LOCATING THE COSMOS: AN ACADEMIC ARGUMENT AGAINST CHRYSI PPUS

BY

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According to Plutarch, Chrysippus not only described the cosmos, but told us where it was to be found: it was to be found ‘in the centre’, or ‘at the central place’, and this mattered a great deal, because if the cosmos were moved away from the centre, it would, he said, be utterly destroyed. Plutarch attacks Chrysippus for this, claiming that what he meant by it was that the cosmos was located in the centre of the infinite void, and hence that he contradicted his own belief that the infinite void has no centre. Interest in this debate has, in the past, naturally focused on a reconstruction of Chrysippus’ beliefs and, in particular, the attempt to absolve him of this self-contradiction. But, less reasonably, this attempt has tended to be adopted very much at the expense of Plutarch, whose argument is assumed to be simply captious or unfair. However, in such a difficult area, it seems to me unwise to think that we can afford to make this assumption. Plutarch was himself a serious commentator on matters cosmological, after all (one need only think of his essay on Plato’s Timaeus, the de procreatione animae in Timaeum). And, since it is a constant truth in the history of philosophy that two sides may take radically opposed positions without either being obviously incoherent in its own terms, we risk a serious misunderstanding if we give Chrysippus the benefit of the doubt in this matter without paying Plutarch a similar courtesy. Indeed, it seems to me that the most secure reconstruction of this debate (and a fortiori of Chrysippus’ own position) will be one in which we can make sense both of Chrysippus’ doctrine and of Plutarch’s objection to it. This paper attempts such a reconstruction, and suggests that the contradictions that Plutarch ascribes to Chrysippus reflect his version of a serious and coherent Academic argument against Stoic cosmology.

1) Plutarch “obviously” misinterpreted Chrysippus according to S. Sambursky

The texts by which we know of Chrysippos’ views on the location of the cosmos are Plutarch’s \textit{de defectu oraculorum 28}, 425DE and \textit{de Stoicorum repugnantia 44}, 1054C-1055C (but cf. also \textit{de facie 11}, 925F-926B, which contains a related argument). The \textit{de Stoic. rep.} passage in particular contains two verbatim quotations from Chrysippus’ \textit{On Possibilities} book 4, which I present in full:

\begin{quote}
“διό καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ κόσμου εἰ ῥητέον φθαρτὸν εἶναι αὐτὸν, λόγον οἶομαι δεῖσθαι. οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ μᾶλλον ἐμοὶ φαίνεται οὕτως ἔχειν: εἰς δὲ τὴν οἶονει ἀφθαρσίαν πολὺ τι αὐτῶ συνεργῆται καὶ ἡ τῆς χώρας κατάληψις, οἷον διὰ τὸ ἐν μέσῳ εἶναι: ἐπεὶ, εἰ ἄλλωσιν νοσθῆται ἄν, καὶ παντελῶς ὁν κατὰ συνέπαι τοῦ ἕθερα.”
καὶ μετὰ μικρὸν αὐθίς:

“οὕτω γὰρ ποιεῖ καὶ ἡ οὕσει συντέτευχεν αἰδίως τὸν μέσον κατεληφθοῦσα τόπον εἰθὸς τοιάδε τις οὕσα ὅστε <καὶ> καθ’ ἐτέρον τρόπον, ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συντυχίαν μὴ ἐπιδεχόσθαι αὐτὴν φθοράν, καὶ κατὰ τούτ’ εἶναι αἰδίων.”
\end{quote}

“For this reason, if the cosmos must be said to be destructible, I think we would need to qualify the claim. As a matter of

\textit{(Physics of the Stoics} [Princeton 1959], 112): Chrysippus was actually referring to “the spherical shape of the cosmos, i.e. to the symmetrical grouping of the material world around a central point”. D. Furley once suggested that by ‘centre’ Chrysippus just meant the centre of the cosmos identified \textit{post hoc} (\textit{Lucretius and the Stoics}, BICS 13 [1966], 13-33, esp. 20-1)—a suggestion which, if true, would not just defuse Plutarch’s argument, but would again make it look extraordinarily unfair. As D. Hahm also points out, this explanation does not take into account the fact that Chrysippus himself talks about the cosmos being in the middle τόπος (\textit{Origin of Stoic Cosmology} [Columbus Ohio 1977], esp. 260-6)—a phrase which suggests that it is in the middle of something else. (Furley reconsiders his position with his paper \textit{Some Points About Stoic Dynamics}, Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy 9 [1993], 57-75, esp. 68-72.) Hahm’s own reading of the problem falls into very great difficulties of its own, not the least of which is that he places Plutarch in an even worse light by suggesting that the claim that the universe is ‘indestructible because of being in the central place’ is actually an opponent’s position—a position which Chrysippus set out to refute. For a detailed critique of Hahm’s reconstruction of Chrysippus’ thought on this issue, see K. Algra, \textit{Concepts of Space in Greek Thought} (henceforth Concepts) (Leiden 1994), 285-8.

2) I adopt Wytenbach’s reading for this sentence (the MSS give: οἰοεὶς δ’ εἰς τὴν ὀστέρον ἀφθαρσίαν...), although I do not go along with his translation (he seems to take the δε to be adversative), and so present a slightly different punctuation. Cherniss presents an emendation based on Wytenbach (although he understands the sense of the way Chrysippus’ argument is set out in a different way again). Cf. also Pohlenz, \textit{Moralia} vol. VI.2 (Teubner, Leipzig 1952) ad loc.; and Algra, \textit{Concepts}, 286 with note 70.