

# From The "Golden Mean" to the "Summum Bonum" - Useful or Deceptive Frames of Reference?

Post by "Don" of February 13, 2022 at 7:27 PM

Here are my thoughts on Norman DeWitt's "Epicurus: The Summum Bonum Fallacy" (1950).

Overall, I'm unimpressed with DeWitt's aim of using a linguistic quirk between Greek and Latin to make a larger philosophical point. Numerous languages get by with no definite article and can convey as complex and nuanced as any language with a definite article: "Linguists believe the common ancestor of the Indo-European languages, Proto-Indo-European, did not have articles. Most of the languages in this family do not have definite or indefinite articles: there is no article in Latin or Sanskrit, nor in some modern Indo-European languages, such as the families of Slavic languages (except for Bulgarian and Macedonian, which are rather distinctive among the Slavic languages in their grammar, and some Northern Russian dialects[7]), Baltic languages and many Indo-Aryan languages. Although Classical Greek had a definite article (which has survived into Modern Greek and which bears strong functional resemblance to the German definite article, which it is related to), the earlier Homeric Greek used this article largely as a pronoun or demonstrative, whereas the earliest known form of Greek known as Mycenaean Greek did not have any articles. Articles developed independently in several language families." (Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Article \(...istic variation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Article_(...istic_variation)))

From all I can see, Latin simply translated Greek τέλος into Latin summum bonum as the closest alternative. To compare the two definitions:

Greek: telos: excerpt: "3. Philos., full realization, highest point. ideal"  
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...57:entry=te/los>

Latin: summum bonum (summus): excerpt: "H.—Of rank or degree, highest, greatest, loftiest, first, supreme, best, utmost, extreme"  
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...60:entry=summus>

I'm curious about his second paragraph where he says that "Epicurus is on record as assuming that "only Greeks are capable of succeeding in philosophy,"" He cites Usener 226 which comes from Clement of Alexandria's Miscellanies, I.15. Here's the full context of that source:

And Plato does not deny that he procured all that is most excellent in philosophy from the barbarians; and he admits that he came into Egypt. Whence, writing in the Phædo that the philosopher can receive aid from all sides, he said: "Great indeed is Greece, O Cebes, in which everywhere there are good men, and many are the races of the barbarians." [128] Thus Plato thinks that some of the barbarians, too, are philosophers. But Epicurus, on the other hand, supposes that only Greeks can philosophise. (1.15.67.1 οὕτως οἴεται ὁ Πλάτων καὶ βαρβάρων

φιλοσόφους τινὰς εἶναι, ὁ δὲ Ἐπίκουρος ἔμπαλιν ὑπολαμ1.15.67.2 βάνει μόνους φιλοσοφῆσαι Ἕλληνας δύνασθαι.) <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ante-Nice...lanies: Book 1>

I wonder if this is also connected to the characteristics of the wise one in Diogenes Laertius (DL) X.117 when he talks about other nations: <https://sites.google.com/view/epicurean...lity?authuser=0> DL does not mention Greek or Greeks specifically in that text.

Whether Cicero's statement that "the Latin language is not only not lacking in copiousness but is actually richer than Greek" is more absurd than DeWitt's contention that the lack of an article makes Latin somehow deficient is problematic from a scholar like DeWitt. As I said, I don't find his basic thesis here convincing or compelling.

DeWitt states that "In Greek the practice is to say "the greatest good" and not "the highest good," and to Epicurus "the greatest good" was not pleasure but life itself. In other words, to him the summum bonum was not the telos." This seems to me to be splitting the tiniest of hairs: greatest vs highest. Look at the Greek and Latin definitions above. Both words seem to show up in the definitions of each.

DeWitt also claims that "Epicurus, holding body and soul to be alike corporeal, placed the two on a parity, and one of his definitions of happiness is "a healthy mind in a healthy body."" I had problems with this in his book, Epicurus and His Philosophy, but I can accept that Epicurus held a similar view. But here in this paper, when DeWitt is putting so much stock in the differences between Latin and Greek, he made me laugh out loud when I read the Footnote 8 (emphasis added):

Footnote says 8 \*\*\*Not citable in Greek,\*\*\* but demonstrable: cf. Horace Carm.i. 31. 17-19; Juvenal x. 356 mens sana in corpore sano (Epicurean context); Petron. 61 bonam mentem bonamque valetudinem.

And he goes on to cite Latin references for Epicurus's supposedly Greek idea. That just seems sloppy to me.

DeWitt tries to use DL X.126 to substantiate Epicurus's "reason for placing a higher value upon old age as against youth." I don't see that in 126. Instead, 126 seems to express Epicurus's insistence that one is never too old or too young to practice philosophy.

[126] The wise man does not deprecate life nor does he fear the cessation of life. The thought of life is no offence to him, nor is the cessation of life regarded as an evil. And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest. And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirableness of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass with all speed through the gates of Hades.

For those unfamiliar with Maecenas (as I was!), here's his WP entry:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaius\\_Maecenas?wprov=sfla1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaius_Maecenas?wprov=sfla1)

DeWitt then discusses Vatican Saying 42 which is interesting on a number of levels. First of all, there is not agreement on what the Vatican Saying even says or, if it is correct in its transcription from some earlier texts. Here is the actual line from the early 14th century manuscript containing the Vatican Sayings: Vat.gr.1950.pt.2  
[https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.gr.1950.pt.2/0257](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1950.pt.2/0257)

9VpRBBDmZnDblVUZSaqrXk8ZWGZacw6oww6G0Ygta0OyY-nP-F6dTg4Arn5wD-UAi2NIWEsUqsJmeYpGxNUsmp

As written it appears to read: ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολύσεως

However, some editors/scholars add to the end: ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολύσεως <τοῦ κακοῦ>. (e.g., Saint-Andre:  
<https://monadnock.net/epicurus/vatican-sayings.html> ,  
[http://wiki.epicurism.info/Vatican\\_Saying\\_42/](http://wiki.epicurism.info/Vatican_Saying_42/) , and others)

Bailey suggests the reading should be ὁ αὐτὸς χρόνος καὶ γενέσεως τοῦ μεγίστου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀπολαύσεως

DeWitt's translation is "The same span of time embraces both beginning and end of the greatest good." I have problems with his use of the word "embraces". I do not see that within the Greek. The Greek, as it stands, without the added on "evil" is literally something like:

*"At the same time, there is both the creation (γενέσεως) of the greatest good and the release/departure (ἀπολύσεως)"* That last word is why some scholars advocate for adding on "of the greatest evil" so we would get "release/departure of the greatest evil." But evil isn't in the manuscript.

Bailey's translation is "The greatest blessing is created and enjoyed at the same moment." I have problems with Bailey's use of "blessing."

Bailey cites ἀπολαύσεως "having enjoyment of a thing" instead of ἀπολύσεως "release, deliverance from a thing" which the latter is suggested by Usener and evidently accepted by DeWitt since he cites Bailey in his paper. Neither Bailey nor DeWitt make use of the added <τοῦ κακοῦ> "the [greatest] evil" so it's obviously not needed to make a decent translation. DeWitt's putting so much stock into this saying to bolster his argument is problematic in that there is so much debate and discrepancy among scholars on VS42. It should be clearly stated that many of the Vatican Sayings, including this one, are without context.

ἀπολύσεως <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...Da%29po%2Flusis>

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I can see rationalizations for either translation, DeWitt's or Bailey's.

So, in the end, I can't see any reason for DeWitt to maintain that Epicurus had any "highest good" or telos other than pleasure.