

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

Post by "Cassius" of February 17, 2022 at 2:01 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

That's Epicurus's answer, as I see it, to the question of "what is that to which everything else points?"

My answer to that part Don would be that it is not clear to me AT ALL that in an atomistic universe as we understand it to be, that there IS or SHOULD be something "at which everything else points." We *don't* think that in regard to the movement of the atoms through the void, so why should at some other point there be a single goal?

That is a *huge* presumption for the Platonists et al to be making -- that there is a "single good" that makes sense to everyone.

What I am suggesting is that if you come at the world through religion, then you stipulate that "god" sets the terms. But religion isn't the only way, and from the Pythagoreans and their numerology on through to Plato and his world of ideal forms, there is a "logic-based" approach through which you can allegedly conclude that there is a single good.

I'm suggesting that Epicurus rejected *both* approaches.

In religion, it's pretty simple to say "You're wrong because there is no god."

But in "logic-based approaches" it's not so simple to understand what they even are saying, must first decode and refute it.

They are postulating things in their formulas and their syllogisms that have to be questioned lest you be tricked. Is it really self-evident that it makes sense to talk of a single highest good? That's pretty much the question we're debating. If we're all in good faith about the basic fundamentals that there's no supernatural realm then we can presume that no one is trying to pull anything over on us, and we can talk about pleasure being "good." But while we agree on what pleasure is (a feeling) no one has ever defined explicitly what "good" is, and so you get packed into that word various presumptions which are at least potentially at odds with Epicurus. Among them are:

Can something be "good" without it being directly attached to pleasure and pain? The world seems to shout "yes" but I am not sure Epicurus would agree.

Are there in fact then many "goods"?

If so, what makes something good? We say pleasure, but the rest of the world shouts that it's more than that.

We pretty much agree I think that there are many pleasures, but they are unified to an extent because our feeling tells us they are pleasures. But all those many pleasures aren't identical to each other in every respect. Sex is not the same as filing your fingernails.

Are all pleasures equally pleasing? Are all goods equally good? If they are not equal and identical in every respect, can they be ranked?

Is there an absolute ranking to which all can refer, or is it purely personal how to rank them?

All these questions tend to get hidden if we jump to "pleasure is the greatest good" and think that ends the process.

Those are questions enough, but I seem to recall (and I bet someone can remind us) that Plato traps some of his interlocutors in his dialogues by talking about "cookery."

As I understand it (and I may be grossly wrong) he asks questions like we are discussing now, and he asks "How do you know which pleasure (or good) is the greatest?"

And he ends up suggesting that the only way we can know which good is the greatest is through WISDOM.

As a result, you end up concluding that if you have to have wisdom in order to know what is the greatest good. Thus by that reasoning it is wisdom itself, and not any other good that's in the competition, that therefore must be considered to be the greatest good.

(And that's the analogy to "cookery" -- the cook must know how to combine the elements in order to produce the best result in the food that is eventually to be served.)

I am concerned that that what I am arguing is going to sound like "nominalism" -- which I understand to mean that words have absolutely no meaning except what we give them, with the presumption that everything is totally relative in life and no certainty is possible in anything. I don't mean to be arguing that. But to a certain degree it is true that words are just symbols that we assign in our human brains, and that process of assembling symbols seems to me to be the "opinion" part of the thought process, which Epicurus held is preceded (and guided or tested by) the three canonical faculties, including pleasure and pain. So ultimately I think Epicurus was stressing that the feeling of pleasure is the only ultimate guide, but that as soon as we translate any of this into "opinions" we have to be on the lookout for errors.

So to repeat something I've asserted already, I think we are always on firm ground when we talk about the feeling of pleasure as being the guide of life. But when we talk about happiness or "good and evil" and other higher-level concepts, it looks to me like Epicurus was saying something like "Yes use those words because you have to, but be careful how you use them and be careful what you're admitting when you use them."

I want us to at least get to the point where we can clearly articulate the issues involved. We're getting closer, but I am not sure we are quite there yet. However I think we will get there.

One way to make progress would be if we were all clear on what Epicurus was warning about in his "don't walk about uselessly talking about the good" statement, and also what Torquatus is talking about when he said that Epicurus didn't hold that logical argument was necessary to establish that pleasure is desirable. We ought to at least be able to agree that he was warning about *something* and be able to articulate what he was warning about.