

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

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I found a number of descriptive, albeit conflicting accounts of the "highest good". In *Epicureanism* (2009), author Tim O'Keefe titles his eleventh chapter "Pleasure, the highest good". He explains, "For almost all Greek philosophers of the time, the fundamental questions of ethics were (i) what is the highest good and (ii) how do you attain it, with the highest good being what is desirable for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. Epicurus declares pleasure to be the highest good" (107). He goes on, "Epicurus' ethics operates within the framework articulated by Aristotle, a framework that systematizes the ethical thinking of Aristotle's predecessors and was accepted by almost all later Greek philosophers. The central question of ethics is: what is the highest good? The good of something is its telos, its goal or purpose. This teleological analysis of the good extends quite widely; we can ask what the good is, not only of human life, but also of actions, artefacts, crafts such as medicine and so on. And in each case, we discover the item's good by discovering its goal or purpose" (111).

Sharples makes an interesting observation in *Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics* (1996) in proposing that "virtue will still, however, derive its *value* from pleasure, which is the sole good, rather than constituting an independent good" (93). Later, he observes, "The second of these views can be understood in terms of pleasure as the sole good [...] if the claim that friends come to be loved for their own sake rather than for advantage is interpreted simply as asserting that friendship ceases to be purely an instrumental good and becomes pleasant in itself" (119). So, here we have an author who supposes that pleasure is the *only* good, rather than being the greatest among many.

*The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (2009) makes that claim that it is indeed the "highest good". "The good is the end to which all other things are means, and never itself a means to an end (*Fin.* I.9). To discover what this end is, we ought to look at what creatures actually *do* pursue as the ultimate end of all of their actions, and this is to attain pleasure and avoid pain (*Fin.* I.30). [...] When Epicurus explain why pleasure is to be regarded as the highest good (*Ep. Men.* 129), he appeals to 'feeling' (*pathos*) as the yardstick for decision about what to choose. [...] Similarly, Epicurus calls pleasure the 'first and congenital' good (*Ep. Men.* 129)" (174).

*The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy* (2020) notes that "any experience of freedom from pain coincides with the highest good: 'pleasure exists everywhere, and for the entire time it lasts, there is no suffering either of body or of mind or both'" (KD3). Citing *De Fin.* 1.3 he quotes, "As soon as each animal is born, it seeks pleasure and rejoices in it as the highest good, and reject pain as the greatest bad thing, driving it away from itself as effectively as it can; and it does this while it is still not corrupted, while the judgment of nature herself is

unperverted and sound." Later, they write, "Epicureans had in mind in identifying aponia and ataraxia as the highest good" and "Like almost all ancient ethicists, Epicurus is a eudaimonist, holding that the highest good is eudaimonia, or happiness. He is also a hedonist, because he identifies the happy life with the pleasant life: only pleasure is intrinsically good, and only pain is intrinsically bad".