

Stoic Physics

For the Stoics, physics deals with everything related to the universe and the things in it. This includes not only physics as we understand it today, but also cosmology, the body, the soul, and the gods. The selections aim to provide a general overview of physics, but also point up issues for further discussion in class: cosmic cycles and conflagration, *pneuma* and tenor, mixture, and the soul. We will discuss further central physical topics in the sixth session, namely fate, determinism, and causation. If you are interested in Stoic theology, the best exposition is probably in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, Book II.

- 44A 1. Explain the difference between 'whole' (ὅλον, *holon*) and 'all' (πάν, *pan*).
- 44BCD 2. What are the two principles of the universe, and what are their roles?
- 46ABC 3.★ What are 'seminal principles' (σπερματικοὶ λόγοι, *spermatikoi logoi*)?
- 46IJ 4. Pick one the arguments for conflagration and sketch it. (See also 47C.)
- 47AB 5. Make a list of the elements, their features, and interrelations.
- 47C 6.★ Try to summarise the argument that begins with heat and ends with the claim that the world is god.
- 47OPQ 7. Explain the difference between 'tenor' (ἕξις, *hexis*), 'physique' (φύσις, *phusis*), 'soul' (ψυχή, *psuchē*), and 'commanding faculty' (ἡγεμονικόν, *hēgemonikon*). (See also 53B.)
- 48 8. Identify the three kinds of mixture, and briefly explain them.
- 9.★ Which is the most relevant kind of mixture, and why?
- 52 10. What are your thoughts about the eternal recurrence of the world? Do you find this plausible? Do you see how this follows from other Stoic doctrines?
- 53 11. Briefly explain the role of the commanding faculty, or *hēgemonikon*.

Background Information. (a) The conflagration (ἐκπύρωσις, *ekpurōsis*) is the periodical dissolution of the universe into fire. It is as if the universe burns itself out and is then recycled. (b) The word for tenor is ἕξις (*hexis*), which derives from ἔχω (*echō*), which means to have or to hold. So, tenor is a 'holding'; and we can think of it as the condition that holds objects together, and thus gives them coherence and unity. Tenor is achieved by *pneuma*, or 'breath', the active substance composed of fire and air that pervades the cosmos.