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**'Typhon was Vanquished but not  
Annihilated': The Metaphysics of  
Evil in Plutarch's *De Iside et  
Osiride***

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President  
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**'Typhon was Vanquished but not Annihilated':  
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**Abstract**

In a passage of the tenth book of the *Laws* (896a-897b), Plato seems to state the existence of '*not less than two*' souls: the first good, ordered and rational, the second cause of all that is evil, disordered, irrational.

Few Platonists accepted this hypothesis as true, structuring their philosophy on a dualistic metaphysics. Among them, Plutarch is one of the most authoritative, and the one whose works are better preserved.

His heterodox interpretation allows him to combine divine perfection with human freedom.

In this way, he can give an account of reality closer both to the everyday experience and to the traditional religion, showing in this case too his inclination to present a philosophy suitable for his times.

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## A mythical account of the structure of the universe

What is the purpose of the essay known as *De Iside et Osiride*?

At a first sight, it is not clear why Plutarch bothered himself with writing a work on Egyptian mythology and how this theological treatise could attract our attention.

In this paper, I will sketch out Plutarch's concept of the nature of evil<sup>1</sup> as it results from the reading of the *De Iside et Osiride* and draw some of its consequences for human ethics either for the II century AD philosophy and for us.

Plutarch is known by his modern scholars as a philosopher deeply interested in the comprehension of the wholeness of the world where he lived<sup>2</sup>.

He shows this tension both in *Lives*, where he explores the spectrum of human reasons and actions, and in *Moralia*, where he deals with a wide range of themes spacing from ethics to physics to literary critics.

In this sense, we can think about Plutarch' stance as a declination of the philosophers' tension to build a system<sup>3</sup> typical of the Imperial age: each essay of the *Moralia* is an investigation, in Platonic terms, of a single aspect of the world, from a particular point of view<sup>4</sup>. Considered together, these writings compose a mosaic that covers the spectrum of human experience<sup>5</sup>.

In the treatise known as *De Iside et Osiride*, Plutarch tells the readers the Egyptian story of the birth of Isis and Osiris, the murdering of the god by his brother Typhon, and Isis' search that brings his husband and brother back to life.

After the tale, Plutarch provides a succession of interpretations on different levels, culminating with the exposition of his cosmology<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Also Torraca 1994 deals specifically with the problem of evil, analyzing in depth the passages in Plato's dialogues that influence Plutarch. However, I am at odds with him about the interpretation of the significance of Plutarch's thinking, that Torraca describes as a superficial and dogmatic system (Torraca 1994:212). Plutarch, on the contrary, follows an antidogmatic and problematic method that, in his eyes, is very close to Plato's one. He is also very careful in keeping his doctrines coherent with his interpretation of the dialogues, and at the same time can rework their positions in original ways, as in the case discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> We can somehow compare his attitude to Montaigne's. Gallo 1994 defines him as an essayist.

<sup>3</sup> On this, see Donini 1982.

<sup>4</sup> I do not share Torraca opinion about an evolution ('*parabola evolutiva*', Torraca 1994:207) of Plutarch's thinking, implying with this radical changes from one work to another. The possible outward differences depend on the different points of view from which the author examines the same problems. '*Plutarco mira a un'interpretazione unificata della filosofia platonica che sia sempre fondata sui testi e coerente con l'immagine del platonismo che egli si è fatta*' (Donini 1992:38-39).

<sup>5</sup> This idea of a movement from a multitude that composes a unity, where each singularity by itself is not self-sufficient, is a fundamental trait of Plutarch's thought; see for example the final image of the *On Isis and Osiris* (*De Is. et Os.* 384c), where '*the air at night is a composite mixture made up of many lights and forces, even as though seeds from every star were showered down into one place*'. My quotations are taken from Babbit 1957.

<sup>6</sup> The myth speaks about deified men (§§22-24), about *daimones* (§§25-31), has a physical explanation (§§32-40), an astronomical one (§§41-44), or, at last, it is a description of the nature of the cosmos (§§45 ff) consistent with the exegesis of Plato. The myth '*contains narrations of certain puzzling events and experiences*' (*all'echei tinas aporiôn kai pathôn diêgêseis*, *De Is. et Os.* 358f). This modular structure, where different interpretations follow one another building the meaning of the writing is typical of other Plutarch's works, e.g. the

However, we face the experience of evil every day: if god has not to be the creator of evil, Plutarch has to recompose its existence with god's benevolence. He is aware of the problem: *'it is impossible for anything bad whatsoever to be engendered where God is the Author of all, or anything good where God is the Author of nothing'*<sup>1</sup>.

Plutarch's interpretation of the *psychogonia* and is *'heterodox psychology'*<sup>2</sup> constitute the result of his attempt to answer the question.

First of all, I need to say a few words about the form of this writing<sup>3</sup>: as we have seen, *On Isis and Osiris* is an exegetical treatise on an Egyptian legend.

The choice of a foreign myth may seem odd, especially when in his exegesis, Plutarch discusses some of the main themes of the philosophical debate, namely the structure of the universe, the problem of evil and the interpretation of two controversially and central Platonic passages (*Timaeus* 35a-b, *Leges* 896d-897d)<sup>4</sup>.

Actually this is not the only case where Plutarch makes use of a myth dealing with metaphysical themes<sup>5</sup>, and this attitude hides a precise philosophical stance: the impossibility, for human beings, of knowing the ultimate truth about divine things<sup>6</sup>.

This point is of particular interest for our topic, because the weakness of human knowledge is deeply linked to the constitution of our soul and, in more general terms, of our plane of existence.

The process that moves man towards god's perfection (*homoïôsis tô theô*) is either an ethical purification, in the way the priests of Isis perform with their rituals, and a philosophical search (*zêtêsis*) to reach a better understanding of our world.

So, Plutarch's interest for a subject such as cosmology so far, in our eyes, to daily life, is on the contrary so far motivated by one of the most common human experience: the existence of evil; his use of mythical material testifies the unstable nature of human understanding on divine matters; and, finally, his attempt to give an answer to this problem represents, by itself, a progress toward the source of good, the divine intellect.

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dialogues *On the sign of Socrates*, *On the face of the moon*, *The E at Delphi*. This essay is not his only attempt to deal with this argument: in the *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, Plutarch face the theme with the instrument of the textual exegesis.

<sup>1</sup>*De Is. et Os.*, 369b.

<sup>2</sup>*De an. proc.*, 1014a.

<sup>3</sup>These aspects are mutually linked in Plutarch's works: *'In Plutarco, non meno che in Platone, forma e contenuto costituiscono un insieme difficilmente districabile: trascurare uno a scapito dell'altro rischia di condurre ad equivoci e fraintendimenti'* (Bonazzi 2008:205).

<sup>4</sup>See Ferrari 1999:327, Ferrari 2004:233ff; Torraca 1994.

<sup>5</sup>As, for example, in the final myths of the dialogues *On the face of the moon*, *On the sign of Socrates*, *On the Delays of Divine Vengeance*. The difference, in the case of the treatise *On Isis and Osiris*, is the employment of an already existent mythical material. Even in this case, however, Plutarch reworks some elements in the narration, in order to bring it closer to his interpretation (see also Richter 2001:201-202).

<sup>6</sup>This distance between human and divine knowledge is expressed by Plutarch itself: *'God gives to men the other things for which they express a desire, but of sense and intelligence He grants them only a share, inasmuch as these are His especial possessions and His sphere of activity'* (*De Is. et Os.*, 351d). On the Academic *eulabeia* (caution) see also Ferrari 1995:20-25.

## Where evil lies

For a Platonist, it is normal to admit the existence of a god, who is the supreme good and who cares for the universe. This god poses himself on an higher level of reality than the world of man, but in some ways he has the power to operate on the lower world.

In order to remove the outward contradiction between god's perfect transcendence and his interaction with the lower world, we have to understand better the structure of the universe.

Plutarch's cosmology, as depicted in the final myth of the dialogue *On the face of the moon*<sup>1</sup> for example, envisages a universe divided in three levels of different complexity: a noetic level, solar, where the *nous* resides, a sensible and earthly level inhabited by the mortals, and an intermediate one, lunar, mediating between human and divine, where dwell *daimones*, creatures native of this plane of existence, but able to operate in the inferior reality.

We could mark the earthly and human world simply as imperfect, but this does not explain anything to us.

*'[T]he substance and materials were not created, but always ready at the ordering and disposal of the Omnipotent Builder, to give it form and figure, as near as might be, approaching to his own resemblance. For the creation was not out of nothing, but out of matter wanting beauty and perfection, like the rude materials of a house, a garment, or a statue, lying first in shapeless confusion'*<sup>2</sup>.

The creation (*hê genesis*) is not the act by which the god makes the raw materials composing the universe appear, but, on the contrary, it is the organizing and shaping action that god performs on an existing matter (both psychical and concrete, *ousia* and *hulê* in Plutarch's words).

These already existing principles inform the inferior (lunar and earthly) part of the cosmos, where they take the form of soul and body.

But in the earthly nature nothing pure exists<sup>3</sup>: the elements that compose this reality are in some way overabundant, and this superfluous part has a kind of corrupting power<sup>4</sup>, that cannot originate from the bodies.

The corporeal nature, indeed, is powerless (*akuron*) and passive (*pathêton up'allôn*)<sup>5</sup>. It can be defined good or evil only by accident, because it is informed by a principle that moves it towards one end or another.

Nature produces unwanted results if it is not properly leaded: so, in its essence, evil is a misguided movement: but this movement is not uncaused.

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<sup>1</sup>*De facie* 942d ff. This is not the only description of the universe: for a different (but not incompatible) mythical account, see *De genio* 591b ff.

<sup>2</sup>*De an. proc. in Tim.*, 1014b.

<sup>3</sup>*De Is. et Os.*, §45. We can see this principle at work also in the nature of men: '*the great natures generate at first a multitude of strange and wild flowers*', *De sera*, 522d; see also the *Life of Demetrius*, § 1..

<sup>4</sup>*De Is. et Os.*, §§4-7.

<sup>5</sup>*De facie*, 945c. See also *De an. procr.* 1014e-f.



If every movement is produced by the soul<sup>1</sup>, even the misguided ones originate from a particular kind of soul.

## Two gods?

*'The great majority and the wisest of men hold this opinion: they believe that there are two gods, rivals as it were, the one the Artificer of good and the other of evil'<sup>2</sup>.*

Plutarch claims that this theory dates back to an ancient tradition, widespread among the eastern cultures as the Persians and the Caldeans.

Shortly afterwards Plutarch nominates even some of the most important Hellenic philosophers<sup>3</sup>.

Of the two traditional gods, says Plutarch, *'There are also those who call the better one a god and the other a daemon'<sup>4</sup>.*

Actually, this theory derivates from the exegesis of two disputed platonic accounts, namely the generation of the world soul of *Timaeus* 35a-b and the discussion about the two souls of *Leges* 896d-897d, as Plutarch makes it clear in the focal passage of *De Is. et Os.* 370f.

*'[T]he movement of the Universe is actuated not by one soul, but perhaps by several, and certainly by not less than two, and of these the one is beneficent (agathourgon), and the other is opposed to it (enantian tautê) and the artificer of things opposed (enantiôn dêmiourgon)<sup>5</sup>.*

This interpretation, heterodox even in the eyes of its author<sup>6</sup>, was for him the sole coherent with his Platonism.

Only in the soul we can find an active principle, able to start all the changes and movements that occur in nature<sup>7</sup>: due to its inactivity, matter cannot be a source of change and so

*'the existence of evil in the world would be unexplained, as God would have fashioned such matter into something perfectly good, having no one able to resist him'<sup>8</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup>This is a fundamental Platonic tenet (on this, see *Leges* 894b-896c, *Phaedrus* 245c ff.)

<sup>2</sup>*De Is. et Os.*, §46, 369d-e.

<sup>3</sup>Eraclitus, Empedocles, the Pythagoreans, Anaxagoras and, finally, Plato himself (370d-f). On the importance of the tradition and the efforts to unify different lines of philosophers, see also Donini 1992, Ferrari 2004. On the importance of the Hellenic root of the whole myth, opposed to his alleged Egyptian origin, see Richter 2001.

<sup>4</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 369e.

<sup>5</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 370f.

<sup>6</sup>See *De an. proc.* 1014a. This position brought on Plutarch the criticism of the main Platonist philosophers of the following centuries (on this, see Philips 2001, who explicitly mentions Porphyry and Iamblichus).

<sup>7</sup>*'Must we then necessarily agree, in the next place, that soul is the cause of things good and bad, fair and foul, just and unjust, and all the opposites, if we are to assume it to be the cause of all things?' (Plato, Leges, 896d).*

<sup>8</sup>Dollinger and Darnell 1906:141.

Actually, Plutarch does not assert the existence of two different world souls<sup>1</sup>, but of two different parts of a unique cosmic soul. Concerning the purpose of our inquiry, the difference is not relevant: anyway, Plutarch states that evil exists in a metaphysical sense, and it is produced by a certain kind of soul.

### **The struggle between Typhon and Horus**

This does not mean, however, that there are two entities that Plutarch would call, in a philosophical sense, 'god'<sup>2</sup>.

If this would be the case, Plutarch could hardly escape from the accuse of contradiction, because he himself describes the universe as a whole depending on the sole principle of the good, identifying it with the intellect and the god<sup>3</sup>.

In the *De Iside*, after 371e, when Plutarch speaks of the two opposing principles, he does not speak of Typhon and Osiris, as it would seem in 360d, but of Typhon and Horus<sup>4</sup>.

About him, Plutarch says that *'Isis generates him as a sensible image of the intelligible cosmos'*<sup>5</sup>.

Of the three parts of the *'better and divine nature'*, Horus is the union of the intelligible (*noêton*) with the substrate (*ulê*), *'which the Greeks calls the world (kosmon)'*<sup>6</sup>.

He represents specifically the good part of the world soul, the one that is not only produced by, but also a part of the demiurge himself<sup>7</sup>; Typhon is the other other part, *'that part of the soul which is impressionable, impulsive, irrational and truculent'*<sup>8</sup>.

None of them can be reduced to the other or eliminated, even if Horus (the part of the soul informed by the intellect) tends to dominate Typhon, thanks to his origin<sup>9</sup>.

This predominance is in fact caused by the nature of the divine: god, the *nous*, is superior to the soul; he remains pure from the influence of evil that is confined in the lower cosmos.

However, the divine providence can manifest itself in our world. This happens thanks to the action of the good part of the cosmic soul and with the mediation of the *daimones*.

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<sup>1</sup>See Opsomer 2004:142-143.

<sup>2</sup>We could be moved on this direction by the Zoroastrian and Caldean myths that Plutarch himself quotes to demonstrate that the doctrine of the double world soul is a common belief shared by most of mankind.

<sup>3</sup>See for example *De genio* 591b, where the Unity unifying the principles of life and motion originates the whole cosmos.

<sup>4</sup>Typhon fight against Horus, *De Is et Os.* 373b; see also 373c-d and 376b.

<sup>5</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 373b, my own traduction.

<sup>6</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 373f.

<sup>7</sup>*Quaest. Plat.* 2, 1001c, see also Opsomer 2004:143. In

<sup>8</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 371b.

<sup>9</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 373b. Also in the myth, *'Typhon was vanquished but not annihilated'* (*De Is. et Os.* 367a).

Indeed, as we had seen, the division between the corporeal and the incorporeal does not explain by itself the structure of the universe: the human and the divine worlds are separated but communicating realities<sup>1</sup>. While the superior cosmos is completely spiritual, the inferior one is composed by a mixture of material bodies and immaterial souls.

In Plutarch's lexicon, '*daimon*' can mean a spiritual entity, who often leads and protects a human being, or the superior part of the soul, external to the body, that is the intellect (*nous*)<sup>2</sup>.

The function of both these manifestation of the *daimon* is the mediation between the two world, adapting the perfect, ideal reality of the intelligible into the chaotic turmoil of the human realm.

In the final myth of the dialogue *On the face of the moon*, Sulla speaks about the god Cronus, that Zeus exiled to the earth. He sleeps in a cave, on a distant island, surrounded by *daimones*. In his dreams his '*titanic affections*' fight with '*the royal and divine element*' in him, enacting the conflict of the two parts of the soul<sup>3</sup>.

The *daimones* reports as dream to Cronus '*the prophecies that are greatest and of the greatest matters*'<sup>4</sup>; moreover,

*'they descend hither to take charge of oracles, they attend and participate in the highest of the mystic rituals, they act as warders against misdeeds and chastisers of them, and they flash forth as saviour a manifest in war and on the sea'*<sup>5</sup>.

They act as the agent of the divine providence in the world, allied with and dependent from the good part of the cosmic soul. In this way, Plutarch can resolve the tension between divine transcendence and divine action in the world.

### **Evil and matter**

By denying that matter is evil in itself, Plutarch maintains an original position in the Platonic school, even though he is coherent with his Platonism, that cannot allow the superiority of concrete over spiritual realities.

In this way, he builds an interpretation of Plato that can better appreciate the commitment of the individual with the human world: if the couple soul/body cannot be equated with the good/evil one, interacting with the concrete reality is not by itself demeaning, but, on the contrary, can constitute a peculiar way to approach the divine and intelligible realm.

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<sup>1</sup>In this way god can wield his power on the creation and the mortals can move towards him, following the Platonic ideal of the *homoiōsis tō theō* (*Thaet.* 176a-b).

<sup>2</sup>See for example *De Genio*, 589b-f and 591e-f.

<sup>3</sup>*De facie*, 942a-b. The image of this never-ending battle between two principles reminds the mythical account of the cosmical revolutions made by the Stranger in Plato's *Politicus* (268c-274e).

<sup>4</sup>*De facie* 942a.

<sup>5</sup>*De facie* 944c-d. Cf. *De defectu* 417a-b and *De genio*, 591c.

This positive evaluation of the sensible cosmos is even strengthened by the role played by the becoming.

Evil is the movement opposite to life's manifestation<sup>1</sup>: it is in its essence, as we have seen before, all that oversteps measure and limits.

In psychic terms, it produces tyranny and violence<sup>2</sup>, expressed by the name of Seth<sup>3</sup>, and corrupts the part of the soul that is irrational and '*titanic (titanikon)*'<sup>4</sup>, in the bodies the influence of evil causes corruption and destruction<sup>5</sup>.

So, the realm of Typhon is '*everything harmful and destructive (blaberon kai phtartikon) that Nature contains*'<sup>6</sup>.

Plutarch says that the evil soul's disruptive power is brought under control<sup>7</sup> by Horus, and so he can assert that even in the lower cosmos the good prevails.

This predominance takes place thanks to the action of the becoming.

The noetic substance is unchanging, while the union of body and soul that takes place in the *kosmos* is subject to the laws of space and time: here movement and mutations are conditions of being.

Plutarch does not regard this fact as a mark of the corrupted nature of the sensible, as we could think.

Some motions are bad, because they are disordered, opposed to life and bring to destruction; some others on the opposite are good, inasmuch as they reflect, on a time-shaped reality, the measure of the eternal being<sup>8</sup>.

But movement in itself, in the eyes of Plutarch, produces life rather than death:

*'The sistrum also makes it clear that all things in existence need to be shaken, or rattled about, and never to cease from motion but, as it were, to be woken up and agitated when they grow drowsy and torpid. They say that they avert and repel Typhon by means of the sistrums, indicating thereby that when destruction constricts and checks Nature, generation releases and arouses it by means of motion'*<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>'Some say that one of the companions of Typhon was Bebon, but Manetho says that Bebon was still another name by which Typhon was called. The name signifies restraint or hindrance, as much as to say that, when things are going along in a proper way and making rapid progress towards the right end, the power of Typhon obstructs them' (*De Is. et Os.* 371c).

<sup>2</sup>'To katadunasteuon kai katabiazomenon', *De Is. et Os.* 371c.

<sup>3</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 371b.

<sup>4</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 371b; this expression has to be compared with the '*titanic affections*' of Cronus (*De facie* 942a, already quoted above), held down by the sleep of the god, that '*restores his repose once more and the royal and divine element is all by itself, pure and unalloyed*', allowing him to communicate with Zeus, that is the divine world. On the role of dreams in the communications with the divine see also *De genio* 588d.

<sup>5</sup>'The images from it with which the sensible and corporeal is impressed, and the relations, forms, and likenesses which this take upon itself, like impressions of seals in wax, are not permanently lasting, but disorder and disturbance overtakes them' *De Is. et Os.* 373a-b.

<sup>6</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 369a. See also 364b.

<sup>7</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 373c.

<sup>8</sup>'In fact, the Deity is not averse to changes' *De def. or.* 426c.

<sup>9</sup>*De Is. et Os.* 376c-d. See also the myth of the legs of Zeus quoted at 376b.

The structure of the universe in itself implies the manifestation and the expansion of life<sup>1</sup>.

*'For universal Nature, being at first void of order, received its first impulse to change and to be formed into a world, by being made to resemble and partake in some way (homoiotêti kai methexei tini) of that idea and virtue which is in God'<sup>2</sup>.*

The way in which Nature participates to the intelligible order is precisely the becoming.

Evil, that cannot be removed from our world, is in this way harmonized in the cosmic order.

### **Cosmology and politics**

As we have seen, the problem of evil in Plutarch has two main branches: evil has to exist regardless of god, but it cannot threaten god's perfection and his action even in the lower world.

Plutarch's theory of evil achieves these main results:

a) divine perfection is saved: god operates in the lower world through the mediation of the good part of the cosmic soul (Horus) and with the help of the *daimones*;

b) evil has its source in the evil part of the cosmic soul and can actually be a principle opposed to god;

c) even if evil exists on a metaphysical level, its action cannot overwhelm god's providence or corrupt god's perfection, because on one hand it is limited to the lower world, on the other it is harmonized in the structure of the universe thanks to the becoming.

Philosophy has for Plutarch an operative and active role in the society: through its results, each man can consciously choose the right course of action assuring happiness to himself and to his community.

The concept of evil that we have hitherto described produces an important consequence: if evil is a permanent feature of the cosmos and of the individual nature, the wise man knows that he has always to find a mediation between an ideal and impracticable state of being and the worse tendencies of the reality.

In the private, that mediation brings to the idea that passions cannot be suppressed, but only harmonized, with our conscious will; in the public sphere, instead, it entails the awareness that even the views opposed to the right one (or to the one we consider the right one) cannot simply be eradicated, maybe together with those who support them, but must be integrated, as far as possible, in the community<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>On this, see the speech of Lampria in *De facie*, 938c-f. The nature (*physis*) has a cyclical movement that on one hand preserves life, on the other draws up the lower cosmos to the intelligible and eternal world (*De E apud Delphos*, 388d).

<sup>2</sup>*De sera* 550d; I altered Goodwin's translation to stretch the value of *tini*.

<sup>3</sup>For the same reason, in the myth, Typhon is not eliminated by the divine community: *'The goddess who holds sway over the Earth would not permit the complete annihilation of the*

Of course, Plutarch is by no mean a supporter of democracy neither in the ancient or in the modern sense of the term.

However, he has a complex conception of the relationship between good and evil, and the conviction that we cannot simply impose an alleged perfect state of being to the present world, but we have to adapt the ideal to reality.

These seems to me two precious teachings given us, citizens of modern democracies, by this aristocratic philosopher.

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*nature opposed to moisture, but relaxed and moderated it, being desirous that its tempering potency should persist, because it was not possible for a complete world to exist, if the fiery element left it and disappeared' (De Is. et Os. 367a).*

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