The Stoic Division of Philosophy*

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To discuss philosophical issues under the three broad headings of logic, physics, and ethics, is customary in every introduction to Stoicism1. After all, the justification of this threefold presentation of Stoic philosophy can be found in the ancient sources; for there are many texts which report that the Stoics themselves approved of such an exposition of their philosophical system. For example, Sextus Empiricus (PH II 13) explicitly states that the Stoics, as well as several other philosophers, advocated a division of philosophy into logic, physics, and ethics; also, Philo of Alexandria (Leg. alleg. I 57) and [Plutarch] (I Prooem. 2 = SVF 2.35) clearly confirm that the Stoics followed a tripartite division of philosophy.

Nevertheless, a systematic inquiry into all the existing textual evidence which either directly or indirectly bears on this subject-matter, shows that the Stoic view on the three parts of philosophy certainly is more complex than it has generally been presented. In fact, difficulties in comprehending the exact nature of the threefold division of Stoic philosophy already arise from the study of a well-known passage in Diogenes Laertius (VII 39-41), which is found right at the beginning of his doxography of Stoicism and which constitutes one of our main pieces of evidence concerning the Stoic account of the parts of philosophy. Given its importance, I quote this text in full:

Τομετη διαν εναι των κατα φιλοσοφιαν λόγων εναι γαρ αυτω τω μεν τι φυσικων, τω δε ηθονων, τω δε λογικων. ουτω δε πρωτος δειλε Ζήνων ο Κλεινεως η τω Περι λόγου και Χριστουφος η τω ο Περι λόγου και η τω ο των

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There are four points in this text which are extremely puzzling: First, Diogenes’ claim that according to the majority of Stoic philosophers, it is not ἡ φιλοσοφία but δ’ κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν λόγος which should be divided into physics, ethics, and logic. Second, Diogenes’ report that different Stoic philosophers used different terms when referring to the three parts of philosophical discourse. Third, Diogenes’ statement that Stoic philosophers were not unanimous in the order of the three parts of philosophical discourse. Fourth, Diogenes’ presentation of quite different similes used by the Stoics to describe the close interrelation of the three parts of philosophical discourse. In what follows, I undertake to investigate these issues; for I believe that it is only through their closer analysis that we may come to understand in what sense Stoic philosophers divided philosophy, and how they perceived the unity of the philosophical disciplines thus divided.

To start with the first issue, although most ancient sources and certainly all modern scholars talk about the Stoic division of philosophy without any further qualification, Diogenes indicates that the Stoics for the most part talked of the division of philosophical discourse into physics, ethics, and logic, and not of that of philosophy. His claim is made sufficiently clear not only by the use of the term κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν λόγος instead of φιλο-

2 ἀποκεκρίθαι is only Cobet’s conjecture, whereas all the codices have προκεκρίθαι. For the significance of the difference in meaning between the two verbs, see: I.G. Kidd, “Posidonius and Logic”, in J. Brunschwig (ed.), Les Stoiciens et leur logique, Paris, 1978, 274.