

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

Post by "Eikadistes" of February 18, 2022 at 4:25 PM

To respond to the original topic, both [1] Aristotle's *Golden Mean* and [2] the Romans' framing of Epicurean *Voluptas* as the *Summum Bonum* are misrepresentations of Epicurean ethics. While Epicurean philosophy is compatible with the phrase *Summum Bonum* (ΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΝ ΑΓΑΘΟΝ), the *Summum Bonum* is not described as *ΗΔΟΝΗ* (pleasure), but as *ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ* (prudence). It would have been more accurate for the Stoics to have written "*SVMMVM BONVM EST PRVDENTIA*".

If Stoic and early Christian authors had described Epicurus as having taught "*PRIMVM BONVM EST VOLVPTAS*", then that would cohere with Epicurus' statement that *ΗΔΟΝΗ* is the *ΠΡΟΤΟΝ ΑΓΑΘΟΝ* (versus the *ΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΝ ΑΓΑΘΟΝ*).

Even so, we have found that Epicurus uses a variety of cases, tenses, and inflections of *ΑΓΑΘΟΣ* (or "good") to describe *pleasant things*, *instrumental actions*, *a noble standard*, *a category of virtues*, and an expression of *pleasure*. The abundance of this term leads to a cultural and linguistic displacement of "the Good" from its Platonic throne. It becomes reduced to a frank, non-technical meaning, usually indicating either as "a pleasant thing", "that which is pleasant", or "pleasantness".

I propose that, unlike other Hellenistic philosophers, Epicurus did not see the question "*What is the Supreme Good?*" to be as fundamental to his ethics as the question "*What is the goal of life?*" Therein, the phrase *Summum Bonum* can be misleading because it frames Epicurus as having been a sort of "Goodness Ethicist" who presupposes the existence of a Supreme Goodness, versus a sort of "Purpose Ethicist" who begins his inquiry by observing nature.

I would view any mention of *Summum Bonum* in Epicurean philosophy with at least a little bit of suspicion.