

Stoicism and Eternal Recurrence: Unraveling the Metaphysical Puzzle



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The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please scan the QR code.

Abstract

In this essay, I explore the Stoic doctrine of eternal recurrence by examining its compatibility with other core Stoic metaphysical commitments, such as their theses of causal determinism, god's benevolence and perfect rationality, and time. In essence, the Stoics maintained that the Universe will 'end' during the period of conflagration, when all things will be destroyed by fire, before returning to the same period of world-order, i.e. the Universe as we know it now. While the Stoics held that everything will be the exact same in each period of world-order, it remains ambiguous as to what exactly will be the "same again." I begin by examining three historical interpretations of the doctrine: the Nemesian model, Alexander's Revisionary model, and what I will call the "Origen-al" model. The first two models are ultimately rejected on the basis that either they are inconsistent with the linear and circular conceptions of time or they undermine the Stoics' closed cosmology. The Origen-al model, however, fares better. While Hudson (1990) defends a view combining the Origen-al model with the linear conception of time, I argue that the Stoics' definition of time undermines this conception and instead supports the circular notion of time. To reconcile circular time with the fact that Chrysippus will live the very same life an infinite number of times, I introduce the 'shm-identity' view of Stoic eternal recurrence. On this account, each period of world-order has the exact same physical and temporal properties, but can be individuated according to the phase of god's life in which they exist. This framework preserves sameness without committing to numerical identity, and allows for an infinite number of ontologically distinct yet qualitatively identical cosmic cycles. Ultimately, the shm-identity view remains coherent within the Stoic doctrine of eternal recurrence and consistent with their other core metaphysical commitments.