THE _THEORETIKOS BIOS IN ALCINOUS_¹

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The *Didaskalikos* of Alcinous is the most systematic, coherent and comprehensive account of Platonism to survive from the half-millennium between Plato himself and Plotinus. There is no better source for learning the complex ways in which Middle Platonist discussion of the _theoretikos bios_ drew on the authority of Plato and Aristotle.

No one doubts that this handbook, whoever its author may be, is a prime specimen of Middle Platonist exegesis. In the days when the name ‘Alcinous’ was taken to conceal that of Albinus, the handbook was for that very reason assumed to date from the mid second century AD. In the last two decades that identification has been more or less abandoned, and for good reasons. Yet by the time the pendulum swung, this particular text had already done so much to fill out our understanding of second-century Platonism that, even cut adrift from Albinus, it feels like a second-century text. Hence its dating to the second century has remained virtually unchallenged. There is a whiff of circular reasoning about this, compounded by the difficulty that we have very few pre-Plutarchan first-century AD Platonist texts to compare with it. I have no particular axe to grind in the matter, and see nothing implausible about the conventional dating, but I nevertheless prefer to leave the question open, saying no more than that (a) the *Didaskalikos* seems to predate the arrival of Neoplatonism; and (b), in view of its advanced synthesis of material from the texts of Plato and Aristotle, it could not credibly be dated earlier than the late first century BC. Many would be confident in dating it at any rate later than the Augustan

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¹ It goes without saying that my task has been made enormously easier by the meticulous commentaries of Whittaker (1990), and Dillon (1993). I shall have occasion now and then to dissent on details, so it is appropriate to record my great appreciation at the outset. I also take the opportunity to thank the many people whose comments during the May 2009 Gargnano conference helped me to develop and improve the paper, and Georgia Mouroutsou for further helpful written comments.

² Whittaker’s work, culminating in his (1990), was a major influence on this development; see also Dillon (1993) ix–xiii, who withdraws his earlier endorsement of the attribution to Albinus.
philosophical writer Arius Didymus, deemed to be the main source of chapter 12, but even on that question I prefer to retain an open mind.²

What is beyond doubt, and will I hope be given substance in the remainder of this chapter, is that the Didaskalikos represents a quite different phase of the Platonic tradition from Antiochus of Ascalon. Antiochus was already pursuing broadly the same agenda as Alcinous, recommending a life which would somehow combine both contemplative and practical components, and tracing its origins back to Plato and Aristotle.³ But his work predates the great era of philosophical commentary, which started only in the late first century BC. Consequently, Antiochus’ account of the best forms of life, as recorded in Cicero, De finibus 5, shows virtually no direct engagement with the text of either Plato or Aristotle. In complete contrast, Alcinous’ version is in effect stitched together out of carefully selected and closely scrutinized key passages of the two authorities.

The distinction between the theoretikos bios and the praktikos bios is altogether fundamental to Alcinous’ version of Platonism, as the handbook’s opening attests.⁴

Chapter 1 is devoted to the definition of the philosopher, with the focus very much on the innate capacity for philosophy and the process of fulfilling that capacity. We should note now, since it will bear directly upon chapter 2, that chapter 1’s account of the philosopher’s natural virtues (here called by the up-to-date term εὐφυεία) is directly derived from the first part of Republic 6.

Chapter 1’s genetic account of philosophy is then completed by chapter 2’s comparison of the two lives, which, although it acknowledges the need for a practical life, implicitly presents the contemplative life as the ultimate outcome of, or reward for, philosophical education: it is the life most devoutly to be wished (ἐυκταίωτατον, 153.10).

By chapter 3, Alcinous will already be beginning on the division of philosophy into its constituent parts, and these are, significantly, the (a) the ‘theoretical’ or ‘contemplative’ branch, and (b) the ‘practical’ branch, accompanied by (c) the ‘dialectical’ branch. That analysis of philosophy into its parts and sub-parts is one whose doctrinal details will in effect occupy the entire remainder of the work. He will not, even at the end, return to the

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² See however n. 22.
³ See Bénatouil (2009) for a fruitful comparison of the two.
⁴ See Boys-Stones (2005) 210–211, and cf. the presence of the same theme at the opening of Aspasius’ commentary on Eth. Nic.