has the whole substance as his commanding-faculty; this is whenever the conflagration is in being (ὅτ' ἐμὲν ἡγεμονικὸν ἔχει τὴν ὅλην οὐσίαν, ὅταν ἡ ἐκπύρωσις ᾖ). At other times, when world-order exists, he comes to be a part of substance.

§1.5 Nemesius 309.5 – 311.2 = *SVF* 2.625 = LS 52C:

The Stoics say that when the planets return to the same celestial sign, in length and in breadth, where each was originally when the world was first formed, at set periods of time they cause conflagration and destruction of existing things (ἐν ῥηταῖς χρόνων περιόδοις ἐκπύρωσιν καὶ φθορὰν τῶν ὄντων ἀπεργάζεσθαι). Once again the world returns anew to the same condition as before (καὶ πάλιν ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ τὸν κόσμον ἀποκαθίστασθαι); and when the stars are moving again in the same way, each thing which occurred in the previous period will come to pass indiscernibly (ἀπαραλλάκτως) [sc. from its previous occurrence]. For again there will be Socrates and Plato and each one of mankind with the same friends and fellow citizens; they will suffer the same things and they will encounter the same things, and put their hand to the same things, and every city and village and piece of

land return in the same way. The periodic return of everything (τῆν ἀποκατάστασιν τοῦ παντός) occurs not once but many times; or rather, the same things return infinitely and without end (εἰς ἄπειρον καὶ ἀτελευτήτως). The gods who are not subject to destruction, from their knowledge of this single period, know from it everything that is going to be in the next periods. For there will be nothing strange in comparison with what occurred previously, but everything will be just the same and indiscernible down to the smallest details (ἀπαραλλάκτως ἄχρι καὶ τῶν ἐλαχίστων).

§1.6 Eusebius, *Evangelical Preparation* 15.18.2 = SVF 2.596 (part) = LS 46K:

On the world's periodic destruction into fire at very long intervals (κατὰ περιόδους τὰς μεγίστας) 'destruction' (φθορὰν) is not used in an unqualified sense by those who hold that the whole world is dissolved into fire, which they call the conflagration. They use the term destruction in place of natural change (ἀντὶ τῆς κατὰ φύσιν μεταβολῆς χρῶνται τῇ προσηγορίᾳ τῆς φθορᾶς).

§1.7 Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions* 1067A = SVF 2.606 = LS 46N:

Whenever they [the Stoics] subject the world to conflagration, no evil at all remains, but the whole is then prudent and wise (κακὸν μὲν οὐδὲ ὄτιοῦν ἀπολείπεται, τὸ δὲ ὅλον φρόνιμόν ἐστι τηνικαῦτα καὶ σοφόν).

2. Epicurean views: our world's natural decline and inevitable destruction

Key Tenets: there is an infinity of worlds of which our world is one, atomic materialism

§2.1 Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 45 = LS 13A:

Also, the number of worlds, both of those which are similar to this one and of those which are dissimilar, is infinite (καὶ κόσμοι ἄπειροι εἰσιν). For the atoms, being infinitely many as has just been proved, travel any distance; and the atoms of a suitable nature to be constituents of a world or responsible for its creation have not been exhausted on one world or on any finite number of worlds – neither worlds which are like ours nor worlds of other kinds. Therefore there is nothing to prevent there being an infinite number of worlds (ὥστε οὐδὲν τὸ ἐμποδοστατήσόν ἐστι πρὸς τὴν ἀπειρίαν τῶν κόσμων).

§2.2 Lucretius, *DRN* 5.95-109 (my translations):

una dies dabit exitio, multosque per annos 95
sustentata ruet moles et machina mundi.
nec me animi fallit **quam res nova miraque** menti
accidat **exitium caeli terraeque futurum**,
et quam difficile id mihi sit pervincere dictis;
ut fit ubi insolitam rem apportes auribus ante 100
nec tamen hanc possis oculorum subdere visu
nec iacere indu manus, via qua munita fidei
proxima fert humanum in pectus templaque mentis.
sed tamen effabor. dictis dabit ipsa fidem res

One day will consign [viz. earth, sea and sky] to destruction, and the structure and complex system of our world will collapse, having been upheld through many years. It does not escape my attention how strange and wondrous an event it is to befall the mind, the future destruction of the sky and earth, and how difficult it is for me to overcome in words. As when you invite a hearing on a previously unfamiliar topic, which you can't either bring into the remit of sight or put into the hands, the highway to belief leads most directly to man's heart and the sanctuary of his intelligence. But nevertheless I will speak forth. Through words the subject itself will

forsitan et graviter terrarum motibus ortis omnia conquassari in parvo tempora cernes . quod procul a nobis flectat fortuna gubernans, et ratio potius quam res persuadeat ipsa succidere horrisono posse omnia victa fragore.	105	perhaps win credit: in a short time you'll see all things shaken into confusion when earthquakes violently arise. But may steering fortune guide this far away from me, and my reason by itself rather than the event persuade me that all things can collapse, overcome by a thunderous clash.
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**Polemic: arguments against a timeless god, impossibility of eternal world-order,
Lucretius on agricultural deterioration**

§2.3 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.18-23 = LS 13G (the speaker is the Epicurean Velleius):
Listen to no ungrounded and fictitious doctrines: no creator and builder of the world like the god from Plato's *Timaeus*; no prophetic hag like the Stoics' Providence...; no world which is itself an animate, sentient, spherical, glowing, rotating god. These prodigies and marvels are the work of philosophers who dream, not argue...

To crown it all, having introduced a world which was not merely born but virtually hand-made as well, he [Plato] said that it would be everlasting. Do you suppose that this man had so much as sipped at the cup of natural philosophy – that is, of the rationale of nature – when he thinks that something with an origin can be everlasting? What compound is not capable of dissolution? What is there that has a beginning and no end? (quae est enim coagmentatio non dissolubilis, aut quid est cuius principium aliquod sit nihil sit extremum?)

§2.4 Lucretius, *DRN* 2.1150-63:

iamque adeo fracta est aetas, effetaque tellus vix animalia parva creat, quae cuncta creavit saecla deditque ferarum ingentia corpora partu. haud, ut opinor, enim mortalia saecla superne aurea de caelo demisit funis in arva nec mare nec fluctus plangentes saxa crearunt, sed genuit tellus eadem quae nunc alit ex se . praeterea nitidas fruges vinetaque laeta sponte sua primum mortalibus ipsa creavit, ipsa dedit dulcis fetus et pabula laeta; quae nunc vix nostro grandescunt aucta labore , conterimusque boves et viris agricolarum, conficimus ferrum vix arvis suppeditati: usque adeo parcunt fetus augentque laborem .	1150 1155 1160	Even now our age is so broken: the earth is washed out and scarcely creates tiny creatures, she who has created all generations and given birth to huge bodies of wild beasts. For it's not, in my belief, that a golden rope from high heaven above let down the generations of living things to the fields, nor did the sea nor the rock-beating waves create them, but the same earth generated them which now feeds them from herself. Furthermore, she herself first created the bright corn and fertile vine-yards for mortals, spontaneously, she herself yielded sweet offspring and flourishing produce. Now these things scarcely soften when increased by our efforts: we wear down the oxen and muscle of our farmers, we're finished with the iron and barely supplied by our fields. Continually up to this point our yield fails to give and increases our efforts.
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§2.5 Lucretius, *DRN* 2.1164-7:

iamque caput quassans grandis suspirat arator crebrius, incassum magnos cecidisse labores , et cum tempora temporibus praesentia confert praeteritis , laudat fortunas saepe parentis.	1165	Now, the aged farmer shakes his head and sighs more frequently that his magnificent efforts have been unsuccessful and pointless, and when he compares the present era with eras gone-by, he often praises the fortunes of his father.
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§2.6 Lucretius, *DRN* 2.1168-74:

tristis item vetulae vitis sator atque <vietae>
temporis incusat momen caelumque fatigat,
et crepat, **antiquum genus** ut **pietate repletum** 1170
perfacile angustis tolerarit finibus aevum,
cum minor esset agri multo modus ante viritim.
nec tenet **omnia paulatim tabescere** et ire
ad †scopulum† **spatio aetatis defessa vetusto.**

Similarly, the depressed sower of the old and shrivelled vine rails at the progress of time and criticises the sky. He grumbles at how ancient humankind, full of piety, endured a life of great ease on a narrow domain, even though the portion of each man's field was far smaller back then. Nor does he grasp that all things gradually waste away and go to wreck¹, worn out by the ancient lapse of years.

1169 caelum *Wakefield* saeculum *O*, *Q*: 1174 scopulum *O* (-
illum *V*): copulum *Q*: capulum *Vossius*

¹ For the metaphor, and in defence of the reading, see
D. M. Possanza, *CJ* 40 (1990) 459-64.

3. End-Thoughts: Apocalypse When?

§3.1 It is not a sufficiently serious attitude to make fun of the whole world now swallowed up. (non est res satis sobria lascivire devorato orbe terrarum: Seneca, *Q. Nat.* 3.27, a critique of *Ov. Met.* 1.262-312)

§3.2 Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.
(D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*)

§3.3 It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era.
(Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*)

§3.4 Men, like poets, rush "into the midst", *in medias res*, where they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations.

(Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*)

§3.5 'The phenomenon [viz. of apocalyptic theorisation] is **fabulously textual** also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place; one can only talk and write about it...

It has never occurred itself; **it is a non-event.** [both my emphases]'

(J. Derrida, *No Apocalypse, Not Now*)

§3.6 We have our loneliness
and our regret with which to build an eschatology.

(Peter Porter, *The Historians Call Up Pain*)

Bibliography

Abbreviated Works:

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Epicureanism:

Primary Sources: LS §13 ('Cosmology without Teleology'), *DRN* 2.1022-1174, 5.91-109

Further reading:

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I. McEwan, 'End of the World Blues', public lecture delivered at Stanford University (June, 2007) and available via http://www.skeptic.ca/End_of_World_Blues.htm

M-J. Rubenstein, *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (Columbia University Press, 2014)