

VANESSA DE HARVEN
THE UNITY OF STOIC METAPHYSICS: EVERYTHING IS SOMETHING

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BOOK REVIEW

Vanessa de Harven is a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research interests lie in ancient philosophy, particularly Stoic metaphysics and the metaphysics and epistemology of Plato. In the book under review, *The Unity of Stoic Metaphysics: Everything Is Something* (2025), she examines Stoic metaphysics and reconstructs the Stoic ontological hierarchy. She aims to show the Stoics as innovative thinkers committed to a completely physicalist account of the world, rejecting both Plato's Forms and Aristotle's hylomorphism, while addressing the challenges raised in Plato's *Sophist*.

To meet the objective set, the author makes a few methodological decisions. First, she presupposes the existence of a Stoic orthodoxy, understood as a set of fundamental principles shared by most Stoics. That does not mean she disregards the existence of internal disagreements among the Stoics or some development of ideas, but rather that she tends to see the school's general agreement where there is no clear textual evidence to think otherwise.

Second, the author prefers a literal reading of the analysed passages to a metaphorical interpretation. She believes that in most cases, our sources are explicit in what the Stoics thought, and no other than a face-value reading is needed. Finally, she includes in her methodology what she calls the principle of maximum charity, which resists the interpretation of Stoic philosophy as incoherent or internally inconsistent and instead seeks to portray the Stoics as original thinkers whose theory "is not just coherent ..., but even philosophically elegant" (21). At the same time, Vanessa de Harven reflects the fact that a considerable amount of the extant fragments comes from sources hostile towards the Stoics. She suggests that most of the misunderstandings stem from different philosophical backgrounds, naturally leading the critics to assume hylomorphic, atomistic, or Platonic commitments on the Stoic side.

At the beginning of the book, de Harven suggests that the Stoics developed the very specific ontological hierarchy she aims to reconstruct as a response to the Battle of Gods and Giants in Plato's *Sophist*. That the Stoics derived their definition of existence (to exist means to be able to act or be acted upon) from this famous passage of Plato's text is mostly agreed upon in the scholarship. However, de Harven goes even further and recognizes eight challenges to a materialist

view of the universe in the *Sophist*, all of which, she believes, the Stoics addressed – the Stoic responses to these challenges are demonstrated throughout the book under review.

The layout of the book reflects the structure of Stoic ontology, as reconstructed by de Harven. The first section explains the concept of Something, the highest genus of Stoic ontology, which is further divided into bodies, incorporeals, and entities that are neither corporeal nor incorporeal. The author suggests that the Stoics recognized two ontological statuses – existence and subsistence – and formulated a criterion for each. Existence is defined by the capacity to act or be acted upon (the *dynamis* proposal, derived from Plato's *Sophist*). Subsistence, on the other hand, is determined by a two-fold criterion: to subsist, an entity must (1) be a proper object of thought, and (2) be non-repeatable, i.e., unable to be in two different places at the same time (the so-called *Outis* test). On this basis, any entity that satisfies the subsistence criterion belongs to the realm of Something. Entities that additionally meet the criterion of existence are bodies, whereas those that do not are subsisting entities dependent on bodies. They thus count as incorporeals or as entities that are neither corporeal nor incorporeal.

The second section of the book deals with bodies – the only entities in the Stoic ontology that have existence. According to the author, Stoic bodies are three-dimensional, solid, malleable, and infinitely divisible, where solidity denotes degrees of density rather than absolute fullness. On this basis, de Harven argues for a literal reading of the Stoic theory of blending: unlike atomistic or Peripatetic accounts, the Stoic conception of body allows for the colocation of bodies, which was traditionally considered absurd. A typical example is the blending of the active and passive principles (the *archai*), ontologically independent bodies that together constitute the physical world.

In the third section, de Harven focuses on incorporeals. She suggests that incorporeals are entirely dependent on existing bodies for their subsistence (meaning also that they inherit properties from the underlying body). Besides the “canonical incorporeals” (time, space, void, and *lekta*), she also considers room, limits, and surface, as she suggests they also belong to the category of incorporeals. *Lekta*, or sayables, whose ontological status is often discussed among scholars, she takes to be semantic incorporeals subsisting according to a rational impression (understood by the Stoics as a body), and thus having the same kind of ontological dependence as the other incorporeals do.

The fourth section deals with entities that are neither bodies nor incorporeals – pure products of thought, such as centaurs and giants (and other fictional characters), as well as units of measurement and geometrical figures. Unlike *lekta* (which are also products of thought), these entities correspond to no real impressor in the world – they do not depend on an existing body and thus do not count as incorporeals. However, the author argues, they still pass the subsistence criterion and thus belong to the category of Something. In this, de Harven departs from a more traditional view of the category of neither corporeal nor incorporeal as Not-Somethings (*outina*).

In the final fifth section, the author continues her refutation of the category of Not-Something, traditionally viewed as lying somewhere between Something and nothing at all. Having placed neither corporeal nor incorporeal under the genus Something, the only candidate for a Not-Something is concepts (*ennoemata*). However, Vanessa de Harven argues that concepts do not belong to the Stoic ontology at all: they fail to meet the subsistence criterion and thus cannot be rendered Something. Because she finds no plausible evidence that the Stoics recognized a category of Not-Something, de Harven assumes that concepts should be regarded as nothing. By eliminating

the category of Not-Something from the Stoic ontological framework, she departs from the traditional interpretation, according to which Stoic ontology is divided into Something (further subdivided into bodies and incorporeals) and Not-Something. De Harven, by contrast, holds the view that every entity belonging to the Stoic ontology is Something – a thesis so central to her monograph that it even appears in its title.

Vanessa de Harven's *The Unity of Stoic Metaphysics* is an inspiring work that offers a fresh look at Stoic ontology and metaphysics. Being true to her principle of maximum charity, she challenges many popular interpretations, both ancient and modern. She offers her own, putting together a picture of a completely physicalist, coherent worldview based on a tripartite ontology, covering under the genus Something bodies, incorporeals, and entities that are neither corporeal nor incorporeal. In a world viewed through the lens of this kind of ontology, everything that exists is either a body or is dependent on a body, and not to exist does not straightforwardly mean to be nothing.

The author's approach is systematic, particularly in considering the subsistence criterion, formulating a proper definition for each entity, and tracing the Stoic responses to the challenges of the *Sophist*. Additionally, for each subtopic, she provides a concise synopsis of existing interpretive options, which may be helpful in orienting oneself in the ongoing scholarly debate. The author's own interpretations and theses might seem bold at times, but they are based on a precise analysis of extant fragments.

Vanessa de Harven's new monograph will be of particular interest to scholars working in the field of ancient philosophy, especially those concerned with the debate on Stoic metaphysics and ontology. Although each section begins with a concise overview of the topic and its scholarly context, the book will be most rewarding for readers already familiar with Stoic philosophy. Overall, the monograph offers a systematic and philosophically unified reconstruction of Stoic ontology, which is likely to stimulate further discussion in the field.

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