

Alcinous on Plato's Dialectic

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This paper examines the relationship between the method of hypothesis presented in Plato's middle dialogues—most notably the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*—and the “collection and division” of his later works, such as the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*. Traditionally, scholars have viewed these two approaches as marking a radical transition in Plato's philosophical methodology. However, this study argues that they are better understood as complementary perspectives within a single dialectical framework. The second-century AD Platonist Alcinous provides a key testimony that sheds light on how Plato's methods of “analysis” from below and “division” from above can be integrated in the pursuit of defining essences.

Alcinous' *Handbook of Platonism (Didaskalikos)* devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 5) to Plato's dialectical practices, offering one of the earliest systematic overviews of these methods. He distinguishes between two main procedures: an “analysis” (or “collection”) that moves upward from contingent, sensible data toward foundational principles, and a “division” that proceeds downward from the highest genera to progressively more specific species, until the definition of the entity under investigation is reached. Significantly, Alcinous links this pair of processes to what is otherwise recognized as the hypothetical method, observing how a premise or hypothesis can be tested and refined by tracing it back to a more fundamental assumption. This iterative process clarifies and strengthens the original hypothesis, ultimately leading to a robust account of the phenomenon in question.

Although Alcinous does not explicitly phrase it this way, his description indicates, I propose, that “analysis” or “collection” is essentially a process for discerning the object's essential form. Nonetheless, it must be paired with “division” to demonstrate where that object fits within a wider conceptual taxonomy. While the analytic method guides the discovery of a provisional definition, the “division” technique helps confirm and teach that definition by systematically differentiating it from closely related forms. Consequently, far from being a mere shift of focus or the adoption of an entirely new approach, Plato's later dialogues can be seen as developing a broader methodological horizon: one that seeks both to uncover definitions “from below,” by exploring how a hypothesis explains relevant cases, and to confirm these definitions “from above,” by situating them within a hierarchical structure of kinds.

By highlighting Alcinous's portrayal of these dual processes, this paper shows that the apparent divergence between Plato's middle and late methodologies is less a rupture and more a deepening of his original dialectical goals.