REVISITING THE THREE TOPOI IN DISSERTATIONES 3.2

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ABSTRACT: I re-examine the three topos or areas of study outlined in Epictetus, Dissertationes 3.2 and the claim that they align with the traditional three parts of Stoic philosophy. I argue that they do not correspond to the three parts, but instead map out a series of stages in philosophical training. I then compare these three topos with another set outlined in Enchiridion 52. I argue that these are distinct from the set outlined in Dissertationes 3.2 and that this second set does not map on to the three parts of Stoic philosophy either. I conclude by suggesting that the three topos in the Dissertationes are not as central to the philosophy of Epictetus as some commentators have supposed.

Introducing The Three Topoi

In Dissertationes 3.2.1-2 Epictetus says that there are three topos or areas of study in which people who would like to be fine and good (kalon kai agathon) must be trained.\(^1\) The first of these is concerned with desires and aversions (orexeis kai ekkliseis); the second is concerned with choice and refusal (hormas kai aphormas), and in general with what is an appropriate (kathêkon) way to act; and the third is concerned with avoiding errors in judgement and assents (sunkatatheseis):

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\begin{align*}
\text{τρεῖς εἰσι τόποι, περὶ οὓς ἀσκηθῆναι δεῖ τὸν ἐσώμενον καλὸν καὶ ἄγαθὸν: [i] ὁ περὶ τὰς ὀρέξεις καὶ τὰς ἐκκλίσεις, ἵνα μὴ ὀρεγόμενος ἀποτυγχάη ὑπὲρ ἐκκλίνων περιπτατή: [ii] ὁ περὶ τὰς ὁρμὰς καὶ ἀφορμὰς καὶ ἀπλῶς ὁ περὶ τὸ καθῆκον, ἵνα τάξιν, ἱναιεύλογον, ἵνα μὴ ἐμελῶς: [iii] τρίτος ἔστιν ὁ περὶ τὴν ἀνέξαπατησίαν καὶ ἀνεικαστησίαν καὶ ἀλῶς ὁ περὶ τὰς συγκαταθέσεις.} \\
\text{(Diss. 3.2.1-2)}
\end{align*}
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There are three fields of study in which the man who is going to be good and excellent must first have been trained. [i] The first has to do with desires and aversions, that he may never fail to get what he desires, nor fall into what he avoids; [ii] the second with cases of choice and of refusal, and, in general, with duty, that he may act in an orderly fashion, upon good reasons, and not carelessly; [iii] the third with the avoidance of error and rashness in judgement, and, in general, about cases of assent. (tr. Oldfather)

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\(^1\) For text and translation of Epictetus I follow W. A. Oldfather’s edition in the Loeb Classical Library (1925-1928). Oldfather’s text follows Schenkl’s Teubner edition (1916), with some emendations. I have occasionally modified Oldfather’s translation.
A number of scholars have suggested that these three areas of training correspond to the three traditional parts of Stoic philosophy: logic, physics, and ethics. The first area, concerned with desires is said to correspond to physics; the second area concerned with choice is said to correspond to ethics; and the third concerned with assent is said to correspond to logic. At first glance it seems fairly easy to make these connections. The third area is concerned with assent, sunkatathesis, and this is a key term in Stoic epistemology, part of logic. We are also told that the second area is concerned with what is appropriate, kathêkon, which is a technical term in Stoic ethics. By a process of elimination, the first area, dealing with desires and aversions must then correspond to physics. This third correspondence might seem less obvious, but one could argue that the best way to manage one’s desires is to know what is reasonable to expect, and that requires knowledge of how the world works, namely physics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topos</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Part of Philosophy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First topos</td>
<td>desires and aversions</td>
<td>Physics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(orexeis kai ekkliseis)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Second topos</td>
<td>choices and refusals</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
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<td>(hormas kai aphormas)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third topos</td>
<td>assents (sunkatatheseis)</td>
<td>Logic</td>
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In what follows I want to re-examine this claim. I shall begin by looking at some of the arguments that have been made in its favour. I shall then consider an alternative interpretation that sees the three topoi not as correlated to the three parts of Stoic philosophy but instead as structured programme of training in three ordered stages. I shall also consider whether both of these interpretations might apply at once. I then want to bring in another account of three topoi that we find in the Enchiridion. But first we need to consider some of arguments that have been given in favour of aligning these three areas of training with the three parts of Stoic philosophy.

The Three Topoi and the Three Parts

The first person to consider the claim that the three topoi align with the three traditional parts of Stoic philosophy was probably Adolf Bonhöffer.\(^2\) If he was not the first, his

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REVISITING THE THREE TOPOI

discussion has no doubt been the most influential. However, although he considered it in some detail, he seems to have resisted concluding that there was a clear alignment. While acknowledging a connection between the third topos and logic (with some caveats), he was more inclined to see both the first and the second topoi as being aligned with ethics, the first concerned with our inner character and the second concerned with outward action:

Epictetus also sometimes lets the first two [topoi] together come into a contrast with the third; those two concern the care of character, morality in the narrow sense, as compared to dialectical perfection which the third topos has to do with. [...] the first topos only has to do with the inner state of mind and outlook on life, the second, on the other hand, comprises all practical action.4

Even so, Bonhöffer is often cited as a proponent of the identification of the three topoi with the three parts of philosophy.5 Even if he does claim this elsewhere, the passage above at least shows some indecision on his part.

The earliest person I have found who explicitly affirms a clear correlation is Paul Elmer More in the extended chapter on Epictetus in his book Hellenistic Philosophies, from 1923. There he writes:

In a loose way these three fields correspond with the normal tripartite division of philosophy, the first with physics, the second with ethics in the narrower sense of practical conduct, the third with logic; but the correspondence, except perhaps in the case of the third pair, was never drawn out explicitly by Epictetus, and should not be pressed. All philosophy was virtually ethics for him.6

As one can see, More was far from insistent on this point. Equally tentative was Benjamin Hijmans who, keen to defend Epictetus against the charge that he had no interest at all in physics or logic, referred to the three topoi as a “tripartition of philosophy”,7 which might lead one to think he had the traditional Stoic division of philosophy in mind. However, as his discussion developed, he resisted going quite that far. The third topos he identified with logic without hesitation, but the first and second he characterized as dealing with “respectively practical and theoretical ethics”.8

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3 See Bonhöffer, Epictet und die Stoa, p. 26.
8 Hijmans, ἈΣΚΗΣΗΣ, p. 38.
REVISITING THE THREE TOPOI

The person who really pushed for this claim and defended it was Pierre Hadot. Hadot not only argued that the three topos correspond to the three parts of Stoic philosophy, he also claimed that they offered a key to the structure shaping both Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* and Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*. We find Hadot stating and arguing for this correlation in a number of short pieces and in his book on Marcus Aurelius, *La Citadelle intérieure*. In his essay ‘La philosophie antique: une éthique ou une pratique?’, for instance, he wrote the following:

Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius after him thus distinguish between three kinds of philosophical exercises. There is the exercise which consists in disciplining our active impulse […]. This is the matter of lived ethics […]. Secondly, there is an exercise which consists in controlling our own feelings, judgements, and representations. This is the matter of lived logic […]. Finally, there is the exercise which relates to the discipline of our desires and which consists in desiring only what depends upon us, and in accepting what does not depend upon us as willed by universal Nature, Providence, or Fate. Such consent supposes that one understands that the events which befall human beings do not depend entirely upon us but result from the necessary enchainment of causes, which is not different from Fate.

As I indicated earlier, the connections between the second topos and ethics, and the third topos and logic, seem relatively easy to make. The challenge comes in connecting the first topos to physics, and here one can see Hadot beginning to make the case. In another, earlier, essay, ‘Les divisions des parties de la philosophie dans l’Antiquité’, he was more explicit:

Epictetus distinguishes in effect three domains of askēsis: the discipline of desires, the discipline of impulses, the discipline of thoughts. In the first domain, one exercises oneself in making one’s desires conformable to the will of universal Nature; in the second domain, one attempts to make one’s actions accord with the will of the rational nature that is common to all men; while in the

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third domain, one attempts to conform one’s thoughts to the laws of reason. We understand, thus, that these three domains correspond in fact to the three parts of philosophy: the first to physics, the second to ethics, the third to logic. In all three cases it is a matter of a spiritual exercise: physics as a spiritual exercise makes us aware of our place in the cosmos [...]; ethics as a spiritual exercise aims to make our actions conform to the fundamental tendency of human nature [...]; finally, logic as a spiritual exercise makes us test at each moment our impressions, so that no unreasonable judgement will be introduced into the chain of our thoughts.  

Hadot developed his account further in various writings on Marcus Aurelius, culminating in his monograph *La Citadelle intérieure*. The same basic argument is repeated, namely that the training or discipline of desire in the first *topos* involves “a specific attitude toward the cosmos and nature”. As such, it corresponds to the study of physics.

Hadot’s account has been fairly influential. It was, for instance, endorsed by A. A. Long in his study of Epictetus. Although Long opened his discussion of the three *topoi* by saying that they involve “a procedure that he [Epictetus] may have invented”, which might be taken to imply that he thinks that this is something wholly new, Long went on to endorse Hadot’s account of how the three *topoi* relate to the traditional parts of philosophy. Thus the second and third *topoi* straightforwardly correspond to ethics and logic, while the first ultimately corresponds to physics when understood in a suitably broad way so as to include the study of human nature and the workings of the soul:

How do Epictetus’ three fields of study relate to the classic division of Stoic philosophy into the three parts—logic, ethics, and physics? The question has been much debated, but I think P. Hadot has given the correct answer. Epictetus’ second and third fields obviously correspond to ethics and to logic. At first glance, the first field, dealing with desires and aversions, looks simply like a preliminary to ethics, or at any rate quite remote from physics or the study of nature. [...] But Stoic physics was a very broad subject. [...] So we should probably take the first field to include such study of human and cosmic nature as he deems necessary for beginning students to master.

Others who have suggested that there might be some kind of correlation between the three *topoi* and the three parts of Stoic philosophy include my former self. In previous work I suggested not a straightforward identification but a correlation between them: three parts of theoretical discourse standing alongside three areas of practical training. In this I was for the most part following Hadot who, as we saw earlier, referred to a lived ethics standing alongside ethical theory, and the same for physics and logic.

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Not everyone has been impressed by the arguments in favour of a correlation between the three topoi and the three parts of philosophy. Jonathan Barnes, in his 1997 monograph *Logic and the Imperial Stoa*, emphatically stated that “The three τόποι here are not the three traditional parts of philosophy”.\(^\text{17}\) Barnes was pushing back against Hadot although, to be fair to Hadot, he was not suggesting a straightforward identification but instead simply a correlation. Robert Dobbin, in his commentary on Book 1 of the *Dissertationes*, suggested that “it is vain to look for a complete correlation” and that they “do not completely correspond”.\(^\text{18}\) Like others, he admits a correlation between the third *topos* and logic, but that is as far as it goes. More recently, Brian Johnson has been equally sceptical, doubting in particular the correlation between physics and training in desires and aversions.\(^\text{19}\) As he notes, there is wide variety of intellectual inquiry falling under the heading of ‘physics’ that has no obvious connection with the training of desire.

So, there has been some dissent and also some hesitancy, but Hadot and Long – both of course very influential commentators – have defended the idea that the three *topoi* correlate with the three parts of Stoic philosophy. If not universally accepted, their view has certainly been often repeated.

### The Three Topoi as Three Stages

Are there any other ways in which we might understand the role of the three *topoi*? Epictetus is quite explicit that these are three areas of training.\(^\text{20}\) Not only that, he also seems quite explicit that they ought to come in a very specific order, in which case we might understand them as three stages in a *structured* programme of training. There are two pieces of textual evidence for the claim that they ought to be seen as part of a structured programme, beyond the numbered order in which they are first presented.

The first piece of evidence is that, after initially listing the three topoi Epictetus describes the first of them, concerning desires and aversions, as “the most important and especially pressing” (*kuriótatos kai malista epeigôn*, Diss. 3.2.3). This is why this area must come first. The reason why it must come first is because it deals with negative emotions, which are produced when our desires are frustrated in some way or we fail to avoid something we dislike, and such emotions make it impossible for us to listen to reason (*oud’ akousai logou*). If we cannot even listen to reason then we are not much use at all, so the first task must be to attend to these emotions. The way we do that, Epictetus suggests, is by paying attention to our desires and aversions:

\[^{17}\] Barnes, *Logic and the Imperial Stoa*, p. 34.
\[^{18}\] Dobbin, *Epictetus, Discourses*, Book 1, pp. 94 and 164 respectively.
\[^{19}\] See Johnson, *The Role Ethics of Epictetus*, pp. 79-81, n. 3.
\[^{20}\] Other commentators who have stressed that the three topoi are primarily three areas of training include J. Xenakis, *Epictetus: Philosopher-Therapist*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, p. 70.
REVISITING THE THREE TOPOI

Among these the most important and especially pressing is that which has to do with the stronger emotions; for a strong emotion does not arise except when a desire fails to attain its object, or an aversion falls into what it would avoid. This is the field of study which introduces to us confusions, tumults, misfortunes and calamities; and sorrows, lamentations, envies; and makes us envious and jealous—passions which make it impossible for us even to listen to reason. (tr. Oldfather)

The second piece of evidence is in Epictetus’s comment on the third topos. He says that this belongs only to people who are already making progress (ho êdê tois prokoptousin epiballôn, Diss. 3.2.5). He describes it as a firm consistency in one’s judgements, so that even in dreams or drunkenness one does not assent to an untested impression:

τρίτος ἐστιν ὁ ἱδή τοῖς προκόπτουσιν ἐπιβάλλων, ὁ περὶ τὴν αὐτὸν τοῦτον ἀσφάλειαν, ἵνα μηδ’ ἐν ὑπνοις λάθη τις ἀνεξέταστος παρελθόσα φαντασία μηδ’ ἐν οἰνόσει μηδὲ μελαγχολῶντος. (Diss. 3.2.5)

The third belongs only to those who are already making progress; it has to do with the element of certainty in the matters which have just been mentioned, so that even in dreams, or drunkenness, or a state of melancholy-madness, a man may not be taken unawares by the appearance of an untested sense-impression. (tr. Oldfather)

He goes on to criticize philosophers of his day who skip the first and second stages of training and go straight to the third, focusing their attention on syllogisms and logical paradoxes. Only someone who is already fine and good (kalon kai agathon) ought to engage in these logical pursuits, he adds. This is one of a number of passages where Epictetus might be seen to disparage the study of logic, but as we can see he is in fact putting it at the summit of intellectual activity. It might not be suitable for beginners, but it is the perfect pastime for sages. Indeed, the consistency in one’s judgements that Epictetus also attributes to this third stage of training is something that one would associate with a sage, not a beginner. So for these reasons, the third topos must come last.

It looks, then, as if there is a very definite order to the three topoi and they ought not to be swapped around. By contrast we are told that the three traditional parts of philosophy were presented and taught in a variety of orders, with little agreement about which should come first or indeed whether they should all be taught at once. Diogenes Laertius reports that both Zeno and Chrysippus started their teaching with logic, followed by physics, and then ethics (although the order logic, ethics, physics, reported by Plutarch and Sextus
Empiricus seems more likely).\textsuperscript{21} Panaetius and Posidonius are said to have started with physics, while others started with ethics.\textsuperscript{22} In short, there was no definite order to the teaching of three parts of philosophy in the way that there is with the three \textit{topoi}.

Three Stages and Three Parts?

The two approaches that we have considered so far are not necessarily incompatible. There is no reason in principle why the three \textit{topoi} could not correspond to the three parts of Stoic philosophy \textit{and} form a structured programme of training that has a deliberate order. If the three \textit{topoi} in Epictetus’s very deliberate order correspond to physics, ethics, and then logic, that might make him committed to the claim that the study of philosophy ought to commence with physics, then turn to ethics, and culminate with logic. I say “might” because it will all depend on how close one takes the relationship between the three areas and the three parts to be. It \textit{would} commit him if he held the three \textit{topoi} to be \textit{the same} as the three parts, but perhaps not if he simply took them to correspond to the three parts in some way. There is no reason in principle why someone might not hold that one ought to study the three parts of philosophy in one order, and then engage in practical training designed to digest the ideas contained in those parts in a different order. After all, the two tasks are potentially quite different in kind.

Let us for the moment assume a close relationship and assume that Epictetus would have taught the three parts of philosophy in a way that mapped on to his three \textit{topoi}. That would commit Epictetus to teaching the three parts in the order of physics, ethics, and then logic. One might then ask whether any other ancient Stoic taught the parts of philosophy in that order. According to Diogenes Laertius, as we have seen, the only Stoics who commenced the study of philosophy with physics were Panaetius and Posidonius.\textsuperscript{23} Diogenes does not report what they taught second and then third. This is striking because it is often claimed that Epictetus paid almost no attention to these two supposedly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Diogenes Laertius 7.40 (= \textit{SVF} 1.46, 2.43). Sextus Empiricus, \textit{Adv. Math.} 7.22 (\textit{SVF} 2.44) and Plutarch, \textit{St. Rep.} 1035a (\textit{SVF} 2.42) both give the order logic, ethics, physics. Plutarch quotes from directly from a work by Chrysippus by \textit{way of} evidence: “[Chrysippus] says this in many places, but it will suffice to quote the statement in the fourth book on Ways of Living (\textit{Peri biōn}), which runs word for word (\textit{kata lexin}) as follows…” (tr. Cherniss). On the order of the three parts, see further V. Goldschmidt, \textit{Le système stoïcien et l’idée de temps}, Paris, Vrin, 4th edn 1979, pp. 60-67. For a critical discussion of the very idea of parts of a systemic, unified whole, see A. Bronowski, \textit{The Stoics on Lekta}, Oxford, OUP, 2019, pp. 17-45. Finally, it is perhaps worth noting that one early Stoic – Apollodorus – is reported to have referred to the three parts (\textit{merê}) as \textit{topoi} (Diogenes Laertius 7.39, \textit{SVF} 3.Apoll.1).
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
heterodox “middle Stoics”, instead aligning himself with the early Stoa. Yet, as we also saw, Diogenes also reports that Zeno and Chrysippus taught the three parts in the order of logic, physics, and ethics, beginning with logic rather than ending with it, as Epictetus’s three topoi might imply. In short, if we did assume a close relationship, the outcome would not neatly fit with other claims often made about Epictetus, namely his strong sense of affiliation with the early Stoa.

That is one potential problem with assuming a close correlation between the three topoi and the three parts of philosophy, albeit a relatively minor one. There are a couple of other, more substantive, reasons to doubt the correlation.

The first reason concerns the first topoi. This, Epictetus tells us, is the most important and pressing because it deals with emotions (Diss. 3.2.3). Emotions are often, he suggests, the product of thwarted desires. It might seem odd to think that the treatment of emotions ought to fall under the domain of physics. One might be more inclined to think of this as an ethical concern or, given the role that judgements and assents play in the production of emotions, falling under the heading of logic. Indeed, one might think that overcoming negative emotions will require some knowledge of how judgements work, what is and is not really good, and what it would be reasonable to expect in any given situation – in other words, it would require some knowledge of doctrines in Stoic logic, ethics, and physics. It is not obvious that this neatly correlates to any one part of Stoic philosophy.

A second reason is that the distinction between the first and second topoi might be taken to be not a division between physics and ethics, but instead a division within ethics between inward looking ethical self-transformation and outward-looking social ethics. Thus Xenakis described the first two topoi as being concerned with “individual ethics” and “socio-political ethics”. In this he was broadly following Bonhöffer who, as we saw earlier, suggested a distinction between inward and outward looking ethical development. More recently, Long has characterized them as being concerned with “inner and outer, or oneself and other persons”, even though, as we have seen, a couple of pages later he endorses Hadot’s view that they correspond to physics and ethics. This line of interpretation would posit two topoi concerned with ethics followed by one concerned with logic.

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24 See e.g. Bonhöffer, Die Ethik des Stoikers Epictet, p. iii-iv (= The Ethics of the Stoic Epictetus, pp. 3-4), with some qualifications in Dobbin, Epictetus, Discourses, Book 1, p. xvi.
25 See n. 21 above. As noted there, Plutarch reports the order logic, ethics, physics, which may be more likely, but that does not affect the point being made here. For a similar point, see also Johnson, The Role Ethics of Epictetus, p. 80.
28 Long, Epictetus, p. 115.
To complicate matters further, there is another passage worth taking into account. This is *Enchiridion* 52, where Epictetus outlines three *topoi* in philosophy. The first and most necessary, he says, is concerned with the application of principles (e.g. don’t lie). The second deals with proofs of those principles (why one ought not to lie), while the third confirms those proofs. At first glance this might look as if the first and second of these *topoi* both relate to ethics, concerned with practical ethics and ethical theory respectively. This might look like a distinction within ethics that is *different* to the one considered above between inward and outward facing ethics:

[i] The first and most necessary division in philosophy is that which has to do with the application of the principles, as, for example, Do not lie. [ii] The second deals with the proofs, as, for example, How comes it that we ought not to lie? [iii] The third confirms and discriminates between these, as, for example. How does it come that this is a proof? For what is a proof, what is logical consequence, what contradiction, what truth, what falsehood?

Therefore, the third division is necessary because of the second, and the second because of the first; while the most necessary of all, and the one in which we ought to rest, is the first. But we do the opposite; for we spend our time in the third division, and all our zeal is devoted to it, while we utterly neglect the first. Wherefore, we lie, indeed, but are ready with the arguments which prove that one ought not to lie. (tr. Oldfather, modified)

Epictetus also stresses an ordered connection between these three *topoi*: the third is necessary because of the second, and the second is necessary because of the first, but the first is most necessary of all. Echoing what we have seen in *Dissertationes* 3.2, he insists that it would be a mistake to jump directly to the third – concerned with the validity of proofs – if one has not already mastered the first, concerned with how to act.

Whether this list of three *topoi* in the *Enchiridion* is the same as the list in *Dissertationes* 3.2 will inevitably have some bearing on the question of the relationship with the three parts of Stoic philosophy. There seems to be some structural similarity between the two accounts. In both passages the first *topos* is concerned with ethical self-transformation and is said to be the most important task; the second *topos* is perhaps

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29 Hijmans, *ἈΣΚΗΣΙΣ*, p. 38, describes the three *topoi* in *Ench.* 52 as concerned with i) practical ethics, ii) theoretical ethics, and iii) logic, understood in a broad sense.
concerned with ethics in some way; while the third is concerned with the analysis of logical arguments, and should be entered into only last.

These similarities suggest that this might simply be a restatement of the same three topoi in *Dissertationes* 3.2. Any minor differences might be Arrian’s responsibility, because Gerard Boter notes that the opening words of *Enchiridion* 52 are very similar to a line in *Dissertationes* 1.4.12, which comes just after an account of the three topoi concerned with i) desire and aversion, ii) choice and refusal, and iii) giving and withholding of assent. However, if we look more closely, I think it becomes harder to argue for a close correlation between these two sets of topoi.

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<tr>
<th>Topos</th>
<th>Dissertationes 3.2</th>
<th>Enchiridion 52</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First topos</td>
<td>desires and aversions <em>(orexes kai ekklieseis)</em></td>
<td>application of principles <em>(chréseos tôn theorēmaton)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second topos</td>
<td>choices and refusals <em>(hormas kai aphormas)</em></td>
<td>proofs <em>(apodeixeis)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third topos</td>
<td>assents <em>(sunkatatheseis)</em></td>
<td>confirms and discriminates between these</td>
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In *Dissertationes* 3.2 it does not seem unreasonable to claim – and many have – that both the first and second topoi are concerned in some way with ethics. It seems much harder to make that claim in *Enchiridion* 52. Setting aside the ethical example of lying, which might otherwise distract us, the second topoi there is concerned with proof. Indeed, both the second and the third topoi seem to be in some way connected with logic. In the case of the third topoi in *Enchiridion* 52, Epictetus elaborates on what he means by saying that “the third confirms and discriminates between these” *(tritos ho autôn toutôn bebaiótikos kai diarthròtikos)*. But to what does “these” refer? Translators of the *Enchiridion* have tended to over-translate this in two different ways. Some have assumed that it refers to the first and second topoi, rendering it “these processes”, “the first two”, “les deux premiers”, and “the other two”. Others have taken it to refer to the proofs covered by

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32 I thank Brad Inwood for raising this question.

the second *topos*, rendering it “the proofs”. On the first reading, the third *topos* would be concerned with distinguishing between actions and philosophical arguments. Given that these are self-evidently quite different in kind, that would be an odd task. On the second reading, it would be concerned with distinguishing between good and bad proofs, assessed according to the principles of logic. This is how Simplicius reads it in his commentary, writing that the third *topos* is focused on “the fact that this is a proof and that we are not being deceived”. Indeed, what Epictetus says immediately next by way of example seems to confirm this reading: “How does it come that this is a proof? For what is a proof, what is logical consequence, what contradiction, what truth, what falsehood?”.

In one sense, this third *topos* is clearly concerned with logic, but this isn’t simply paying attention to what one assents to, as we find in the third *topos* in the *Dissertationes*. This is a much higher order, meta-level reflection on the very nature of logical concepts: “what is a proof?” Indeed, it is perhaps the last thing one might expect Epictetus to insist is necessary (ανανκή) in his supposedly practical ethical handbook. It is not practical advice, or even the arguments underpinning such advice, but instead the assessment of whether those arguments are worthy of being accepted. As Epictetus presents it, it is not just assessing the validity of a particular argument but reflecting on what it means for any argument to be valid. Epictetus’s point, of course, is that his beginning students ought to prioritize mastering good ethical conduct over this sort of higher-order reflection, while at the same time insisting that this kind of reflection is ultimately required if one is to complete one’s education.

As before, we might ask the question whether this set of three *topoi* in the *Enchiridion* correspond in some way to the three parts of philosophy. If they did in a manner analogous to the claims made for the three *topoi* in the *Dissertationes*, that would require the first *topos* in *Enchiridion* 52 corresponds in some way with physics. Yet as we can see, the first *topos* is concerned with the application of principles (chërêsōs tôn theôrêmatôn) and the example that Epictetus gives us is “don’t lie”. It is not immediately clear how that could be made to correspond exclusively to doctrines in Stoic physics. One might try to do so by saying that physics is concerned with understanding the world correctly, so not lying will be an important part of giving an accurate account of the way things are, but that seems weak at best. It might just as easily be connected to ethics or logic in so far as it presupposes that lying is something one ought not to do or that it involves assenting to an untruth. But those are perhaps equally weak. Lying is merely an example that Epictetus (or perhaps Arrian) happened to choose, and the real distinction at work here is between

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training oneself not to lie in the first *topos* and giving proofs for why not to lie in the second *topos*. Epictetus could have made the point using a variety of other examples of ethical behaviour. There’s no obvious *topos* in *Enchiridion* 52 that could correspond with physics.

There is a further reason to doubt that the two sets of three *topoi* correspond to each other. The first set in the *Dissertationes* appears to be devoted to practical training in three areas. The goal in each case is a transformation of one’s conduct. In the second set in the *Enchiridion*, only the first *topos* is concerned with conduct; the next two are concerned with arguments justifying a certain path of conduct, followed by confirmation of the reliability of those arguments, culminating in the sort of understanding one would expect from a sage. In this sense, the first set seem aimed at beginning students, while the second set are more appropriate for more advanced education.  

Indeed, Epictetus describes the three *topoi* in the *Dissertationes* as areas in which one should be trained (*askēthênai dei*) but presents the three *topoi* in the *Enchiridion* as the three areas of philosophy (*en philosophiai*), which might be taken to imply that he conceived them differently.

**Conclusions**

What conclusions can we draw from all this? The main conclusion I would like to draw is that there are some good reasons to doubt the claim popularized by Hadot and Long that the three *topoi* in *Dissertationes* 3.2 correspond to the three parts of philosophy. Epictetus makes clear that his three *topoi* – indeed, his two distinct sets of three *topoi* – have a clearly defined hierarchical order. This is quite different to accounts we have of the three parts of philosophy, which are said to be closely inter-related, with no one part having priority over another, and sometimes all taught together because there is no unambiguously obvious starting point.

A secondary conclusion I would like to draw is this. It is not uncommon to see these three *topoi* hailed as a key feature of Epictetus’s philosophy and one of his original contributions to Stoic thought. Hadot argued that they offer a key to explaining the

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37 I owe this suggestion to Alex Long.

38 See e.g. Diogenes Laertius 7.40 (*SVF* 2.41): “No single part, some Stoics declare, is independent of any other part, but all blend together. Nor was it usual to teach them separately.” Bronowski, *The Stoics on Lekta*, pp. 32-33, draws an interesting distinction between transmission (*paradosis*) and teaching (*didaskalia*), arguing that the tripartition of Stoic philosophy related to transmission, not teaching. By contrast, one might add that both of Epictetus’s sets of three *topoi* look to be clearly concerned with teaching, not the transmission of doctrine. This might offer another reason not to expect to find any correlation between the two.

structures of both the *Enchiridion* and Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*.\(^{40}\) But what about *Enchiridion* 52? As we have seen, that seems to offer a different set of three *topoi*. Why prioritize the account in *Dissertationes* 3.2? Let us assume that the account of *Enchiridion* 52 summarizes a fuller discussion in one of the lost books of the *Dissertationes*.\(^{41}\) If so, it is simply due to the contingencies of textual transmission that one set of *topoi* appears in the extant *Dissertationes* and one does not. Although commentators have tended to focus on the three *topoi* in the *Dissertationes*, it is in fact the those in the *Enchiridion* that are said to be the three areas of philosophy. Yet, as we have seen, these do not neatly correspond to the three parts of Stoic philosophy either. With these two different sets of *topoi* in Epictetus’s work, perhaps the three *topoi* in *Dissertationes* 3.2 were not as central in Epictetus’s mind as they often appear in some modern accounts of his philosophy.

\(^{40}\) See n. 9 above. I have argued against this claim with regard to the *Meditations* in J. Sellars, *Marcus Aurelius*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, e.g. p. 111.

\(^{41}\) As does Barnes, *Logic and the Imperial Stoa*, p. 38, n. 63.