

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

Post by "Don" of February 19, 2022 at 9:53 AM

It strikes me that one reason we're getting tied up in knots about this is our trying to reconcile ancient Greek and Latin sources. For me, any Latin source will always - always! - be secondary to an ancient Greek source, even Cicero or even (*gasp*) Lucretius. Lucretius was using Epicurus as a source but had to translate what he found there. Any ancient Greek source can quote verbatim from Epicurean sources without the need for translation into a different language and idiom. The Greek sources are going to be debating using shared cultural memes, maybe vehemently disagreeing but most likely coming from a common background. A Latin source is, for me, always going to be - to use a Zen metaphor - looking at the finger pointing to the Moon and not looking at the Moon directly. Latin is like, to put it a different way, looking at the Moon's reflection in the pond and not looking at the Moon itself. English is even worse, especially if it's a translation of a Latin source! That's like reading a description of the reflection of the Moon in the pond! Getting hung up on summum bonum is, in some respects, pointless. Epicurus didn't use that phrase, Philodemus didn't use that phrase (who knows, he may have used it in conversation with his Roman friends but he certainly didn't need to use it in his texts), Diogenes Laertius didn't need to use that phrase, etc. For me, to understand what Epicurus and the Epicurean school taught, we always need to return to the Greek.

This is why I'm becoming more intrigued with the word τἀγαθὸν which appears in Epicurus and Philodemus as well texts from before Plato, in Aristotle, in Plutarch... And that's just what I found this morning poking around online. I think that's what the Romans were trying to "point at" with their summum bonum, but I'm finding I don't care as much now. I'm becoming curious about the significance of τἀγαθὸν itself within that Greek cultural milieu and why it was so widespread. Epicurus couldn't conceive of τἀγαθὸν "without the joys of taste, of sex, of hearing, and without the pleasing motions caused by the sight of bodies and forms." τἀγαθὸν is not simply ἀγαθὸς "good" with "the" definite article slapped on the front. It is an ancient Greek cultural meme, endlessly debated for hundreds of years from before Plato (428 BCE) through Aristotle through Plutarch (119 CE) and beyond to even 15th-century Christian theologians (see <https://epistole.wordpress.com/2009/03/26/the...humanist-ethos/>). I'll have more to say at some point. For now, that's where my head is at.