

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

Post by "Don" of February 14, 2022 at 11:48 PM

I was initially going to respond point by point to the comments posted in this thread. That, however, was going to take more work than I was willing to put in, but ya'll may recognize where I'm responding to specific points made elsewhere. We may end up breaking this out into a separate thread at some point as it seems we've strayed far from discussing Aristotle's golden mean. That being said, since I promised I'd have more to say, here is my further contribution to this thread.

As I understand it, the major points of contention under discussion include:

- What is actually meant by summum bonum vs telos.
- Can we ask the question "Is there really one "greatest good"?"
- Is there one "greatest good" for everyone?

Feel free to respond if anyone sees there are more. Here are my responses to those three for now:

As I've said, my understanding is that "summum bonum" is simply the Romans' attempt at translating the Greek word *τελος* [telos] into Latin. I see this as a reasonable attempt. The telos is the goal, end-point, fulfillment, the end, the highest point, etc. The summum bonum is the highest, greatest, supreme "good." I reject DeWitt's contention that Epicurus said "'the greatest good' was not pleasure but life itself." Of course we can only experience pleasure while alive by definition - by Epicurus's definition even: there is no sensation in death. That being said, living is simply a prerequisite for the practice of philosophy itself.

But let's leave summum bonum for the side for a moment since Epicurus didn't speak or write in Latin. The wording he used was "we say pleasure is the telos" (Letter to Menoikeus) and referred to pleasure as "the good" in one fragment that was in Epicurus's work "On the Telos":

"I know not how I can conceive the good, if I withdraw the pleasures of taste, and withdraw the pleasures of love, and withdraw the pleasures of hearing, and withdraw the pleasurable emotions caused to sight by beautiful form."

In this fragment, he specifically refers to pleasure as *ταγαθον* [tagathon] "the good", the same word used in the 3rd line of the Tetrapharmakos: "And the good is easily obtained" again equating "the good" with "pleasure."

This **exact** word - ταγαθον [tagathon] - was also used by Aristotle:
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%3a1999.01.0053>

τάγαθόν οὔ πάντ' ἐφίεται "the Good is That at which all things aim." (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1094a)

Epicurus is not shying away from a fight by using Aristotle's own word to define what The Good - ταγαθον - is. Epicurus is meeting Aristotle on the philosophical field of battle and throwing down the gauntlet of pleasure. "You want to know what The Good is? That at which all things aim? It's pleasure."

It seems to me that Epicurus clearly equates pleasure with "the good" and with the telos - the goal/fulfillment/purpose/end - of a human life. And "the good" ταγαθον is "The Good", the good at which all other good things aim as in other goods are only instrumental to ταγαθον The Good which is pleasure according to Epicurus.

That's why I contend that there is such a thing as a telos or "the good" (ταγαθον). Because Epicurus taught that. There is something that can be called "the good" and it is the telos of a human life. Pleasure is both the goal and the guide **in that** pleasure is the north star by which we guide our own small boat. Pleasure isn't a guide **in** the boat, it's the "guiding light" the beacon to which we steer. If we get off course, we steer back towards the "guide".

This is exactly why I also contend that, yes, there is one telos, one good, The Good, for everyone. We are all humans. Humans - as natural animals - are human before they are Christian or Buddhist or Muslim or Humanist or any other creed or religion. However, the more I think about it, we are also - in many respects and by some definition - Epicureans in that humans, in our natural state, will steer themselves toward pleasure and recede from pain. Just because someone wants to see "God" as their guide, the reason they want to please God is because this brings them pleasure. They could just cut out the middle-man (or middle-deity, as the case may be) and seek pleasure for itself. So, while there are multiple ways to experience pleasure - pleasant forms, pleasant tastes, the joys of sexual passion, pleasant sounds, etc. - it is pleasure writ large which is the telos - The Good - of every human life whether they admit that to themselves or not.