

**THEORY AND TRAINING IN EPICETETUS' PROGRAM OF MORAL
EDUCATION**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the educational function of training, as contrasted with the study of theory, within Epictetus' program of moral education. The motivation for this research is that there exists an apparent tension in Epictetus' moral philosophy. According to Stoicism, knowledge is sufficient for virtue; however, many students of Stoicism have learnt that virtue is the only good, and endorsed this claim as true, and yet fail to act appropriately. Epictetus seems to resolve this problem through the introduction of applied exercises. That Epictetus requires his students to train themselves in this way seems in potential conflict with his moral psychology. In this dissertation, I resolve this tension through three contributions: (1) First, I develop an account of why Epictetus believes moral failure occurs in dedicated students of Stoicism who wish to achieve virtue. It occurs primarily because of two factors, precipitancy and weakness, which impede the progressing student of Stoicism from properly reflecting upon a situation. (2) Second, I argue for a novel explanation of the function of training in Epictetus. Epictetus tells us that training is necessary to 'digest' our theory. Building upon this neglected metaphor, I argue that the 'digestion' of theory is the process by which students move from weak commitments to general principles (i.e., virtue is the only good), which are vulnerable to instances of precipitancy or weakness, to specific actionable beliefs (i.e., I should not desire this bribe because it is not an instance of virtue). (3) Lastly, I demonstrate, by way of examples, the function of Epictetus' applied training exercises. These exercises are shown to facilitate the 'digestion' of theory by mitigating weakness and precipitancy. This explanation accounts both for why these exercises are considered necessary, and why they do not conflict with Epictetus' psychological commitments.

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List of Abbreviations

EE = Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*

NE = Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Div. = Cicero, *On Divination*

Fat. = Cicero, *On Fate*

Tusc. = Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*

D.L. = Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Disc. = Epictetus, *Discourses*

Ench. = Epictetus, *Enchiridion*

Frag. = Epictetus, *Fragments*

Intr. = Galen, *Medical introduction*

PHP = Galen, *On Hippocrates' and Plato's Doctrines*

LS = Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*

St. Rep. = Plutarch, *On Stoic self-contradictions*

Virt. Mor. = Plutarch, *On Moral Virtue*

Leg. Alleg. = Philo, *Allegories of the Laws*

Letters = Seneca, *Letters on Ethics: To Lucilius*

M. = Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors*

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Stoics however thought that [emotions] depended absolutely on our will and that we could have absolute sovereignty over them. But they were compelled by refractory experience rather than by their principles to admit that a good deal of practice and effort are also required to restrain and govern them.

- Spinoza, *Ethics*, 221

This quote is an appropriate introduction to this thesis, because it highlights two important things. First, as Spinoza rightly points out, the Stoics believe it takes a great degree of practice, effort, and training to have our emotions come into accordance with nature. Second, the quote is an example of how some interpreters of Stoicism, Spinoza included, have suspected that this demand for training does not follow logically from Stoic principles about the nature of virtue and the soul. It seemed to me a worthwhile pursuit to investigate if such suspicions were deserved, or if they were instead based on a misrepresentation of Stoicism.

This thesis is about the function and role of training in the moral education of the Stoic for whom training features most prominently: Epictetus. It is interested in what Epictetus takes training to consist of, what pedagogical function he believes it serves, and ultimately it is interested in whether there is a way to make sense of the necessity of training that fits coherently with Epictetus' commitments as a Stoic.

First, I must provide a number of caveats about the nature of this project. As a work on Epictetus, it is concerned with Epictetus' specific brand of Stoic philosophy. While it should be recognized that Epictetus' thinking can only be understood within the context of the Stoic tradition, and Hellenistic philosophy more generally, he will still be taken to

be his own thinker, who has innovated and adapted Stoicism for his own purposes. There exist many great resources on Stoicism and Hellenistic philosophy more generally, but this project is specialized in nature to focus on one thinker.¹

The thesis will also follow in a tradition, established by Pierre Hadot, of viewing ancient philosophy as a way of life. This means that I take Epictetus to consider the primary function of philosophy to be the ethical transformation and improvement of those who practice it.² I am interested, above all else, in how Epictetus went about educating and transforming his students into better Stoics. While the Stoics developed complex theories concerning both logic³ and epistemology⁴, these contributions will only be discussed thoroughly in terms of how they inform Epictetus' ethics.

This work is also primarily philosophical in nature, rather than historical. This means that I am concerned with Epictetus' philosophy as it is presented to us in the *Discourses*, the *Handbook*, and the fragments attributed to him. Epictetus is a difficult historical figure, partly because we have no remaining works written by him. All his remaining corpus is purported to have been written by his student Arrian, of whom we know a great deal more.⁵ Nonetheless there have been attempts to reconstruct information about Epictetus' life.⁶ In terms of biographical information that seems to have affected his

¹ For a general overview of Stoic philosophy, see: Rist, 1969; Brennan, 2005; Sellars, 2006. For excellent collections of papers on a variety of Stoic topics, see Long, 1971 and 2001; Rist, 1978; Sandbach, 1989; Ierodiakonou, 1999; Inwood, 2003. For an overview of Stoic ethics more generally, see Inwood and Donini, 1999. For books about the tradition of Hellenistic philosophy, of which Epictetus forms an important part, see Nussbaum, 1994; Annas, 1995; Sellars, 2018. For collections of papers by a single author on topics in Hellenistic and Ancient philosophy see Long, 1974 and 2005; Striker, 1996; Algra, 1999; Bobonitch, 2017.

² For those interested in works which explore ancient philosophy in this manner, see Hadot, 1995 and 2002; Sellars, 2003; Cooper, 2012.

³ For discussion of Stoic logic in general, see Mates, 1953; Frede, 1974; Barnes, 1997; Brunschwig, 2006.

⁴ For a discussion of Stoic epistemology, see Sandbach, 1971; Striker, 1996; Frede, 1999; Hankinson, 2003.

⁵ For bibliographical work on Arrian see Brunt, 1977; Stadter, 1980; Syme, 1982.

⁶ For works on Epictetus of a bibliographical nature see Starr, 1949; Brunt, 1977.

philosophy, we know that Epictetus lived in Rome as a slave and studied under the Stoic Musonius Rufus. At some point he achieved freedom, and left Rome to open his own school in Nicopolis, on the coast of contemporary Greece.⁷ Additionally, the *Discourses* themselves seem to have been composed in 108 C.E., when Epictetus was teaching in Nicopolis. At this time, he was over 50 and mature in age and thought.⁸

While there is doubt, as always in these circumstances, of how precise Arrian's portrayal of Epictetus is, it makes little difference to my project. I am interested in Epictetus' thought, as it is contained in these works. And an analysis of this work is still valuable, even if it differs from the historical Epictetus as he truly was. That being said, there is considerable evidence that Arrian's writings are portrayals of Epictetus' lessons, rather than his own inventions. For example, the *Discourses* are written in Koine Greek, whereas Arrian typically writes in Attic. In addition, there are several other differences in style between Arrian's other works and the *Discourses* which all point to Arrian attempting to accurately reconstruct wording and style of a different person.⁹

What remains of Epictetus' thought are three works. Our primary source is the *Discourses*, which consists of a series of informal lessons and conversations Epictetus had with students and visitors at his school in Nicopolis. While this work was originally made up of eight books, only four remain, each divided into a number of chapters.¹⁰ Fragments of the four lost books have been collected into what are known as the *Fragments*. These fragments are typically short, and while they are of value, the lack of

⁷ Millar, 1965, p. 141. Cf. Lutz 1947 p. 8-9.

⁸ Millar, 1965, p. 142.

⁹ See Oldfather, 1925, p. xiii; Hartmann, 1905, p. 252.

¹⁰ Oldfather, 1925, Pg. xii. However, how much of what is essential to Epictetus' philosophy has been lost is up for debate, as De Lacy (1943) has argued that Epictetus introduces all of his original arguments in the first book, and then only goes on to elaborate in subsequent books.

context surrounding them limits the degree to which we can learn of Epictetus' thinking from them. Finally, there is the *Handbook* of Epictetus, which consists of 53 short chapters, typically of only a paragraph or two. The *Handbook* is a summary of the *Discourses*, also created by Arrian.

Next, the scope of this project is limited to how Epictetus trained and educated those who were students of Stoicism and wished to become better people in the Stoic sense. There are a number of interesting questions about how one should best go about educating those who are ignorant, indifferent, or even hostile towards Stoic philosophy, and how to appeal to the ethical intuitions of those who have not read or endorsed Stoic doctrine.¹¹ However, this thesis is not concerned with these questions. It is concerned with how Epictetus thought it best to educate students of Stoicism, who had already read and endorsed Stoic theory and, most importantly, were actively trying to be better Stoics but failing.

There have been a number of monographs concerning various topics of Epictetus' philosophy, although notably less than the number devoted to someone like Plato or Aristotle. In the late with 19th century and the early 20th century the literature on Epictetus was dominated by the work of French and German scholars, with the exception of Sharpe's *Epictetus and the New Testament* (1914).¹² Bonhöffer's three part study of Epictetus, including *Epiktet und Die Stoa* (1890), *Die Ethik der Stoikers Epiktet* (1894), and *Epiktet und das Neue Testament* (1911) was arguably the premier scholarship on

¹¹ For an account of how Epictetus interacts with laypeople, or those uninitiated in Stoic philosophy see Macgillivray, 2020.

¹²Cf. Bonhöffer, 1890, 1894 and 1911; Colardeau, 1903; Halbaur, 1911; Jagu, 1946. See Hershbell, 1986 for a thorough discussion of the historical literature on Epictetus.

Epictetus for roughly 100 years until Long's *Epictetus* (2002), and is still a valuable source of information. So much so that Stephens (1996) has translated the second of Bonhöffer's three books, *The Ethics of the Stoic Epictetus*, into English over 100 years after its original publication.

Since the 1960's there has been an increase in English monographs on Epictetus, and an even further surge in popularity in the last twenty years since Long's work. Enough so that English can fairly be said to be the current prominent language of Epictetian scholarship, although there continue to be notable German and French additions.¹³

Of these monographs on Epictetus, two focus extensively on Epictetus' training program: *Askēsis* by Hijmans (1959) and *Epictetus Philosopher-Therapist* by Xenakis (1969). However, unlike Hijmans and Xenakis, I situate Epictetus' training within his greater educational program. I am concerned both with what he takes training to consist of, and *also* what he thinks training achieves functionally in relation to other parts of his educational program, such as the study of theory.

In terms of primary sources, for the Epictetus' Greek I am working from Schenkl (1916) which is the standard Greek text for Epictetus. My translation, unless otherwise noted, is taken from Robin Hard's 2014 translation *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*.

This thesis has two main projects. It develops the structure of Epictetus' program of moral education and it explains the role of training within that project. My hope is that this will be a valuable endeavor for two reasons. First, it is worth better understanding

¹³ Notable English monographs include Hijmans, 1959; Xenakis, 1969; Long, 2002; Stephens, 2007; Johnson, 2014. There are also two English edited volumes concerning the philosophy of Epictetus: Scaltsas and Mason, 2007, and Gordon and Suits, 2014. The two notable French works on Epictetus are Germain, 1964 and Gourinat, 1996, and in German there is Billerbeck, 1978, Gretenkord, 1981 and Wehner, 2000.

Epictetus' program of moral education. In Epictetus, we have a unique opportunity to see a Stoic philosopher acting as an educator. The *Discourses* is, more than an explanation of Stoic theory, an explanation of how Stoic theory should be applied and incorporated by the individual if they wish to transform themselves.

Second, there is still a contemporary debate about the exact role of training in Epictetus' program of moral education, especially in relation to the study of theory¹⁴, and even, as anticipated by Spinoza in the quote above, some concerns about how Epictetus' reliance on training can coherently fit with Stoic moral psychology, which posits virtue as being identical to knowledge.¹⁵ I hope that the conclusions reached here helps resolve these debates, and explain why Epictetus thought both training and theory were necessary for moral progress, and why this does not conflict with his theoretical commitments as a Stoic.

In service of this project, this thesis will consist of six chapters beyond the introduction and conclusion. The first three chapters are descriptive in nature, while the last three are argumentative. Chapter 2 provides an overview of Stoic moral psychology, and how Epictetus deviates from his predecessors. In order to understand why Epictetus' structures his program of moral education the way he does, it is necessary to understand how he thinks the human mind and human motivation work. It argues that Epictetus' moral psychology is unique in three ways. First, Epictetus emphasizes the *prohairesis* as the seat of our reason, instead of the *hegemonikon* as is traditional with previous Stoics. Second, Epictetus develops the most robust version of intellectualism present amongst

¹⁴ See Cooper, 2007; Sellars, 2007; Sharpe, 2014.

¹⁵ See Brennan, 2003, p. 278-279 and Johnson, 2014, p. 83, Footnote 30.

surviving Stoic texts. Epictetus is adamant that we must be motivated towards what seems good to us, and away from what seems bad to us in all circumstances. Third, Epictetus places a unique emphasis upon the role of preconceptions in determining our motivations. In his view, we are motivated towards or away from something because of the preconception we apply to it.

With Epictetus' unique moral psychology in mind, the third chapter outlines the structure of his program of moral education. Epictetus believes a proper education towards virtue is divided into three *topoi*, or areas of study, which must be mastered sequentially. The first area concerns the mastering of our impulses of desire and aversion by applying the preconceptions of good and bad to specific objects in accordance with nature. The second area concerns mastering the impulse to act (*hormai*) and not to act, by understanding what is appropriate for us to select given our roles. The third area concerns mastering assent, through a mastery of logic.

The fourth chapter then examines the question of why individuals, who study Stoic theory and set out to become virtuous, fail to achieve this goal. It argues that Epictetus believes that most moral failure occurs for one of two reasons. First, the student attempts to master the *topoi* in the incorrect order. For example, they attempt to master impulse to act, the topic of the second area of study, before they have mastered desire, the topic of the first. The second primary reason students fail is that they fail to reason properly when considering new impressions. There are two main reasons this could occur: precipitant assent, or weakness.

Chapter 5 examines how Epictetus thinks the student should ensure they make correct use of their impressions and reason properly in complex situations. It argues that Epictetus

considers both theory and training to be necessary but insufficient parts of a proper moral education. This is the case because theory is concerned with general types, while training prepares us to deal with particular situations and objects. It can seem initially puzzling that Epictetus considers training beyond the study of theory to be necessary for moral progress, given that he considers virtue to be knowledge. At its worst, unless an explanation of the function of training is provided, the reliance on training could conflict with his psychological commitments to intellectualism. As such, the remaining two chapters will attempt to construct an explanation of Epictetus' reliance on training which both explains its function and resolves any potential conflict with his Stoic commitments.

Chapter 6 argues for the novel position that the function of training in Epictetus is to ensure the 'digestion' of theory, understood as a process of continued inferences from theory about a type of object, to particular beliefs about particular objects. To digest theory then, is to successfully move from a type of general knowledge about what types of things are good and bad, to an actionable knowledge of the value of specific objects in one's life. 'Digesting' theory requires training, because it is training which prevents precipitancy and weakness, which are two prominent reasons students of Stoicism fail to make correct judgements about incoming impressions.

Finally, Chapter 7 examines the actual exercises that make up Epictetus' training program. It argues that exercises can be generally divided into two types: Preventative and Remedial. Preventative exercises stop the agent from making poor judgements, and remedial exercises help the agent to correct poor judgements. Both serve to help the agent 'digest' their theory, by enabling the student of Stoicism to develop more beliefs in accordance with what they have learnt in theory. Five exercises are examined, and it is

explained how they function and what goal they serve in Epictetus' program of moral education.

Chapter 2

Epictetus' Moral Psychology

2.1 Introduction

Stoic ethical theory is deeply interconnected with their understanding of human psychology.¹ Human virtue is reducible to a specific physical disposition, or tenor, of the commanding faculty (*hegemonikon*) in which it becomes consistent, firm, and unchangeable in accordance with reason.² In other words, to be a virtuous individual is just to have certain kind of soul. Because of this, we cannot separate Stoic psychology from its ethics. Stoic moral development is always interrelated with what we would now call the mind. All ethical improvement in Stoicism relates in some way to changing the beliefs and reasoning processes of the individual until these coincide with what nature dictates. As such, any proper exploration of Epictetus' ethics must begin with an examination of his psychology.

Epictetus was a late-period Stoic, who was born in the mid-first century C.E. This means that the peak of his teaching would have taken place more than 300 years after the death of the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium. By the time of Epictetus, Stoicism had been a prominent philosophy for centuries, and experienced the kinds of variation and change that is to be expected of any school of thought over that period of time.³ The late-

¹ Because this dissertation focuses on Epictetus I will not be able to discuss Stoicism theory of the mind in full detail. For general introductions to Stoic philosophy of mind, see Annas, 1992, p. 37-122; Long, 1982 and 1999; Brennan, 2003; Gourinat, 2017.

² “[Menedemus, Aristo, Zeno and Chrysippus agree] virtue to be a certain character and power of the soul’s commanding-faculty, engendered by reason, or rather, a character which is itself consistent, firm, and unchangeable reason” (Plutarch, *Virt. Mor.*, 440E-441D = LS 61B). Cf. “[The Stoics believe that] virtue is a soul which has been fashioned to achieve consistency in the whole of life” (D.L., 7.89 = LS 61A).

³ See Inwood, 2012.

period Roman Stoics, who along with Epictetus prominently included Marcus Aurelius, Seneca the younger and Epictetus' teacher Musonius Rufus, are typically understood to have shifted their Stoicism towards an emphasis on practical ethics, and away from giving equal importance to the other two traditional areas of Stoic philosophy: physics, and logic.

Beyond this focus on ethics, there is evidence the later-period Stoics also differed from their predecessors regarding their conception of human psychology. For example, we find in Seneca's *Letters* discussions of *voluntas* (will), which has been argued to be the precursor to our contemporary conception of the will, and was, to the best of our knowledge, missing from the older Stoics.⁴ We see in Marcus Aurelius discussions of the mind (*nous*) as causally separate from our divine breath (*pneuma*), something which would have seemed very strange to his predecessors.⁵ It is clear from this that change was taking place, both over time and between authors. Let us examine, then, Epictetus' particular psychology, with special attention to any important changes from his predecessors.

To begin, it should be noted that on most of the main points of Stoic theory, Epictetus remains in line with what we would expect from an orthodox Stoic. We know this because an in-depth discussion of how human psychology works is present in the *Discourses*, one that is more detailed than is to be found in Seneca's *Letters*, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, or what remains of Musonius Rufus. At the beginning of the *Discourses* Epictetus tells us that human beings, uniquely of all living creatures, are

⁴ For a discussion of the use of *voluntas* in Seneca, see Inwood, 2005.

⁵ *Meditations*, 12.3.

granted by the divine the capacity for self-reflection. This capacity includes the power to deal rightly with the impressions we receive, which, contrary to how things may appear to the uninitiated, is the only capacity in our power. Alternatively put, our capacity to deal rightly with impressions is the only aspect of our life not *externally* constrained or determined.⁶ This power of the rational faculty is manifested in our ability to assent, dissent, or withhold judgement concerning these impressions.⁷ Following an assent, if it concerns something we deem to be good or evil, we receive an impulse and are compelled to move towards that which we conceive as good, and away from that which we conceive as evil.⁸

The psychological powers of impression (*phantasia*), reason (*logos*), assent (*sunkatathesis*), and finally impulse (*hormē*), are fundamental to Stoicism's theory of action.⁹ Epictetus is particularly adamant that our use of these powers is sufficient to explain all the complexities of human behavior. All human behavior is caused by the impressions we receive, how we choose to assent to them, and the impulses that follow from this. All of our actions, from crying over a dead loved one to starting a war, are ultimately reducible to these simple psychological powers, over which we have been granted the power to make proper use.¹⁰

Good and evil actions are also reducible to the use of these psychological powers. As such, our ethical status as agents is determined by which kinds of impressions we assent to as true. The ethical emphasis has to be on this moment of assent, because impulse

⁶ *Disc.* 1.1.

⁷ *Disc.* 1.14.7.

⁸ *Disc.* 1.1.12; 3.3.2.

⁹ Iamblichus, *De anima* (Stobaeus. I.368,12-20 = LS 53K; *SVF* 2.826, part).

¹⁰ *Disc.* 1.28.11-13.

follows necessarily from assent, and what impressions we receive can be determined by that which is external to us. Of all our psychological functions, our assent alone may be properly called a choice, one due to our divinely acquired power to make proper use of impressions through self-reflection. Accordingly, Epictetus tells us that “the essence of the good is a certain disposition of our choice (*prohairesis*), and that of the bad likewise”.¹¹

We can see from this that the framework of Epictetus’ psychology is fundamentally Stoic. Nonetheless there are important aspects of his moral psychology where Epictetus begins to deviate from those before him. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the three most important instances of this:

- 1) His use of *prohairesis* instead of *hegemonikon* when referring to the self.
- 2) His emphasis on the persuasive and motivational power of what seems true to us.
- 3) His description of preconceptions (*prolepseis*) as exclusively value laden.

None of these points represent a clear break from Stoic theory. However, Epictetus does intentionally stress these aspects of our psychology, giving them a more prominent role in his work than is to be found in other Stoics. In order to understand Epictetus’ unique moral psychology, these features must be appropriately examined.

2.2 Prohairesis

In Stoicism, the soul of any animal is identified as its *pneuma*, the divine active principle which shapes and moves all matter.¹² But *pneuma* alone does not endow a being

¹¹ *Disc.* 1.29.1. Cf. 1.30.4.

¹² *D.L.* 7.156.

with life, as it is present within all matter. The way that *pneuma* is modified determines the capacities of the matter it imbues. In stones, it is manifested as just *hexis*, or coherence in shape and form. In plants, it is manifested as physique (*phusis*), which provides the capacity for internally directed growth and change. In animals *pneuma* becomes soul (*psychē*) which endows the animal with the abilities of impression and impulse, which are notably missing from plant life.¹³ In humans *pneuma* achieves its highest possible form in the form of reason (*logos*), located in the commanding-faculty.¹⁴

A human however, is not endowed just with *logos*. The human form contains all four types of *pneuma*, manifested in different ways throughout our different parts. The *pneuma* of our bones, for example, is modified as *hexis*.¹⁵ This makes sense, as the Stoics would not wish to be committed to the position that our bones possess the same kind of reason as our commanding faculty, but their form and shape must still be accounted for. We can attribute the growth and change of our body to its *phusis*. Finally, while we do possess *logos*, we also possess a soul just as other animals do.

In a human being there are eight faculties or parts of the soul. These are the five senses, the faculty of reproduction, the faculty of speech, and the commanding faculty (*hegemonikon*).¹⁶ The *hegemonikon* is the most important aspect of Stoic psychology. It is the seat of human consciousness and possesses the functions we would now associate with the brain. However, its physical location was understood to be in the heart.¹⁷ Like

¹³ Philo, *Leg. alleg.* 1.30 = LS 53P; Nemesius 291, 1-6 = LS 53O.

¹⁴ Galen, *Intr.* 14.726,7-11 = LS 47N; Philo, *Leg. alleg.* 2.22-3 = LS 47P. See also: Inwood, 1985, 20-21 for an excellent overview of this topic.

¹⁵ D.L. 7.138-9.

¹⁶ Aetius 4.21.1-4 = LS 53H.

¹⁷ D.L. 7.159.

non-human animals, the *hegemonikon* possesses the capacities of impression and impulse.¹⁸

An impression (*phantasia*) is an affection or alteration of the soul, caused by an impresser.¹⁹ The impression is imprinted upon the soul, like a signet-ring into wax.²⁰ Impulse (*horme*) is a movement towards or away from the impresser when it has been grasped by the mind, through means of the impression, to relate to one's proper function.²¹ In other words, we receive an impulse towards or away from an object when we understand that object, perceived through means of an impression, to be beneficial or harmful to us. This impulse then motivates the body into action.

Impression and impulse alone are sufficient to explain non-human animal behavior. However, due to the superior form of *pneuma* present within adult humans, added to the *hegemonikon* of the human are the additional capacities of reason and assent.²² Assent is an internally determined capacity to endorse, or refrain from endorsing, impressions as true.²³ In human beings above a certain age assent is a necessary condition of impulse. There can be no impulse without prior assent.²⁴ This process of assent is made possible by reason, which allows us to form and reflect upon verbal representations of impressions known as 'sayables' (*lekta*).²⁵ Strictly speaking, it is not the impression we assent to, but its *lekta*, derived from the impression and represented as a proposition by reason.²⁶

¹⁸ Iamblichus, *De anima* (Stobaeus I.368,12-20 = LS 53K).

¹⁹ Aetius 4.12.1-2 = LS 39B.

²⁰ D.L. 7.49-51 = LS 39A.

²¹ Philo, *Leg. Alleg.* 1.30 = LS 53P Cf. Stobaeus, 2.86, 17-87.6.

²² Iamblichus, *De anima* (Stobaeus I.368,12-20 = LS 53K).

²³ Cicero, *Academica* 1.40 = LS 40B; *On Fate* 39-43 = LS 62C.

²⁴ Stobaeus 2.88, 2-6 = LS 33I; Plutarch, *St. rep.* 1057A = LS 53S.

²⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 8.70 = LS 33C; D.L. 7.49 = LS 33A.

²⁶ Stobaeus 2.88, 2-6, = LS 33I.

Given that the *hegemonikon* contains all the elements that explain human behavior and allows us to be morally responsible for our actions, it is not surprising that it was historically attributed as the most prominent part of the self. Indeed, Sextus Empiricus tells us that Stoics would even use the term ‘soul’ to refer to just the *hegemonikon*, even though in orthodox theory the soul contains faculties in addition to the *hegemonikon*. There is present then a conceptual division in Stoicism between the body, which is external and inessential, and *hegemonikon*, which is identified as the seat of our rationality and identity.²⁷

In Epictetus we see this same division between self and the external body, except the self is now identified as *prohairesis*, not the *hegemonikon*. Epictetus tells students that they are not their bodies, but their *prohairesis*:

For you yourself are neither flesh nor hair, but choice (*prohairesis*), and if you render that beautiful, then you yourself will be beautiful (*Disc.* 3.1.40)

‘Then I will have you chained up.’ What are you saying, man, chain *me* up? You can chain my leg, but not even Zeus can overcome my power of choice (*prohairesis*). (*Disc.* 1.1.23)

Epictetus is adamant that our body is nothing special. It is reducible to molded clay.²⁸ In fact, a major cause of our suffering is that we do not recognize our body’s moral indifference, and thus form attachments to our body, and devote ourselves to its improvement rather than to the improvement of our *prohairesis*.²⁹ This dismissal of the

²⁷ See Sextus, *M.*, 7.234 = LS 53F. Sextus provides the example of the Stoics describing death as the separation of soul and body, but he argues that the Stoics are really discussing what happens to the *hegemonikon* after death.

²⁸ *Disc.* 1.1.11 Cf. 4.1.100.

²⁹ “But as things are, although we have it in our power to apply ourselves to one thing alone [our *prohairesis*], and devote ourselves to that, we choose instead to apply ourselves to many things, and attach ourselves to many, to our body, and our possessions, and our brother, and friend, and child, and slave.” (*Disc.* 1.1.14).

body is in line with Stoicism. We are not to overly concern ourselves with that which is outside our power or, in other words, external to our *hegemonikon*. But Epictetus opts for the term *prohairesis* here instead.³⁰

So, what is our *prohairesis*? Etymologically it means a pre-choice, or a choice before a choice. In the translation of Epictetus utilized here, Hard opts to translate *prohairesis* as “choice”, but it should be noted that the concept is more robust than mere selection of one thing over another.³¹ The philosophical use of the term originates at least as far back as Aristotle.³² Often translated as ‘reasoned’ or ‘purposive’ choice in an Aristotelian context, in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle describes *prohairesis* as a capacity of the mind to choose and feel appetite for something by means of deliberation: “As to purposive choice (*prohairesis*) it is clear that it is not absolutely identical with wish (*boulēsis*) nor with opinion, but is opinion plus appetite (*orexis*) when these follow as a conclusion from deliberation.”³³

For Aristotle, our *prohairesis* is tightly linked with the concept of moral virtue. In fact, he says that excellence of character is “a disposition concerned with choice (*hexis*

³⁰ See Long, 2002, p. 207-220. Long identifies this concern and provides a detailed analysis that I find to be correct. Epictetus’ uses *prohairesis* because it only involves the faculties of our *hegemonikon* under our control: assent impulse and reason.

³¹ In terms of how to translate the term, the debate in the literature concerns choosing between ‘choice’ as an under-translation, and ‘will’ as an over translation. Cassanmagnago (1977) translates it as ‘choice’ and argues that it cannot be translated as ‘will’, because a ‘will’ implies some kind of non-rational appetitive force which is absent in Epictetus’ intellectualism. In contrast, Long prefers “volition”, although he previously translated it as “will”, (2002, p. 218-220). Long argues that volition is a better translation than ‘choice’, as choice is just one aspect of what the *prohairesis* can do and is thus too reductionist of a translation.

³² Of particular interest is the question of if Epictetus’ derived the term from Aristotle, despite never mentioning him in the existent discourses. Rist (1969, p. 226-232) argues that Epictetus’ use of *prohairesis* was not based upon Aristotle’s. Dragona-Monachou (1978-9) and Gourinat (2005) argue, contra Rist, that Epictetus’ use of the term developed from Aristotle. For a fuller discussion of comparisons between Aristotle and Stoic philosophy more generally than I am able to provide here, see Long, 1968 and Sandbach, 1985.

³³ EE 1227a3-5. cf. EE 1226b9, NE 1112a15. For a discussion of *prohairesis* in Aristotle, see Sorabji, 1973 and Sherman, 2004, p. 57-117.

prohairesis), lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way the intelligent man would determine".³⁴

And this notion of a deliberative or purposeful choice which is linked to desire, and in a certain state achieves virtue, is still present in Epictetus. However, it has been modified.³⁵ To get a better grasp of the concept as Epictetus understood it, let us examine what Epictetus has to say:³⁶

Consider now, you who are going into court, what you want to preserve and what you want to accomplish. If you want to preserve your choice (*prohairesis*) and keep it in accord with nature, you'll be entirely safe; all will go smoothly; you'll have no trouble. If you want to safeguard those things that lie within your own power and are free by nature, and remain satisfied with those, what is left for you to worry about? For who holds power over them; who can take them away from you... If you want to be subject to no hindrance and constraint, who can constrain you to desire things that you don't think that one should desire, or to avoid things that you don't think that one should avoid? Well then, the judge may take measures against you that are commonly regarded as being frightening, but unless you accept them as such by seeking to avoid them, how can he do that? Since desire and aversion are within your own power, then, what else do you need to worry about? (*Disc.* 2.2.1-6)

In the above passage, Epictetus describes the *prohairesis* as being completely in one's power and naturally free. Additionally, there is an association drawn between the *prohairesis* and desire and aversion. The judge cannot make you feel aversion, nor desire, since to master one's *prohairesis* is to also master our impulses. One's *prohairesis* then

³⁴ NE 2.1106b36. Translation taken from Long, 2002, p. 241. Cf. NE 6.1139a 22-25.

³⁵ See Dobbin, 1991; Sorabji, 2002, p. 328-333, 2006 p. 181-197, 2007, and Hatipoglu, 2014, for a discussion of how Epictetus' use of *prohairesis* differs from and resembles Aristotle's use. The most substantial difference, according to Sorabji (2007), is Epictetus' view that choice cannot be compelled by anything other than our *prohairesis* itself. Aristotle, in contrast, seems to be open to the possibility of compelled action (see EE 2.8 and NE 5.8).

³⁶ Cf. Long, 2002, 208-10, who identifies the importance of these passages for gaining a better understanding of *prohairesis*.

seems to involve assent, as we know impulse to be directly related to the process of assent. Epictetus confirms this in the following passage:

‘You have a power of choice (*prohairesin*), man, which is secure by nature from hindrance and compulsion. That is written here in the entrails. I’ll demonstrate that to you first of all in the sphere of assent. Can anyone prevent you from assenting to the truth? No one at all. Can anyone constrain you to accept what is false? No one at all. Do you see that, in this area, you have a power of choice that is immune from hindrance constraint and obstruction? Well then, are things any different in the sphere of desire and motivation? What can overpower a motive except another motive, and that alone? And what can overpower a desire or aversion except another desire or aversion?’

‘But what if someone threatens me with death,’ someone says, ‘for he is constraining me then.’

No, it isn’t what you’re threatened with that compels you, but your own judgement that it is better to do this or that than to die. So once again, it is your judgement that has constrained you, or in other words, your choice has constrained itself. For if God had so created that portion of his being that he has detached from himself and given to us that it would be subject to hindrance or compulsion, whether from himself or from another, he would no longer be God...
(*Disc.* 1.17.21-28)

Prohairesis is our God-given capacity to assent to impressions in a way which is unconstrained or determined by those outside of ourselves, and it is thus also our ability to determine our own impulses. When we believe we are compelled by an external force, such as the threat of death, we are actually being compelled by ourselves. The external force may threaten us, just as the judge may deliver a sentence which they deem to be fearful, but it is only our internally determined assent which may produce an impulse of aversion.

Although Epictetus says our choice cannot be externally constrained or determined, we should be careful not to misinterpret this to mean that Epictetus is abandoning the causal determinism of his Stoic predecessors and positing a freewill free from causal

determination. The Stoics, Epictetus included, were causal determinists.³⁷ While we lack Chrysippus' original writings on the topic, according to Gellius Chrysippus believed the world to be fated, and fate to be "a certain natural ever-lasting ordering of the whole: one set of things follows on and succeeds another, and the interconnexion is inviolable".³⁸ Additionally, Alexander reports that the Stoics believed there to be a necessary causal sequence between existing things, such that every cause is dependent upon a previous cause, and if an uncaused movement were to be introduced, the world would be wrenched apart.³⁹

While a full discussion of Stoic determinism is beyond the scope of this project, it is worth addressing here how this affected their perception of moral responsibility. We know from other sources that Epictetus' Stoic predecessors took a compatibilist position. The Stoics were compatibilists because, as Bobzien makes clear, when determining moral responsibility, the Stoics were not interested in our capacity to do otherwise, but rather the *principal cause* of our behavior.⁴⁰ We are morally responsible if something internal to us is what determines our behavior, and not responsible if our actions are externally determined. For the Stoics:

Moral responsibility for an action is based directly on a particular kind of causal dependency: An action happens because of me if I (*qua* rational being) am causally responsible for it. This causal dependency presupposes that whether I act depends on me in the sense that, when external stimuli suggest some action, whether or not I act depends on what beliefs I have, and not those stimuli. This is possible, because I have the capacity to give or withhold assent. (Bobzien, 1998, p. 290)

³⁷ See Long, 1971a; Bobzien, 1998 and Salles, 2005 for a thorough discussion of determinism in Stoicism. For primary sources on the topic, See Cicero. *Div.* 1.125-6 = LS 55L; Stobaeus. 1.79.1-12 = LS 55M.

³⁸ Gellius 7.2.3 = LS 55K

³⁹ Alexander, *On Fate.*, 191,30-192,28 = LS 55N.

⁴⁰ Bobzien, 1998, p. 276-290.

It is in this way that humans are understood to be responsible for their behavior. Given that they possess the power of assent, their impulse is not thought to be determined by the impression received, but by the assent given. And this assent is not externally determined, but rather it is a reflection of the person's own character and beliefs.⁴¹

It is clear from reading the *Discourses* that Epictetus is less interested in questions of moral responsibility than his predecessors and he discusses the topic rarely.⁴² However, the remaining passages where he does discuss fate give us little reason to assume his position is significantly different than the compatibilism of his predecessors.⁴³ Rather, Epictetus attributes moral responsibility only to that for which we have control of the

⁴¹ The famous justification for this position, attributed to Chrysippus by Cicero, is made through an analogy to a cylinder and a cone. The cylinder and cone cannot help but be pushed, but once pushed it is their own shape which determines that the cylinder rolls and the top spins. Thus the push is the *proximate* cause of the cylinder rolling, but the disposition of the cylinder to roll upon being pushed is the *principle* cause, and attributable to the cylinder itself (Cicero, *Fat.* 42.2-3/43.1). The argument is also mentioned by Gellius and attributed to Chrysippus by him as well (*Noctes Atticae* 7.2.11 = LS 62D). See Bobzien, 1998, p. 258-271 for an in-depth discussion of this topic. She rightly makes clear that the important point for Chrysippus in making this analogy is what the *principle* cause of our assent is. The principle cause of our assent is the disposition of our character, specifically the tension of our particular *pneuma*, because an impression does not necessitate an assent, and will not be followed by an assent unless our *pneuma* is in a certain state. Thus it is the tension of our *pneuma* which is the principle cause of our assent, just like the shape of the cylinder is the principle cause of its rolling, and our assent is not determined by anything external to us.

⁴² See Erler, 2007 and Braicovich, 2010 for a discussion of determinism in Epictetus. Both agree that Epictetus downplays concerns about determinism and how it might affect individual freedom. Braicovich argues that we see little discussion of moral responsibility in Epictetus because our contemporary concern with what actions of ours are to be praised or blamed has its origins in Judeo-Christian thinking. In contrast to this Epictetus is primarily concerned with causes. What epistemic mistake caused our faulty action or belief, and how can we fix it? It is this question which Epictetus focuses upon, more than the question of who is to blame for the mistake, because he takes the later question to be unhelpful to the project of cultivating virtue.

⁴³ As Long (2002, p. 162, Footnote 14) points out, besides Epictetus references to Cleanthes' verse 'Lead me Zeus, and you, Fate' (*Disc.* 2.23.42; 3.22.95; 4.1.131; 4.4.43), Epictetus discusses fate in only two other instances. One of which seems to be a reference to mythology (*Disc.* 1.12.25) and the other of which is a discussion of how we would act if we *knew* what was fated for us (*Disc.* 2.6.9-10). None of these constitute a critical discussion of fate or causation by Epictetus. Bobzien (1998, p. 332-337) argues that we have no good evidence from the remaining works of Epictetus to believe he differs from his predecessors on his view of fate and moral responsibility for our actions. Long agrees with Bobzien's reading (2002, 230). I think this is the position we must take. We should not assume his position differs unless presented evidence to the contrary, and his emphasis of the *prohairesis* as being unhindered certainly does not provide such evidence.

cause (*to aition*). Our actions are caused by our beliefs, and we are in control (*hemeis kurioi*) of our beliefs. Therefore, we are morally responsible for our actions.⁴⁴

By introducing the concept of a *prohairesis*, Epictetus is not positing a choice free from causal determinism into Stoicism. Instead, he is further emphasizing that nothing *external* to us can force any assent or impulse. This is a position which can be taken in line with the compatibilism of earlier Stoics, which held that we were morally responsible for an action if that action was not *externally* determined.

From this evidence, I take choice to be an adequate definition, although we must keep in mind that *prohairesis* contains aspects beyond the assent itself. It also includes impulse. Since impulse necessarily follows assent in Stoic psychology, to understand choice as the definition of *prohairesis* we must understand choice in a robust sense, with impulse as a component of it.

As Long persuasively argues, this use of the term *prohairesis* is an interesting deviation from the typical Stoic use of *hegemonikon* and the two terms should not be taken as synonyms.⁴⁵ Epictetus still uses the term *hegemonikon*, and he certainly thinks all humans have one, but he does not equate the *hegemonikon* with our essential selves in the same way he does with our *prohairesis*.⁴⁶ The reason for this shift, Long argues, is that *prohairesis* emphasizes the aspects of the *hegemonikon* which are exclusively up to us: the faculties of assent and impulse. The *hegemonikon* includes *phantasia* or sense

⁴⁴ See *Disc.* 1.11.27-37. The reconstruction of Epictetus' argument in that passage is from Salles, 2014.

⁴⁵ Long, 2002, p. 211.

⁴⁶ See *Disc.* 3.53; 3.64; 3.9.11 for examples of Epictetus discussing our *hegemonikon*.

impressions, and thus is capable of being determined and shaped by that which is exterior to us.⁴⁷

By situating the self as the *prohairesis*, Epictetus is emphasizing and justifying his position that the individual, properly understood as what they really are, is free from any external coercion or determination. As Epictetus says: “Nothing can overpower our choice, apart from choice itself”.⁴⁸ And if what we are, essentially, is not our bodies or even our *hegemonikon* but just our choice, then no one can overcome us, not even god. We are thus left with a conception of personal autonomy in Epictetus which is extremely robust, although very local, achieved by shrinking the typical Stoic understanding of what the person is.

2.3 Rationalism

The previous section concerned Epictetus’ identification of the self as choice, and how this allows Epictetus to claim us to be free from external determination. However, this does not mean that the process of assent is totally free. Perhaps surprisingly, we, as rational agents, are not able to assent in whatever manner we please. The following section shall discuss Epictetus’ view on how our assent and impulse is internally limited, and sometimes entirely determined, by our rational nature.

⁴⁷ The important difference between identifying our essential selves as the *prohairesis* instead of the *hegemonikon* is perhaps best visualized by using the example of a courtroom, which is my own example, not Epictetus’. The *hegemonikon* is like a courtroom. It contains the individual being judged (*impression*), as well as the judge who evaluates (*reflection*), makes a verdict (*assent*), and sees that verdict carried out (*impulse*). All of the psychological functions necessary for action are present within the courtroom. The *prohairesis* is then like the judge, who carries out the reflection, assent, and impulse. The important point is that the contents of the courtroom is not entirely up to the individual, since the individual cannot determine which impression is on trial, as these impressions are prompted, at least sometimes, by external stimuli. But by identifying the self with the judge, instead of the courtroom, Epictetus avoids this problem.

⁴⁸ *Disc.* 1.29.12.

Epictetus, like his Stoic predecessors, is committed to an intellectualist view of human psychology. By rationalism, I mean a psychological state with two key features:

- 1) Agents must act in accordance with that which they take to be good.
- 2) The mind has a natural affinity for truth.

There were some historical precursors to this position. For example, the Socrates of the *Protagoras* argues for the first feature.⁴⁹ But the full implications of the position are not developed into a coherent moral psychology until the Stoics. Epictetus in particular is adamant about the second condition and provides a detailed picture of what it means for a mind to have a naturally affinity for truth, and how this influences the kinds of assent we can make. But let us begin by examining Epictetus' commitment to the first feature: that an agent must act in accordance with that which they think to be the good. This first feature is also known as intellectualism.

To be committed to such a position might seem strange, and indeed seems opposed to other ancient thinkers. For example, the Plato of the *Republic* allows for the intellect to have a motivational power, but Plato does not give it an unalienable power over our other parts of the soul.⁵⁰ Likewise, according to some commentators, Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia* in Book 7 of the *NE* indicates that Aristotle considered desire to be a

⁴⁹ See 358d.

⁵⁰ *Republic*. 436b – 440a. In this famous passage Socrates uses two examples of potential conflicting simultaneous desires: the individual who is both thirsty and does not want to drink, and Leontius, who both wishes to observe dead corpses and is disgusted with himself for wanting to do so. Plato's moral psychology in the *Republic* thus allows for multiple conflicting simultaneous desires to act. Cf. Cooper (1999) and more recently Kamtekar (2017), who both argue that we should not think of the other parts of Plato's soul as being unintelligent just because they are not identified as reason. Both spirit and appetite are intelligent in that they respond to reasons. They differ from the part of the soul known as reason not because they lack intelligence, but because they motivate the agent towards different ends. I agree with Cooper and Kamtekar here, but such a reading of Plato still puts him in sharp contrast to the Stoics, who considered simultaneous conflicting motivational forces to be impossible.

motivational force opposed to reason which was capable of driving a wedge between an agent's self-directed imperatives and their practical action.⁵¹ At the very least, the position that an agent must act in accordance with what they rationally determine to be the best course of action was not taken for granted in ancient ethics.

To understand why the Stoics take such a position to be true, we must keep in mind their unique psychology. The faculties of the mind are minimal: impression, assent, impulse, and reason. There exists then no non-rational motivational force within the self which may disrupt or impede one's necessary impulse towards that which one assents to as good.⁵²

Epictetus certainly adopts this Stoic understanding of action. In his view, the agent receives an impression, and then they either assent, dissent, or withhold judgement concerning the impression. If an assent is made, then the form of the impression determines what kind of impulse is produced. If the impression deems something good, the agent receives an impulse of desire (*orexis*) moving them towards the object. If it deems something bad, he or she receives an impulse of aversion (*ekklisis*), moving them away from the object. And finally, if it deems something to be of indifferent value, they receive no impulse.⁵³

⁵¹ This is known as the non-intellectualist account of *akrasia* in Aristotle, and is discussed by Charles, 1984, p. 67 and 2007, and Dahl 1984. The non-intellectualist account holds that it is Aristotle's position that we can know the right thing to do and still fail to do it because the motivational power of desire overrides the motivational power of reason. This is opposed by the intellectualist account, which holds that Aristotle thinks that reason interferes with our capacity to make correct judgements, but if the judgement is successfully made it will motivate the individual (See Hutchinson 1995, p. 216–17; Destrée 2007; Gerson, 2007, p. 269–72). For a comparison of these two accounts of *akrasia* in Aristotle, and how they relate to the moral psychology of Epictetus see Tremblay, 2020.

⁵² See Inwood, 1985, p. 132-139.

⁵³ *Disc.* 3.3.2.

This account of impression and impulse is sufficient to explain all the complexities of human behavior and motivation. Epictetus is particularly adamant about this reductionist point:

The *Iliad* consists of nothing more than impressions and the use of impressions. An impression prompted Paris to carry off the wife of Menelaus, and an impression prompted Helen to go with him. If an impression, then, had prompted Menelaus to feel that it was a gain to be deprived of such a wife, what would have come about? Not only the *Iliad* would have been lost, but the *Odyssey* too! (*Disc.* 1.28.11-13)

We have no appetitive or non-rational aspect of the self which is capable of motivating behavior. Nor is such a thing necessary to explain human action. Even the intricacies of Homeric plot can be explained through the three faculties of impression, assent and impulse. This means that all human behavior is rational, in so far as it is responsive to our judgements. We may be mistaken in forming our judgements, as many people are, and foolishly judge that which is indifferent to be a good. But in such a case we are still exclusively acting in accordance with how we judge the world to be. In other words, if one can only act on the basis of impulse, and the cause of impulse is the assent to an impression of an object as being good or bad, then one cannot genuinely deem something as good *and* not be moved towards it:

If it is true, as the philosophers say, that it is for one and the same reason that all people give their assent, namely, because they feel that something is the case, or refuse their assent, namely because they feel that something is not the case, or, by Zeus, that they suspend judgement, because they feel that the matter is uncertain, and so also, regarding motivation towards something, because I feel that it conduces to my advantage, and that it is impossible to judge one thing to be advantageous and yet desire another – if all of this is in fact true, why is it that we're still angry with so many people? (*Disc.* 1.18.1-2) ⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Cf. 1.26.6; 2.20.1; 3.7.15.

We should not be angry at others who do wrong, because individuals act poorly only because of ignorance. They are drawn towards bad things because they mistake them for goods: “‘They are thieves’, someone says, ‘and robbers.’ What does that mean, thieves and robbers? That they’ve fallen into error with regard to what is good and bad.”⁵⁵

Such a theory of action is necessary for Epictetus to justify the Stoic position that wisdom is sufficient and necessary for virtue. If we know what is good and bad, we will necessarily act in perfect accordance with that knowledge, as there is no other motivational force which may distract, corrupt, or impede our actions, and the link between assent and impulse is necessary. This is how Epictetus can be comfortable in his position that the good is wisdom, and folly is evil.⁵⁶ However, wisdom may only be achieved through the diligent and proper use of our faculty of assent. As such, once again bringing the emphasis back to *prohairesis*, Epictetus tells us that “the essence of the good is a certain disposition of our choice, and that of bad likewise”.⁵⁷ An understanding of how the process of assent works is required to understand not just Epictetus’ theory of action, but also his entire ethical project.

Let us turn then to the second claim of Epictetus’ rationalism: that the mind has a natural affinity for the truth. We can recognize this feature in the nature of what Long calls Socrates’ *elenctic* method of discourse.⁵⁸ This is the method by which Socrates

⁵⁵ *Disc.* 1.18.3

⁵⁶ *Disc.* 1.20.6

⁵⁷ *Disc.* 1.29.1.

⁵⁸ 2002, p. 60-64; p. 68-86. There is a large amount of literature on Socrates’ influence on Stoic teachings and their educational style. Schweingruber (1943) was the first to catalogue Epictetus’ allusions to Socrates. Döring (1979), Slings (1983), and Gourinat (2001) examine Socrates’ influence on Epictetus in particular. The connection between Socrates and Stoicism is explored in detail in Long (1988), Repici (1993) and Alesse (2000). For an explanation of Socratic elenchus unrelated to Epictetus, see Vlastos, 1982 and 1983. Vlastos, 1982, p. 712 reconstructs the method as follows:

compels his interlocutors to give up their previous definitions of justice, piety, virtue or some other term by demonstrating the presence of a contradiction. In order to have faith in the effectiveness of such a method, Socrates must believe that individuals wish to pursue what is true and good, and thus will revise their beliefs and desires if a contradiction is made apparent to them. The justification for this method is made most explicit by Socrates in the *Gorgias*, where Socrates tells us that all things are done for the pursuit what the agent takes to be good, and that when an individual errs, he is not doing what he wishes.⁵⁹

In the *Discourses*, Epictetus also uses this method of discourse to help teach his students, for Epictetus also believes that individuals only err because of ignorance as to the nature of the good. Epictetus even explicitly references Socrates as the inspiration for this aspect of his instruction:

Every error involves a contradiction; for since someone who commits an error doesn't want to do that, but to act rightly, it is clear that he isn't doing what he wants. For what does a thief want to achieve? Something that is to his benefit. If theft, then, is contrary to his benefit, he isn't doing what he wants. Now every rational mind is by nature averse to contradiction; but as long as someone fails to realize that he is involved in a contradiction, there is nothing to prevent him from carrying out contradictory actions; when he becomes aware of it, however, he must necessarily turn aside from the contradiction and avoid it, just as harsh necessity forces one to renounce what is false as soon as one realizes that it is false, although one assents to it as long as its falsity remains unapparent.

Someone who is skilled in reasoning and is able both to encourage and to refute (*elenktikos*), will thus be able to show each person the contradiction that is causing him to go astray, and make him clearly understand that he isn't doing

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1. The interlocutor, "saying what he believes," asserts *p*, which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
 2. Socrates obtains agreement to further premises, say *q* or *r*, which are logically independent of *p*. The agreement is *ad hoc*: Socrates does not argue for *q* or *r*.
 3. Socrates argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that *q* and *r* entail *not-p*.
 4. Thereupon Socrates claims that *p* has been proved false, *not-p* true.

⁵⁹ Cf. Long, 2001 and 2002, p. 70-74, for a discussion of the influence Socrates had on Epictetus' style of teaching.

what he wants, and is in fact doing what he doesn't want. For if anyone can make that clear to him, he'll renounce his error of his own accord, but if you fail to show him, don't be surprised if he persists in it, being under the impression that he is acting rightly. That is why Socrates, placing full confidence in this capacity, used to say, 'I'm not in the habit of calling another witness to speak in support of what I'm saying, but I always remain satisfied with the person who is engaging in discussion with me, and call on his vote and summon him as a witness, so that he alone suffices for me in place of all others.' For Socrates knew how a rational mind is moved: that being like a balance, it will incline whether one wishes it or not. Make the ruling centre aware of a contradiction, and it will renounce it; but if you fail to make it clear, blame yourself rather than the person whom you're unable to convince. (*Disc.* 2.26)

Epictetus' commitment to this aspect of rationalism is likely the most extreme version of this position in ancient philosophy after Socrates. While it has already been shown that the faculty of assent may not be externally impeded or restricted, as it turns out its freedom is severely *internally* restricted by this aspect of our nature.⁶⁰ Humans have an overpowering natural affinity for the truth, which is accompanied by a compulsion to assent to what seems true, and dissent from what seems false:

For what reason (*aition*) do we give our assent to something? Because it appears to us to be the case. If something appears not to be the case, it is impossible for us to give our assent. And why so? Because that is the nature of our mind, that it should agree to things that are true, not accept things that are false, and suspend its judgement with regard to things that are uncertain. What is the proof of that? 'Form the impression, if you can, that it is night at present.' That is impossible. 'Put aside the impression that it is day.' That is impossible. So whenever anyone assents to what is false, one may be sure that he does not willingly give his assent to falsehood... (*Disc.* 1.28.1-4)

Now since it lies in the nature of every mind to give its assent to what is true, and to dissent from what is false, and to suspend judgement with regard to what is uncertain, it lies in its nature likewise to be moved by desire towards what is good, and aversion from what is bad, and to remain indifferent towards that is neither good nor bad... Never will the mind refuse a clear impression of the good. (*Disc.* 3.3.2-6)

⁶⁰ For further discussion of this topic see Long, 2002, p. 98-100.

For just as it is impossible to give your assent to what appears to be false, it is impossible (*adunaton*) likewise to abstain from something that seems good. (*Disc.* 3.7.15)

More references to the persuasive power of the truth appear within the Discourses.⁶¹ Worth noting is the strength of Epictetus' language. Our natural inclination towards truth is not one factor among many, rather it is the cause (*aitios*) of our assent. To assent to an apparent falsehood is thus impossible (*adunatos*). Most importantly perhaps, we cannot suspend judgement in the presence of that which seems true to us, and take a skeptical position.⁶² We are obliged by our rational nature to assent to an impression which seems true to us, just as a money-changer must accept a piece of legitimate currency. Nor is there an incredibly high epistemic threshold for an impression qualifying as an apparent truth, above and beyond simply using our senses. Unless presented with additional evidence, we must acknowledge that it is night, and not day, presumably just in virtue of our observing the stars as present and the sun as absent.

The persuasive power of the truth was an established part of Stoic doctrine before Epictetus. *Kataleptic* impressions, which were impressions the agent could confidently consider to be true, were thought to have a persuasive power over the faculty of assent.⁶³ Sextus Empiricus claims that such an impression, without impediment, "all but seizes us

⁶¹ See 2.20.1.

⁶² Cf. *Disc.* 2.20

⁶³ See Frede, 1999 and Hankinson, 2003 for a discussion of kataleptic impressions in Stoicism and an overview of Stoic epistemology more generally.

by the hair and drags us to assent.”⁶⁴ In the *Academica*, Cicero also has a Stoic spokesman tell us that we must assent to that which is self-evident.⁶⁵

While this position is not an innovation of Epictetus, what is interesting for our purposes is Epictetus’ insistence that there are certain things the faculty of assent cannot do. It is very important to him that his students understand that there are still restrictions on what they may assent to. Because the mind has a natural affinity for truth, one cannot:

- A) Dissent or suspend judgement when presented with an apparent truth.
- B) Assent to an apparent falsehood.
- C) Make an assent when we are aware that we have no evidence of truth.

Following from this, given the necessary connection between impulse and assent to impressions concerning value, one must necessarily:

- D) Receive an impulse of desire towards what they take to be good.
- E) Receive an impulse of aversion towards what they take to be bad.
- F) Receive no impulse towards what they take to be without value.

Epictetus’ rationalism allows us to understand the limitations of human action. *Prohairesis* and rationalism complement each other. To understand the first is to comprehend that one’s self, understood as one’s choice, is totally free from external

⁶⁴ *M.* 7.257 = LS 40K. However it is worth noting that Epictetus does not use the language of *katalepsis* in the above passages, referring to the impressions of the good as clear (*enarges*) (*Disc.* 3.3.4) and apparent (*phainomenou*) (*Disc.* 3.7.15).

⁶⁵ “For just as a scale must sink when weights are placed in the balance, so the mind must give way to what is self-evident. It is no more possible for a living creature to refrain from assenting to something self-evident than for it to fail to pursue what appears appropriate to its nature” (Cicero, *Academica* 2.37-8/ LS 40 O).

determination or impediment. But to understand rationalism is to know the ways in which one's choice is internally determined by our rational nature.

There remains one further point in Epictetus' psychology worth exploring. Namely, the incredibly strong claim that assenting to something as good or evil necessitates an impulse. Why must the soul experience desire and be drawn towards the good? Why can one not simply identify something as good, perhaps in an abstract or impersonal sense, and not be moved towards it? It seems plausible for someone to be able to say "that would be a good thing to do, but I will not do it", or likewise "this is a bad thing to do, but I will do it anyway". To understand why these kinds of judgements are impossible for Epictetus' we must understand what he means by good and evil, and this requires an explanation of his theory of preconceptions.

2.4 Preconceptions

Preconceptions (*prolepseis*) play a fundamental role in orthodox Stoic epistemology, and it originated as a technical Stoic term long before Epictetus, in the work of Chrysippus.⁶⁶ A preconception is a naturally formed conception of the general characteristics of an object.⁶⁷ As naturally formed conceptions of things, they are not innately possessed at birth. We begin our lives as blank slates, but our minds have a disposition to form certain ideas through repeated experience, and thus we form preconceptions of these things without the need for instruction. Diogenes Laertius

⁶⁶ See Dyson, 2009, p. 1-22. for an in-depth discussion of Chrysippus' use of the term.

⁶⁷ Sandbach, 1971, p. 25.

provides our understanding of an object as being just and good as an example of preconceptions acquired naturally.⁶⁸

A conception that must be taught because it does not fall into a category we are naturally disposed to form is known simply as a conception (*ennoia*).⁶⁹ Conceptions are also acquired through the accumulation of impressions, but do not correspond to specific categories the mind is inclined to receive.⁷⁰ Cicero provides the example of ‘horse’ and ‘dog’. If we encounter enough examples of horses, we can compare these impressions and form a conception of what a horse is. This then allows us to easily identify new impressions as impressions of horses, and to discuss horses with others.⁷¹ But the mind must nonetheless be instructed as to what a horse is in a way that is not necessary when we form preconceptions. In this way, conceptions are peripheral to human experience when compared to preconceptions. The Stoics would surely think one could successfully navigate the world without the conception of a horse, but to be deprived of the preconception of ‘good’ would be to lack something fundamental to how humans understand the world.

Preconceptions are thus crucial for Stoic epistemology. They allow the individual to recognize and conceptualize incoming impressions. In fact, we are told that the development of reason over our childhood is due to the accumulation of preconceptions.⁷²

⁶⁸ D.L., 7.53.

⁶⁹ Aetius 4.11.1-3.

⁷⁰ See Hankinson, 2003, p. 62, also Plutarch, *On common conceptions* 1084F-1085A.

⁷¹ Cicero, *Academica* 2.21.

⁷² Aetius 4.11.4.

While there is debate about how closely Epictetus' view of preconceptions aligns with the use of the term by the Old Stoa, for the purpose of this thesis it is sufficient to understand how Epictetus' uses the term.⁷³ Epictetus views preconceptions as shared, and common to all people.⁷⁴ They are also a form of tacit knowledge. As being tacit, they do not require explicit instruction, and as knowledge they faithfully represent qualities of the universal type they represent.⁷⁵

Epictetus' use of preconceptions is unique among earlier Stoics in the emphasis he places on their importance for our moral development.⁷⁶ Epictetus considered identifying and guiding our preconceptions to be one of most important parts of a moral education, going so far as to say that a proper education is just learning how to properly apply preconceptions to particular cases.⁷⁷ This is a substantial shift from other Stoics, to whom preconceptions helped explain a human's development of reason and shared intuitions. Preconceptions explained how the minds of humans develop in similar patterns, despite being born as blank slates. They had very little importance in the ethics of the developed mind. Additionally, this is not indicative of a shift in later Stoicism

⁷³ Sandbach (1971) argues that there was a major shift in how preconceptions were thought of between Chrysippus, and later thinkers such as Cicero and Epictetus. Sandbach argues that preconceptions as discussed in Epictetus do not accurately reflect Chrysippus' position. This is because Epictetus' description of preconceptions portrays them as a type of *tacit* knowledge, which would conflict with an empiricist reading of Stoicism. Dyson (2009) argues against Sandbach, that Epictetus' view of preconceptions reflects the orthodox Stoic position. While he agrees that Epictetus views preconceptions as a form of tacit knowledge, he claims that this was also the position of Chrysippus. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to answer this question as it relates to Chrysippus' for our purposes it is sufficient that neither disagrees that Epictetus views preconceptions as tacit knowledge.

⁷⁴ "Preconceptions are common to all people, and one preconception doesn't contradict another. For who among us doesn't assume that the good is beneficial and desirable, and that we should seek and pursue it in every circumstance?" (*Disc.* 1.22.1).

⁷⁵ Cf. Dyson, 2009, p. 73-4.

⁷⁶ As Long says, "The criterial role and natural origin of preconceptions goes back to early Stoicism, but Epictetus was probably alone in making them equivalent to an innate moral sense" (2002, p. 83). See Long, 2002, p. 80-85 for a further discussion of Epictetus on preconceptions.

⁷⁷ *Disc.* 1.22.9; Cf. 1.2.6

towards a greater focus on preconceptions. We do not find this kind of position in Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, or even the remaining works of Musonius Rufus. It is an innovation particular to Epictetus.

It is worth asking then if Epictetus even means the same thing as his predecessors when he refers to *prolepsis*. First, Epictetus tells us that preconceptions are common to all men and do not conflict *qua* preconceptions: “Preconceptions are common to all people, and one preconception doesn’t contradict another. For who among us doesn’t assume that the good is beneficial and desirable, and that we should seek and pursue it in every circumstance?”.⁷⁸

While we all consider the good to be worth pursuing, this is not to say that we all agree about how to live our lives. Disagreement among people arises when we attempt to categorize particular cases as good:

When does the contradiction arise then? It comes about when we apply our preconceptions to particular cases, as when one person says, ‘He acted well, he’s a brave man,’ while another says, ‘No, he’s out of his mind.’ That is how people come to fall into disagreement. Hence the Jews, Syrians, Egyptians, and Romans hold conflicting views, not about whether holiness should be valued above all else and pursued in all circumstances, but whether the specific action of eating pork is holy or unholy. (*Disc.* 1.22.1-4)

Epictetus views preconceptions as universally shared naturally formed conceptions, through which we interpret and define particular cases in our lives. Because preconceptions are universal, and not cultural, any disagreement between individuals or cultures cannot be on the basis of a disagreement about the preconceptions themselves.

⁷⁸ *Disc.* 1.22.1.

They disagree rather about how to properly categorize a particular object or type of action.

So far Epictetus' perspective is in accordance with what we would expect from a Stoic. His theory that disagreement concerning preconceptions must be at the level of particular cases is innovative, but a natural consequence considering the practical implications of being committed to universally shared naturally formed conceptions. Epictetus' shift towards the ethicizing of preconceptions, then, is not based on some vastly different picture of what a preconception is.

Epictetus' shift in thinking becomes apparent, though, when we examine what preconceptions Epictetus takes human beings to possess. He refers exclusively to preconceptions in terms of value-laden concepts: rational and irrational, good and bad, advantageous and disadvantageous,⁷⁹ justice,⁸⁰ holiness,⁸¹ fortunate and unfortunate, ought and ought not,⁸² fair and base.⁸³

For Epictetus, preconceptions, or at least the ones worth talking about, are where we find basic conceptions of value. Epictetus does not mention preconceptions involving logic, mathematics, or any other aspect of the world that is without motivational force. Rather he focuses on preconceptions concerning what is to be pursued and avoided, and it is in preconceptions that we find the basis of human motivation. It is our categorization of cases into preconceptions that determines our impulse. This is because a judgement that

⁷⁹ *Disc.* 1.2.5.

⁸⁰ *Disc.* 1.22.1.

⁸¹ *Disc.* 1.22.5.

⁸² *Disc.* 2.11.5.

⁸³ *Disc.* 2.17.2.

an object is worth pursuing or avoiding involves categorizing that object into a preconception concerning value.

Humans do not just share a concept of the ‘good’. They also share the conception of the good as advantageous, and worthy of being chosen, sought, and pursued in all circumstances.⁸⁴ This motivational aspect of the ‘good’ is a universally acquired and necessary part of the human mind. We *must* then take what we recognize as good to be also worth pursuing. This motivational aspect is a part of all value-laden preconceptions, and an essential aspect of categorizing any particular case into one of these conceptions.

We are now in a position to properly understand Epictetus’ claim that it is impossible to abstain from an apparent good.⁸⁵ This is because ‘good’ is not an inert concept I can apply at will without implication, as I may categorize something as blue or red. To recognize something as good is to simultaneously recognize it as choice-worthy in all circumstances. And, given Stoic psychology, recognition of choice-worthiness is sufficient to produce an impulse towards the object.

Given the necessary connection between good and choice-worthiness, to say an object is considered good by the agent but not motivating would be the equivalent of saying something is a circle but has four corners. Such a statement involves a contradiction.

To conclude, Epictetus’ rationalism is made possible by his view of preconceptions. Preconceptions form a necessary link between assent and impulse, because they connect individual cases with shared motivational categories. As we

⁸⁴ *Disc.* 1.22.1.

⁸⁵ *Disc.* 3.7.15.

navigate the world, we categorize objects into these universally shared conceptions of good and bad, and this produces our impulses of desire or aversion. The agent must experience desire for that which they take to be a good, and aversion for that which they take to be an evil, because choice-worthiness is necessarily built directly into those concepts.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a foundational understanding of Epictetus' psychology, which will be necessary to properly understand his program of moral education in the coming chapters. Special emphasis was placed on three aspects of Epictetus where he deviates from other Stoics:

- 1) His use of *prohairesis* instead of *hegemonikon* when referring to the self.
- 2) His emphasis on the persuasive and motivational power of what seems true to us.
- 3) His focus on preconceptions (*prolepseis*) concerning value.

Epictetus places a heavy emphasis on the impossibility of the self being externally determined. In order to preserve this claim, he limits the self to just our *prohairesis*, or the faculties of assent and impulse, rather than the more inclusive *hegemonikon*, which is typically thought of as the self by the early Stoics but includes externally determined impressions.

In contrast to this, Epictetus is especially adamant about the existence of certain internal limitations on our *prohairesis* due to the rational natures of human beings. These limitations take two main forms: we must assent in accordance with how things seem true or false to us, and we must receive impulses in accordance with things seeming good or

bad. The first claim is justified by our rational nature's love of truth. The second claim is justified through appeal to preconceptions.

Preconceptions for Epictetus are universally possessed and naturally acquired concepts concerning value categories which serve as the foundations for the motivation of the agent. When we conceive of something as good, or associate it with an equivalent positive preconception, we will necessarily receive an impulse of desire for that object because: A) choice-worthiness in all contexts is necessarily a part of the preconception of 'good' for all people, and B) to recognize something as choice-worthy in all contexts is sufficient to receive an impulse of desire. Likewise, the same can be said for 'bad', and its corresponding impulse of aversion.

These three aspects of Epictetus' psychology provide a foundation from which we may transition to understanding his unique program of moral education, which is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Epictetus' Program of Moral Education

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an outline of Epictetus' program of moral education, focusing on his three *topoi*, or areas of study. The aim is to explain what Epictetus thinks his student must do in order to achieve virtue. As such, we must begin with a brief overview of how Epictetus conceives of virtue in the individual.

As mentioned in Chapter 2 section 1 of this thesis, Epictetus tells us that the essence of our own good and evil is a certain disposition of our choice.¹ Externals contain no value, but are rather the materials which allow us to practice choice and actualize its value.² But this still leaves the question as to how good and evil dispositions function. Epictetus elaborates: "If its [the *prohairesis*] judgements about the materials are correct, that makes the choice good, whereas if they are twisted and perverse, that makes it bad."³ A good choice is one that makes true judgements. A bad choice is one that makes distorted and perverse judgements. This helps us understand his position that wisdom is good, and folly is evil.⁴ Our good is a proper disposition of our choice, understood as a disposition that makes correct judgements. It is for this reason that Epictetus often tells us that moral progress is achieved by learning to 'make correct use of impressions'.⁵

¹ *Disc.* 1.29.1. Cf. 1.30.4.

² *Disc.* 1.29.1-2.

³ *Disc.* 1.29.3.

⁴ *Disc.* 1.20.6.

⁵ *Disc.* 1.1.7; 1.3.4; 1.6.13; 1.7.33; 1.12.34; 1.20.15. Cf. Long, 2002, p. 214-220.

It is our *prohairesis* which makes use of impressions and judges them correctly or incorrectly. As such, moral progress is to be found in modifying and perfecting our *prohairesis*. We are told that philosophical progress brings one's choice into the ideal state of being brought "into harmony with nature, raising it up and rendering it free, unhindered, unobstructed, trustworthy, and self-respecting...".⁶ This state is incompatible with distorted and perverse judgements, specifically those in which we value something outside our power, because "whoever longs for things that are not within his power, or seeks to avoid them, can neither be trustworthy nor free, but must necessarily be subject to change, and be tossed in all directions...".⁷ Thus our choice may only be free, unrestrained, and good when it is fully in harmony with nature, or when it only makes correct judgements.

As not just a philosopher, but an educator, Epictetus provides a strategy for helping his students achieve this good disposition of choice. He describes three *topoi* or areas of study and training, which must be mastered in sequential order if we wish to become good.⁸ Much has been written on this topic, but for the purpose of my argument it is worthwhile and necessary to explain them in depth as well.⁹ While Epictetus refers to these areas throughout the discourses, we get the best account of what they entail in the following passage:

⁶ *Disc.* 1.4.18.

⁷ *Disc.* 1.4.19. When Epictetus refers to freedom he certainly is not referring to the risk of external determination. One's *prohairesis* cannot be controlled by anything but itself. But when it attaches itself to those things which are not in our power because of a false judgement concerning their power, it compels itself.

⁸ For Epictetus' discussion of these area of studies see *Disc.* 1.4.11-12; 2.17.15-17 and 31-33; 3.2; 3.12.13-14; 3.26.14; 4.10.13; *Ench.* 52; Fragment 27.

⁹ For discussion of Epictetus' *topoi* in secondary literature see Hadot 1978, Long 2002, p. 112-118, Roskam 2005, Ch.6 and Cooper 2007, p. 15-19.

There are three areas of study in which someone who wants to be virtuous and good must be trained: that which relates to desires (*orexeis*) and aversions (*ekkliseis*), so that he may neither fail to get what he desires, nor fall into what he wants to avoid; that which relates to our motives to act (*hormas*) and not to act (*aphormas*), and, in general, appropriate behavior (*kathekon*); so that he may act in an orderly manner and with good reason, rather than carelessly; and thirdly, that which relates to the avoidance of error and hasty judgement, and in general, whatever relates to assent. (*Disc.* 3.2.1-2)

These areas can be briefly summarized as follows:

- 1) Training in regard to desires, aversions, and what is good and bad.
- 2) Training in regard to motives to act and what is appropriate and inappropriate.
- 3) Training in regard to assent.

These areas of study are meant to be mastered sequentially. Epictetus tells us that the ideal student will focus on each of these in order, turning to the next once the previous one has been appropriately mastered.¹⁰ Indeed it is not just inefficient but also harmful to your progress to focus on an area before the appropriate time. Epictetus uses the example of those who turn to syllogisms and logic, a feature of the third *topos*, before they have made sufficient progress in the previous two. Such students find their understanding of philosophy perverted, as they become obsessed with syllogisms and logical puzzles without the tools to render logic ethically useful.¹¹

This three-fold division of philosophy was prominent among late Stoics. Attributed by Pohlenz to have its origins in the middle Stoic Panaetius,¹² it is found in Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. In Cicero's *On Duties*, inspired by a work of the same name by Panaetius, he tells us that "virtue in general may be said to consist almost

¹⁰ *Disc.* 2.17.31-33.

¹¹ See *Disc.* 3.2.6; 3.26.14-24.

¹² 1948, p. 328.

wholly in three properties: the first is the ability to perceive what in any given instance is true and real, what its relations are, its consequences, and its causes; the second is the ability to restrain the passions (which the Greeks call *pathē*) and make the impulses (*hormai*) obedient to reason; and the third is the skill to treat with consideration and wisdom those with whom we are associated...¹³

Seneca provides three-fold picture of ethical development as well. In his *Letters*, Seneca tells us that "...the objectives of ethics are first, to enable you to judge what each thing is worth; second, to enable you to entertain a well-adjusted and controlled impulse with respect to them; and third, to enable you to achieve harmony between your impulse and your action so that you may be consistent in all your behavior."¹⁴ Seneca also views these objectives as interrelated. He goes on to tell us that a defect in any area impedes progress in the others.¹⁵

Finally, we also find this division present in Marcus Aurelius, who quotes it directly in a fragment from Epictetus:

What must be found is a method with regard to *assent* (*to sunkatatithesthai*). In the area (*topōi*) of the *inclinations* (*hormai*), we must keep vigilant our attentive faculty, so that these inclinations may operate with reserve, in the service of the community, and in a way corresponding to the value of their objects. Finally, when it comes to things that do not depend on us, we must abstain totally from desire (*orekseōs*) and feel no aversion towards any of them. (*Meditations* 11.37. Trans. Chase in Hadot, 2002)

As Hadot makes clear, this division pervades the thinking of Marcus, and we can find versions of it throughout the *Meditations*.¹⁶ However, it should be noted that Marcus'

¹³ Cicero, *On Duties.*, 2.18.

¹⁴ 89.14

¹⁵ *Letters*, 89.15.

¹⁶ Hadot, 1978, p. 65-67. Cf. *Meditations* 4.33; 7.54; 8.7; 9.7.

division is not identical to Epictetus. When Marcus discusses the *topoi* in his own terms, he shifts the emphasis of the first *topos* away from desiring what is morally good, and towards making our will accord with fate: “Everywhere, at each moment, you have the option: to accept this event with humility, to treat this person as he should be treated, to approach this thought with care, so that nothing irrational creeps in.”¹⁷ This is different from Seneca and Epictetus, who make correctly evaluating what is good and bad as the realm of the first *topos*.¹⁸

There are two main points of interest to be drawn from these comparisons. First is that dividing moral education into three *topoi* was an important part of the way Stoics understood ethical progress at least since Panaetius. It is not, then, a trivial division for Epictetus that could have just as easily been two or four or five *topoi*. Second is that the *topoi*, while similar, are not identical between authors. There is a variation to account for each author’s understanding of what is important and should be emphasized. This means that Epictetus’ divisions are not canonical, but rather individualized to suit his unique approach to moral education and Stoic philosophy.¹⁹ As such they can provide insight into the particularities of Epictetus’ Stoicism and style of moral education. With this in mind, the following chapter shall examine each *topos* in detail.

¹⁷ *Meditations* 7.54. Trans. Hays.

¹⁸ Hadot, 1978, p. 66-67 argues that this change in the first *topos* is unique to Marcus, and due to his emphasis on the *topos* of desire as a kind of applied physics, in which we can only properly understand the value of something once we consider the point of view of universal nature and fate.

¹⁹ Cf. Pohlenz (1948, p. 328) argues that Epictetus adapted Panaetius division to suit his ethically focused style of Stoicism.

3.2 Topic 1: Desire and Aversion

The first *topos* of Epictetus concerns desire (*orexis*) and aversion (*ekklisis*). Epictetus uses these terms in a unique manner when compared to other Stoics. For the early Stoics, desire and aversion are motivating forces, but they are subcategories of *hormē*, as they are a specific type of *hormē*. But in Epictetus, *orexis* and *ekklisis* are granted the same status as *hormē*, as separate, distinct, forms of impulse.²⁰ In other words, for Epictetus a human action may be motivated by *orexis* or *hormē*, but one form of impulse does not, and cannot, entail the other. We see this division made explicit when Epictetus tells his students to suppress desire and be motivated just by a motive to act (*hormē*) and not to act (*aphormē*).²¹ If *orexis* was a form of *hormē*, it would make no sense for Epictetus to tell his students to use only *hormē*, as if that would not also entail *orexis*.

The purpose of this conceptual distinction is two-fold. First, there is a difference between the objects of *hormē* and *orexis*. Second, there is a difference in the intensity of these two motivational forces. Beginning with the first, Epictetus tells us that the objects of desire and aversion are good and bad respectively.²² As we have seen, this means that desire is only produced when we take some object to be a good. In contrast, *hormē* and *aphormē* take as their object the appropriate (*to kathekon*).²³ This means that how one

²⁰ See Inwood, 1985, p. 115-120 for an in-depth discussion of this topic.

²¹ *Ench.* 2. I am following here Hard's translation of *hormē* as 'motive to act', despite the more obvious and traditional translation used in the Stoic tradition being 'impulse'. This was possibly done by Hard to make it clear that *hormē* means something different in Epictetus than it did for other Stoics. Following Hard, for the purposes of this thesis, I will use 'impulse' to describe all the motivational forces in the soul, including desire and aversion, and 'motive to act' to refer to *hormē* in an Epictetian context.

²² *Disc.* 1.4.1.

²³ *Disc.* 3.2.2.

views an object, namely as good or merely appropriate, will determine the type of impulse he or she receives. This is how Epictetus can coherently tell his students to suspend *orexis* and use only *hormē*. He is telling his students to only view objects as appropriate or inappropriate and suspend judgements of good and bad.

Orexis and *hormē* do not just also have different objects, but different psychological results. Desires and aversions are directly related to the passions. Passions, Epictetus tells us, “arise in no other way than through being frustrated in our desires and falling into what we want to avoid”.²⁴ Our passions directly depend upon the state of our desires and aversions. *Hormē* is still an impulse, but we do not experience a passion when we fail to receive its object. Thus, *hormē* is a gentler form of impulse compared to *orexis*, and as we shall see, while it should still be applied appropriately, it need not be applied with the same caution.

Epictetus tells us that because of the relationship between *orexis*, *ekklisis*, and passions, the first of the *topoi* is the principal one and the most urgent.²⁵ We can only eliminate passions through mastery of desire and aversion, and eliminating the passions is of utmost importance to the progress of our moral education, given that passions render us incapable of being properly responsive to reason.²⁶ In order to master desire and aversion, and eliminate the passions, you must train yourself such that you “neither fail to attain what you desire, nor fall into what you want to avoid...”.²⁷ If either of these conditions is not met, a passion will be produced. The first *topos* concerns then how to

²⁴ *Disc.* 3.2.3.

²⁵ *Disc.* 3.2.3.

²⁶ *Disc.* 3.2.3.

²⁷ *Disc.* 1.4.11. See also 2.17.15-18 and 31; 3.2.1.

ensure the agent achieves this state of never failing to attain what they desire, nor fall into what they would want to avoid.

The first step towards this is to immediately suspend our desire and severely limit our aversion. Achieving wisdom is long process, but the disruptive effects of the passions must be mitigated as quickly as possible. Therefore, the beginning student must suppress their desire and must transition to being motivated by the comparatively gentle *hormē* and *aphormē*:

...For the present, however, suppress your desires entirely; for if you desire any of the things that are not within our power, you're bound to be unfortunate, while those that are within our power, which it would be right for you to desire, aren't within your reach. But use only your motives to act (*horman*) or not to act, (*aphorman*), and even these lightly, with reservations and without straining. (*Ench.* 2)²⁸

The beginner does not however totally eliminate aversion, but they do limit it to its proper object: “[The one making progress] has rid himself of every desire, and has transferred his aversion to those things alone that are contrary to nature among the things that are within our power.”²⁹ And again, we see this idea present in a remaining fragment of Epictetus: “we should abstain wholly from desire, and exercise aversion towards nothing that is not within our power.”³⁰

Ridding ourselves of desire can be achieved quickly, without having to internalize and learn complex Stoic doctrine, by adopting an immediate agnosticism as to good and bad. Epictetus tells us that the proper beginning to philosophy is an acknowledgement that humans are flawed, and overall very poor at correctly identifying which objects

²⁸ Cf. *Disc.* 1.26.15.

²⁹ *Ench.* 48.

³⁰ *Frag.* 27.

should be categorized as good and bad. This is made evident by the fact that so many people disagree about what is right and wrong, and is the result of the non-philosopher having no proper standard by which to judge what is good.³¹ This recognition is important, because we cannot begin to learn until we acknowledge our own ignorance concerning the good and bad.³² Because desire and aversion are directly related to our categorization of particulars as good and bad, a suspension of these kinds of judgements will suspend desire and aversion. This then puts the student in a position where they are comparatively free from passions and are able to begin to learn.

While this agnosticism about value is necessary at the beginning, there is still much work to be done to master desire and aversion. Epictetus outlines the beginnings of the process as follows:

Look now, this is the starting point of philosophy: the recognition that different people have conflicting opinions, the rejection of mere opinion so that it comes to be viewed with mistrust, an investigation of opinion to determine whether it is rightly held, and the discovery of a standard of judgement, comparable to the balance that we have devised for the determining of weights, or the carpenter's rule for determining whether things are straight or crooked. (*Disc.* 2.11.13)

The above passage should be understood as follows: the new student of Stoicism realizes people disagree about what is good and bad, and that they disagree because they make their judgements based solely on what seems right to them, rather than by using a legitimate methodology.³³ This realization produces caution in the student, who withdraws their commitments to categorizing objects as good and bad and develops a mistrust of opinion. This is the agnosticism described above. It forms the first half of the

³¹ *Disc.* 2.11.1-15.

³² Cf. "What is the first task for someone who is practicing philosophy? To rid himself of presumption: for it is impossible for anyone to set out to learn what he thinks he already knows." (*Disc.* 2.17.1).

³³ Compare *Disc.* 2.11.10.

topos. But the student is not satisfied with mere skepticism as they wish to know the truth of the matter, not just abstain from false belief, so they begin to examine which opinions are correct. This may only be done through the discovery of a standard of judgement, by which the student may determine if a particular object is in fact good or bad.

This is the beginning of the first *topos* and thus the beginning of philosophy for Epictetus. The beginner does not apply their preconceptions of good, bad, and other value judgements to particular objects until they have a proper standard by which to determine if particular objects are good and bad. However, while ridding themselves of desire and aversion is an appropriate beginning, as it limits the negative effects of the passions that come from having these impulses frustrated, it does not count as mastery of the desires. To master desire and aversion, we must neither fail to get what we desire nor fall into what we would avoid.³⁴ Mastering desire and aversion is not giving up these impulses. Instead, mastery is making sure they are never frustrated and always achieve their ends. As such, there is still a room for desire and aversion within the soul of the student, but they must be used appropriately.

If a standard of judgement was not available, the student would presumably have to remain an agnostic concerning value judgements. However, as a Stoic, such a standard is readily accessible to Epictetus:

What does it mean, then, to become properly educated? It is to learn to apply our natural preconceptions to particular cases in accord with nature; and further, to draw the distinction that some things lie within our power while others do not; within our power lie moral choice and all actions that depend on that choice, whereas our body and every part of it are not in our power, and likewise our possessions, parents, brothers and sisters, children, country, and, in short, everyone with whom we associate. Where, then, are we to place our good? To

³⁴ *Disc.* 3.2.1.

what kind of reality are we to apply that name? To what lies within our power. (*tēi eph' hēmin*). (*Disc.* 1.22.9-11)³⁵

Epictetus tells us that the class of things that should be categorized as good is that which is in our own power. And a proper education consists of just learning how to make these categorizations correctly, both presently and in future instances. Additionally, we are told elsewhere that aversion, and thus also preconceptions concerning the bad, is to be applied exclusively to things in our power, but contrary to nature.³⁶

Such a distinction might be obvious for a Stoic, but Epictetus provides his own argument following the above quote which may be summarized as follows: God is providential and good, and thus intends for us, or at least makes it possible for us, to be happy. But it is impossible for one who fails to obtain good things to be happy. Therefore, if good things were the types of things we fail to obtain regardless of our choices, then it could be impossible for a person to be happy. But external things are the types of things which we will necessarily fail to obtain eventually. Additionally, we may only come close to obtaining all we want externally by scorning others and stealing their property, something which betrays our natural obligation to others. Thus, the category of good belonging to external things is incompatible with a providential god, and the category of good must belong to those things in our own power.³⁷

The strength of this argument aside, the structure of the first *topos* is clear. It concerns mastering desires and aversions, and thus the preconceptions which produce

³⁵ Cf. *Disc.* 1.2.6: “It is for that reason above all that we have need of education, so as to be able to apply our preconceptions of what is reasonable and unreasonable to particular cases in accordance with nature.”

³⁶ *Ench.* 48. Compare *Frag.* 27.

³⁷ *Disc.* 1.22.12-16. While the above argument is valid, it would clearly not be sound for a non-stoic. It requires a commitment to a providential god, who has constructed the universe and our individual natures in such a way that it is possible for us all to be happy.

them. Mastery of desire and aversion is achieved by suspending our judgements concerning the applications of preconceptions to particular objects, until we have developed a standard of judgement which allows us to apply these preconceptions accurately and in accordance with nature. This standard of judgement is that good and bad apply solely to things within our power, namely choice and those things dependent upon choice. Only choices in accordance with nature are good, and only choices contrary to nature are bad. When this is properly understood by the student, they are still able to feel desire and aversion, but the ends of these impulses will never be frustrated externally. The student always has the internal capacity to make the right choice, and to abstain from choices contrary to nature, and thus they are always capable of achieving their desires and escaping what they would avoid. As such, a student who has completed the first *topos* is free from passions entirely, which only derive from the frustration of these impulses.

3.3 Topic 2: Motives to Act

Once the student has mastered their desires and aversions, they may progress to the second *topos* which relates to “our motives to act (*tas hormas*) and not to act (*tas aphormas*) and, in general, appropriate (*to kathekon*) behavior; so that he may act in an orderly manner and with good reason, rather than carelessly...”³⁸

As discussed above, there is a significant division in Epictetus between types of impulse. *Hormē* and *aphormē* are separated from the stronger, passion-causing, *orexis* and *ekklisis*. Besides the difference in their strength, motive to act and desire are also

³⁸ *Disc.* 3.2.2.

differentiated by their object. Desire takes as its object the good, and impulse to act takes as its object the appropriate (*to kathekon*). The second *topos* deals with the appropriate, and our corresponding motives to act. *Hormē* and *aphormē* cannot produce passions, so the negative repercussion for applying them poorly is significantly decreased. This is why Epictetus recommends the beginner limit themselves to just *hormē* and *aphormē* as motivational sources. However, they can still be applied incorrectly: “After desire and aversion, the second area of study is concerned with your motives to act or not to act, so that they may be obedient to reason, and not be exercised at the wrong time, or in the wrong place, or improperly in any comparable respect.”³⁹

When examining what Epictetus believes it means for our *hormē*, or motive to act, to be exercised incorrectly, it is important to note the shift in emphasis compared to the previous *topos*. Incorrectly exercised *hormē* is a matter of it being applied at the wrong place or the wrong time. What constitutes a properly applied *hormē* is then more contextual than *orexis*. This makes sense, as *orexis* is to be applied to good things, which are necessarily good regardless of context. In contrast, *hormē* deals with selection of the appropriate. This means it concerns objects which are not good or bad, but indifferent (*adiaphoros*).

Aligning with Orthodox Stoicism, Epictetus identifies indifferents as the category of value belonging to any objects which are not good or evil.⁴⁰ As good and evil have been shown to be dispositions of choice, which is identified as the self, then anything beyond our choice belongs to the category of indifferents. As Epictetus concisely puts it,

³⁹ *Disc.* 3.12.13.

⁴⁰ *Disc.* 2.9.15; Cf. 2.16.1; 2.19.13.

“life is indifferent; but the use that one makes of it is not.”⁴¹ We know that our selection of the appropriate, which produces *hormē*, must take something considered to be indifferent as its object, because otherwise our choice would relate to good and evil and produce desire and aversion instead. But if the proper objects of *hormē* and *aphormē* are always indifferent, then we need a method to judge what constitutes an appropriate selection. The correctness of our impulse can no longer be determined solely by the value category of the object it is directed towards, since all objects involved in this *topos* have an indifferent value.

Epictetus follows his Stoic predecessors in identifying that indifferents are not strictly equal; some are preferred, and some are not. In the chapter titled ‘About Indifference’ Epictetus tells us that “Chrysippus did well to say, ‘As long as the consequences remain unclear to me, I always hold to what is best fitted to secure such things as are in accordance with nature; for God himself, in creating me, granted me the freedom to choose them.’”⁴² Although Epictetus does not use the term ‘preferred’, the ‘things’ in question clearly refer to the Stoic category of preferred indifferents. Historically, these were external objects which typically, but not necessarily, helped promote a life in accordance with nature. They cannot be considered good, since they do not necessarily benefit the individual and can even harm the individual in certain circumstances. However, given that god has imbued us with a tendency to prefer these things, it would be contrary to nature to scorn them without cause. Diogenes Laertius provides a list of Stoic examples: life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth,

⁴¹ *Disc.* 2.6.1.

⁴² *Disc.* 2.6.9. Compare 2.10.5-6.

reputation, and noble birth.⁴³ So, given no other information, it is appropriate for the individual to select and experience *hormē* towards these kinds of objects, and *aphormē* towards their opposite. However, such a picture gives us very little information about how to navigate situations with competing interests, or when to know if it is an appropriate time to select a dispreferred indifferent.

Epictetus provides a more robust criterion for how we are to select between indifferents with an innovative appeal to our roles (*prosōpa*).⁴⁴ It is our roles which ground and determine how we are to exercise our impulse. As such, understanding these roles and the actions appropriate to them form the central focus of the second *topos*:

The second [*topos*] is concerned with appropriate action; for I shouldn't be unfeeling like a statue, but should preserve my natural and acquired relationships, as one who honours the gods, as a son, as a brother, as a father, as a citizen. (*Disc.* 3.2.4)⁴⁵

And then, when he has laboured in this fine field of study [the first *topos*] and proved his mastery, let him come back to me and say, 'I want indeed to be free

⁴³ D.L. 7. 101-3 = LS 58A. Epictetus considers at least life and pleasure as preferred indifferents (*Disc.* 1.2.15-16).

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the place which our roles play in Epictetus' ethics, see Long, 1983, p. 184-197 and 2002, p. 237-41; Kamtekar 1998, p. 147-152; Johnson, 2012 and 2014. Johnson relates Epictetus' word for role, *prosōpon*, to its use in the context of drama, where it means 'mask' (Johnson 2014, p. 12-14). This analogy to drama is most clear in *Ench.* 17, where Epictetus describes us as actors in a divine drama, who each have a role to play. As Johnson points out, while the term *prosōpon* is most common, it is not fixed. Epictetus also refers to our place (*chōra*) and position (*taxis*) as rational animals (*Disc.* 1.10.10, 1.16.20-21, 2.4.5), as well as our station (*stasis*) (*Disc.* 3.15.13; 3.9; *Ench.* 48). Johnson makes clear that *prosōpon* is most commonly used when Epictetus is referring to the specific roles of individuals, and the other terms are preferred when discussing the universal role which apply to all agents, that of a rational being. See Frede, 2007 for the argument that Epictetus' use of the term *prosōpon* contributed to the development of the concept of a 'person', helping the term transition from that of a dramatic role, to its modern sense of a rational agent.

⁴⁵ Some passages of Epictetus can give the impression that his ethics is focused on the cultivation of the self at the expense of our relationships with others, or even that he claims that an attachment to others is a source of suffering and a mistake (Cf. *Disc.* 4.1.100). However, as this passage makes clear, our relationships to others play a major role in the second *topos*. Epictetus has a eudemonistic ethic in which part of achieving virtue involves maintaining proper relationships with others. As Inwood (1996, Pg. 246) puts it "De toute évidence donc, Épictète attribue une très grande valeur aux liens que les êtres humains entretiennent en société. Ces liens sont naturels, surveillés par Zeus, indispensables au bien-être humain, et constituent la clé pour la compréhension de nos *kathēkonta*." What can seem then as Epictetus saying for us to detach from others, is better read as warning to not become inappropriately attached.

from passion and disturbance of mind, but I also want, as a pious person, a philosopher, and a diligent student, to know what my duty is towards the gods, towards my parents, towards my brother, towards my country, and towards strangers.’ (*Disc.* 2.17.31)

Once again, Epictetus is stressing the relativity of the second *topos* in comparison to the universal nature of the first. What is good and evil is the same to all rational individuals, but what is appropriate and reasonable is related to our particular circumstances and character: “...to determine what is reasonable or unreasonable, not only do we have to form a judgment about the value of external things, but we also have to judge how they stand in relation to our own specific character (*prosōpon*). It is thus reasonable for one person to hold out a chamber pot for another... whereas, for another person, it won’t just seem intolerable to hold out a pot himself, but to even allow someone else to do so for him.”⁴⁶

Epictetus describes five things which the agent must consider in order to determine their role, and thus exercise their *hormai* correctly:⁴⁷

- 1) Our universal role as a human being.
- 2) Our capacities.
- 3) Our relations (*scheseis*) to others.

⁴⁶ *Disc.* 1.2.7. There is a great degree of disagreement in the literature in how to read this passage as it relates to roles (cf. Johnson, 2014, p. 105-121 for a summary of possible readings). Of most concern to my interpretation is what Johnson calls the “deflationary” reading of Bonhoffer (2000, p. 129), and Gill (1988, p. 189). On this view, all of our particular roles can be reduced or deflated to our universal role as a rational agent. The deflationist thinks that the point Epictetus is making in this passage is not that the proper action in the situation is different amongst individuals. Rather, the proper action is to resist being demeaned by holding the pot, even at risk of physical punishment. I side instead with what Johnson calls the “egalitarian” interpretation (2014, p. 115-120). On this view, it might be proper to hold the chamber pot, *if* the agent reflects that the particular role of slave suits them. What Epictetus is warning against then, is for the agent to be motivated by either fear of punishment or being demeaned. Rather, they should be motivated by a role, be it the universal role of rational agent, or the particular role of a slave who finds it fitting to hold a chamber pot.

⁴⁷ This 5-fold division is based on the work of Johnson (2012 and 2014, p. 12-42).

- 4) Our choice.
- 5) Divine signs.

First and foremost, all people share the universal role of human being. There are certain expectations or appropriate actions that correspond to such a role. We fail to fulfill our role as a human when we act like wild beasts, by acting contentiously, angrily, and aggressively, or when we act like sheep, by acting for the sake of our stomach or genitals, or in a manner that is unconsidered.⁴⁸ Above all else, to be a human being means we should act rationally, understood as making careful use of impressions: “Learn first to know who you are, and then adorn yourself accordingly. You’re a human being; that is to say, a mortal animal who has the capacity to make use of impressions in a rational manner. And what does it mean, to use them rationally? To use them in accordance with nature and perfectly”.⁴⁹

Second, there are also roles which we determine with reference to our particular capabilities or powers. When asked how we are supposed to perceive the specific role assigned to us, Epictetus appeals to a kind of intuition or instinct. The possession of powers or capabilities suited to our role as wrestler, philosopher or senator is accompanied by an awareness of these powers. We are like a bull, who, when attacked by a lion, does not have to think about how to use its body to defend itself, but does so naturally. However, also like a bull which matures over time, the development of our

⁴⁸ *Disc.* 2.9.1-10. Compare 1.6.12-22; 2.10.1; 3.23.3-4.

⁴⁹ *Disc.* 3.1.25-26.

powers requires training and effort over long periods.⁵⁰ Just because one is suited to a life of philosophy, does not mean one can immediately rival Socrates.

The roles derived from our capacities provide us with information as to what is appropriate to us. A proper senator will accept death before they are intimidated by Caesar into staying silent when they would disagree. A true wrestler will die before they allow their genitals to be amputated. Likewise, a philosopher would sooner be beheaded than cut their beard.⁵¹ While these examples are culturally specific (we no longer consider a beard to be an essential part of a life as a philosopher), they demonstrate individuals who in Epictetus' view have mastered the second *topos*. Death is a dispreferred indifferent and is thus typically to be avoided. But the philosopher, perceiving a beard as necessary to the fulfillment of their role as philosopher, selects death, or at least its possibility, over betraying their role. They have stayed faithful to their role and used it to determine which selection of indifferents is appropriate to them.

The third method of determining our roles is by considering our relations to others. These relate to the specific circumstances of our lives rather than our innate talents:

[After considering your obligations as a human being] Remember next that you are a son. What is required of a person in this role? To regard all that he owns as belonging to his father... Know next that you are also a brother. In this role, too, you're obliged to show deference, obedience, and restraint in your language, and never to contend with your brother for anything that lies outside the sphere of choice... And next, if you're sitting on the council of some city, remember that you're a councillor; if you're young, remember that you're young; if an old man, remember that you're an old man... For each of these names, if carefully considered, indicates the actions that are appropriate (*ta oikeia erga*) to it. (*Disc.* 2.10.7-11)

⁵⁰ *Disc.* 1.2.30-32

⁵¹ *Disc.* 1.2.19-29.

Roles based on our relations to others are varied and one may possess many of them simultaneously. One may be an old man, a father, a brother, and a city councilor all at the same time. We will also fluidly transition between these roles over the course of a normal life. An individual may transition from the role of youth to adult, and then take on the additional role of father. In contrast, one shall always retain the natural role of human being so long as they live.

It is these social roles which generate many of our pro-social obligations to other human beings.⁵² One passage of the *Discourses* features a father who, in his grief over his daughter's illness, has abandoned his daughter and fled. Epictetus explains that this is not an appropriate way to act because it is contrary to family affection, which is the appropriate disposition of any father towards his daughter.⁵³ The father is acting poorly because he is not doing what a father should do *qua* father.

Next, some roles may be chosen by the individual.⁵⁴ Epictetus says to “tell yourself first of all what kind of person you want to be, and then act accordingly in all that you do”.⁵⁵ For just as the athlete chooses their sport, and the craftsman chooses their craft, there is a certain degree of choice in the kind of person we want to become.⁵⁶ Epictetus does tell us that the kinds of roles which appropriate to choose are confined by our natural limitations. Someone should not choose to be a wrestler if they possess a weak

⁵² It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss Epictetus' particular advice to students on how to conduct themselves in situations with others. For a fuller discussion of Epictetus' views on specific topics like marriage, parenthood, and politics, along with the views of the other Roman Stoics, see Reydams-Schils, 2005.

⁵³ *Disc.* 1.11.

⁵⁴ Cf. Johnson, 2014, p. 33-34, who persuasively argues that individual choice is a legitimate way to generate roles for Epictetus, even though Epictetus does not explicitly state this.

⁵⁵ *Disc.* 3.23.1.

⁵⁶ *Disc.* 3.23.2-5.

body for example.⁵⁷ Nonetheless there does seem to be a degree of choice present to us, and an individual can take up a variety of professions which may benefit others.⁵⁸

Finally, Epictetus believes we can come to know certain roles through divine signs concerning what god has intended for us. He states explicitly at *Disc.* 3.21 that receiving such a sign is the most important factor for knowing if you have the role of teacher of wisdom:⁵⁹

To be wise, indeed, is perhaps not even a sufficient qualification for taking care of the young; one should also have a special aptitude and predisposition, and yes, by Zeus, a particular physique also, and above all else, a vocation from God to fulfil this function, as Socrates was called to fulfil that of cross-examining people... (*Disc.* 3.21.18-19)

Epictetus goes on at *Disc.* 3.24 to compare life to a campaign, and God to a general. As such, in life “you must fulfil the role of soldier and carry out every deed as your general bids, divining his will so far as is possible. For there is no comparison between this general and an ordinary one...”⁶⁰. Although what God has determined our station to be may be difficult to learn, if we do recognize a divine sign, our selection of indifferents should come to reflect this role. Epictetus quotes Chrysippus on this matter: “But if I in fact knew that illness had been decreed for me at this moment by destiny, I would welcome even that; for the foot, too, if it had understanding, would be eager to get spattered with mud.”⁶¹ In so far as I am ignorant of God’s plan or intention for my life, I

⁵⁷ *Disc.* 3.15.9

⁵⁸ See *Ench.* 24.4., in which Epictetus tells a student that so long as they preserve their character, there are a variety of positions in the city they could hold which would benefit others.

⁵⁹ Cf. Johnson, 2014, p. 34-36 for a discussion of this passage and the related 3.24.

⁶⁰ *Disc.* 3.24.34-35.

⁶¹ *Disc.* 2.6.10. Compare *Ench.* 17: “Remember that you’re an actor in a play, which will be as the author chooses, short if he wants it to be short, and long if he wants it to be long. If he wants you to play the part of a beggar, act even that part with all your skill; and likewise if you’re playing a cripple, an official, or a private citizen. For that is your business, to act the role that is assigned to you as well as you can; but it is another’s part to select that role..”

am to select that which nature has disposed me to prefer. But once I am aware that I am ordained to not achieve these things, but their opposites, I am to prefer their opposites as I understand it is my natural role to achieve these things as a small part of a greater whole. It is inappropriate then to fether, exile, or kill ourselves for no reason, however, should we recognize this to be our fate then we are to select it as appropriate to us, and thus experience it with a smile, good cheer, and serenity.⁶²

To summarize Epictetus' educational program up until now: after the first *topos* the student has mastered desire and aversion. However, this runs the risk of leaving the student 'unfeeling like a statue' towards other people as desire and aversion are now felt only towards dispositions of their choice. The student naturally wishes to know how they should apply their gentler *hormai* and *aphormai* towards other people and indifferent externals. Now that the student knows what is good, they need a way to identify and select what is appropriate. This is the realm of the second *topos*. What is appropriate for the individual is determined by reference to three criteria: 1) your universal role as a rational agent, 2) your particular role, which you can determine by reflecting upon your capabilities, your relationships to others, and divine signs. It can also be determined in part by your own choices. 3) If no other information is present, you are to select indifferents which are preferred over those dispreferred. If the student follows these steps properly, they will have mastered the second *topos* concerning our motives to act and not to act.

⁶² See *Disc.* 1.1.21-25 and 4.1.89-90.

3.4 Topic 3: Assent

Epictetus' third and final area of study concerns a mastery of the process of assent. This is intended, when combined with a mastery of the previous *topoi*, to make the knowledge of the student certain, and thus unchangeable:

[The third *topos*] relates to the avoidance of error and hasty judgement, and, in general, whatever relates to assent (*tas sunkatatheseis*).” (*Disc.* 3.2.2)

The third [*topos*] belongs to those who are already making progress, and is concerned with the achievement of constancy in the matters already covered, so that even when we're asleep, or drunk, or depressed, no interested impression that presents itself may catch us off guard. (*Disc.* 3.2.5)⁶³

...You've concentrated on the area of study which should come last, that which is concerned with immutability, so that you may be unchanging... (*Disc.* 3.26.14)

The third and final *topos* concerns achieving unchangeable certainty of what has previously been learnt, and a mastery of assent. Epictetus is in line with Chrysippus in taking certainty to be the final part of the process of achieving happiness and virtue. Stobaeus tells us that: “Chrysippus says: ‘The man who progresses to the furthest point performs all proper functions without exception and omits none. Yet his life’, he says, ‘is not yet happy, but happiness supervenes on it when these intermediate actions acquire the additional properties of firmness and tenor and their own particular fixity’”.⁶⁴

For Chrysippus, the agent may be acting properly in all circumstances, but they have not yet achieved happiness until these actions acquire a particular fixity, or unchangeability, that is a condition of virtue. The exact level of unchangeability that could be expected from virtue was a matter of internal debate among Stoics. Philo reports

⁶³ Cf. 2.17.33.

⁶⁴ Stobaeus 5.906, 18-907.5 = LS 59I.

that Zeno argued that the virtuous man could not be compelled to anything against his will because “the soul which right reason has braced with firm doctrines is unyielding and invincible.”⁶⁵ According to Diogenes Laertius, Chrysippus takes a weaker stance on this position, and conceded that virtue can be lost in instances of intoxication and depression.⁶⁶ In contrast, Cleanthes argues virtue to be incapable of being lost even in such extreme instances.⁶⁷ Epictetus falls on the side of those who take virtue to be incapable of being lost, given that he says we may achieve certainty in cases of depression and drunkenness, which were the paradigm examples in this debate. He even goes so far as to add dreams to the states in which we can retain our certainty and avoid being fooled.

For Epictetus, this certainty requires the study and mastery of logic, and thus the study of logic makes up a substantial part of his program of moral education. Specifically, the third *topos* involves a formal training in the rules of logic, as well as the study of syllogisms, and even specific logical paradoxes: “But philosophers nowadays neglect the first and second areas of study to concentrate on the third, dealing with equivocal arguments, and those that are developed through questioning, and those that are fallacious, like ‘the Liar’.”⁶⁸ We are additionally told that training in the third *topos* involves learning how to prove things in argument, and how to identify and not be persuaded by fallacious arguments.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Philo, *On every virtuous man's being free* 97 = LS 67N.

⁶⁶ It is unclear from Laertius' writing why Chrysippus weakened this position. Long and Sedley (1987, p. 385) propose that it might be nothing more than “an *ad hominem* response to the objection that even a wise man could be the victim of circumstances outside of his control.”

⁶⁷ D.L. 7.127 = LS 611.

⁶⁸ *Disc.* 3.2.6.

⁶⁹ *Disc.* 3.26.16.

The Stoics were incredible innovators of logic, and Epictetus, as a Stoic, rightfully values the importance of an education in this topic.⁷⁰ However all of this training in logic remains purposefully oriented towards improving the agent morally.⁷¹ At Book 1 Chapter 7, Epictetus provides an in-depth explanation as to how the study of logic benefits the agent in his or her pursuit of virtue. The study of logic teaches the individual the following rules of how to reason properly:

- A) One must establish what is true, to reject what is false, and to suspend judgement in doubtful cases.⁷²
- B) One must learn a way to distinguish between what is true and what is false.⁷³
- C) One must accept the consequences of what you have properly granted.⁷⁴
- D) One must accept that if one's premises logically produce an absurd and necessarily false conclusion, one must reexamine the premises and find the fault in them.⁷⁵

All of these concepts may be applied to an academic assignment, but they may just as easily be applied to how we reason about particular scenarios and form beliefs about the world. Epictetus uses a syllogism to describe our reasoning process when we come to form complex beliefs.⁷⁶ Given this analogy between practical reasoning and logic, the

⁷⁰ For an overview of Stoic logic more generally, see Mates, 1953, Mueller, 1978, and more recently Barnes et. al. 1999, p. 92-176. Barnes, 1997 argues that the study of logic was a crucial and popular practice for the late Stoics, including Epictetus, and his students, despite that it may initially seem otherwise given their emphasis on ethics.

⁷¹ See Xenakis, 1968, Barnes, 1997, p. 24-99 and Crivelli, 2007, for a discussion of Epictetus' use of logic. Both argue that logic, while considered an important and necessary part of a moral education, it was considered by Epictetus to be less important than ethics.

⁷² *Disc.* 1.7.5.

⁷³ *Disc.* 1.7.6-8.

⁷⁴ *Disc.* 1.7.9-12

⁷⁵ *Disc.* 1.7.13-20.

⁷⁶ *Disc.* 4.1.60-61.

rules of logic permeate the way we reason about the world and how we should act within it. Logical training then develops in us logically sound practical reasoning. It develops in us a reverence and appreciation for beliefs which are justified by demonstrable argument, as well as a willingness to change our beliefs in accordance with what the evidence establishes. And this skillset is an essential part of ensuring that, like a logician working his way through an argument premise by premise, we only assent to impressions that are true, and we seek to understand why these beliefs are true.

But the role of logic in our ethical development is a precarious one. On the one hand, Epictetus criticizes those who think logic is not important compared to practical ethics:⁷⁷

‘But after all, If I go astray in these matters [when practicing a logic puzzle], it’s not as if I’ve killed my father, is it?’
Tell me, slave, where was your father present here for you to kill him? So what have you actually done? Committed the only fault that it was possible for you to commit in the present context. I myself made the very same remark to Rufus when he once criticized me for not having discovered the missing step in a syllogism: Why, is said, it’s not as if I’ve burned down the Capitol! To which he retorted, ‘In this case, slave, that missing step is indeed the Capitol!’. Or are there not other faults than burning down the Capitol or killing one’s father? Whereas to deal with our impressions in a random, ill-considered, and haphazard fashion... Is none of this to be regarded as a fault? (*Disc.* 1.7.31-33)

Proper logical reasoning is to be taken seriously. Missing the step of a syllogism is perhaps not as important as burning down the Capitol, but the point remains that this is a difference of degree, not of type: both are faults. Logical errors must matter to the student the same way a failure to act appropriately must. The reason for this is once again the connection between logic and thinking. Carelessness in logic corresponds to carelessness in how we reason and deal with impressions. The passages indicate that logic plays a

⁷⁷ Cf. *Disc.* 1.17.1-12

fundamental role in the Epictetus' education program and studying logic would benefit the student.

However, the students' relationship with logic is not always positive. Epictetus reprimands those who study the third *topos* in the wrong way. Epictetus' concern for students that abuse the study of logic takes two general forms. First, there is a problem when we approach the topic too early. Logic is intended primarily as means to solidify the knowledge gained in the previous *topoi*, and one cannot solidify what is not already present.⁷⁸ Second, the student may become distracted by the aspects of logic which are not relevant to our moral progress, such as training in persuasion and deception, and indulgence in logical puzzles such as the 'Master Argument'.⁷⁹ These two concerns seem to be easily avoided by dedicating oneself to logic only after much progress has been made in the first two areas of study, and by concentrating on the ethically relevant aspects of logic described above.⁸⁰ Nonetheless it is important to understand Epictetus does not consider logic necessarily beneficial for the student.

Mastery of the third *topos*, on my interpretation, consists then of the following: The student must first make great progress in regard to desire and aversion, and the motive to act and not to act. At this point, the student studies rules of logical reasoning, with the intention of internalizing these rules and making them a part of how they come to form beliefs and reason about practical situations. If this internal process of reasoning is perfected and accompanied by the true beliefs gained in studying the previous *topoi*,

⁷⁸ *Disc.* 3.2.6-12; 3.26.14-24. *Ench.* 51.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Disc.* 1.8 and 2.19.1-5.

⁸⁰ Furthermore, I see no reason to take Epictetus' position to be that logic is *necessarily* harmful. Some students may be inclined towards logic, and capable of studying in a way which is not harmful to their progress. The point is one of caution to students: do not get distracted by logic as an intellectual puzzle in way that compromises your pursuit of virtue.

then the student's knowledge is solidified, even when drunk, depressed, or dreaming. This is because the student may not be tricked, deceived, or otherwise fooled into making a careless or poorly justified assent, given that 1) the agent will have internalized the logical rule that they may only assent to a conclusion when its premises have been demonstrated to be true, 2) the agent will know not to take on any premise without sufficient evidence, and 3) because of their mastery of the previous *topoi*, the agent will have no false beliefs that may produce a false conclusion or a passionate state which might interfere with their reasoning.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined Epictetus' general educational program. Epictetus describes a proper education in philosophy as consisting of the study of three *topoi*, or areas, which are to be mastered in sequential order. These *topoi* may generally be summarized as follows:

- 1) Concerns the mastery of desire and aversion, achieved through an understanding of what is good, bad, and indifferent.
- 2) Concerns the mastery of motive to act and not to act, achieved through an understanding of what is appropriate with reference to our natural and social roles.
- 3) Concerns the mastery of assent, achieved through an understanding of logic and its associated rules of reasoning.

The first *topos* must be mastered first, and is the most important, as desire and aversion are powerful impulses which may disrupt the reasoning of the individual. Most

notably, these impulses also produce passions, which both cause suffering and impede the capacity of the individual to reason properly when under their influence. As such, the student is to suspend all desire and limit aversion to only its proper object until they confidently develop both a criterion to distinguish between what is good and bad, and the ability to apply that standard consistently and successfully. The student can be said to have mastered desire and aversion when both are only applied to their proper objects, types of choice. When this is achieved, they will never cease to obtain the object of their desire, nor avoid the object of aversion, because these objects are in the power of the individual. As such, desire and aversion can be said to be mastered when they are never frustrated.

At this point, the student risks being unfeeling like a statue towards the situations in their lives, as their desire and aversion are only applied to events internal to the agent. The second *topos* then concerns external events, and how to appropriately select between external objects of indifferent value. Recognition of an act or object as appropriate, as opposed to good, is accompanied by the gentler impulses of *hormē* and *aphormē*, thus allowing the agent to be motivated to act without the risks caused by desire and aversion. The student is to select something as appropriate through reference to three criteria: 1) your universal role as a rational agent, 2) your particular role, which you can determine through certain choices and by reflecting upon your capabilities, your relationships to others, and divine signs, and 3) if no other information is present, you are to select indifferents which are preferred over those dispreferred. By following these three criteria, the student will be able to successfully navigate their social obligations in the world, while still only considered good and evil to apply to aspects of their own choice.

Finally, at this point the student is prepared for serious study in the third *topos*. This involves mastering the process of assent, such that the knowledge achieved in the previous *topoi* will become unchangeable, in order that it may not even be removed in extreme circumstances. This is achieved through the study of logic, which provides a framework of how to perfect our practical reason. If we follow these rules of reasoning, and possess true beliefs from the previous *topoi*, then our knowledge will be rendered secure.

Chapter 4

Moral Failure

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on Epictetus' division of moral education into three areas, or *topoi*, which teach students how to make proper use of their impressions. This chapter explores the question of why a student who wishes to practice Stoicism and is aware of Stoic theory may still fail to achieve virtue. This chapter argues that students fail to act properly for three main reasons: Either they fail to reason properly due to weakness, or precipitancy, or they try to master the *topoi* in an incorrect order.

It is important to note that the focus of this chapter, and the remaining work, is on the progressing student of Stoicism. I am not interested in why Epictetus takes the regular individual to fail to be virtuous, but rather why he thinks a dedicated student of Stoicism might fail. As such, in the remaining work I am assuming the students in question are A) familiar with Stoic theory and Epictetus' specific type of Stoicism, B) believe the basic tenants of Stoicism to be true at some level, even if their beliefs are not yet supported by a thorough understanding of Stoic theory, and C) are trying their best to improve as Stoics and move towards virtue. This dissertation is not concerned with how to convert opponents of Stoicism or entice those who do not see the value of philosophy.¹

The question of why moral failure occurs in the student of Stoicism is different than with a non-Stoic. Unlike the non-Stoic, a student of Stoicism, while still lacking perfect

¹ For those interested in how Epictetus approaches educating non-philosophers see Macgillivray, 2020.

knowledge, is familiar with Stoic theory and wishes to act in accordance with it. As such, this chapter is not interested in exploring the very broad reasons why anyone might fail to act in accordance with Stoic principles. Someone might fail to do this because they have never heard of Stoicism or prefer Epicureanism instead. Instead, this chapter addresses the most specific question of why Epictetus' students act inappropriately, despite earnestly working towards moral progress.²

The fact that people seem to do what they know to be against their best interest has always been one of the more difficult implications of an intellectualist position. According to Epictetus' rationalism, people are supposed to act in accordance with what they believe to be true and the correct course of action. And yet Epictetus' students, despite having been taught how to act and the nature of good and bad, still act improperly.

Other philosophers have a much easier time accounting for such a phenomenon. As mentioned in Chapter 2, section 3 of this thesis, Plato and Aristotle at least allow for the possibility of other motivational sources in the soul than reason. For them, the failures of someone educated in moral philosophy can be explained by a lack of cooperation by these other motivation sources. Epictetus has no such explanation available to him. Nonetheless, he does provide an explanation for why students of Stoicism act incorrectly.

This chapter argues that there are three primary reasons Epictetus believes a progressing student of Stoicism might act inappropriately:

- 1) Because they approach the study of the *topoi* in the incorrect manner.

² This question can be roughly construed as follows: why do Stoics fail to achieve the goals they have set for themselves? I explore Epictetus' answer to this question, and discuss weakness and precipitancy in this context in my paper "Akrasia in Epictetus", 2020.

- 2) Because they suffer from weakness, caused by false beliefs.
- 3) Because they assent precipitately.

4.2 First Cause of Moral Failure: Studying the *Topoi* incorrectly

Epictetus is adamant that there is a correct order in which to study the *topoi*. A student can fail to make progress if they approach them in the wrong way, or at the incorrect time in their education. The aim of this section is to demonstrate why moral failure occurs when students study the 3rd and 2nd *topoi* at the wrong time.

Beginning with the 3rd *topos*, Epictetus is explicit that this area must only be studied in depth after making significant progress in the previous two.³ Arguments for this seem to come in two general forms. The first is that logic is concerned with unchangeability. Its purpose in our education program is to secure our correct beliefs so that they may not be changed in the most extreme of circumstances. But we cannot secure what does not exist. Studying logic, even if done successfully, yields no benefit for one who has not mastered the previous *topoi*:

Never have you desired firmness of mind, serenity, impassibility; never have you attended any teacher with that purpose in mind, but many a teacher to learn about syllogisms. Never have you tested out any of these impressions for yourself, asking yourself, ‘Am I capable of bearing this or not? What remains for me to do?’, but as if all were safe and sound for you, you’ve concentrated on the area of study which should come last, that which is concerned with immutability, so that you may be unchanging – in what? In your cowardice...? (*Disc.* 3.26.13-16)

But philosophers nowadays neglect the first and second areas of study to concentrate on the third, dealing with equivocal arguments, and those that are developed through questioning... ‘Yes, because when one is dealing with these matters, one needs to protect oneself against being deceived.’
Who must? One who is virtuous and good. Is it in this regard that you fall short, then? Have you achieved perfection in the other areas of study? When a bit of

³ *Ench.* 52.

money is involved, are you secure against deception? If you see a pretty girl, can you resist the impression? ... Even while you're studying these topics, you wretch, you're trembling with anxiety at the thought that someone may despise you, and are asking whether anyone is making remarks about you. (*Disc.* 3.2.6-9)

Epictetus tells us that logic is the concern of 'one who is virtuous and good'. We should not understand these terms as being used technically, for if the man is literally virtuous and good he would need no additional education. Rather they are being utilized by Epictetus to emphasize the importance of progress before turning to logic. The student cannot benefit from using logic to secure their beliefs, unless they have correct beliefs to secure, and these beliefs are acquired in the previous areas of study.

At this point it may seem that Epictetus is only saying that the value of logic cannot be fully actualized until we have mastered the other *topoi*. However, Epictetus takes the stronger position that studying logic may actually be harmful if we have not made a reasonable degree of progress concerning desire and aversion. This is because studying logic is only suitable for those who may learn it with an undisturbed mind.

As discussed in Chapter 3, desire and aversion are the exclusive source of the passions, which impede our ability to follow reason. If the student has not mastered desire and aversion, then they will be subject to restraint or compulsion when they desire or are averse to something beyond their *prohairesis*. In this way, their mind is disturbed by passion and thus not free to study logic in the suitable manner. Take the following example of how desire and aversion can impede our study of logic:

No, one hears nothing like that [of a student wanting to progress to the third area after mastering the first and second], but rather, 'I want to know what Chrysippus has to say in his treatise about "the Liar".' Why don't you go off and hang yourself, you wretch, if that is really what you want? And what good will it do to you to know it? You'll read the whole book from one end to the other while grieving all the while, and you'll be trembling when you expound it to others.

And the rest of you behave like that too. 'Would you like me to read something out, brother, and you can do so for me in turn.' – 'My friend, you write astoundingly well.' – 'And you in the style of Plato.' – 'And you in the style of Antisthenes.' And then, when you've recounted your dreams to one another, you fall back into the same old faults; you have the same desires as before, the same aversions... (Disc. 2.17.33-36)

The student in the above passage who studies logic before making significant progress in the previous *topoi* does not gain any benefit from logic because they study it for the wrong reasons. They desire to become good writers, or to impress their peers. Thus, they study Chrysippus' logical paradoxes only with concern for how others will praise them, and without concern for how this relates back to improving their designs, resolutions or endeavors.

When we have not yet mastered desire and aversion, we risk desiring to study logic for the wrong reasons. And while the allure of logical mastery may not seem as dangerous as the allure of pleasure or wealth, Epictetus was concerned that his students would develop an intellectual elitism in which they strove to be considered intelligent, rather than actually becoming virtuous.⁴ Students who study logic prematurely are at risk of perverting their understanding of what knowledge entails, thinking it to consist of demonstrations and proofs:

The third area of study is necessary, then, because of the second, and the second because of the first, but the most necessary, and that on which we should dwell, is the first. But we do the opposite; for we spend our time on the third area of study, and employ all our efforts on that, while wholly neglecting the first. And so it comes about that we lie, while having at hand all the arguments that show why we oughtn't lie. (*Ench.* 52)

⁴ *Disc.* 1.4.5-17. Epictetus criticizes those who study Chrysippus' ethical treatises with the intent of boasting of their knowledge of the material, rather than with the intent of improving their choice.

The student who approaches the study of the logic prematurely, or in the wrong manner, will misunderstand the connection between logic and action that is so important to Epictetus. They will reduce logic to motivationally inert intellectual exercises, in which they can produce a proof of X, perhaps to gain notoriety or to boast, but do not see the connection between this proof and their actions. Studying logic without significant progress in the previous *topoi* is valueless because we cannot secure as unchangeable knowledge we do not yet possess. But more than that, it is also potentially actively harmful for the student. It may distract them from the important tasks at hand, and their successes and the praise they receive may lull them into a false sense of progress while their *prohairesis* remains unchanged. As such, Epictetus holds that we should not study logic seriously until we have made a great deal of progress on the previous *topoi*.

Let us turn our attention now to the second *topos*, concerning mastering our motives to act through appeal to our roles. Once again Epictetus tells us that we should not engage in this *topos* until we have mastered the first.⁵ However, the connection between the two is not immediately apparent. If motive to act and not act and desire and aversion are separate types of motivational sources, why is one dependent upon the other? It is not obvious why perfecting one's desire and aversion is necessary to achieve an appropriate motive to act, and why they could not be developed separately at the same time. I will argue that Epictetus thinks appropriate motives to act depend upon mastering desire and aversion because of his conception of freedom. We cannot determine our motive to act and properly fulfill our roles unless we are free from compulsion, and we can only achieve freedom from compulsion by mastering the first *topos*.

⁵ *Ench.* 52; *Disc.* 2.17.31-32.

In Book IV Chapter 1, titled 'On Freedom' Epictetus explains his understanding of freedom:

That person is free who lives as he wishes, who can neither be constrained, nor hindered, nor compelled, whose motives are unimpeded, and who achieves his desires and doesn't fall into what he wants to avoid. (*Disc.* 4.1.1)

Each clause should be understood as an explanation of the previous, rather than as further conditions for freedom. A free man is one who lives as he wishes, which is to say a man who cannot be compelled, hindered, nor constrained. In other words, a free man is someone who always gets what he wants and is never forced to suffer what he wishes to avoid.

In this picture, freedom is necessarily linked to one's state of desire and aversion, the domain of the first *topos*. But there still remains an ambiguity as to whether freedom is achieved by modifying one's character, or by the accumulation of goods. After all, I can achieve my desires by only applying them to that which is part of my choice, but I can also achieve them by gaining the power and wealth to acquire whatever desires I may have. However, Epictetus is explicit that the accumulation of power is not a viable way of achieving freedom, "for freedom is not attained through the satisfaction of desires, but through the suppression of desires."⁶

Freedom may be temporarily achieved by fulfilling our desires through external means, but it cannot be secured. Even if we are Caesar there is always the potential that we shall develop new desires we cannot fulfill or lose the power that allowed us to acquire these external goods in the first place. Freedom belongs securely only to the individual who *cannot* be hindered, rather than the one who is not hindered in this

⁶ *Disc.* 4.1.175.

moment. And it is only impossible to be hindered if one internalizes their desires and aversions towards that which is necessarily their own and in their power:

The person who isn't subject to hindrance is free, he who has everything at hand as he wants it; but one who is subject to hindrance, or constraint, or obstruction, or can be thrown into any difficulty against his will, is a slave. And who is the person who is free from all hindrance? He who desires nothing that is not his own. And what are the things that are not our own? Those that are not within our power, either to have or not to have, or to have with certain qualities, or under certain conditions. (Disc. 4.1.128-129)

Freedom is achieved by desiring only that which is within our power, and anything that requires a specific condition outside of our own power to possess counts as something that is not within our power. Even Caesar is not free, because while it may be a fact that he has the power to achieve many things, this fact is contingent and requires a specific circumstance that may change.

One thing that is not our own, because it requires specific conditions beyond our control, is our own life. Nonetheless, it is extremely difficult to relinquish our desire to live. For this reason, we may put up with many things bravely but find ourselves compelled when threatened with death. As such, we may only be rightfully called free when we are also willing to die: "That is why we call free only those animals that won't put up with captivity, but escape through death as soon as they're captured. Diogenes remarks accordingly somewhere that the only sure means to secure one's freedom is to be happy to die..."⁷

⁷ Disc. 4.1.29. It may seem bizarre that Epictetus thinks we rationally can, or more so *should*, face death cheerfully. However, as Stephens (2014) makes clear, while death itself should not be considered good, for it is indifferent, death can also offer us a means, or an open door, out of terrible situations that would prevent us from living in accordance with nature.

If you are not afraid of anything that can be done to you while living, nor death itself, then nothing is capable of compelling you. For you shall not be coerced by threats if you do not fear them being carried out. Nor can even your body be held captive or made useful to others, as long as you are willing to kill yourself.⁸ In this way, liberty from our desire to live and our aversion to death is the ultimate means to ensure our freedom in any possible circumstance.

Now that we understand Epictetus' conception of freedom, and how it can only be achieved by mitigating our desires and aversions, we are in a position to see why freedom is necessary to master our impulse to act and not to act. At first it might be difficult to see the connection between mitigating desires and maintaining our social relationships to others. One may even argue that being free from desiring external states would give us no reason to work towards pro-social behavior, which is often difficult to achieve and requires serious motivation. Any account of Stoicism is open to these kinds of criticisms. If we should desire only the good, and the good is an internal disposition of our choice, what reason could we have for helping or caring about others, who are outside of our power? As we have seen, Epictetus avoids this problem by providing a separate motivational source, impulse to act and not to act. The agent perceives fulfilling their social roles as contextually appropriate, but not necessarily good, and they are then motivated to act on them by this gentler form of impulse. As this motive to act (*hormē*) is not desire or aversion, which are the sole sources of our passions, they are not frustrated or suffer from passions if circumstances prevent them from being successful, but nonetheless they do try to achieve these external goals.

⁸ *Disc.* 4.1.30-32.

Epictetus believes we should discard this notion that desire and aversion are somehow required to motivate action concerning externals. Not only is the free agent able to select and pursue appropriate externals, they are also the person best able to do so:

And so that you may not think that I'm offering to you as an example [of a free man] a man who lived on his own having neither wife nor children, nor country, nor relations, who might have turned him aside and caused him to deviate from his path, take Socrates and consider a man who had a wife and young children, but didn't regard them as being his own, and had a country, in so far as it was his duty, and in the way in which that duty required, and had friends and relations, all of this subject to the law and to obedience to the law. That is why, when it was his duty to serve as a soldier, he was the first to set out, and exposed himself to the dangers of war without sparing himself in the least. But he was sent by the Thirty Tyrants to arrest Leon; being sure in his mind that such a deed would be shameful, he never even contemplated it, although he was well aware that he might meet his death as a result, if things turned out that way. But what did that matter to him? For there was something else that he wanted to preserve other than his body, namely, his character as a trust-worthy man, as a man of honour. These are things that cannot be violated, that cannot be reduced to subject. (*Disc.* 4.1.159-161)

Socrates does not desire his relatives, friends and country, as he does not consider them his own or within his power. As such, in matters concerning them he was able to make his decisions of how to act based on considerations of duty alone. When asked to go to war for his country he does so without reserve because he is not attached to his life or afraid of dying. As a free man, he is able to consider only what duty, or his social role, demanded of him without the fear of death compelling him to act against what is appropriate. This does not mean, however, that he will simply follow the requests of others without consideration. When asked to arrest Leon, he refuses because it is shameful. But he is only free to refuse because he cannot be compelled by an aversion to death. Socrates cannot be compelled by the Thirty Tyrants, because what Socrates wants, his fidelity and honor, is within his power to preserve regardless of how others act.

Epictetus' position is thus that only the free individual can be guaranteed to act on consideration of what is appropriate. The individual who is not free, who desires or is averse to things outside of their choice, is at risk in any situation of having that desire conflict with what is appropriate. And given the hierarchy of impulse discussed in Chapter 3, desire and aversion will overpower our impulse to act and not to act. For example, the individual averse to dying will always choose what preserves their life over what is appropriate. It is only the free individual then who can successfully fulfill their roles and obligations to others, regardless of circumstance or risk of death.⁹

Epictetus repeats elsewhere in the *Discourses* the idea that only those who are willing to die are truly free to fulfill their roles. Epictetus provides the example of Helvidius Priscus¹⁰, a Senator who was not intimidated into staying home from the senate or staying silent if he did attend. When threatened with death, Priscus responds: "Well, when have I ever claimed to you that I'm immortal? You fulfil your role, and I'll fulfil mine. It is yours to have me killed and mine to die without a tremor..."¹¹ Priscus is then compared to a famous athlete who decided to die rather than have his body, the

⁹ This does raise the interesting question of whether altruistic friendship is possible for Epictetus. The answer seems to be no. Epictetus states that we will be able to be good friends only if we identify ourselves with our *prohairesis*, and pursue virtue, and not external goods, because only then will we understand that it will "benefit me to preserve my trustworthiness, my sense of shame, my patience, my temperance, my cooperativeness, and to maintain good relations with others." (*Disc.* 2.22.20). The point is that we shall only be good friends if we recognize friendship to also be in our best interest, which is not a purely altruistic position. Annas (2017) persuasively argues that while the kind of self-interested approach to ethics and friendship found in eudaimonistic ethics can seem initially off-putting, it is nonetheless a fine foundation for an ethical system. Nonetheless, Epictetus does understand genuine friendship to be possible even if it is pursued for the benefit of oneself. But friendship must be pursued for the genuine benefit of the oneself, in that it is pro-social behavior in accordance with nature, and not because it is thought to provide some external benefit.

¹⁰ More specifically, the person in question is Helvidius Priscus senior, who was praetor in 70 CE and was executed under Vespasian around 75 CE. Helvidius Priscus junior would go on to be killed by the order of Domitian. Of particular interest is that Epictetus was still living in Rome during the time of Helvidius Priscus senior's execution.

¹¹ *Disc.* 1.2.21.

mechanism by which he fulfills his role as athlete, mutilated.¹² Epictetus refers to these individuals as examples of those who have acquired a proper respect for their character.¹³ In other words, these are individuals who have mastered the second *topos* and act in accordance with their roles. The point is clear. Such a mastery of the second *topos* is not possible unless we are willing to die, because only then are we free from being compelled by our desire and aversion and thus free to select what is appropriate to us.

With this understanding, it is clear why Epictetus takes the first *topos* to be necessary to master the second. We are not free to select the appropriate until we have mastered desires and aversions. It should also be clear that most of the difficulty in mastering the second *topos* is just a result of a failure in desire and aversion. We fail to select what is appropriate for us and our roles because our selection is compelled by contrary desires and aversions for external objects. It is not difficult for Socrates to fulfill his roles, because he is able to freely select the appropriate course of action, with no fear of what may result, or no desire for anything beyond what is appropriate to him.

We are thus now in a position to appreciate Epictetus' claim that "The third area of study is necessary, then, because of the second, and the second because of the first..."¹⁴ The *topoi* build upon one another, and are all necessary to achieve virtue, but the first *topos* has a special place as the most important aspect of our moral education. This is because:

- A) A mastery of the other two *topoi* requires a mastery of the first.

¹² *Disc.* 1.2.25.

¹³ *Disc.* 1.2.28.

¹⁴ *Ench.* 52.

B) Mastering the other two *topoi* is only possible when we have mastered desire and aversion, as problems these *topoi* can often be related back to desiring or being afraid of the wrong things.

It follows from this that many failures experienced by students Stoicism when they approach 3rd and 2nd *topoi* is caused by trying to master these *topoi* too early, without having made significant progress in regard to desire and aversion. This is why Epictetus considers the first *topos* to be the most necessary, and worthy of the greatest attention.

4.3 Second Cause of Moral Failure: Weakness

It is clear Epictetus is concerned about his students approaching the *topoi* in an inappropriate manner. But this is not the only reason for moral failure in his students. Two other causes which receive significant attention from Epictetus are weakness and precipitancy:

- A) Weakness: When the agent fails to reason, assent, or act properly because they suffer from passions.
- B) Precipitancy: When the agent does not properly judge novel impressions because they fail to apply the appropriate standard of judgement.

We will begin by discussing weakness. To understand the nature of weakness, we must recall that, as discussed in Chapter 3 Section 2, the achievement of knowledge was thought to coincide with a firmness or unchangeability of the soul or mind.¹⁵ What is meant by a firm or unchangeable mind can also be described in terms of strength. The

¹⁵ Stobaeus 5.906, 18-907.5 = LS 59I.

strong, unchangeable mind does not yield to tempting false impressions or coercion.¹⁶

The sage possesses the relevant knowledge about ethics, logic, and physics required for virtue, and also understands *why* their knowledge is true. This coupled with a refusal to assent to anything new without further evidence produces a mind which unchangeably continues to act in according with virtue.

Weakness, as described by Chrysippus in *On Affections*, is the state of the soul when it lacks the strength, tension, or unchangeability of knowledge. Weakness can impede one's ability to follow through in action on what reason has commanded, even in those who have learnt Stoic doctrine and made correct judgements:

Galen tells us that:

Some of men's wrong actions are referred by Chrysippus to faulty judgement, others to the soul's lack of tension and its weakness (*atonian kai astheneian*), just as their right actions are guided by right judgement together with the soul's good tension... He says there are times when we give up right decisions because the soul's tension gives in, and does not persist till the end or fully execute the commands of reason. (*PHP*, 4.6.2-3, Trans LS 65T)¹⁷

The reason the weak soul cannot motivate the agent to carry out their correct judgements is, at least in large part, because the presence of passions in the unwise mind interferes with their conviction and motivation. Cicero tells us that passions "are disorderly and agitated movements of the mind, at variance with reason and utterly hostile to peace of mind and of life. For they cause troubling and severe ailments, oppressing the mind and weakening it with fear."¹⁸

¹⁶ Philo, *On every virtuous man's being free* 97 = LS 67N.

¹⁷ Cf. Galen, *PHP* 4.5.29-36. For a thorough discussion of weakness and infirmity in Chrysippus, see Tieleman, 2003, 250-264.

¹⁸ Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.29, 34-5 = LS 61O.

Epictetus also shares the view that passions impede our capacity to listen to or follow the dictates of reason:

Of these [*topoi*], the most important and most urgent is that which is concerned with the passions... This is what brings about disturbances, confusions, misfortunes, and calamities, and causes sorrow, lamentation, and envy, making people envious and jealous, with the result that we become incapable of listening to reason. (*Disc.* 3.2.3)

The reason passions can interfere with our reasoning is explained by Chrysippus. Chrysippus describes appropriate impulse as being analogous to walking, whereas a passion is analogous to running. When the agent is walking, the momentum is under their control such that they may change direction whenever they want. But when the agent runs, the momentum carries them away, and they are no longer able to move themselves as they wish.¹⁹ In this way, passion was understood in Stoicism to carry us away and make us temporarily unresponsive to reason, despite being the result of the rational phenomenon of our assent to an impression. Stobaeus reports that the Stoics believed that a passion may be retained even after the agent is instructed and taught why that passion is inappropriate.²⁰

The fact that the agent can be unresponsive to reason while in a passionate state may seem peculiar. Given that assent is supposed to necessitate an impulse regardless of circumstance, why are instruction and assent not sufficient to alleviate a passion? This can be made sense of with brief reference to Stoic metaphysics concerning the nature of the soul. The soul was considered to be corporeal. One reason for this was that the soul

¹⁹ Galen, *PHP*, 4.2.10-18 = LS 65J.

²⁰ Stobaeus 2.88-90.6 = LS 65A.

acts upon the body and only a body may act upon another body.²¹ Passions are the shrinking and swelling of the soul. The soul shrinks from what it thinks it should avoid, and swells towards that which it takes to be a good.²² Therefore, a passion is a literal movement of the soul, which as a corporeal being experiences momentum just like any other object in motion. The analogy to running is thus stronger than it may initially seem. Just as an object shrinking at great intensity and speed is not able to swell immediately, the soul must retain the motivational force of the passion even after a contrary assent has been made. The soul affected by passions is in this way unresponsive to reason.

Epictetus also acknowledges the phenomenon of weakness, and uses it in the same sense as Chrysippus:

This, then, is the first step in philosophy, to become aware of the condition of one's ruling centre (*hegemonikou*). For when a person comes to know that it is in a weak (*asthenōs*) state, he will no longer wish to employ it on matters of importance. But as things are, people who are incapable of swallowing down a small morsel go and buy a whole treatise and set out to devour it. With the result that they vomit it up or suffer from indigestion; and then come bowel upsets, diarrheas, and fevers (*Disc.* 1.26.15-17)

Epictetus tells us that we must recognize the strength of our *hegemonikon* and proceed cautiously if it is not strong. If we are weak, we should not attempt to navigate situations which are too difficult for we will fail to act properly. The reason for this is presumably that our passions, present from having failed to abstain from desire and aversion towards externals, will undermine our capacity to follow this theory faithfully. As such, the student in progress must consider their current level of progress and act accordingly.

²¹ Nemesius 78.7-79.2 = LS 45 C. Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 8.263; Cicero, *Academica* 1.39 = LS 45A. For a second argument for the corporeality of the soul, see Nemesius 8, 6-10 = LS 45 D.

²² Galen, *PHP*, 4.2.1-6 = LS 65D.

Another feature of weakness in Epictetus is that it causes an uncertainty to our actions. The weak individual is pulled around by their passions and thus loses a sense of control over their actions: "...for just as in a sick body that is suffering from a flux of humours, the flux will incline now in one direction, now in another, so also in the case of an enfeebled mind (*asthenēs psychē*), one can never be sure in what direction it is tending..."²³

Because the weak individual is unable to follow through with what is dictated by reason, there is a kind of randomness or uncertainty to their behavior. They might see something and be drawn to it with the incredible force of a passion, without time to reflect on their motivation. This can be contrasted with someone who has mastered the three *topoi* who would only be motivated towards externals by a gentle impulse that is the result of a calculated and cautious assent to something as appropriate.

Finally, the weak individual may not even know or acknowledge when they are making mistakes:

But if you're defeated on one occasion and say that you'll win at some future time, and then allow yourself to be defeated again, you can be sure that you'll finally find yourself in such a wretched and feeble (*asthenōs*) state that, in due course, you won't even be aware that you're acting wrongly... (*Disc.* 2.18.31)

This state of weakness seems to impede our ability to reflect upon the state of our own progress and reduce our sense of accountability. We can infer why this is the case. The weak individual, because they are being pulled about by passion, does not understand the full extent of their autonomy when making decisions. They lose an appreciation for the tight link between assent and impulse because the ability to have full

²³ *Disc.* 2.15.20.

control over this process is being impeded by passions. At which point they may feel as if their mistakes are somehow not their fault, or their responsibility.

In terms of the origins of weakness, it is a result of previous mistaken judgements. An agent who suffers from weakness may act or assent inappropriately, but the weakness was there previous to the event which made its existence apparent. It is a fault in the tension of their soul, caused by false beliefs formed by the agent previously. In this sense, any student of Stoicism will come to Stoicism already suffering from weakness, due to the beliefs formed during childhood, or in their adult life before their Stoic education. In fact, anyone but the sage will suffer from a degree of weakness. A successful Stoic education must not just teach students about Stoicism, but also remedy the false beliefs, poor habits, and incorrectly applied desires which produce passions and cause weakness.

4.4 Third Cause of Moral Failure: Precipitancy

A student of Stoicism might fail, despite having learnt Stoic theory, because of their weak state caused by incorrect beliefs and misapplied desires. Another reason a Stoic in training might fail is if they assent precipitately. This is when the agent assents to an impression without applying the appropriate standard of judgement. Epictetus refers to this phenomenon as *propeteia*, or precipitate action:²⁴

When we want to make a judgement with regard to weights, we don't judge at random; when we want to judge whether things are straight or crooked, we don't do so at random; in short when it is important to know the truth in any case, none of us ever does anything at random. But when it comes to the first and only cause of acting rightly or in error, of succeeding or failing, of being unfortunate or fortunate, there alone we act in a random and precipitate (*propeteis*) way.

²⁴ My account of precipitancy in Epictetus relies heavily upon the work of Ricardo Salles in his paper "Epictetus on Moral Responsibility for Precipitate Action", 2007. For references to precipitate action in Epictetus, see *Disc.* 1.28.30; 2.1.10; 3.22.104; 4.4.46; 4.8.1; 4.13.5.

Nowhere anything like a balance, nowhere anything like a standard, but no sooner does some impression strike me than I immediately act upon it. (*Disc.* 1.28.28-30)

The mistake of precipitancy is that the agent fails to apply the standard of judgement. The precipitate assents to impressions without reflecting upon them. Immediately following the above passage, Epictetus warns us that such behavior is analogous to that of a madman:

What do you call those who follow every impression that strikes them? Madmen (*mainomenoi*)! What about us, then; do we act any different? (*Disc.* 1.28.33)

The phenomenon of precipitancy is dangerous for the student because it can occur even if one is familiar with Stoic theory, if the student fails to apply that theory when deliberating. All of Epictetus' students would be aware of the standard of judgement but would still be assenting precipitately if they failed to apply that standard intentionally as they experience impressions and navigate the world. It is this habit of self-examination, and making the process of assent conscious and intentional, which is necessary to prevent precipitancy. It is for this reason that Epictetus tells us that "...the most important task of a philosopher, and his first task, is to test out impressions and distinguish between them, and not to accept any impression unless it has been duly tested."²⁵ Our most important task is to ensure that our process of assent has become intentional and conscious to us, and that way the standard of judgement may be applied in all cases. Presumably, this is the most important part of philosophy because we can only render what we have learnt in theory useful to us if we have cultivated the ability to apply it.

²⁵ *Disc.*1.20.7.

Epictetus then tells us that the cure for the madness of precipitancy is to apply the standard of judgement without fail in any action:

And so the opinion that each person holds is not a sufficient criterion for determining the truth. When it comes to weights and measures, too, we aren't satisfied with mere appearances, but have devised a standard to test them out in each case. In the present area, then, is there a higher standard than mere opinion? And how is it possible that that which is most vital for human beings should lie beyond determination, beyond discovery? 'There surely must be a standard.'

Why don't we seek it out, then, and discover it, and after having discovered it, put it to use without fail ever afterwards, never departing from it by so much as a finger's breadth? For that is something, I think, which, when found, will rescue from madness those who use opinion as their soul measure in everything, so that from that time onward, setting out from known and clearly defined principles, we can judge particular cases through the application of systematically examined preconceptions. (*Disc.* 2.11.16-19)

Precipitancy is prevented, Epictetus tells us, through two steps. Step one is to discover the proper standard by which to judge impressions, and step two is to apply that standard in all circumstances, even the extension of a finger. If done properly, we shall transition from possessing known and determinate principles, to also possessing properly classified particular cases. In other words, we will progress towards knowledge by correctly categorizing the objects and situations in our lives into their appropriate value categories.

Moral failures caused by precipitancy are different from those caused by weakness in that weakness is necessarily the result of false beliefs, or a lack of true belief, while precipitancy is not. While precipitancy could be the result of passion, or a manic state, it could also be the result of simple carelessness.

For this reason, the solutions for weakness and precipitancy will be different. A student's weakness can only be remedied by correcting false beliefs and strengthening the

student's understanding. Correcting precipitancy is instead about changing the agent's disposition towards impressions to one that is more cautious and intentional. It seems from this that correcting for precipitancy should be an easier task than eliminating the agent's weakness. Or in other words, it would be easier to help a student who assents frivolously but has few false beliefs, than it would be to help someone who assents carefully, but is riddled with passions, ignorance, and poor habits.

4.5 Conclusion

In summation, I have argued that there are three main reasons students who have learnt theory act inappropriately, despite wanting to becoming better Stoics. First, they can approach the 2nd or 3rd *topoi* at an inappropriate point in their education. Second, they can suffer from weakness, caused by the false beliefs. Third, they can assent precipitately, and develop new false beliefs.

The most important guarantee of progress then, is to mitigate weakness and precipitancy, and ensure the student studies what is appropriate to their level of progress. Up to this point, it seems that an instruction in Stoic theory could be sufficient to complete this task. To make proper use of impressions the student seems to only need a thorough education concerning Stoic theory, presented in the correct order. However, the next chapter shall argue that Epictetus views theory as necessary but insufficient to achieve this goal and demands additional training beyond the study of theory.

Chapter 5

The Limits of Theory

5.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters examined the structure of Epictetus' program of moral education. These chapters focused on what the agent had to accomplish, and avoid, in order to progress towards virtue. The next three chapters focus on the means by which the student accomplishes this progress towards virtue. They are concerned with how the agent, who knows they must master the three *topoi* and prevent weakness and precipitancy, is supposed to go about achieving these goals.

Given Epictetus' conception of human psychology and motivation discussed in Chapter 2, it may seem that mastering these *topoi* will just require a thorough instruction in Stoic theory. And there is good reason for suspecting Epictetus holds such a view. First, all three *topoi* can be reduced to a certain kind of knowledge. The first pertains to knowledge of that which is good and bad and the standard to distinguish between them, the second pertains to how to select between preferred and dispreferred indifferents, and the third pertains to knowledge of rules of inference and how to secure our knowledge. The second reason one might assume Epictetus would think studying theory to be sufficient for achieving virtue is that on his view the agent will necessarily assent to, and be motivated by, that which seems true to them. It seems then that all the agent requires to progress towards virtue is a thorough understanding of Stoic theory, and explanations of why this theory is true.

Despite the intuitive appeal of such an account, Epictetus is explicitly critical of those who focus exclusively on the study of theory, and sometimes he is even adamant that theory alone will not ensure the progress of a student of Stoicism. The following chapter is broken into three parts. First, it will defend the interpretation that Epictetus takes theory alone to be insufficient for achieving virtue.¹ Second, it will argue that instruction in theory is a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving virtue, as it forms the first part of a two-part educational program in which both training and theory are necessary. Finally, the third section explores why Epictetus' position on the necessity of training might be problematic for Epictetus' psychology. It concludes that in order for Epictetus' reliance on training to be compatible with his commitments to Stoic psychology, Epictetus' view on the role of training must satisfy two conditions:

- 1) Training plays a role that theory cannot perform or cannot perform well.
- 2) This role must be coherent with Epictetus' conception of human psychology.

5.2 The Limits of Theory

Any thorough reader of Epictetus is familiar with the disdain he demonstrates for the relationship some of his students have with theory:

What does virtue achieve for us? Serenity (*euroia*). Who is making progress, then? Someone who has read many treatises by Chrysippus? For if that is the case, virtue assuredly consists in nothing else than in having gained a knowledge of Chrysippus. As things are, then, while acknowledging that virtue achieves one result, we're yet declaring that the approach to virtue, namely progress, produces

¹ It is important to note that my position is that Epictetus considers studying theory to be insufficient for achieving virtue, *not* that virtue consists of something other than knowledge. As Cooper (2007) persuasively argues, Epictetus is still very much committed to the position that virtue consists of true beliefs and a thorough understanding of the Stoic principles that justify the truth of these beliefs. In other words, virtue consists of knowledge. What is being argued in the following chapter is that Epictetus believes an instruction in theory is insufficient as a means to achieve knowledge. Knowledge can only be achieved through the addition of training. This interpretation is argued for by Sellars (2003; 2007), and Sharpe (2014).

another. ‘That person’, Someone says, ‘is already able to read Chrysippus on his own.’ By the gods, man, you’re making excellent progress, what wonderful progress! ‘Why are you making fun of him?’ And you, why are you diverting him from an awareness of his own failings? Aren’t you willing to show him what virtue achieves, so that he may learn where to look for progress? Look for it, wretch, where your proper task lies. And where is that? In desire and aversion...in motivation to act or not to act...and in assent and the withholding of assent... (Disc. 1.4.5-11)

Epictetus warns students that studying the texts of Chrysippus can serve as a distraction from the true means of achieving progress, which is mastering the three *topoi*. This is because one does not necessarily entail the other. Progress in the *topoi* is not achieved by just knowing more of the works of Chrysippus. Furthermore, Epictetus tells us that knowing the works of Chrysippus is insufficient for virtue. Virtue achieves something, in this case Epictetus emphasizes serenity, which is not necessarily achieved when we know the works of Chrysippus.

It is clear that having a thorough knowledge of Chrysippus does not entail actual progress or a change in the student’s relationship with the three *topoi*. Epictetus again emphasizes this point further on in the same chapter: “‘Take the treatise *On Motivation* and see how thoroughly I’ve read it.’ That’s not what I’m seeking to know, slave, but how you’re exercising your motives to act and not to act, how you’re managing your desires and aversions...”²

Epictetus makes clear that knowing the theoretical treatises of Chrysippus does not entail a transformation of our *prohairesis* as it concerns the three *topoi*. A student can study Stoic theory and not find themselves progressing. It can be tempting to read these passages as supporting the radical claim that theory is useless for Epictetus. However, as

² Disc. 1.4.14.

Cooper persuasively argues, we should understand Epictetus not to be criticizing the study of theory in general, but rather criticizing the study of theory done incorrectly.³

Theory is useless when we study it for the wrong reasons and in the wrong ways.

The study of theory is not valuable to the student when the student engages in their study without the aim of mastering the three *topoi* and transforming their *prohairesis* in the process.⁴ Epictetus tells us that progress lies in the transformation of our *prohairesis*.⁵ But students can ignore this advice and seek progress in the wrong places. For example, a student can misidentify progress as knowing more and more of the works of Chrysippus. But as Epictetus tells us, one does not entail the other. As such, Epictetus warns us that if a student training with him “has directed his efforts to what is contained in books, and that is what he toils away at, and it was for that that he has travelled abroad, I would ask him to return home at once and no longer neglect his affairs there, because he has made his journey for no purpose...”⁶

The student can also be distracted from progress by an interest in producing philosophical works, and demonstrating their knowledge of the works of others, rather than transforming themselves. Epictetus warns us that such a student also focuses their attention on the wrong thing:

And now, when the moment calls, will you go off and give a reading to show off your compositions, and boast about them, saying, ‘Look how well I can put dialogues together?’ No, that’s not what you should be boasting about, man, but this: ‘See how I never fail to attain what I desire, see how I never fall into what I want to avoid.’ (*Disc.* 2.1.34-35)

³ 2007.

⁴ See *Disc.* 1.4; 2.1.30-40; 2.16; 2.19.14.28.

⁵ *Disc.* 1.4.18-21.

⁶ *Disc.* 1.4.22.

Epictetus reminds his student not to take pride in producing philosophical dialogues, but instead display with pride their progress in the first *topoi*, as this is the true mark of progress towards virtue.

In another passage, Epictetus discusses those who have accumulated knowledge of the theories of many Stoic philosophers but have not formed a personal judgement concerning them. Such individuals can recite the theory that virtue is exclusively good, and vice exclusively evil, but they will forget this distinction immediately under duress, such as a shipwreck or accusations from Caesar.⁷ Epictetus accuses them of being Stoics in talk only, and asks: “And why do you dress in a costume that isn’t your own [that of a philosopher] and walk around in it, as thieves and robbers who have filched titles and properties that in no way belong to them?”⁸

If a student studies theory without purposefully applying it to their progress in the three *topoi*, then that theory is useless for their progress. The student will lament and tremble at the opinions of others despite being well versed in the theory that such opinions are indifferent. It is clear from the above passages that Epictetus believes that a student can study the correct theory in an inappropriate manner. The student must study theory with reference to transforming their *prohairesis* if they wish to render that theory useful to them.

However, this still invites the question of the role that theory, properly engaged with, can have for our progress. In other words, it remains unclear whether Epictetus believes that studying Chrysippus and other Stoics can be sufficient to achieve virtue if it

⁷ *Disc.* 2.19.12-19.

⁸ *Disc.* 2.19.28.

is done properly and with the correct transformative intentions. From the above evidence Epictetus clearly takes the position that studying theory can be done poorly and for perverted reasons and such a kind of study is useless for our progress. But I will argue that he also takes the stronger position that studying theory alone is insufficient for achieving virtue, even when we engage with it properly and for the right reasons.

Evidence of this is found in many passages. First, Epictetus claims that students can be well versed in theory but fail to be persuaded by it:

But for our part, we may be able to write about these matters, and give them our approval when we read about them, but we're very far from being convinced (*peisthēnai*) of them. And so that proverb about the Spartans 'Lions at home, but foxes at Ephesus' applies to us too: we're lions in the schoolroom but foxes outside. (*Disc.* 4.5.36-37)

Students are able to write, read, and even praise Stoic theory without this theory modifying their behavior beyond an academic setting. They become lions in the lecture hall, explaining the merits of Stoic theory, but remain foxes outside of the classroom. There is present then, in Epictetus's work, a recognition of a disconnect between what a student understands and even praises theoretically, and what they are able to put into practice. This seems to imply that the student requires something beyond the reading, writing, and the praising of theory to bridge this disconnect.

There is additional evidence that this gap cannot be bridged through further instruction in theory. In the following passage Epictetus urges the student well versed in theory to begin the process of self-transformation:

How much longer will you delay before you think yourself worthy of what is best, and transgress in nothing the distinctions that reason imposes? You've acquired knowledge of the philosophical principles (*theoremata*) that you ought to accept, and have accepted them. What kind of teacher, then, are you still waiting for, that you should delay any effort to reform yourself until he appears? (*Ench.* 51)

It seems that being introduced to the *theoremata* of Stoicism, and familiarizing ourselves with them, is not sufficient to ensure that we put these principles into practice. There is something further that is required, something that a teacher and theory cannot provide for us. In the following passage we see why instruction in theory is insufficient for progress:

How is it, then, that when I've listened to the arguments of the philosophers and have given my assent (*sunkatatithemai*) to them, my burden has in fact become none the lighter?... Can it be, then, that reason has failed to convince me? In point of fact, there is nothing that I've so approved of from the beginning, or that I've liked better, and these are the matters that I now spend my time reading about, hearing about, and writing about. Up until now we haven't found a stronger argument than this. What is it that I lack, then? Can it be that the contrary opinions (*tanantia dogmata*) haven't been eradicated from my mind? Or can it be that the thoughts themselves haven't been properly exercised (*agumnastoi*), that I haven't got into the habit of confronting them with the facts, but instead, like old pieces of armour that have been stored away, they've grown rusty and no longer fit me? Yet when it comes to wrestling, or writing, or reading, I'm not satisfied merely to learn (*arkoumai tōi mathein*), but I turn the arguments that are presented to me round and round in my mind, and I put together new ones, and equivocal arguments too. Yet in the case of the essential principles, those that could serve as a starting point in enabling one to become delivered from grief, fear, passion, and hindrance, to become free, I neither train (*gumnazō*) myself in them, nor do I devote such study (*meletaō*) to them as I ought. (*Disc.* 4.6.12-16)

In the above passage, Epictetus asserts the surprising view that the student can even assent to the arguments of the Stoics and acknowledge these arguments as the strongest arguments presented to them, and not act in accordance with that theory. This is surprising, because assent is supposed to necessitate an impulse. Thus, it seems that assenting to Stoic theory should be sufficient to act in accordance with it. But Epictetus holds the view that this is not the case. And he provides two reasons for why we might fail to act in accordance with the theory we have assented to.

First, we may fail to remove the contrary judgements to these arguments.⁹ Second, we may fail to strengthen these arguments with exercises, and in doing so, fail to accustom them to the facts such that they do not fit our particular situation any longer.¹⁰ None of these problems are solved by mere learning. The agent recognizes this in other disciplines and is not satisfied just learning theory when practicing wrestling, writing, or reading, presumably because they recognize the deficiencies of such a kind of learning. Yet somehow, despite recognizing the failure of this style of learning in other domains, we treat our philosophical theory in such a way.

It is worth noting how well these two problems map onto the phenomena of weakness and precipitancy. Failing to remove contrary judgements can be seen as the cause of weakness. The student assents to theory, but still has many false value judgements which evoke passions and interfere with their ability to act in accordance with theory. Failing to accustom theory to the facts can be seen as a result of precipitancy. If a student possesses the correct theory but fails to apply it or be conscious of it in particular situations, then the student will not see that theory influence their judgements or behavior. They will not apply the standard of judgement which theory has provided them.

⁹ I take this to mean that the student does not act in accordance with the arguments they have assented to because they possess contrary judgements and thus still experiences weakness. Presumably, this process would look like the following: The student, having assented to a Stoic theory such as “all external are indifferent”, has not yet removed the judgement that their car is a good, presumably because they have not thought hard enough to recognize the conflict between these two judgements. Thus, despite holding the general theory that externals are indifferent, they retain a judgement about a particular situation that is contrary to this, and thus will continue to fail to act in accordance with the Stoic theory they have learnt.

¹⁰ This can be understood as a form of precipitancy. I may have assented to a theory as true, but if I fail to apply it in any particular situation I encounter it becomes useless to me. It is just like armor that has been cast aside, because while it is of use to me if I use it, I fail to do so. Thus while theory can help me form the correct judgement, if I fail to employ it I will fail to act in accordance with.

The remedy to these two problems is to exercise (*gumnazō*) ourselves in our theories, and to devote the appropriate amount of care and practice (*meletaō*) to them. We have here the missing condition required to make progress, and the reason why theory is considered to be insufficient on its own to achieve virtue. Theory without exercise is just mere learning, something a student should not be content with if they wish to achieve progress.¹¹

5.3 The Introduction of Training

The previous section argued that Epictetus views the study of theory alone to be insufficient to ensure the progress of the student. This is because the student may find themselves not acting in accordance with the theory they have studied, even if they have understood the theory and assented to it, if they have failed to remove contrary judgements, and made this theory come to terms with the particular facts of their life. This section shall further develop the claim that Epictetus believed that these problems were best solved by training, and thus training is a necessary component of our moral education.

There are numerous passages which suggest that Epictetus considers exercise and training beyond the classroom to be a significant part of a student's moral education.¹² In Book 3 Chapter 12, titled "On Training" Epictetus explicitly tells us that that it is also a necessary part of that education, for "without hard and unremitting training (*askēsis*), it

¹¹ Epictetus uses the term 'mere learning' or *tōi mathein* to refer negatively to learning without training at *Disc.* 2.9.13 as well.

¹² *Disc.* 1.1.21-25; 2.9.13; 4.1.111-3. For thorough discussion of *askēsis* in Epictetus, see Hijmans' 1959 book of the same name.

isn't possible for us to ensure that our desires won't fail to attain their object, or that our aversions won't fall into what they want to avoid...".¹³

However, there still remains the question as to how training and exercise are conceptually distinct from theory. If there are two separate parts of our education, they must differ from each other in some important respect. In other words, training and practice should involve something which theory does not.

The main difference between theory and training is that theory involves studying and assenting to the principles (*theoremata*) of Stoicism, whereas training concerns the agent's assent when faced with particular situations beyond the classroom. Roughly put, training concerns correcting our actions and our habits. Further on in the chapter "On Training" we see this association between habit and training: "And since habit is a powerful force that leads us where it will, when we've become accustomed to exercising our desires and aversions in relation to these external things alone, we must set a contrary habit in opposition to that habit, and when impressions are most inclined to make us slip, there we must apply our training (*to askētikon*) as a counteracting force".¹⁴ It is important in these kinds of discussions to remember the Stoic emphasis on assent as the locus of human action. What matters to the Epictetus is not an external action, but the assent that has given rise to it. If a student lusts after another person, the vice is not their movement towards that individual. The vicious action is them giving assent to the impression that this individual is worth pursuing because of their physical beauty. It is this assent which

¹³ *Disc.* 3.12.5.

¹⁴ *Disc.* 3.12.6.

produces the impulse that causes one to chase them. Training deals with these internal moments of assent concerning particular objects.

This connection between habit and training is further emphasized in another passage. Epictetus warns of the harmful effects poorly habituated actions have on the character of an individual. A poor habit may only be countered by a good habit, and “that is why philosophers recommend that we shouldn’t be contented to merely learn, but should add practice (*meletēn*) too, and then training (*askēsin*)”.¹⁵ We must incorporate training to defeat a bad habit because training is the practice of acting properly, which leads to the development of good habits. Training is not concerned with the general principles we endorse because, as demonstrated in Chapter 4 Section 1, these principles can be endorsed without modifying our behavior. Rather, training involves correcting our particular assents in particular situations, and thus only it can help cultivate good habits and defeat poor ones.

Epictetus goes on to provide two examples of training. We must practice bearing abuse and insults with patience and without anger, and we must practice abstaining from wine, pretty girls, and sweet cakes.¹⁶ It is clear from this that training involves action. I can study that I should not be angered by insults, or eat too many sweet cakes, but such study does not train me. To engage in training, I must leave the classroom. I must actually be insulted and be in the presence of sweet-cakes and pretty girls. It seems then that the study of theory and the execution of that theory in action are two different things. Theory only requires me to endorse a general concept, whereas training requires me to

¹⁵ *Disc.* 2.9.13.

¹⁶ *Disc.* 3.12.10-11.

successfully act in accordance with that theory in particular situations. It is the difference between assenting to the claim that one should not be tempted by an attractive person, and assenting to the impression that I, here and now, should not be tempted by this attractive person in front of me.

Epictetus acknowledges the further degree of understanding that proper action requires. It is why theory can fail to motivate even those who have assented to it, if they have failed to remove contrary judgements, and failed to accustom this theory to particular facts. And it is for this reason that theory is thought to be easier than training:

As someone was reading out hypothetical arguments, Epictetus said, ‘It is also a law of hypothetical arguments that one must accept what follows from the hypothesis. But far more important is the law of life that states that we must do what follows from nature... And so the philosophers must train us first in theory, which is the easier task, and then lead us on to more difficult matters; for in theory there is nothing to restrain us from drawing the consequences of what we have been taught, whereas in life there are many things that pull us off course. (*Disc.* 1.26.1-3)

Epictetus believes studying theory to be easier than acting in accordance with theory, because we are less likely to be distracted, or have our arguments opposed in the classroom. The student may study theory in isolation, without the temptations of externals present before them. In the classroom it is easier for the student to consider the arguments directly, and assent to what follows from these arguments. We can see why this is the case, when we consider how the student is less likely to experience weakness and precipitancy. The student studying theory is protected from weakness, because they are not presented with temptations that would oppose their commitments to Stoic theory. And they are protected from precipitancy, because there is nothing to distract them from the relevant theory they should be referring to. They are able focus exclusively upon the appropriate theory for any given syllogism or logical exercise. These two conditions are

not maintained when the student leaves the classroom and maneuvers public space. As such, the level of difficulty for maintaining one's commitments in action is much higher than in just theory.

I have argued so far that Epictetus considers it necessary for the student of Stoicism to engage in both theory and training. But there remains the question of the nature of the relationship between these two, and what role they are to play in the education of the student. Following the work of Sellars¹⁷, I argue the following: training and theory are the two necessary parts of a student's moral education, with each being insufficient in isolation. In order to be rendered valuable, they are to be studied sequentially, with the student beginning with a study of theory, before progressing to training.

Beyond the textual evidence already examined, there are three main reasons for taking such a view. First is that this view seems to be mirrored in the very structure of Epictetus' texts themselves. We may view the *Discourses* as the supplement for theory, as it provides extensive explanations of Stoic doctrines and their justifications. The *Enchiridion* is then the supplement to training. It contains brief summations of Stoic principles that may aid the student in moments of action, as they navigate the world beyond the classroom.¹⁸ But the student who only studies the *Discourses* may find

¹⁷ "The second [point to be taken from Disc. 1.17] is Epictetus' clear affirmation of the necessity of both exercise and theory for philosophy. Philosophical exercises cannot replace theory; rather they supplement theory. Theory... remains a necessary condition and, for Epictetus, the point of departure for philosophical education. Yet theory alone is not enough either for one to make proper philosophical progress. For that, both logos and *askēsis* are required." (2007, p. 129-130).

¹⁸ Sellars (2007, p. 135) argues for this interpretation that the dual components of theory and training are represented in the different structures of the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion*. He also argues that Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* should be seen as a text primarily concerned with training rather than theory. The writing of the *Meditations* served as a component of Marcus' personal training, following his study of Stoic theory. Hadot (2002, p. 195) even argues that Marcus Aurelius got the idea for the *Meditations* from reading Epictetus and intended the work as a form of philosophical practice in line with Epictetus' teachings.

themselves unsure how to convert these lessons into principles which may be acted upon. Likewise, someone who makes reference just to the *Enchiridion* will find themselves lacking the theoretical justifications required to understand why they should act in accordance with its principles. The two works complement one another. Both are necessary, but neither is sufficient, for the student of Stoicism to progress. This relationship thus reflects the one between theory and training within Epictetus' work.¹⁹

The second reason to view theory and training as the two parts of moral education is that such a view helps make sense of why Epictetus often compares theory to a tool. In the following passages, Epictetus compares theory to exercise equipment, a jumping-weight, to demonstrate the absurdity of coveting the means of improvement over the improvement itself:

Suppose I was talking with an athlete and said, Show me your shoulders, and he were to reply, 'Look at my jumping-weights.' That's quite enough of you and your weights! What I want to see is what you've achieved by use of those jumping weights. 'Take the treatise *On Motivation* and see how thoroughly I've read it.' That's not what I'm seeking to know, slave, but how you're exercising your motives to act and not to act... (*Disc.* 1.4.13-14)

[Concerning those who wish to spend their time only reading and studying but are upset at being required to do something else] It is as if an athlete, on entering the stadium, should burst into tears because he is no longer able to carry on training

¹⁹ When discussing these two texts, it is worth remembering that the *Discourses* and *Enchiridion* do not have the same relationship to Epictetus. While both were authored by Epictetus' student Arrian, rather than Epictetus himself, the *Discourses* is at least reported to be a faithful recreation of Epictetus' oral instruction. In contrast, the *Enchiridion* is a summary of these lessons into 53 chapters created by Arrian alone. There is no evidence that Epictetus intended his lessons to be succinctly divided into 53 lessons, or that he had a part in the construction or planning of the *Enchiridion*. In one way, this impedes the interpretation that the *Enchiridion* was the text associated with the training portion of Epictetus' educational program. After all, there is no evidence that Epictetus intended for an *Enchiridion* to exist. However, I do not believe this disproves my argument that the existence of the *Enchiridion* is evidence that Epictetus considered theory to require the supplementation of training. It seems very plausible that Arrian, as a student of Epictetus, recognized the importance or utility of a text designed to complement the training portion of Epictetus' teachings, just as the *Discourses* complemented the theoretical. The divide between these texts would be Arrian's creation then, but a creation derived from what Arrian best thought would support the natural division found in Epictetus' instruction.

outside. This is what you were training for, this is what your jumping-weights were for, and the sand too, and your young training partners. And are you now looking for these when the time for action has arrived? That is just as if, in the sphere of assent, when we're presented with impressions, some of them convincing and others not, we should refuse to distinguish between them and want to read a treatise *On Understanding* instead. (*Disc.* 4.4.11-13)

The argument of the first passage is clear enough. Just as the athlete must not covet their weights but rather value the change these weights can produce in them, the student must not covet their knowledge of theory, but instead value the change it has produced in their actions. The absurdity of coveting the tool, rather than the benefits the tool provides, is emphasized again in the second passage. When we are upset that the time has come to act properly, rather than study theory further, we are like an athlete who wishes to exercise rather than compete. Such an athlete has missed the point of exercising. The training prepares them for such moments of competition. Likewise, such a student has misunderstood the point of reading *On Understanding* if they would rather read that book than distinguish between impressions. The book is designed to help them distinguish between impressions as they navigate their lives beyond the classroom. It is not meant to be studied well for its own sake.

Epictetus utilizes other analogies besides that of athlete and weight to describe the theory as a tool. He compares theory to the material of the craftsman. Epictetus, as a teacher, has provided the material to the student, but it is upon the student to build something with it.²⁰ At another point, he describes theory as armor.²¹ Finally, he also employs a medical analogy:

²⁰ *Disc.* 2.19.30-33.

²¹ *Disc.* 4.6.14.

[Concerning those who are interested in Stoic precepts, but make no effort to act upon them] But you open up shop as a doctor with no other equipment than your medicines; as to when or how you should apply them, that you neither know nor have ever bothered to learn. ‘Look, that man has those eye salves, and I have just the same.’ Do you have the ability, then, to make proper use of them?...But if philosophical principles (*theoremata*) hold a fascination for you, sit down and reflect on them within yourself, but don’t ever call yourself a philosopher... (*Disc.* 3.21.20-23)

In this analogy, philosophical precepts are like the tools and medicines of a doctor. They are necessary to be a good doctor but are valueless in the hands of someone who does not know how to apply them. And just as owning eye-salves does not make you a physician, knowing and contemplating Stoic precepts does not make you a philosopher. There is no harm in taking a curious joy in exploring philosophical principles, but one who makes no effort to understand when or how they are to be applied in action has no right to call themselves a philosopher.

Theory then is a tool that can be misapplied and rendered useless for the student, if the student does not develop the correct relationship with it. Despite this, Epictetus defends against the claim that theory is therefore useless. Epictetus is still very much committed to the importance of theory:

And then you say, ‘Philosophical principles (*theoremata*) are useless.’ Useless to whom? To those who fail to make proper use of them. Eye salves aren’t useless to those who rub them in when and as they ought; and jumping-weights aren’t useless, but merely useless for certain people, while they’re useful, on the other hand, to others. If you want to ask me now, ‘Are syllogisms of any use?’, I’d reply that they are, and if you wish, I’ll show you how. (*Disc.* 2.21.20-21)

Returning to both the eye-salve and jumping-weight analogy, Epictetus emphasizes that these tools are not useless, just useless to those who misapply them. Likewise, syllogisms and philosophical principles are useful to the student, but they must be approached and utilized in the right manner. Implicit in this analogy is the idea that

theory is necessary but insufficient for our progress. An athlete requires their jumping-weights to transform their bodies, just as the student requires theory to act properly. But also like a jumping-weight, theory is only a tool for self-improvement and self-transformation, and a tool can be misused. Or worse yet, we can confuse the goal of our efforts as the accumulation of better and better tools and focus on this end rather than focusing on the transformation those tools are supposed to enable us to achieve. We must therefore remember that despite these tools being necessary for our progress, they are a means to an end, and not the end itself. Likewise, we must use these tools properly in order for their value to be actualized. A jumping-weight left unused does not develop an athlete's body. Likewise armor not worn grows rusty and ill-fitted. This call to utilize our tools, and learn how to utilize them properly, is Epictetus' way of confirming the necessity of training.

The third reason we should adopt this interpretation of the relationship between theory and training is that it is anticipated in Epictetus' teacher, Musonius Rufus:

How then would knowing the theory of a thing be better than practicing that theory and doing things in accordance with its guidelines? Although understanding the theory behind the action enables one to speak, it is practice that enables one to act. Theory which teaches how one must act assists action and logically precedes practice, for it is not possible for something good to be accomplished unless it is accomplished in accordance with theory. But as a matter of fact, practice is more important than theory because it more effectively leads humans to actions than theory does. (Stobaeus 2.15.46., Trans. King, p. 34-35)

We see all of the aspects of my interpretation already present within Musonius. Practice is necessary for proper action because it enables the individual to act well. Theory is also necessary because an action may only be deemed good if it accords with theory. Accordingly, both are necessary but insufficient conditions for proper action, with theory preceding practice in a student's education. This is once again confirmed in

another passage, in which Musonius tells us that “practicing each virtue always must follow learning the lessons appropriate to it, or it is pointless for us to learn about it”.²²

This agrees exactly with the interpretation I provided earlier. So, while Epictetus may be missing an explicit articulation of this position, we find it instead in the words of his teacher.

The only aspect that is still puzzling is why practice enables the individual to act properly. We know Musonius holds this position, but it remains to be explained why Musonius does not think a thorough grasp of theory is sufficient to act in accordance with what theory dictates. This may be explained through reference to an additional passage, in which Musonius is credited with the claim that virtue requires both theoretical and practical knowledge:

Virtue, he [Musonius Rufus] said, is not just theoretical knowledge, it is also practical, like both medical and musical knowledge. The doctor and the musician must each not only learn the principles of his own skill but be trained to act according to those principles. Likewise, the man who wants to be good must not only learn the lessons which pertain to virtue but train himself to follow them eagerly and rigorously. (Stobaeus 3.29.78., Trans. King, p. 36)

Just as the musician and doctor must train rigorously to act in accordance with what they have learnt in theory, so must the student of Stoicism. The reason for this is that virtue consists, in part, of the practical knowledge of how to apply theory in action, and this practical knowledge may not be developed without training. Musonius goes on to claim that the Stoic actually requires greater training than a musician or a doctor, because unlike members of other disciplines, the student of philosophy has already been corrupted by learning things contrary to their aim. A musician has not, presumably, been taught

²² Stobaeus. 3.29.78., Trans. King, p. 36.

incorrectly about what good music is, or how to play an instrument poorly. But by the time someone sets themselves to learn Stoicism, they have already been corrupted by numerous lies concerning the subject of philosophy.²³ Taken together, this means that practice is necessary and in no way periphery to the education of a Stoic. It forms a major part of any proper educational program. A Stoic's emphasis on training must be even greater than that of a doctor; a profession which we all recognize requires much diligent practice.

In summation, the previous two sections have developed the argument that Epictetus considered both theory and training as necessary but insufficient for developing virtue. They are also to be engaged with in a specific order, with training following theory in a student's education. It has provided three arguments in support of this position:

- 1) The structure of the *Discourses* and *Enchiridion* seem to mean that the first was intended as a supplement to theory, and the second as a supplement to training.
- 2) Such an interpretation helps make sense of Epictetus' analogies between theory and tools, in that tools are necessary but insufficient if we do not practice using them properly through training.
- 3) We see such a view developed and argued for in Epictetus' teacher, Musonius Rufus.

But there remains a major concern with such an interpretation. Namely that such a view, if held by Epictetus, seems to conflict with his rationalism as discussed in Chapter 2. In other words, if recognizing the truth of something is sufficient to motivate behavior,

²³ Stobaeus 3.29.78., Trans. King, p. 36.

for what possible reason could theory be insufficient to motivate proper behavior? At its worst, Epictetus seems to be forced to choose between his commitments to rationalism, and the necessity of training. The following section will explore this type of concern.

5.4 Concerns About a Reliance on Training

Part of the argument of this chapter has been that Epictetus views training as necessary for a moral education. The previous section demonstrated that he does believe training to be necessary, but this still leaves unanswered the question of the function of training. In other words, we still need to understand what training achieves that theory alone cannot. This is what I call the function of training; the role it plays within our moral education which cannot be subsumed by theory. When we attempt to understand the function of training a problem emerges.

As discussed in above, in Chapter 2 section 3 of this dissertation, Epictetus endorses the psychological view of rationalism, which holds that the agent must necessarily assent to what seems true and must necessarily pursue or avoid what they judge to be good or bad. This is in opposition to other psychological views put forward by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, in which the motivational strength of reason may be stifled or beaten out by other sources of motivation within the agent. If optimistic rationalism is true, then it seems that theory should be sufficient to motivate proper behavior. Epictetus' demand for training and practice seems to produce a dilemma then. Either practice is not necessary, because theory can motivate proper action, or rationalism is not true, and we require training because the recognition of a proposition's truth is not sufficient to motivate us.

Tad Brennan articulates this problem, and raises the concern as follows:

Theorists who view emotions as essentially irrational products of the sub-rational soul will naturally think of them as relatively unresponsive to the ministrations of reason; the Black Horse of the Phaedrus needs the whip and goad. Beliefs, by contrast, should be open (at least in principle) to modification by reasoned argumentation – that need not be the only way of changing beliefs and it need not be the fastest or most efficient method. But one would hope that for any false belief, there is a way of bringing its owner over to the truth by purely rational methods (e.g., considerations of evidence, argument, thought-experiment, and so on). Thus it is quite striking how much of the Stoic therapeutic practice involves methods that seem, at least *prima facie*, to be directed to the non-cognitive modification of non-cognitive entities...some of the methods envisioned by Epictetan *askēsis* should prompt us to ask the general question: Can cognitive theorists help themselves to just any possible means of behavior modification, while still claiming that what they are attempting to do is to reshape beliefs?... It is a plausible rule of thumb that what can only be altered by non-rational means is a non-rational state; even if we reject it as too simplistic, we must still ask what in detail separates cognitivism of the Stoic sort from a full Platonic acceptance of irrational parts of the soul, when our means of altering the dispositions for behavior amount to the same thing in each case. (2003, p. 278-279)

Brennan's concern can be summarized in the following way:

- A) Because of his commitment to rationalism, Epictetus holds the position that our behavior is, and must only ever be, the result of our beliefs.
- B) Beliefs should be able to be modified by rational means, such as that found in the study of theory.
- C) The kinds of training (*askēsis*) recommended by Epictetus do not always seem to be rational means of modifying behavior.
- D) Epictetus considers training to be necessary to modify our behavior towards virtue.

These premises cannot be all true, as this would entail a contradiction. As such, the fact that they all *seem* to be true represents a major concern for the internal consistency of Epictetus' philosophy. To regain internal consistency, one of the premises must be

rejected as false. Brennan, while acknowledging that more work must be done to explore this problem, implies that it is most likely the first premise which should be called into question. Epictetus' reliance on the necessity of theory calls into question the difference, if any, between his conception of the soul and human behavior, and the conception held by someone like Plato, who acknowledges the existence of non-rational motivational forces.

In support of the claim that training does not qualify as a rational means of modifying our beliefs, Brennan provides the example of Epictetus' exercise of repetition. Epictetus demands that his students repeat theory to themselves day and night as a form of training.²⁴ However, repetition of theory gives the agent no new reason to endorse something they did not already endorse, nor does it seem to strengthen the conviction of someone who already takes the theory to be true.²⁵ Thus the exact role something like repetition plays within the framework of rationalism is unclear.

This conflict between the necessity of training, and the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue is also acknowledged by Johnson: "For Epictetus an *orthos logos* is achieved through both learning *and* assiduous habituation. There is a tension for Epictetus in holding this position because intellectualism is only supposed to require knowledge (and not practice) to make certainty secure".²⁶ The concern for Johnson is the relationship

²⁴ Cf. *Disc.* 1.2.28; 2.16.27; 3.10; 3.17.6; 3.18.1; 3.24.103-106; 4.1.110-111; 4.4.29; 4.4.39; 4.12.7; *Ench.* 3; 4; 53. *Frag.* 16.

²⁵ 2003, p. 278-279. Brennan does soften this claim by acknowledging that we do seem to use repetition as a means to strengthen our rational capacities in education today. Memorization is involved in mastering multiplication, and no one would claim that this undermines the rationality of multiplication. I think his concern remains a strong one though, because Epictetus' call for repetition is not a means for memorization. Epictetus seems to believe that there is some additional persuasive power a theory has when it has been recently repeated and brought on hand for the individual.

²⁶ 2014, p. 83, Footnote 30.

between knowledge and practice. Practice is not, for him, a means of achieving knowledge. So, Epictetus' position that practice is necessary to secure an *orthos logos* (right reason), undermines the claim that knowledge is sufficient for this, and thus also challenges his commitment to rationalism.

Johnson and Brennan help to make clear that there is more at stake in this debate and what it means for the consistency of Epictetus' philosophy, than may be immediately apparent. Some recent work has attempted to address this concern. For example, Braicovich's 2012 paper "Critical Assent, Repetition, and Intellectualism" in Epictetus directly addresses Brennan's concerns, and argues for an interpretation of Epictetus' use of repetition which does not conflict with Epictetus' rationalism. But as Braicovich himself acknowledges in the paper, much work remains to be done as this only resolves the conflict between intellectualism and the one exercise of repetition. It does not show that all of Epictetus' exercises can be reconciled with his intellectualism, or that his position on the necessity of training is justified.

What is required then, and missing from current literature, is an account of the overall function of training which can coherently fit within Epictetus' moral psychology. To avoid the concerns of Brennan and Johnson, such an account would have to fit two criteria: First, it must explain the necessity of training. It must provide an explanation of something training can do that the study of theory cannot. Second, this function must be compatible with Epictetus' optimistic rationalism. In other words, it must challenge premise C) of Brennan's argument. Namely, it must explain how training can still be understood as a rational means of modifying beliefs. Moving forward into the next

chapter, I will attempt to provide an account which fits these two criteria and resolves this problem.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Epictetus does not think that an instruction in Stoic theory is sufficient on its own to ensure a proper education, contrary to what we might assume given his commitments to optimistic rationalism. Theory is not sufficient, because it must be combined with training to ensure the progress of the student. From there, it argued that theory and training form the two necessary but on their own insufficient components of a proper moral education, which must be studied sequentially, with theory preceding training. There are three reasons for endorsing this view: First, such a model is mirrored in the respective forms of the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion*. Second, it allows us to make sense of Epictetus' analogy comparing theory to a tool. Third, we find such an account of the relationship between theory and training already present in the philosophy of Epictetus' teacher, Musonius Rufus.

This chapter concluded by exploring some of the problems a commitment to the necessity of training would cause for Epictetus. Specifically, as Brennan and Johnson make clear, the necessity of training seems to be in tension with Epictetus' moral psychology, specifically his commitments to optimistic rationalism. These authors are justified in emphasizing this problem. If left unresolved, this tension between the necessity of training and Epictetus' psychological commitments is a significant problem for the internal consistency of Epictetus' philosophy.

The following chapter will attempt to resolve these concerns, by providing an account of the function of training that both explains why it is necessary, and how it does not conflict with Epictetus' intellectualism.

Chapter 6

Digesting Theory

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter argued that Epictetus views training and theory as two necessary but individually insufficient components of a proper moral education. It was shown that Epictetus considers training to be necessary for achieving virtue, but it was also noted that scholarship on Epictetus has raised concerns about the function which this training serves. Epictetus' insistence on the necessity of training seems to potentially conflict with his psychological commitments.

The aim of this chapter is to explore Epictetus' metaphor of the digestion (*pepsis*) of theory. I argue that it is this metaphor which explains the function of training. The chapter examines what the 'digestion' of theory entails for the individual at a psychological level. I show that the metaphor of digesting theory refers to the process by which the student forms beliefs about particular objects and situations which are consistent with what the student has endorsed at a more general theoretical level. Digestion is necessary if the student wishes to act in accordance with what they have learnt in the classroom.

This digestion is deeply connected to training, because it is Epictetus' view that digestion requires training, and cannot be achieved with theory alone. I argue that training facilitates digestion, because it is training which mitigates weakness and precipitancy so that digestion may occur. Such an account of the function of training

would eliminate any concerns about an inconsistency between training and Epictetus' commitments to optimistic rationalism.

6.2 Ancient Medical Conceptions of Digestion

Before exploring Epictetus' metaphor of digestion, it is worth briefly sketching how digestion was understood as a physiological process, and as a philosophical metaphor, by his contemporaries.

Galen (129-200 CE) was a prolific medical author who came to prominence not long after the death of Epictetus c. 135 CE. In his work *On the Natural Faculties*, Galen summarizes the Hippocratic and Aristotelian understanding of digestion as follows: “[Hippocrates and Aristotle held] that digestion is a species of alteration- a transmutation of the nutriment into the proper quality of the thing receiving it...”.¹ While this conception of digestion was held by prominent figures before the era of Galen and Epictetus, it seems to have persisted in the Roman Era. Galen himself endorses this view, claiming later in the same work that “digestion was shown to be nothing else than an alteration to the quality proper to that which is receiving nourishment.”²

Digestion was conceived of at this time primarily as a form alteration or transmutation. The nutriment of food contains something of value to the individual, but this value is inaccessible. Through the process of digestion, the nutriment is transformed into the appropriate nourishing quality, which may then benefit the individual.

¹ Galen, *On Natural Faculties*, Book 2, Section 4, p. 140-141.

² *Ibid.*, Book 3, Section 7, p. 258.

Understood in this way, the ancient conception of digestion has two important features. First, it is a transformative process. It alters in some way the object of digestion. Second, this transformation renders the object valuable to the one digesting it. Digestion involves transforming the inaccessible value of an object into a form which may be utilized by the agent.

Another source of information on digestion is Aulus Cornelius Celsus's *On Medicine*. Celsus was a Roman author of encyclopedias. He lived from 25 BC – 50 CE, which was just before the approximate birth of Epictetus in c. 55 CE. Celsus tells of the important role played by digestion in the ancient Greek understanding of health. He claims that the ancient Greeks considered digestion to be the most important natural function of the body, above breathing and the production of blood.³ The importance of digestion for physical health was also present within Roman thought. Celsus considers digestion to be a necessity for the proper exercise of all other bodily functions, and that indigestion is incredibly harmful for an individual.⁴

We can see from this is the holistic function digestion had in the medical understanding of the time. Digestion was not just a means to extract value from food, it was also a significant part of overall health of the individual and influenced the success or failure of other bodily functions. It played a central role in ensuring the overall health and well-being of the individual, due to how it related to the rest of our bodily functions.

It is also important to note the relationship that vomiting held for ensuring proper digestion. While vomiting unnecessarily is harmful, it was considered beneficial to vomit

³ *On Medicine*, Book 1, Preface, p. 13.

⁴ *On Medicine*, Book 1, Ch. 9, p. 78.

if one is unable to digest their food properly because they ate too much or ate something of a corrupted nature. In such cases, vomiting is beneficial for our health and digestion, and should be induced or encouraged.⁵ This account of vomiting seems to have a slightly different connotation than our modern conception. Celsus believes vomiting to be helpful for a variety of ailments, and he advocates it “to anyone who has heartburn and copious salivation or nausea, or ringing in the ears, or watering of the eyes, or a bitter taste in the mouth...as well as in the case of those who become troubled by pain over the heart when they have not vomited for several days.”⁶

However, Celsus also recognizes the dangers of vomiting, claiming it to be dangerous for our health, and “that no one who wants to keep well, and live to old age, should make it a daily habit.”⁷ In this way, vomiting was seen as superior to indigestion and its symptoms, but it was not to be practiced in excess or for luxury. For example, the practice of eating and then inducing vomiting so that one may eat again was not approved by Celsus. Such practices were considered to be poor for the health of the individual.

We are left with the following medical understanding of digestion in Epictetus’ time period: digestion is a process of transformation, in which the nutriment of food may be transformed into the quality that is appropriate and beneficial to the agent. As such, digestion both distributes the nutriments throughout the body *and* transforms them into something suitable for individual. Digestion is of central importance for the overall health of the individual. It was considered among the most important of all the body’s natural functions for overall well-being. Indigestion may be caused by eating too much, or

⁵ *On Medicine*, Book 1, Ch. 3, p. 55-64.

⁶ *On Medicine*, Book 1, Ch. 3, p. 61.

⁷ *On Medicine*, Book 1, Ch. 3, p. 61.

something of a corrupted matter, and this should be alleviated with vomiting. However, vomiting is still harmful for the individual's health, and is best to be avoided unless done to help alleviate a different problem.

With this the medical understanding of digestion in mind, let us turn then to the use of digestion as a metaphor in the other Roman Stoics: Seneca and Marcus Aurelius.⁸ Seneca used digestion as a metaphor in his *Letters on Ethics*, written and published when Epictetus was still a child in 65 CE.

In Letter 2, Seneca warns Lucilius to not read too many different authors in too short a period of time. He reminds Lucilius that the writings of others must be considered carefully if he is to find value in them. But if he reads one text, and immediately moves to another, then these texts will not aid him, just as “food does not benefit or become part of the body when it is eaten and immediately expelled.”⁹ The solution to this problem is to study a text thoroughly. If Lucilius finds himself moving too quickly through many authors and topics, he should instead “select one to ponder that day and digest”.¹⁰

Later in the same work, Seneca encourages Lucilius to both read and write as part of a proper education. We need to write about what we have read to ensure that “whatever is collected through reading maybe assimilated (*redigat*) into the body by writing.”¹¹ He then says that we should be like bees, who do not just collect honey from

⁸ While this section will focus on discussion of digestion in the Roman Stoics, there is an important precursor present in Plato's *Protagoras* 313d-14c. Socrates compares public philosophical lessons to food bought at the market and notes a major difference between the two. When one purchases food from the market, they can store the food before they ingest it and consult experts on if it should be eaten and how. However, when one hears a public philosophy lesson, the lesson is immediately integrated and taken away in one's soul, and the soul is left damaged or bettered. As such, it is much riskier buying a philosophical lesson than food, as only the lesson must be immediately ingested.

⁹ Seneca, *Letters*, 2.3.

¹⁰ Seneca, *Letters*, 2.4.

¹¹ Seneca, *Letters*, 84.2.

flowers, but actively transform what they have collected into honey through their own effort.¹² The concept of assimilating what we have read into the body through writing, and the metaphor of bees transforming what they collected into something of value, both evoke the medical notion of digestion. Seneca goes on to confirm this comparison by explicitly relating them to digestion:

We must also imitate these bees, and taking the things we have gathered from our diverse reading, separate them (for things are better preserved when they are kept distinct), then, applying the care and ability of our own talent, conjoin those various samples into one savor... It is what we see nature do in our bodies through no effort of our own. The nutriments we have taken are burdensome for just so long as they retain their own character and swim as solids in the stomach; but when they have been changed from what they were, then at last they are added to our strength, passing into our bloodstream. Let us accomplish the same with these things that nourish the talent... Let us digest them; otherwise they will pass into the memory, not into the talent (*ingenium*). (Seneca, *Letters*, 84.5-7)

These two uses of digestion as a metaphor have enough in common to show that Seneca is using the metaphor in a consistent manner. We must digest the texts of others in order to render them valuable to us. Digestion is facilitated by reading texts slowly and carefully, as well as writing about what we have read. Digestion is harmed by moving from author to author too quickly, or by reading in a shallow manner and not supplementing our reading with other exercises.

Digestion for Seneca is the process by which we transform the texts we have read from inert words into something valuable which improves or alters our nature (*ingenium*). Digestion in this sense is thus not perfectly analogous to physical digestion, which we “see nature do in our bodies through no effort of our own”. The digestion of philosophical texts requires effort. In this way we are like a bee, which must work

¹² Seneca, *Letters*, 84.

purposefully to transform what they have acquired from external sources into something valuable to them.

We find this association between purposeful effort and digestion present within Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* as well. As Marcus reflects upon the inevitability of death and the transitory nature of life, he tells himself: "what is any of this but training (*gumnasmata*) – training for your *logos*, in life observed accurately, scientifically. So keep at it until it's fully digested (*exoikeiōsēs*).¹³ As a strong stomach digests whatever it eats. As a blazing fire takes wherever you throw on it, and makes it light and flame."¹⁴

While this passage is more obscure than those in Seneca, they are some significant similarities. First, digestion is used as a metaphor for a means to self-improvement. Marcus is not talking about literal digestion of food. He is referring to transforming the hardships of life into something which benefit his *logos*, or rational nature. Second, digestion involves transformation of something external to the agent. It converts something previously inert into something of value. This is made clear through the analogy to a fire. A fire incorporates what is thrown onto it as part of the fire, and it uses it as fuel to become even stronger. Finally, there is this association between digestion and training. This kind of philosophical digestion is not passive. It is something that must be kept at and is the result of effort.

As we turn to Epictetus' use of the metaphor, we should keep in mind then that he is writing within the context of a greater scientific and philosophical context. One in which Seneca has already used digestion as a metaphor to refer to the process by which we

¹³ It is worth noting here that the verb rendered as 'digestion' by Hays, *exoikeoō*, is typically translated as 'to appropriate' or 'to assimilate'. However, Hays, presumably because of Marcus' discussion of the stomach, translates it as 'digests'. While Marcus does not use the same term Epictetus, I believe the connection with the stomach is enough to render 'digests' an accurate translation here.

¹⁴ *Meditations*, 10.31.

incorporate the lessons of philosophical texts into our constitution, through careful reading and writing.

6.3 Digestion in Epictetus

There are three passages in the remaining works of Epictetus in which he discusses the digestion of theory, and an additional passage where he references the related phenomenon of vomiting. This is not a significant amount of text, but nonetheless enough evidence can be taken from these passages to develop a coherent picture of what Epictetus means by this metaphor.

Epictetus first mentions digestion in Book 2, Chapter 9 of the *Discourses*. It is preceded by a passage in which he warns of the negative effects of poor habituation. He argues that performing vicious acts strengthens the vicious nature of one's character, making it harder to remedy. This tendency, if not corrected by practice and training, produces individuals who can recite a systematic discourse on Stoic theory, but are flustered by the opinions of others:

That is why philosophers recommend that we shouldn't be contented merely to learn, but should add practice too, and then training (*askēsin*)... For who is there among us at this present time who cannot give a systematic account of what is good and bad?... Then, while were speaking, if some rather loud noise occurs, or someone in the audience begins to laugh at us, we become disconcerted. Tell me, philosopher, what has become of the fine things that you were saying? Where did you get them from? Your lips, and that's all. Why do you spoil helpful thoughts, then, that are not your own? Why do you play around with matters of the highest importance? It is one thing to put bread and wine away in a store-room, and quite another to eat them. What is eaten is digested (*epephthē*) and distributed around the body, to become sinews, flesh, bones, blood, and a good complexion, sound breathing. What is stored away is ready at hand, to be sure, to be taken out and displayed whenever you wish, but you derive no benefit from it, except that of having the reputation of possessing it. (*Disc.* 2.9.13-18.)

Digestion is presented as a way for Epictetus to explain how it is possible, given Stoic psychology, that some people can understand Stoic theory to the point of being able to provide a systematic discourse upon it, but yet do not act in accordance with that theory. The explanation is that such individuals possess theory but have not yet digested it. In an undigested state, theory is unable to transform or alter the character of the individual, and thus has no value to them, besides as a means to show-off. We must recognize, then, the difference between acquiring theory and actively digesting it, if we hope to avoid this hypocritical way of living.

Epictetus also acknowledges the relationship between training (*askēsis*) and digestion. It is the individual who does not train themselves to adopt and apply correct opinions who finds themselves in this position of not being able to act in accordance with theory. Although Epictetus does not explain in this passage why training is necessary, or the form it must take beyond adopting and applying correct opinions, it is clear that training is part of the link between acquiring theory and digesting it. It is not sufficient, if we wish to be virtuous, to simply learn theory with no attempt to actively incorporate it into our character through training.

Epictetus returns to the metaphor of digestion in Book 3, Chapter 21:

Those who have taken in the principles raw (*theoremata psila*) and without any dressing immediately want to vomit them up again, just as people with weak stomachs bring up their food. Digest (*pepson*) them first, and then you won't vomit (*exemesēis*) them up in this way. Otherwise they do indeed become nothing more than vomit, foul stuff that isn't fit to eat. But after having digested them, show us some resulting change in your ruling centre (*hegemonikou*)... (*Disc.* 3.21.1-3)

Once again, there is this association between digestion of theory and the transformation of our character. Digested theory is valuable because it changes our

hegemonikon for the better. Epictetus also returns to a warning about engaging with theory in the wrong way. He warns us against studying *theoremata psila*, or raw principles.¹⁵ The point is that there is something lacking from studying precepts in this way. It is a way of engaging with Stoic theory which is deficient in some important manner. This again reminds us of the insufficiency of theory. It is not enough to learn just the bare precepts. We must also train ourselves in them and focus on their applicability to our own life.

Epictetus also introduces in this passage the metaphor of vomiting (*exemeō*), which further develops the theme of theory as food. Before discussing Epictetus' use of vomiting further, it is worth noting that a metaphorical discussion of vomiting seems to have been present in Stoicism since at least Chrysippus and was perhaps even a common phrase. Galen, reporting on Chrysippus' *On Affections*, quotes Chrysippus as saying: "...we say that some people vomit up (*anemein*) their impressions... Thus when people have swallowed (*katapiontes*) the statement (let us say) that it is day, and have stored this up in their minds, and then make that other assertion, that it is not day – the circumstances remaining the same -, it is not absurd or inappropriate to say that they vomit up."¹⁶ (*PHP* 3.5.15, De Lacy 205). According to Chrysippus, Stoics of his time would refer to 'swallowing' impressions. These impressions are 'vomited up' when you assert something to their contrary. Given Epictetus' familiarity with Chrysippean texts, it is quite possible this terminology and extended metaphor is taken from Chrysippus directly.

¹⁵ *Theoremata psila* was translated by Robin Hard as 'precepts as mere theory', in his 1995 translation.

¹⁶ *PHP*, 3.5.15, De Lacy 205.

From Epictetus use of the vomiting metaphor in *Disc.* 3.21., we see that vomiting theory is something to be avoided and is avoided by completing the process of digestion. We learn later on in the same chapter that there is a performative aspect of vomiting. Vomiting is associated with those who wish to show off their theory. When a student who has no interest in demonstrating what they have learnt in their actions offers to read their commentaries to Epictetus, Epictetus responds “away with you, look for someone to vomit over.”¹⁷ Vomiting is the opposite of digestion. It is the process by which theory is rendered valueless, into tainted matter unfit to eat, and then externalized onto others. Digestion, by contrast, is an internal and personal process. It is when we transform theory into something valuable for us, and it is used to alter our *hegemonikon*.

These two metaphors are evoked together one final time in chapter 46 of the *Enchiridion*. In this passage, Epictetus warns against publicizing our philosophical practice. Instead, we should focus on working to act in accordance with our principles:

And accordingly, if any talk should arise among laymen about some philosophical principle (*theorematos*), keep silent for the most part, for there is a great danger that you’ll simply vomit up (*exemesai*) what you haven’t properly digested. So when the day arrives when someone tells you that you know nothing, and you, like Socrates, aren’t upset by that, you may be sure that you’re making a start on your work as a philosopher. For sheep, too, don’t vomit up their fodder to show the shepherds how much they’ve eaten, but digest their food inside them, and produce wool and milk on the outside. And so you likewise shouldn’t show off your principles (*theoremata*) but rather show them the actions that result from those principles when they’ve been properly digested. (*Ench.* 46)

In this passage, digestion is once again set as opposite to vomiting. Vomiting is a metaphor for when students boast about their knowledge of principles to others. This is counter-productive to the actual task of the student, which is digesting theory and

¹⁷ *Disc.* 3.21.6-7.

actualizing it in their actions. Once again, we see that our tendency to vomit up theory may be countered by the process of digestion. We are at risk of vomiting up what has not been digested.

The metaphor of vomiting and digestion helps to emphasize the public and private nature of these psychological phenomena. Vomiting is public and external. It is something one does in presence of others and the act is immediately noticeable. Digestion, by contrast, is private and internal. It is a process of transformation which cannot be seen or noticed by others. Epictetus is telling us that proper engagement with theory will be an internal and private process. When we attempt to demonstrate our progress through words, we vomit the theory up, transforming it into something tainted and unfit to be consumed by the individual. However, when we internalize theory, and do not attempt to show it off to others, we are in a position to transform it into something valuable to us. We can digest it.

Epictetus is using digestion and vomiting here in manner which is consistent with the other passages. This consistency of usage establishes that these metaphors are really meant to refer to specific aspect of how the student engages with theory.

In this final passage, Epictetus refers to vomiting without mentioning digestion. However, given that the phenomena are deeply interrelated, we can infer some things about the nature of digestion from the nature of vomiting:

This, then, is the first step in philosophy, to become aware of the condition of one's ruling centre. For when a person comes to know that it is in a weak (*asthenos*) state, he will no longer wish to employ it on matters of importance. But as things are, people who are incapable of swallowing down a small morsel go and buy a whole treatise and set out to devour it. With the result that they vomit it up (*emeō*) or suffer from indigestion (*apepteō*); and then come bowel upsets, diarrheas, and fevers. (*Disc.* 1.26.15-17)

We learn from this passage that vomiting and indigestion are related to weakness. An individual suffering from weakness is more likely vomit what they have learnt and less likely to successfully digest it even if they do not vomit it up. Avoiding vomiting and indigestion, and thus achieving successful digestion, is also dependent upon the student taking on challenges and learning theory at a level appropriate to their current progress. The weak individual does not have to abstain from theory, but they must be careful to not extend beyond what their current state allows, if they wish to avoid vomiting and indigestion. Successful digestion of theory thus depends in part on these two features: the removal of weakness, and a cautiousness to not employ ourselves in matters greater than our current level of weakness allows.

With the textual evidence provided, let us turn now to an interpretation of what digestion means for Epictetus, and the function it plays within his educational program. While Epictetus does not explain what the metaphor of digestion represents psychologically in explicit terms, we have enough evidence to recognize features of digestion that any interpretation will have to be able to explain:

- 1) Digestion involves philosophical principles (*theoremata*).
- 2) Digestion allows principles to actualize their moral worth.
- 3) The study of theory alone is not sufficient for digestion to occur.¹⁸

First, we can be confident that digestion concerns principles (*theoremata*), or Stoic theory. This is confirmed in *Disc.* 3.2.1, and *Ench* 46, which are the second and third

¹⁸ This account of digestion is similar to the one I sketch out in “Digestion and Moral Progress in Epictetus” (2019). The accounts are essentially identical the main difference is I go into greater detail in the present chapter and situate digestion within the context of Epictetus’ peers such as Seneca.

passages presented above. Principles are the object of digestion. They are what are digested by the agent, and they will fail to be digested if they are vomited out.

Second, digestion allows principles learnt in the study of theory to actualize their latent moral worth. In other words, when a theory is ingested, or learnt in study, the theory is not yet able to alter the *hegemonikon* of the agent, and thus the agent does not yet act in accordance with the theory. Through digestion theory is transformed in some sense, such that it may be of value or benefit to the *hegemonikon*. This is further supported by the ancient conception of digestion as a form of transformation, in which the nutriment takes a form which may be utilized by the agent.

Finally, any account of digestion will have to explain why theory alone is insufficient for digestion to occur. The connection between digestion and theory is made explicit in *Disc. 2.9.13-17*, and it is also alluded to in *Disc. 3.21.1-3* when Epictetus' warns against students learning theory 'raw'. But this still invites the concerns about Epictetus' psychological coherence raised in the previous chapter. Why can a student not digest principles by merely studying them, and considering the reasons why they should assent to them and take them to be true? A coherent account of digestion will have to explain why this is the case.

6.4 The Nature of Digestion

What is required then, is an interpretation of digestion which can explain these three features. There has been very little reference to digestion in the literature on Epictetus. This is due, at least in part, to the obscure nature of the evidence. John Sellars notes the metaphor and argues that Epictetus believes digestion to be necessary for the individual

“to absorb one’s philosophical ideas into one’s character”.¹⁹ While Sellars’ identification of this metaphor is invaluable, he does not provide an account of how digestion achieves this end. What is missing from the literature is an account of what digestion entails at a psychological level. Digestion involves gaining the ability to act in accordance with theory, but what does this process of digestion entail at the level of beliefs?

I argue that digestion refers to the process in which the student, through reference to philosophical principles, successfully categorizes particular objects and situations with the appropriate preconception. In this way, digesting theory is a necessary part of making proper use of our impressions. It is what the student must do after they have acquired the appropriate principles and standard of judgements by which to judge and categorize impressions of particular objects. It is the process of actually forming beliefs about the objects in the world in accordance with the principles we have learnt in a general and abstract form.

Under this conception, the individual who has not digested theory possesses the required principles or the theory necessary for making proper use of impressions, but still lacks correct beliefs about the specific circumstances of their life. It is for this reason that the individual who has not digested theory cannot act in accordance with it, despite being able to recite this theory. They store the theory, rendering it useless to them until they have a mind to employ it, or they vomit it over others in the form of recitations and commentaries. These recitations are vomit, valueless discharge, because they represent the perverted understanding of theory by one who has not taken the time to render the rest of their beliefs in accordance with what they claim to endorse.

¹⁹ 2007, p. 133.

Let us consider an example of how digestion would work for the Stoic in training. All individuals already possess shared moral preconceptions, even before studying Stoicism. Through studying theory, they can also gain Stoic principles, which give content to those preconceptions. Principles tell us what qualifies as an instance of certain preconceptions. Take the following for example:

Preconception = I should pursue what is good.

Theorema = Virtue is the only good.²⁰

If the student has learnt this principle, they are in possession of both a motivating preconceptual category, in this case goodness, and a principle which allows them to define if a specific object qualifies as a member of that category. In this case, the principle tells us that something only qualifies as good if it is an instance of virtue. An education up to this point would, I argue, be the study of mere theory. The student possesses and may have even assented to the principles of this kind, but they are not yet acting in accordance with them.²¹ If Epictetus' rationalism is to be preserved, then the student must still be lacking a kind of knowledge. However, this knowledge is not at the level of general principles, so we must search elsewhere.

I argue that the type of knowledge which the individual lacks is a kind of particular knowledge. They lack beliefs about particular objects in their life which are in accordance with the principles they endorse on a general level. At best they have no

²⁰ Cf. *Disc.* 2.9.15

²¹ See *Disc.* 4.6.12.

beliefs, and at worst they have the wrong beliefs. Someone who possess undigested theoretical knowledge, and as such still has incorrect beliefs about particular objects, would be the student mentioned in the first passage. They are able to deliver a systemic discourse on Stoic principles but are flustered by the laughter of others. They understand the Stoic theory of indifferents, and they may even agree, on a general level, that the opinions of others are indifferent. But they still believe the opinions of those around them, here and now, are of genuine value and this belief causes the laughter to upset them.

To digest a theory then, is to go around applying that theory successfully in particular instances of reasoning, concerning particular objects in our lives, until all of our beliefs about the world and the particular objects within it agree with that theory. To fully digest the principle that virtue is the only good is to have used that principle to successfully categorize all instances of virtue you have encountered as good, and to have excluded from goodness all other types of objects you have beliefs about. It is clear that this is still a type of knowledge that must be gained in order to act virtuously, despite being a different kind of knowledge than general principles. Digestion would not be an immediate or easy process and would not necessarily immediately follow a genuine and informed assent to a principle.

Given the account I have provided, it is also clear why digestion is required to act in accordance with our theory. Principles are necessary and important, because we require them to correctly categorize particular objects. But what matters when we act is how we value the object we are encountering. I will desire the admiration of my peers, and will be disappointed when they laugh at me, if I have categorized this admiration as a good. I can

have this mistaken categorization, even if I know the Stoic principle that virtue is the only good, so long as I do not apply that principle in the situation at hand. In other words, if the student does not take the necessary steps to apply the theory they have learnt in particular situations, they will not engage in the process of digestion and not act upon that theory.

If digestion is understood in the way I have described it, then it is a necessary part of Epictetus' educational program. This still leaves the question of how digestion is supposed to be facilitated. We need to understand what a student must do to ensure that they are successful in this process. In the next section, I argue that this is where training finds its function. Training is necessary for Epictetus' educational program, because it is training which allows the student to digest their theory.

6.5 The Necessity of Training

We have seen in the passages above warnings from Epictetus to his students that if they wish to digest their theory they must not be content with mere learning or mere theory but add training and practice. This connection must be explored in greater detail. If digestion is just the process of acquiring true beliefs about the value of particular objects in accordance with Stoic theory, then it still needs to be explained why this requires training. We can all understand why theory can be studied poorly, without a focus on its practical applications, but it is perhaps unclear why the student could not successfully apply theory just by gaining a more thorough understanding of its justifications and implications. I argue that digestion requires training, and not mere theory, because

digestion is prevented by weakness and precipitancy and these phenomena may only be mitigated by training.

In Chapter 4 I argued that precipitancy and weakness were two phenomena which impeded or prevented the Stoic in training from making correct judgements. Moral progress consists of series of correct inferences from general principles to beliefs about particular objects. If the student possesses the appropriate theory, and desires to become a better Stoic, then the two things that might prevent these inferences from being successful are precipitancy and weakness.

Precipitancy is when we fail to make the correct inference because we fail to apply the appropriate standard of judgement when forming a belief about a particular object or situation. It is a lack of appropriate reflection concerning a particular assent. It involves failing to make our assent intentional, and a failure to call forward the necessary theory when contemplating a situation.

Weakness is when we fail to make the correct inference, or we change our mind, because the presence of a passions and false beliefs impedes our reasoning process. The important point here is that moral progress in part consists of forming a number of correct beliefs about particular situations and objects. For a correct belief to be formed and acted upon, three criteria must be met:

- 1) The student must possess the proper standard of judgement (or principle) by which to judge the situation.
- 2) The student must avoid precipitancy.
- 3) The student must avoid weakness.

If the student can achieve and maintain all three criteria, then they can correctly apply the standard of judgement in particular situations and digest theory. Having outlined what a correct inference requires, we are in a position to understand why training is necessary for digestion. Training is necessary because theory only gives us the first necessary part of a successful judgement. Theory only provides us with the required principle. Theory without training does not, in Epictetus' view, prevent precipitancy and weakness. The prevention of precipitancy and weakness can only be achieved by training.

Training is necessary because preventing precipitancy and weakness is a skill employed in particular situations, which must be practiced. Theory is general, and thus can be appropriately trained in a general context such as the classroom. But preventing precipitancy and weakness requires a degree of practical mastery in dealing with impressions. It requires a competency in the process of assent. It is not enough to have the general principles; the agent must also learn how to mitigate their passions and remain vigilant and aware of when a certain principle needs to be invoked and applied. I hold that Epictetus believes the agent can only gain this type of competency through the process of assenting to a variety of different impressions in a variety of different applied contexts, while implement a series of training exercises.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the metaphor of digestion is essential to understanding Epictetus' view on the relationship between theory and training. Digestion involves progressing from having endorsed Stoic theory at the level of general precepts, to having beliefs about particular objects and situations which are in accordance with that theory.

Digestion is required to act as a Stoic should, whereas a superficial knowledge of theory is sufficient to recite that theory to others. Furthermore, I argued that Epictetus believes we must engage in training above and beyond the study of theory if we are to successfully digest theory. If this is correct, this means that Epictetus' reliance on training in no way conflicts with his rationalism. Training just helps us come to form more true beliefs, by helping us reason about specific situations instead of general principles. The next and final chapter will develop the content of Epictetus' training exercises and provide examples of how they function.

Chapter 7

The Moral Exercises

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter argued that training is a necessary part of Epictetus' educational program because it performs a specific function which theory alone cannot. Specifically, training allows for the digestion of theory, where digestion is understood as the process of forming correct judgments about particular objects and situations which are in accordance with the theory studied by the student.

While I have argued for this reading of Epictetus, we have yet to see what Epictetus' training exercises consist of, and how they would facilitate digestion. This chapter will discuss these exercises. It makes a distinction between two types of exercises in Epictetus: preventative and remedial. It then examines in detail three preventative training exercises, and two remedial exercises.¹

¹ This list is not meant to be exhaustive. There are other types of exercises present within Epictetus, and different ways of categorizing the examples and passages that I discuss here. For example, Braicovich (2014) identifies the discussion of 18 exercises in the secondary literature on Epictetus. Braicovich argues that an ethical exercise, properly understood, should only consist of those things which are performed by the agent "in a conscious, deliberate and voluntary manner" (p. 136), and on this criterion reduces the list from the 18 identified in the literature to 10 which may legitimately be called exercises. For example, with this definition Braicovich argues that we may not properly call the suspension of desire and aversion an exercise, because it is not deliberately done in the moment of assent by the agent when forming judgements, despite it still being a fundamental part of Epictetus' educational program (p. 132). I agree with Braicovich's definition of an exercise as something that must be intentional and deliberately done by the agent and agree that this is an important distinction to make in order to separate actual *exercises* from other therapeutic aspects of Epictetus' educational program. My categories seem to be of a broader nature than Braicovich's, however there remains an overlap. What he identifies as exercises 4 and 5 roughly correspond to what I call critical assent, and Exercises 1, 11, and 12 would fall under what I call Repetition. However, even with this reductionist standpoint, there are still more exercises present in Epictetus than I shall cover here. My aim in the chapter is to explore the five exercises I take to be the most important to Epictetus' educational program. For a further discussion of Epictetus' exercises beyond Braicovich's paper, see Sorabji, 2002, p. 211-216 and Xenakis, 1969, p. 85-104.

The discussion of each exercise will be broken into two parts. First, I will discuss the exercise itself and what it consists of and demands the agent to do. Second, I will discuss in what way this helps to mitigate or prevent precipitancy and weakness.

7.2 Two Types of Training Exercises

When arguing that training facilitates digestion, it is important to clarify that digestion can come about in two ways. We have defined digestion as the process of coming to form beliefs about particular objects and situations which are in accordance with general Stoic theory. If this is the case, then there are two ways to digest theory because there are two ways to come to form correct beliefs:

- 1) We can change currently held false beliefs.
- 2) We can assent correctly when facing novel impressions.

Both processes result in the digestion of theory. They both result in the agent coming to hold beliefs which follow from what Stoic theory dictates. But these processes are quite distinct in terms of how they go about arriving at correct beliefs.

This distinction was anticipated by Xenakis in his book *Epictetus: Philosopher-Therapist*. Xenakis makes the distinction between two types of therapeutic training exercises in Epictetus. He divides them into preventative and remedial exercises.² As defined by Xenakis, preventative exercises are “techniques for anticipating ills”, and remedial ethics are “techniques for alleviating ills”.³ As a Stoic, for Epictetus ills are false

² 1969, p. 71.

³ 1969, p. 71. It should be noted that this is not a distinction made by Epictetus himself. However, the distinction does follow legitimate differences between types of exercises he employs. This distinction between the remedial and preventative is made by Sorabji (2002, p. 211-227) and Gill (2013) more recently as it applies to therapeutic exercises in ancient philosophy more generally.

judgements, and the passions which accompany them. So, following this distinction, we will call preventative those exercises which prevent the formation of new false beliefs and remedial those which correct currently held false beliefs. We can see that this distinction is just a different way of framing these two methods of digestion.

Forming correct beliefs is facilitated in two ways by these two kinds of training. Two quick examples, which will be discussed in detail later, will help make the difference between these two types clear. Xenakis provides as an example of a remedial exercise what he calls ‘lenitive talk’.⁴ These are soothing reflections which allow those undergoing hardship to reframe the situation in a positive light. What type of lenitive talk should be used depends on the problem faced. For example, Epictetus tells his students to reframe the death of a child or wife from them being ‘lost’ to them being ‘given back’.⁵ In another passage, Epictetus makes clear that if one is insulted or struck, they can mitigate their suffering by reminding themselves how things could be worse.⁶ This reframing exercise is remedial because it is applied to an already present passion, caused by a fault in one’s character or beliefs. It is the one who has already conceived of the death of their child incorrectly who must apply a remedy.

Preventative exercises do not work in the same manner. Preventative exercises are those which stop false judgements from being formed in the first place. As a quick example, we will take the exercise of critical assent. Critical assent is the exercise of drawing attention to the process of assent, and delaying assent to an impression until

⁴ 1969, p. 98-102.

⁵ *Ench.* 11.

⁶ *Disc.* 4.5.8-10

sufficient reflection has been given.⁷ This exercise gives the agent a better chance of making proper use of incoming impressions by giving them the time required to make the correct judgement about their veracity. This exercise is preventative because it intervenes before there is a mistaken judgement to alleviate. While preventative and remedial exercises have the same ends in mind, they go about achieving it through different means.

What this means is that there are two ways in which what is learnt as theory can be actively applied by the student of Stoicism through training. Training can be applied to beliefs already possessed, or it can be applied when making judgements about new impressions. Remedial exercises are those which help remedy false beliefs already held by the agent, and preventative exercises help the agent assent correctly to incoming impressions, and form true beliefs, or at least abstain from judgement, instead of forming false ones.

While Xenakis introduces this division, he stops short of fleshing out more generally the differences between these two categories of exercises, and the unique role they each hold within Epictetus' program of moral education. And while much recent work labels and describes the exercises of Epictetus, it does not develop this distinction between preventative and remedial exercises or point to its greater implications.⁸ The remainder of this chapter will return to Xenakis' distinction and develop it in greater detail in order to understand how each type of exercise functions.

Beginning with preventative exercises, their role is to stop the student from assenting incorrectly to incoming impressions. In order to do so, they must prevent the causes of

⁷ See *Disc.* 2.18.24-26, 3.3.14-17, 3.8.1-4.

⁸ See Xenakis, 1969, p. 70-106; Sorabji, 2002, p. 211-216; Irvine, 2009; Braicovitch, 2014; Pigliucci and Lopez, 2019.

poor reasoning. As outlined in Chapter 4, Epictetus describes two primary causes for why someone who is knowledgeable in Stoic theory might still fail to assent correctly:

- A) Precipitancy: When the agent does not properly judge novel impressions because they fail to apply the appropriate standard of judgement.
- B) Weakness: When the agent fails to properly judge novel impressions because passions impede their capacity to reason properly.

Therefore, a major function of preventative exercises is to mitigate precipitancy and weakness in the individual, so that they are in a strong position to assent properly to incoming impressions, even in difficult or novel situations. To see how preventative exercises achieve this, we will look at three prominent examples in Epictetus.

7.3 Three Examples of Preventative Exercises

7.3.1 The Exercise of Critical Assent

The first exercise we will examine is the suspension of judgement and examination of impressions. This is referred to by Braicovich as critical assent, a term I will use here.⁹

The exercise consists of slowing down the process of assent, such that we have time to intentionally reflect upon the impressions at hand.¹⁰

⁹ This exercise is identified and described by Braicovich in his paper “Critical Assent, Intellectualism and Repetition in Epictetus” (2012, p. 314-321). It is also noted by Hijmans (1959, p. 68-70) who calls it the exercise of alertness and relates it to the Greek term *prosochē*. Bartsch (2007) identifies this exercise as well, and relates it to *ekphrasis* in the work Seneca, which is the exercise of describing a scene or work of art without yet make value judgements about it. He argues that Seneca’s practice of providing descriptions of places, scenarios, and stories, serves as training so that we may better be able to practice *ekphrasis*, description without judgement, on the impressions we receive.

¹⁰ Critical assent seems to be an original contribution of Epictetus. We see some evidence for the same demand for vigilance from his teacher Musonius Rufus: “the student should pay close attention to the things which are said and watch out that he does not inadvertently accept some falsehood” (Stobaeus 2.31.125, Trans King. p. 25). But the way in which Epictetus constructs vigilant assent as an active exercise to be practiced by the student is unique to him.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Section 4 of this thesis, Epictetus says that "...the most important task of a philosopher, and his first task, is to test out impressions and distinguish between them, and not to accept an impression unless it has been duly tested".¹¹ The exercise of critical assent is just engaging in this active examination and testing of impressions:

But first of all, don't allow yourself to be dazed by the rapidity of the impact, but say, 'Wait a while for me, my impression, let me see what you are, and what you're an impression of; let me test you out.' And then don't allow it to lead you on by making you picture all that may follow, or else it will take possession of you and conduct you wherever it wants. But rather, introduce some fine and noble impression in place of it, and cast out this impure one. If you get into the habit of carrying out such exercises (*gumnazesthai*), you'll see what shoulders you'll develop, and what muscles, and what strength. (*Disc.* 2.18.24-26)

It is in accordance with this plan of action above all that one should train oneself. As soon as you leave the house at the break of day, examine everyone whom you see, everyone whom you hear, and answer as if under questioning. What did you see? A handsome man or a beautiful woman? Apply the rule. Does this lie within the sphere of choice, or outside it? Outside. Throw it away. What did you see? Someone grieving over the death of his child? Apply the rule. Death is something that lies outside the sphere of choice. Away with it...If we acted in such a way and practiced (*ēskoumetha*) this exercise from morning until night, we would then have achieved something, by the gods. But as things are, we're caught gazing open-mouthed at every impression that comes along, and it is only in the schoolroom that we wake up a little, if indeed we ever do. (*Disc.* 3.3.14-17)

As we train ourselves to deal with sophisticated questioning, so we should also train (*gumnazesthai*) ourselves each day to deal with impressions, because they too put questions to us... If we adopt this habit, we'll make progress, because we'll never give our assent to anything unless we get a convincing impression. (*Disc.* 3.8.1-4)

Practice (*meleta*), then, from the very beginning to say to every disagreeable impression, 'You're an impression and not at all what you appear to be.' Then examine it and test it by these rules that you possess and first and foremost by this one, whether the impression relates to those things that are within our power... (*Ench.* 1)

¹¹ *Disc.* 1.20.7.

In the above passages Epictetus explicitly refers to this process as an exercise (*gumnazō*) which the student must train (*askēomai*) themselves in. The exercise itself seems to have three components which remain consistent across the passages, although they are emphasized to varying degrees. First, the agent is to identify that they have received an impression. This is done by engaging in a dialogue with the impression. We are to tell the impression that it is an impression and as such it may or may not be representative of the truth. This stage is significant because it involves the recognition that the agent engages with impressions, representations of the world. By identifying this, the agent is recognizing that more work needs to be done before an appropriate assent may be given, and the impression may be said to be true.

The second step is to introduce a standard or test by which we may judge the impression. Given Epictetus' emphasis on moral philosophy, the most important test is the standard of judgement provided in the first *topos*:¹² Is the object of the impression within the sphere of choice or outside of it? This test tells the agent if the object of the impression should be judged to be good or bad, or if it is to be judged to be indifferent.

Finally, given that the agent has both identified the impression and examined it in relation to the appropriate test, the agent is to make an informed decision about whether

¹² While critical assent would be a beneficial process for any type of judgement, it is clear from the above passages that this is primarily an ethical exercise for Epictetus. Asking ourselves whether the object of our impression is within our sphere of choice or outside of it only helps us to properly categorize the impression as a preconception concerning value. It tells us nothing about more general skeptical concerns, such as if an object is really as it seems *physically*. These types of epistemological concerns were of greater worry to previous generations of Stoics, as was demonstrated in the debate between the Stoics and the Academic Sceptics concerning the possibility of a reliable criterion of truth (Cf. Hankinson, 2003; Frede, 1999.). Epictetus, in contrast, is much more concerned with how we judge impressions concerning value. Although we are still to judge and evaluate every impression by process of critical assent (including those not concerning value) Epictetus seems to believe we are much more likely to make incorrect judgements concerning impressions of value. This makes sense, given his belief that it is the passions which impede our rational faculty.

they should assent, dissent, or suspend judgement. Critical assent is not a skeptical avoidance of assent, but a demand to make assents which are justified, intentional and supported by Stoic theory. While we are not to assent to anything unless we have a convincing impression, the goal of critical assent is a positive one. The goal is to help the agent assent properly, not to permanently suspend judgement.

Critical assent may properly be called an exercise because it is a deliberate and conscious action performed by the student when presented with an impression. Training in this exercise consists of successfully performing critical assent, until it becomes habituated such that it is more readily performed.

I chose to begin with critical assent because of all the exercises its function is clearest. The function of critical assent is to prevent precipitancy. Critical assent is the proper way to perform an assent, and the appropriate alternative to precipitancy.

Critical assents prevent precipitancy because an assent cannot be both critical and precipitate. Recall that a precipitant assent is not necessarily an assent to a false impression. It is just an assent to an impression which was not critically evaluated. The agent can perform a precipitant assent to a true impression. The problem with this however, is that such an assent is correct by chance. When we assent precipitately, we do not use our reason to evaluate the impression. In neglecting the use of reason, we make ourselves more liable to mistakes and errors.

The reason we are more likely to make mistakes and errors is that in an instance of precipitant assent, we do not have time to call forth the appropriate test or standard of judgement provided to us by theory. So, if we assent precipitately, our theory cannot be

rendered fully active or valuable in our decision-making process. As Epictetus puts it, in such instances we are caught half asleep by the impression.

Another problem with precipitant assent is that it can ruin progress that is already made by the agent. No matter the degree of progress made by the student, until they have mastered the three *topoi* they have not yet achieved virtue and are still liable to err, especially when their assent is given unreflectively. Furthermore, a false assent made precipitately concerning an object deemed to be good or bad will evoke a passion, which will further disrupt and impede the process of reason. As Epictetus says, progress is like commanding a ship. It requires much skill and focus to direct the ship properly, but only a little negligence to have it be caught in the wind and lose direction.¹³ Our process of assent functions the same way. Negligence is not inert; it is actively harmful. Therefore, the only appropriate relationship to our faculty of assent is an active and critical one.

As such, critical assent prevents precipitancy, which in turn serves at least two functions. First, it allows the agent to apply the theory they have learnt as a standard of judgement when examining impressions, and second it prevents the incorrect assents that would come from a state of negligence or being ‘asleep’ to our impressions. This ensures the digestion of theory, by increasing the number of instances in which we correctly assent to impressions in accordance with Stoic theory.

7.3.2 The Exercise of Repetition

¹³ Disc. 4.3.5-7.

The second preventative exercise which we will examine is the repetition of theory. This is the practice in which Epictetus demands his students keep theory ‘on hand’ through a process of constant repetition:¹⁴

For it is not a cake that should have this effect on us [peace of mind], but true judgements. And what are they? Those that a person should reflect upon all day long, so that, feeling no attachment to anything that is not his own...he may keep the law constantly in mind and have it forever before his eyes. (*Disc.* 2.16.26-27)

Both by night and by day, keep these reflections at hand (*procheira*); write them down, read them, make them the subject of your conversation, whether with yourself, or with another. (*Disc.* 3.24.103)

There are other passages where Epictetus encourages students to repeat and write to themselves theory they have already been instructed upon.¹⁵ This emphasis on the therapeutic benefits of repetition is not unique to Epictetus and was recognized in some form by all of the Roman Stoics. Musonius Rufus tells us that he defeated his fear of exile by constantly repeating to himself arguments concerning its indifference.¹⁶ In his *Letters on Ethics*, Seneca encourages Lucilius to rehearse and remind himself often of Stoic principles.¹⁷ Finally, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* is full of passages in which Marcus urges himself to ‘remember’ or ‘bear in mind’ an aspect of Stoic theory.¹⁸

What is significant about the two passages above, is that Epictetus establishes that the purpose of this repetition, at least in his system of moral education, is to have the law

¹⁴ This exercise is noted and discussed briefly by Sorabji, 2002, p. 214-216. Sorabji also emphasizes how this exercise was intended to keep the appropriate standard of judgement ‘on hand’ for students of Stoicism.

¹⁵ Cf. *Disc.* 1.2.28; 4.4.29-30; Frag. 16.

¹⁶ Stobaeus 3.40.9. Trans. King, p. 48.

¹⁷ Cf. *Letters*, 4.5; 15.10

¹⁸ Cf. *Meditations* 2.1, 9, 14; 3.10, 13; 4.3, 32, 39; 5.1, 16, 24, 33; 6.7; 7.1; 8.5, 12; 9.42; 10.6, 23, 27; 11.18, 34; 12.16.

‘constantly before our eyes’, and ‘at hand’. This metaphor of having theory ‘at hand’ is one of his favorites, and there are many more instances of it throughout his work:¹⁹

If you keep these thoughts constantly at hand (*en chersi*), and reflect on them constantly within your own mind to make them ready for use (*procheira*), you’ll never have need of anyone else to encourage you or strengthen your resolve. (*Disc.* 3.24.115)

This is a thought that you should keep at hand to apply whenever you lose anything external: what are you acquiring in exchange for it? (*Disc.* 4.3.1)

There is one path alone that leads to happiness – and keep this thought at hand morning, noon and night – it is to renounce any claim to anything that lies outside the sphere of choice... (*Disc.* 4.4.39)

‘To what things should I pay attention, then?’ In the first place to those general principles that you should always have at hand, so as not to go to sleep, or get up, or drink or eat, or converse with others, without them... (*Disc.* 4.12.7)

The first passage tells us that the purpose of repetition is to keep certain Stoic principles or ideas at hand, which means that they are ‘ready for use’ (*procheiros*, which literally means at hand again, but metaphorically means to be ready). In other words, repetition keeps certain principles prominent within the thinking of the individual, and thus accessible and easily reflected upon during moments of judgement. The second passage indicates that there are certain reflections which are appropriate for certain kinds of situations. There is a reflection I will keep on hand if I am liable to lose something external, and likewise there are other reflections for different types of situations.

That being said, some rules and principles are also beneficial to have on hand. These are presumably those principles which are important and applicable in all contexts, such as the distinction between what is within my sphere of choice and outside of it. Such

¹⁹ See also *Disc.* 3.10.1-5, 18; 3.17.6; 3.18.1; *Ench.* 53.

reflections are to be repeated constantly, and thus kept on hand at all times of the day. Finally, if we practice this exercise appropriately, we always have the appropriate universal principles accessible to us, such that we will perform no action without them.

What justifies that importance of this exercise is the recognition that not all beliefs are equally prominent in the attention of the agent. Some will be more prevalent and accessible in the mind of the agent than others.²⁰ Furthermore, we are more likely to assent correctly if the relevant beliefs are prominent in our attention. As such, repetition as an exercise is the tool that keeps the most helpful and beneficial principles as prevalent and accessible to the agent as possible, when they are engaging in reflection. Theory can only be reflected upon if it is accessible, and this accessibility is achieved through the practice of repetition.

The view that a Stoic principle may be more or less accessible to the agent in moments of judgement depending upon its frequency of use is once again present in the other Roman Stoics. Musonius Rufus tells us that “the first step in the proper training of the soul is to keep handy (*procheirous poieisthai*) the proofs showing that things which seem to be good are not good and that things which seem to be bad are not bad”.²¹ Notice the same use of the metaphor of keeping the theory ‘on hand’. Musonius goes so far as to claim that this is the first step for the training of the soul, implying its overall importance.

²⁰ Braicovich (2012, p. 326) discusses this point in detail: “Whether or not we critically examine our impressions before assenting to or rejecting them, that act is not the operation of a neutral, transcendental faculty which might be considered to be independent from our epistemic history. More importantly, it is not an evaluation of the impression in isolation. Concerning the first aspect, every act of assessing an impression is done on the basis of the judgements or opinions that constitute our soul (which are actually impressions we have assented to in the past). Concerning the second aspect, the act of examining an impression that comes to our mind is not to evaluate it in terms of logical consistency, but rather to confront it with the opinions and beliefs we hold and, by doing so, to evaluate whether it contradicts them or not.”

²¹ Stobaeus 3.29.78, Trans. King, p. 37.

In Seneca's *Letters* we find a passionate defense of the importance of repetition. In Letter 94, Seneca is arguing against the claim that repeating precepts about how to act is useless, because the individual either already knows it to be true or will not be persuaded by it. Seneca argues that there is a value in repeating precepts to those who already have learnt and endorsed Stoic theory, because "a reminder does not teach, but it does call attention; it arouses us, focuses the memory and prevents it from slipping away."²² Seneca reminds us that we often act in opposition to what we know and endorse to be the proper way of acting. Individuals know that friendship requires obligation, but they do not keep their obligations. They know that adultery is wrong, but still they seek to seduce the wives of others. They have forgotten, or ignored, the contradiction present here:

Hence you need to have your attention called to these points over and over. These principles should not be stored away but readily at hand (*in promptu*). We need to be frequently thinking about and dwelling on all such beneficial reminders so that we not only know them but also have them available. Besides, even points that are obvious to us can be made more so. (*Letters*. 94.26)

The value of repetition, in Seneca, is once again that it renders important Stoic principles 'at hand' and accessible for the individual. It focuses our attention of the relevant moral information when must make a judgement.

Finally, turning to Marcus Aurelius, he tells us that "the things you think about determines the quality of your mind. Your soul takes on the color of your thoughts."²³ This line is then followed by a list of the kind of thoughts one should remind themselves of constantly, such as that we can lead a good life regardless where we live, and that things gravitate towards what they were intended for. Once again, we see a recognition

²² *Letters*. 94.25.

²³ *Meditations*, 5.16.

that thinking about certain concepts or principles can affect the health of our soul, even if these are principles we have already assented to. Just the process of actively thinking of them alters and improves the individual.

Furthermore, we can understand the *Meditations* as being written, at least in part, for the purpose of practicing this exercise of repetition. The *Meditations*, as a work, was not intended to be read by others as it is today but was only intended to help Marcus as a student of Stoicism improve his practice through the daily repetition of principles and concepts he had already learnt thoroughly in the form of theory.²⁴ The *Meditations* is thus itself an exercise, perhaps inspired by Epictetus' demand for students to write down and repeat Stoic principles.

The function of repetition is to help the agent correctly judge the truth of impressions, by making the appropriate principles or standard of judgements readily accessible to the agent when they reflect upon the impression. In this way, the exercises of critical assent and repetition work together to eliminate precipitancy. Critical assent trains the individual to examine each impression, and allows the time required for the introduction of an appropriate Stoic principle into the consideration of the agent. But the agent still must introduce that principle if the assent is to be successful. It is repetition, keeping the appropriate principles 'on-hand', which ensures that the agent will introduce the appropriate Stoic principle into their reasoning. In this way, repetition also prevents precipitancy, which is not just when we assent without reflection, but also when we assent without employing the appropriate standard of judgement.

²⁴ Sellars, 2007, p. 139, argues that the *Meditations* should be understood in this way.

To better understand why repetition is necessary, let us return to Epictetus' discussion of what determines how an agent will assent, covered in Chapter 2 section 3. Part of the internal limitations of reason is that reason must assent in accordance with what seems true to the agent. We cannot assent to something as true if it seems false, for example. However, we still make many errors in our assents because what seems true or false to us does not always correspond to the truth of the matter. Nonetheless this limitation of reason can work in favor of the agent. It means that if the contradiction or error implicit in a false assent is made explicit and clear to the agent, the agent will necessarily correct their assent and judgement:

Every error involves a contradiction; for since someone who commits an error doesn't want to do that, but to act rightly, it is clear that he isn't doing what he wants... Now every rational mind is by nature averse to contradiction; but as long as someone fails to realize that he is involved in a contradiction, there is nothing to prevent him from carrying out contradictory actions; when he becomes aware of it, however, he must necessarily turn aside from the contradiction and avoid it, just as harsh necessity forces one to renounce what is false as soon as one realizes that it is false, although one assents to it as long as its falsity remains unapparent. (*Disc.* 2.26.1-3)

Epictetus tells us that what is required for the agent to avoid errors of judgement is just for the nature of the error to be explicit and understood by that agent. Once something is clearly perceived to be a contradiction, then reason must necessarily renounce one of the opposed impressions or beliefs as false. The exercise of repetition ensures that the contradiction inherent in a false assent is always made apparent to the agent in any given circumstance. It also ensures that the agent has accessible to them the information required to make the correct assent. This is because repetition makes prominent the relevant Stoic principles and theory during the reasoning process of the

individual. By fulfilling these two functions, repetition helps the agent make assents which correspond to the Stoic theory they have learnt, and thus further digest this theory.

7.3.3 The Exercise of Abstinence

I have argued that critical assent and repetition help reduce instances of precipitancy. The next exercise is focused on reducing weakness or instances in which false beliefs and passions prevent the agent from acting in accordance with reason when confronting novel impressions. We are told by Epictetus that in order to master the first *topos* one must suspend desire entirely, and suspend aversion directed towards all things external to the individual. However, we have not yet examined a means to do so. If an explanation of how to suspend desire and aversion cannot be provided, then this is a major problem for Epictetus' program of moral education. Suspending desire and aversion is required to avoid weakness and make correct assents, but one would assume that suspending desire and aversion is not a simple thing to do, especially for those needing help the most. What Epictetus requires then, is a method of helping the student to avoid incorrectly applying desire and aversion. I argue that the next exercise of abstinence serves this purpose.

Abstinence involves intentionally refraining from acting upon certain impressions. Recognizing that certain situations are more challenging to navigate with equanimity than others, Epictetus encourages the student to avoid objects or situations which are likely to cause passions. In *Ench.* 33 we get our most exhaustive list of what the student is to abstain from.²⁵ The student is told to: speak rarely, and just what is necessary; to not

²⁵ Seneca also encourages others to practice minimalism. He encourages Lucilius to spend some time living in poverty (*Letters.* 18.5-14). However his reasoning seems to be different from Epictetus. Seneca seems to recommend poverty as an exercise so that the agent is not surprised or unprepared if thrown into poverty by

laugh too much; avoid oaths; avoid entertainment given by non-philosophers; be minimalistic in things relating to the body, such as food, drink, clothing, and housing; remain chaste before marriage if possible; do not respond to criticism and gossip; avoid public shows; avoid public readings; avoid discussing yourself in conversation.

This call for abstinence and minimalism is repeated in another passage. Epictetus tells his students to “practice at one time to live like one who is ill, so as to be able, one day, to live like one who is healthy. Take no food, drink water alone; abstain from every desire at one time so as to be able, one day, to exercise your desires in a reasonable way.”²⁶ In this passage Epictetus makes the link between abstinence and desire (*orexis*) explicit. We are to abstain from the kinds of action or objects that may promote incorrect desire until we are in a position to exercise our desire in accordance with reason. This is because exercising desire in accordance with reason is only possible later on in the education of the student, thus abstinence is required at the start.

Let us turn now to the function of abstinence within Epictetus’ educational program. I argue that the function of abstinence is to prevent or minimize weakness in the individual, so that they are in a strong position to assent correctly to impressions. There are a few reasons for thinking this. First, Epictetus closely associates abstinence as helping to combat inappropriate desire and aversion, which are the causes of passion and thus weakness.

chance. I am arguing that Epictetus encourages poverty so that the student may remove themselves from the kinds of things that enflame their desire as they work to master it.

²⁶ *Disc.* 3.13.21.

Second, Epictetus encourages the student to disproportionately abstain in the areas where they are most likely to slip into inappropriate desires and aversions.²⁷ This makes the most sense if abstinence is meant to combat weakness. Weakness is caused by false beliefs, so it makes sense that there would be some areas in which the student has many false beliefs, and other areas in which their judgements are fairly secure and correct.

It makes less sense to talk of combating precipitancy disproportionately, because critical assent is the proper way of interacting with all impressions. It is something we should do constantly, regardless of the kind of impression we receive. In contrast, it is perfectly coherent to talk of targeting weakness disproportionately, by abstaining more from the things which are most liable to make us slip into inappropriate desire and aversion.

Abstinence helps the agent to suspend desire and aversion, and thus combats weakness, in two stages. First, the agent is to avoid the objects or situations which produce passions. The agent is also to abstain from actions which inflame their desire or aversion for external goods. When the agent has not yet mastered desire and aversion, then merely being around the objects one desires provides an opportunity for false assents, and the inflammation of passions. Thus, the first step to combat weakness is to change our behaviors, such that we abstain from desired objects such as money, sex or fancy food. This is the aim of Epictetus' call for a general abstinence at *Ench.* 33.

The second step of abstinence is to reintroduce the object once the agent is able to respond to it appropriately. The agent cannot simply remove themselves from society and abstain from all temptation. They must begin to reintegrate, once the degree of their

²⁷ *Disc.* 3.12.8

capacity for weakness has subsided, and they can act properly when interacting with what would have previously been passion causing objects for them. Epictetus describes this two-step process in the following passage:

[After significant training and abstinence] you'll venture into the lists to see whether your impressions still get the better of you as they once did. But to begin with, keep well away from what is stronger than you. If a pretty girl is set against a young man who is just making a start on philosophy, that is no fair contest. 'Pot and stone', so the saying goes, 'don't belong together.' (*Disc.* 3.12.11-12)

We must remove ourselves from that which is tempting to us, because our weakness prevents us from acting properly. Then we will test ourselves by reintroducing such types of objects into our lives. If we succeed, we have bested that area of weakness and can now interact with that type of object without a fear of making incorrect assents. If we fail, we can reevaluate and begin the process again.

Step two is necessary because the goal of abstinence cannot possibly be to avoid certain kinds of impressions permanently. The problem with this is that it would make avoiding weakness dependent on circumstance. The agent's lack of lust would not be the result of knowledge, but just the result of not being around any individuals they found attractive. This is not sustainable as its success is circumstantial. Rather, abstinence is a means to an end. It is way to temporarily suspend weakness so that the agent may progress further. The ultimate goal of this training exercise is to develop the capacity to deal with any kind of impression, not to just avoid them. When referring to Socrates laughing off the beauty of Alcibiades, Epictetus tells us that "here is the true athlete, one

who trains himself to confront such impressions!”²⁸ Training teaches us how to confront impressions, not just how to avoid them.

In conclusion, the function of abstinence is to improve the agent’s ability to reflect well upon impressions, by reducing instances of passion. First by demanding the agent abstain from actions which promote passions, and second by demanding the agent to introduce a beneficial action in its place. This exercise thus forms a crucial partnership with critical assent and repetition. Critical assent and repetition have been shown to promote correct judgements through encouraging the agent to reflect upon impressions while considering the appropriate theory. But weakness makes the agent unresponsive to reason, thus threatening the success of this entire process. In order for critical assent and repetition to aid the agent in forming correct judgements, the agent must also target and reduce their weakness through practicing abstinence.

7.4 Two Examples of Remedial Exercises

We will turn our attention now to remedial exercises. Unlike preventative exercises, remedial exercises attempt to correct false beliefs and behavioral dispositions already held by the agent. This section will look at two remedial exercises: habituation and reframing.

7.4.1 The Exercise of Habituation

The exercise of habituation involves cultivating a positive habit in contexts where we tend to act improperly. Epictetus believes that there is a strong link between the actions

²⁸ *Disc.* 2.18.27.

we perform, and the state of our character. Any character or capacity is strengthened by actions which correspond to it, and weakened by contrary actions:

Each person is strengthened and preserved by actions that are appropriate to his nature; the carpenter by those that accord with the art of carpentry, the grammarian by those that accord with the art of grammar. But if the latter gets into the habit of writing ungrammatically, his skill will necessarily be destroyed and perish. A modest character is preserved likewise by modest actions, while shameless actions will destroy it... (*Disc.* 2.9.10-12)

The link between action and character also applies to mental states. For example, experiencing anger or lust serves to intensify and promote future instances of these negative emotions:²⁹

Every habit (*hexis*) and capacity (*dunamis*) is supported and strengthened by the corresponding actions, that of walking by walking, that of running by running. If you want to be a good reader, read, or a good writer, write...In general, then, if you want to do something, make a habit of doing it; and if you don't want to do something, don't do it, but get into the habit of doing something else instead. The same applies to states of mind. When you lose your temper, you should recognize not only that something has happened to you at present, but also that you've reinforced a bad habit and you have, so to speak, added fresh fuel to the fire. When you've yielded to sexual desire, don't count that as being just a slight defeat, but recognize that you've fortified your incontinence, you've given it added strength. For it cannot fail to come about that, as a result of the corresponding actions, some habits and capacities will be developed if they didn't previously exist, while others that were already present will be reinforced and strengthened.

It is in this way, of course, that moral infirmities grow up in the mind, as the philosophers explain. For once you've come to feel a desire for money, if reason is brought to bear in such a way as to make us become aware of the evil, the desire will be suppressed and our ruling centre will be restored to its original state, but when it comes to be aroused again by the corresponding impression, it will become inflamed by desire more rapidly than before. And if this happens repeatedly, a callus will finally be formed and the infirmity will cause the avarice to become entrenched. (*Disc.* 2.18.1-9)

²⁹ For a further discussion of *hexis* or habit in the early Stoa, see Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, Ch 6. Graver translates the term as 'condition'. For a discussion of *hexis* in Epictetus, See Stephens, 2013, pp. 55-61.

This passage can be understood in relation to the phenomena of weakness. Weakness is a state in which knowledge has not been achieved, and thus the agent experiences passions and impulses concerning external objects due to false beliefs about their value. In such a state, we are more likely to assent poorly and act incorrectly towards the objects we have many false beliefs about. A poor assent then leads to the formation of a new false belief, which in turn strengthens its corresponding vice, be it anger, lust, or love of money. This then contributes to our weakness further and has a harmful effect on our capacity to assent properly in the future. Passions and false beliefs influence our future assents, and thus our future state of mind. In this way certain vices become entrenched in the individual.

This is made clear with the example of money. If the agent has an unchecked desire for money, this is caused by a false belief which has produced a passion. This passion, and the false belief about the value of money which caused it, interfere with the proper function of reason in future instances of assent. If the agent holds the belief that money is to be desired in one instance, she is much more likely to assent incorrectly to impressions concerning money in future instances. If this happens long enough then this love of money becomes fixed in us. Our passion for money becomes so strong, and supported by so many false beliefs, that we will become totally unresponsive to reasoned arguments concerning the indifference of money.

Due to the recognition of the importance of proper habit, Epictetus recommends in the above passage two ways to counter bad habits. First, Epictetus says that “if you want to do something, make a habit of doing it; and if you don’t want to do something, don’t do

it, but get into the habit of doing something else instead”.³⁰ When dealing with bad habits, Epictetus encourages his students first to practice abstinence, a preventative exercise discussed previously. One does not want to make the bad habit worse. But the bad habit must also be remedied, and for this Epictetus encourages the student to identify where they are most poorly habituated, and introduce the opposing habit:

And since habit (*ethos*) is a powerful force that leads us where it will, when we’ve become accustomed to exercising our desires and aversions in relation to these external things alone, we must set a contrary habit in opposition to that habit, and when impressions are most inclined to make us slip, there we must apply our training as a counteracting force.

I’m incline to pleasure: I’ll throw myself beyond measure in the opposite direction, for the sake of training. I’m inclined to avoid hard work: I’ll train and exercise my impressions to ensure that my aversion from everything of that kind will cease. For who is a man in training? One who practices not exercising his desire, and practices exercising his aversion only in relation to things that lie within the sphere of choice, practicing especially hard in matters that are difficult to master. So different people will practice hardest with regard to different things. (*Disc.* 3.12.6-8)

As Epictetus makes clear, different people will have to habituate themselves differently depending on their particular weaknesses. So, the individual particularly inclined towards pleasure will have to focus on that aspect of habituation. The same can be said for the individual particularly averse to suffering. As such, what it looks like to properly habituate one’s actions will not be uniform for all students of Stoicism. Different students will have to habituate themselves in different ways depending on where they are weakest.

The function of habituation is to actively target and remove groups of false beliefs held by the agent which incline them towards certain harmful behaviors and replace them

³⁰ *Disc.* 2.18.4

with beliefs in accordance with Stoic theory, which incline them towards appropriate behavior. In this way, it helps to strengthen the individual and promotes the digestion of theory. It is different from abstinence then in being active. Abstinence is preventative, because it just aims to mitigate instances where the agent succumbs to weakness, by avoiding objects the agent relates poorly to. Habituation is remedial, because it aims instead to actively remove the false beliefs causing the harmful disposition towards certain objects, by confronting the object and introducing the opposite habit.

But how does habituation achieve this? It does so by forcing the agent to reevaluate and change their false beliefs. If we incline towards anger, for example, we can only habituate ourselves away from being easily angered by reevaluating the way we value the world and the reasons for our anger. We can only behave contrary to how our habits incline us by shaping beliefs appropriately. Consider the example Epictetus uses, of one habituated to grieve death inappropriately:

If it is a habit (*ethos*) that troubles us, we must endeavor to find a remedy to use against it. What remedy can be found, then, to use against a habit? The contrary habit. You hear uneducated people saying, ‘Oh dear, the poor fellow’s dead, his father’s heartbroken, and his mother too; he’s been struck down before his time, and in a foreign land!’ Listen to the opposing arguments, pull yourself away from these expressions, counter a habit by setting a contrary habit against it. (*Disc.* 1.27.3-6)

If we have the habit of lamenting inappropriately, we are to habituate the contrary habit, presumably a calm and reasoned response to death. Since our response to death is the result of our incorrect beliefs about the indifference of death, habituating a calm response is a matter of actively reevaluating our perception of death. We are to introduce opposing arguments into our thinking, about how death is not harmful, and we are to pull away from typical arguments which portray death as an evil.

In this sense, habituation is not non-rational or subconscious. It is not something the body does without the involvement of the mind. The bad habit of lamenting death, in so far as it is a habit and not a one-time mistake, is caused by the agent's false beliefs about the value of death and its harmful nature. These also produce passions which can cause one to insufficiently consider arguments about why death is indifferent. One can only change a habit to grieve death by changing the way they think about death.

Habituation then, properly done, remedies harmful states of character by forcing the agent to reevaluate and change the beliefs which caused this harmful state to begin with. Grieving is not just an action, but also evidence of a mistaken judgement that it was appropriate to grieve at the time. Therefore, refraining from grief is also the result of a judgement that grief is inappropriate in this context. Each instance of not grieving, is another instance in which the agent has deemed that response inappropriate. And hopefully if that process goes on long enough, the false beliefs which produce the bad habit of excessive grief are eliminated.

7.4.2 The Exercise of Reframing

The second remedial exercise is that of reframing. The reframing exercise is when the agent provides themselves a different perspective by which to view a situation, which helps them view the situation more accurately.³¹ Since we live in a providential world, and virtue is up to us, then an accurate conception of the world will also be one that is

³¹ This exercise is discussed by Sorabji, 2002, p. 211-216. It is also the major topic of William Irvine's 2020 book *The Stoic Challenge*.

less passion-inducing. Epictetus' most consistent use of the reframing exercise concerns how we should reframe situations as wrestling opponents:

'Is it possible, then, to derive advantage from these things [hardships]?'

Yes, from all of them.

'Even from someone who insults you?'

And what advantage does a wrestler gain from his training partner? The greatest. And that man, too, who insults me becomes my training partner; he trains me in patience, in abstaining from anger, in remaining gentle. You disagree; and yet the man who seizes me by the neck, and gets my hips and shoulders into shape, renders me some advantage, and the wrestling master does well to tell me, 'Raise up the pestle with both hands,' and the heavier the pestle is, the more good it does me. And yet you say that if someone trains me in abstaining from anger, he brings me no benefit? It is simply that you don't know how to draw advantage from other people. (*Disc.* 3.20.9-12)

When confronted with a difficult situation, we should consider the example of a wrestler. A person does not normally want to be 'seized by the neck'. However, a wrestler recognizes that their opponent is doing them a service. By providing antagonism, they strengthen and train the body. Likewise, when someone insults you, this is not to be thought of as a harm but as an opportunity to gain an advantage. The insult provides the student with an opportunity to practice abstaining from anger.

Not only can difficulties be framed in a positive light, they are, to a degree, required to achieve virtue:

It is difficulties that reveal what men amount to; and so, whenever you're struck by a difficulty, remember that God, like a trainer in the gymnasium, has matched you against a tough young opponent.

'For what purpose?', someone asks

So that you may become an Olympic victor; and that is something that can't be achieved without sweat. It seems to me that no one had a difficulty that gives a better opportunity than the one you now have, if only you're willing to tackle it as an athlete tackles his young adversary. (*Disc.* 1.24.1-2)

Epictetus explains that just as the Olympic victor must sweat and struggle, the student of Stoicism must face difficulties if they wish to achieve virtue. A wrestler requires training partners in order to struggle, practice and improve. Wrestlers also need opponents to display their virtue. One cannot wrestle by oneself.

Once this has all been internalized, the student, like the wrestler, should come to be excited by the prospect of difficult challenges:

We should keep all of this in mind, then, and when we're summoned to confront any difficulty of this kind, we should know that the moment has come to show whether we have received a proper philosophical education. For a young man who leaves his studies to confront such a difficulty is like one who has studied how to resolve syllogisms, and if someone offers him one that is easily solved, will say, 'No, please give me a complicated one instead, to enable me to gain some practice.' Athletes likewise are none too happy to be matched against young lightweights. 'He can't lift me off the ground,' they'll say. Such is the attitude of a gifted young man. (*Disc.* 1.29.33-35)

Skilled wrestlers are disappointed if they train with partners unable to challenge them, because without a challenge they have neither the opportunity to practice what they have learnt, nor to display their skill. Likewise, Epictetus thinks a philosopher should adopt the same perspective towards difficulties.

The metaphor between wrestlers facing opponents and students encountering difficulties or insults is consistent across these passages. The pedagogical purpose of this metaphor is to teach the students to think differently about situations they would have previously considered as negative or harmful. These situations should be reframed as athletic opponents in a wrestling match. Difficult situations are thus opportunities to both practice what one has learnt, and to display one's expertise and skill. This saves the student from distress and allows them to capitalize on the situation for their own benefit. This notion, that an impediment to our action can in turn benefit us if it is reconceived to

be to our advantage was famously adopted by Marcus Aurelius, without the athletic metaphor.³² But here Epictetus integrates it with the culturally relevant notions of wrestling and athletics.

However, this is not the only kind of reframing exercise employed by Epictetus. What needs to be reframed depends on the problem faced. For example, Epictetus tells his students not to say that a deceased child or wife has been ‘lost’ but only ‘given back’.³³ In another passage, Epictetus makes clear that if one is insulted or struck, they should remind themselves how things could be worse.³⁴

This reframing exercise is primarily remedial because if one needs to reframe something they have already framed it incorrectly. It is the one who has already conceived of the death of their child incorrectly who must work to conceive of the situation differently. However, if the process of how to frame situations is perfected, then there is no need for reframing, and it becomes a preventative exercise. Like the athlete who is disappointed when provided with a weak opponent, eventually students aim to immediately see challenges as opportunities, and not have to reframe them as opportunities after being initially upset.

The function of reframing is to remedy false beliefs held by the agent by giving them a different perspective by which to reflect upon the situation. This will hopefully help them change their beliefs into ones which are in accordance with Stoic theory. In this way it promotes the digestion of theory. Reframing differs from habituation in terms of scope.

³² “The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.” *Meditations* 5.20. Marcus seems to have been influenced by Epictetus’ athletic imagery and does elsewhere compare himself to both a wrestler and an athlete in the greatest of contests.

³³ *Ench.* 11.

³⁴ *Disc.* 4.5.8-10.

Habituation is a strategy applied to groups of false beliefs which incline us to act incorrectly with a degree of consistency. We might have a habit to become angry, pursue pleasure, or avoid pain for example. Habituation then attempts to remedy a bad habit and the beliefs that underlay it. In contrast reframing can also be applied to specific situations, non-habitual situations.

For example, someone who judges the passing of a loved one to be a terrible thing has formed a false belief and will suffer a passionate response. But they do not yet have the habit of overindulging in grief, at least not yet. They thus do not necessarily require something as severe as habituation, and reframing may suffice.

If developing specific beliefs which are in accordance with Stoic theory is the goal of training, then it is clear how reframing achieves this. It asks the agent to reflect upon and reevaluate their false beliefs with new information, perspectives, and concepts which help them come to new conclusions. In doing so, the agent moves towards a set of beliefs which are more in line with what Stoic theory claims.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ethical exercises of Epictetus and explained how they contribute to the digestion of theory. It argued that these ethical exercises are best divided into two categories, preventative and remedial. Both types help the agent digest theory, but they do so in different ways.

Preventative exercises prevent the formation of new false beliefs. To show how they do this, we examined three different preventative exercises, namely critical assent,

repetition, and abstinence. It argued that all three serve the function of mitigating either weakness or precipitancy in the individual when they leave the classroom and confront various kinds of impressions. By mitigating these factors, these exercises increase the probability that the agent will assent to impressions concerning specific objects correctly and continue to digest what they have learnt in theory.

In contrast remedial exercises correct previously held false beliefs. We examined the exercises of habituation and reframing. Both exercises promote the digestion of theory, by providing the agent with strategies to help correct false beliefs and eliminate passions currently experienced.

The previous chapter argued that the major function of training was to facilitate the digestion of theory. This chapter showed how preventative and remedial exercises can achieve this in a way that does not conflict with Epictetus' intellectualism. These exercises are either ways to maximize the accuracy of the judgements made when the agent confronts impressions outside of the classroom, or ways of reflecting upon and correctly previously formed false beliefs.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This thesis has provided an overview of Epictetus' educational program and attempted to better understand the role of training within it. It argued that the function of training is to facilitate the 'digestion' of theory, through the introduction of preventative exercises, which mitigate causes of poor reasoning, and remedial exercises, which help agents correct false beliefs. In doing so, it has also attempted to resolve two potential tensions in the literature.

First, there is a concern that some of Epictetus' exercises may conflict with his commitments to rationalism, the position that all motivation to act originates in the impulses which accompany rationally formed beliefs. As described by Brennan, beliefs should be, at least in theory, open to modification by rational argumentation. So, if Epictetus believes exercises are necessary for behavior modification, it is possible that what is being is motivating behavior are not just beliefs.¹ Braicovitch had argued in response to Brennan that at least one exercise, repetition, can be interpreted in a way that is coherent with Epictetus' rationalism, although he acknowledges that more work must be done to explain the other exercises.²

It is my hope that the discussion provided here about the function of training, and the particular forms it takes, has resolved these concerns. Epictetus' exercises, be they

¹ 2007, p. 278-279. Johnson (2014, p. 83, Footnote 30) echoes these concerns.

² 2012.

preventative or remedial, are aimed at digesting theory, which means moving towards knowledge through acquiring correct beliefs about particular objects and circumstances. Epictetus' reliance on training can seem inconsistent with his psychology, I have argued that upon inspection this concern does not stand.

The second major way this thesis adds to the discussion on Epictetus concerns the present debate about the role of training in relation to theory in Epictetus' education program. The general consensus is that Epictetus considers training and theory to be two necessary but on their own insufficient parts of a proper moral education.³ The arguments provided here add support to that interpretation. Theory is necessary because exercises cannot tell us how to assent nor do they provide a standard of judgement by which to evaluate impressions. But likewise, exercises are necessary in order to ensure the agent has a good disposition for deliberating. These exercises allow the agent to utilize what they have learnt in theory. This interpretation of the function of Epictetus' exercises helps further explain why Epictetus views theory and training as necessary but on their own insufficient for moral progress.

Beyond the applications I have argued for in the chapters above, I hope that there are some other uses for this project. First, it further establishes the position that Epictetus was an original, innovative, and important thinker. This is an excellent time for scholarship on Epictetus, but this was not always the case. Before Long's 2002 book *Epictetus*, the last English monograph dedicated to him was by Xenakis in 1969, which means there was a

³ See Sellars, 2007, Sharpe, 2014, Tremblay, 2019. Also Barnes (1997, p. 38-42) and Cooper (2007) argue that we should not take Epictetus' criticism of those who focus on the study of theory to indicate that he thinks a thorough understanding of theory is somehow unnecessary for moral progress. Rather, Epictetus is criticizing those who study theory in the wrong way, particularly with the intention of showing off to others.

gap of over 30 years between extended projects dedicated exclusively to Epictetus' philosophy. Part of what contributed to this gap were the notions that a) what is orthodox about Epictetus' Stoicism he just took from others, such as Chrysippus, so we are better served by referring to Chrysippus and other early Stoics to learn about Stoicism, and b) what is unique to Epictetus is somehow less important because it represents a deviation from Stoicism proper.

However, as Inwood has argued, Stoicism is not as historically a unified school as it is sometimes made out to be.⁴ Like any other school of thought, it has changed over time, adapted, made concessions, and developed new additions. I hope this thesis helps show Epictetus to be the original thinker that he is. He developed a version of Stoicism that is both strongly indebted to his predecessors, and uniquely informed by his experiences as an educator. And this Stoicism, while perhaps not exactly the Stoicism of Chrysippus or Zeno, is surely worth developing and understanding further.

Second, I hope this thesis is especially valuable for improving our understanding of Epictetus, because it focuses on the part of his philosophy which is so unique. One of Epictetus' most important contributions to Stoicism and ancient philosophy more generally is that the *Discourses* contains a developed picture of how an actual program of moral education in Stoic philosophy was structured and implemented. This leads to another aspect of Epictetus' philosophy which is unique. Often, moral philosophy focuses on debating what has moral value, or the best course of action to take between competing goods. While Epictetus certainly does teach Stoic axiology, he also focuses on what I take to be a more interesting question: Given that we agree X to be an object of value,

⁴ Inwood, 2012.

and Y to be the best course of action, how can one motivate themselves towards obtaining object X, and pursuing plan Y consistently?

The question of how to transform ourselves into the kinds of people that are motivated towards whatever we take to be good must be central if philosophy is to be an applied activity. And Epictetus' *Discourses* are, in large part, dedicated to answering this question. It is my hope that this thesis will help contribute to our understanding of Epictetus' philosophy in this regard.

Finally, there is a loftier hope that some of what is discussed here will inspire contemporary thought and have modern applications which improves the lives of others. In recent years there has been a renaissance of applied modern Stoicism. Beginning with Becker's 1999 book *A New Stoicism*, we are now seeing major interest in reinvigorating Stoicism for a modern context. There are numerous books being released which serve as introductions to Stoicism and practical guides for applying Stoicism to help with contemporary problems.⁵ Stoicism has also been applied in a therapeutic context and is the inspiration for the contemporary psychology school of Cognitive Behavioral-Therapy.⁶ There are even books designed to implement Stoic training. *The Daily Stoic*, by Holiday and Hanselman, contains 366 analyses of Stoic passages, meant to be read once a day over the course of a year, and *The Daily Stoic Journal* is meant to assist you in writing about your Stoic reflections.⁷ These books are deliberately designed to help the modern student of Stoicism practice the ethical exercise of repetition, as described in

⁵ See Irvine 2009, Pigliucci 2014, Farnsworth 2018, Robertson 2018 and 2019, Sellars 2019, Pigliucci and Lopez 2019,

⁶ See Drydan and Still, 2019; Robertson, 2020.

⁷ Holiday and Hanselman, 2016 and 2017.

Chapter 7. All this shows that there is currently a major demand for the therapeutic and transformative benefits of Stoicism, of the sort discussed in this thesis.

It is my hope that this work can be of use to this contemporary Stoic movement by providing a bridge between the ancient and the modern. I hope that the work above was able to explain Epictetus' teachings in a way that is accessible and clear, but also accurate, precise, and informed. For I think there is no better way to respect the teachings of Epictetus than to discover what is still of value, and to utilize it to transform ourselves to better, happier people.

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