

Theōria as Activity: From Aristotle to Cicero

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Since ‘philosophy’ itself has been a contested concept from its very beginning, in order to introduce people to philosophy as one thinks fit, some indications should be given, at least implicitly, of one’s own conception of what philosophy is. Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* is one such case, which provocatively defends the intrinsic value of purely theoretical philosophy as being a truly ‘free’ activity, against the Isocratean view that the value of philosophy lies in its practical utility. In stark contrast to this Aristotelian ‘aristocratic’ conception of philosophy, however, the more ‘democratic’ view was then put forward by the Cynics and the Stoics, who claimed that philosophy is not just a theoretical pursuit but ‘lived’ as ethical practices. This paper explores how this issue was dealt with by Antiochus of Ascalon, who derived his synthetic philosophy from both Aristotle and the Stoics, and was eventually passed on to Cicero.

Aristotle’s point is most clearly shown by the thought experiment of the Isles of the Blest, where he opines that all the ethical virtues are no longer necessary, leaving only theoretical knowledge. Cicero adopted this argument in the *Hortensius*, most probably mediated by Antiochus of Ascalon, who drew on Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* in his reappraisal of purely theoretical pursuits in opposition to the Stoics. In doing so, Antiochus appropriated the figure of Odysseus, who was once portrayed by the Stoics as a practical sage, and was now re-interpreted as a man of theoretical wisdom. Antiochus also emphasized, following Aristotle, that theoretical pursuit is itself an activity (*actio/energeia*), or even the highest activity for human beings and thus provides them with the greatest pleasure. This point is well illustrated by both Aristotle and Antiochus through their allusions to the figure of the sleeping Endymion, but Antiochus also put it into the context of the Hellenistic discussions of *oikeiōsis*, in which the Stoics claimed that human beings naturally strive for proper activities while the Epicureans claimed that human beings naturally pursue pleasure. Antiochus, at least as reported by Cicero, in rehabilitating the intrinsic value of theoretical activities, focused on the act of investigation rather than the contemplation of the truth. No matter its provenance, Cicero as an Academic sceptic welcomed the conception of philosophy as a free activity of investigation. This also explains why Cicero thought that philosophy has the power to exhort young people to virtue, reverting at the same time to the ‘Socratic’ protreptic in which exhortation to philosophy coincides with exhortation to virtue.