

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

Post by "Don" of February 17, 2022 at 12:35 AM

I want to read the papers posted by both [Kalosyni](#) and [Cassius](#) but haven't had a chance yet. I also don't have direct responses to [Cassius](#)'s questions in post #43 yet, but I'd like to address the summum bonum issue directly in *De Finibus*.

Above in post #19, I said summum bonum was the Latin translation of Greek τέλος [telos]. I'm going to amend that to saying summum bonum was the Latin literal translation of Greek αγαθον [tagathon]. Aristototele defines αγαθον as that "at which all things aim." From *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 1:

"Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good: hence it has been well said that the Good is That at which all things aim." (Note: The translator's capitalization, not mine)

Aristotle goes on to explain what he means by αγαθον throughout Book 1:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...%20page%3D1094a> Here is an illustrative excerpts:

"If therefore among the ends (τελος/telos) at which our actions aim there be one which we will for its own sake, while we will the others only for the sake of this, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (which would obviously result in a process ad infinitum, so that all desire would be futile and vain), it is clear that this one ultimate End must be the Good, and indeed the Supreme Good. [2] Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life?"

That "futile and vain" is significant, because the Greek words there are kenos and mataios (κενήν καὶ ματαίαν). We are \*very\* familiar with Epicurus using kenon to describe actions or desires as "empty." Epicurus also uses mataios throughout his extant writings:

VS62. If parents have cause to be angry with their children, of course it is \*foolish\* (μάταιον) to resist, and thus not try to beg for forgiveness. But if they do not have cause and are angry without reason, it is ridiculous to make an appeal to one who is irrationally opposed to hearing such an appeal, and thus not try to convince him by other means in a spirit of good will.

VS65. It is foolish (μάταιόν) to ask of the gods that which we can supply for ourselves.

Fragment 445. [We must not blame the body for the greatest evils] nor attribute our troubles to mere circumstance. Instead we seek their cause within the soul: for by giving up every foolish

(ματαίαν) and fleeting desire we give birth to a confidence perfect in itself.

Menoikeus 125b. "So, the one who says death is to be feared is foolish (μάταιος)/at fault..."

Menoikeus 127c. "If, on the other hand (he says so) joking, (he speaks) foolishly (μάταιος) [about] things that [do not] allow (for jokes)"

This use of kenon and mataion in both Aristotle and Epicurus leads me to consider that he might just agree with Aristotle in that our actions would be "foolish and vain" if they are not directed to one chief aim/telos/tagathon.

Cicero's Torquatus is one of the latter-day Epicureans that believes "elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion" are needed to disprove "why pleasure should not be counted as a good nor pain as an evil", as some philosophers maintained. "Torquatus" states that "The fact is, I think that you [Cicero] are like our friend Triarius, and dislike Epicurus because he has neglected the graces of style that you find in your Plato, Aristotle and Theophrastus. For I can scarcely bring myself to believe that you think his opinions untrue."

So, "Torquatus" is trying to beat Cicero's "Plato, Aristotle, and Theophrastus" by meeting on their philosophical playing field. He's going to show why Epicurus's pleasure meets the criteria for Aristotle's ταγαθον or, to give it its Latin translation, summum bonum. "Torquatus" is going to show why pleasure is the "Chief Good" and "That at which all things aim."

Below are the occurrences of "summum bonum" (or a form of the phrase) in Book 1 of De Finibus. These are the instances spoken by "Torquatus" in his exposition of Epicurus's philosophy.

Section 29 - Torquatus: "We are inquiring, then, what is the final and ultimate Good, which as all philosophers are agreed must be of such a nature as to be the end to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else. This Epicurus finds in pleasure; pleasure he holds to be the **\*\*Chief Good\*\***, pain the **\*Chief Evil\***."

Section 30 - Torquatus: "...every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks for pleasure, and delights in it as the **\*\*Chief Good\*\***, while it recoils from pain as the Chief Evil,"

Section 42 - Torquatus: "Pleasure and pain moreover supply the motives of desire and of avoidance, and the springs of conduct generally. This being so, it clearly follows that actions are right and praiseworthy only as being a means to the attainment of a life of pleasure. But that which is not itself a means to anything else, but to which all else is a means, is what the Greeks term the Telos, the highest, ultimate or final Good. It must therefore be admitted that the **\*\*Chief Good\*\*** is to live agreeably.

"Those who place the Chief Good in virtue alone are beguiled by the glamour of a name..."

Section 55 - Torquatus: "(1) The Ends of Goods and Evils themselves, that is, pleasure and pain, are not open to mistake; where people go wrong is in not knowing what things are productive of pleasure and pain." [NOTE: A variation on summum bonum: finibus bonorum et malorum]

Section 57 - Torquatus: Notice then how the theory embraces every possible enhancement of life, every aid to the attainment of that **\*\*Chief Good\*\*** which is our object.

quod propositum est, **\*\*summum bonum\*\*** consequamur?

Section 70 - Torquatus: "All these considerations go to prove not only that the theory of friendship is not embarrassed by the identification of the **\*\*Chief Good\*\*** with pleasure, but also that without this no foundation for friendship whatsoever can be found."

I want to specifically look at Section 29's quote. Torquatus says specifically that "all philosophers are agreed [the final and ultimate Good] must be of such a nature as to be the end to which all other things are means, while it is not itself a means to anything else." This is almost a word-for-word translation of Aristotle's definition of *ταγαθον* in Nicomachean Ethics. Torquatus's "all philosophers" shows that he's addressing a widespread philosophical idea and attempting to provide an Epicurean answer to "What is the 'final and ultimate Good' [extremum et ultimum bonorum]?"

Also, in section 42, Torquatus specifically uses the Greek *telos* and defines the Greek word as "the highest, ultimate or final Good [summum bonorum vel ultimum vel extremum — quod Graeci *τέλος* nominant] which isn't a bad attempt at a definition, see the LSJ: "full realization, highest point, ideal; the final cause; the chief good" <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...ntry%3Dte%2Flos>

So, referring to pleasure as the Chief Good (yes, I'm capitalizing because the translator did) is addressing a specific philosophical question that "all philosophers" appeared to have asked before, during, and after Epicurus's time. Epicurus's school needed an answer to this, maybe especially for a segment of the school that felt "elaborate and reasoned argument, and abstruse theoretical discussion" were necessary at the period of time Cicero and Philodemus and possibly Zeno of Sidon were writing - and maybe even Epicurus himself in answer to a widespread Greek question articulated even before Epicurus's time by Aristotle. As of my writing this, I don't have a problem with seeing Epicurus maintaining that pleasure is the Chief Good at which all other things point.