

Plato's Philebus and the Limit of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2022 at 2:31 PM

Here are two brief Wikipedia articles that I think are highly relevant because they go to the core of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. What I am suggesting is that if this central issue ("the good" / "the form of the good") was among the most important things that Aristotle and Plato were arguing about, we would expect that Epicurus too would weigh in on the topic of "the good" very early in the [Principal Doctrines](#). Unless and until refuted Plato and Aristotle's position that the most important thing in life to us is "the good" we would never expect to proceed further away from what Plato and Aristotle taught. The first step in the analysis has to be establishing that this "form of the good" is not to be looked to as the ultimate standard. You don't even begin to discuss "types of pleasures" or "which pleasures to choose" until you first establish that pleasures itself is the goal.

How do you do that in a single document (which as we discuss a lot, was not numbered in the original version)?

To me, we can look for that logical process is what we see in the PD's. The first point to establish is the proof that, if accepted, allows you to reject the view that there are no supernatural gods and that the gods do not and cannot punish you after death. You start with that first because everyone, even Plato and Aristotle, essentially point to religion and supernatural gods as the source of everything. And you don't just say "The gods don't exist and there is no life after death" because you're a philosopher and you're listing out proofs (logical arguments) not just raw assertions.

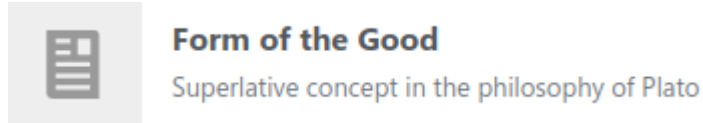
And then the second point that you establish, in order of importance after disposing of the supernatural claims, is you provide the proof that there is no logical argument against considering "Pleasure" to be the good. And you do that by directly addressing the most potent logical argument against pleasure, which is that (in Platonic terms) "since pleasure has no limit it is in the class of the more or less and therefore is not a superlative and cannot be considered to be the highest or best." And I see that as the reason for the otherwise convoluted wording "The limit of quantity in pleasures is the removal of all that is painful." All the rest of PD3 and PD4 as to pleasure and pain are subsidiary corollaries that address Platonic logical arguments against making "Pleasure" the highest good.

Seen this way [PD01](#) through [PD04](#) are not primarily therapeutic advice (though they do have that effect for those who are able to absorb them). They are primarily logical positions intended as cannonballs fired against the opposing philosophical positions that ruled Epicurus' world and still rule ours today.

Wikipedia:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2533-plato-s-philebus-and-the-limit-of-pleasure/?postID=18148#post18148>

1 - [The Form of the Good](#) Interestingly I see the shortest blurb on wikipedia about that is "Superlative Concept in the Philosophy of Plato."



The first references that are seen in *The Republic* to the Form of the Good are within the conversation between [Glaucon](#) and [Socrates](#) (454 c-d). When he is trying to answer such difficult questions pertaining to the definition of [justice](#), Plato identifies that we should not "introduce every form of difference and sameness in nature" instead we must focus on "the one form of sameness and difference that was relevant to the particular ways of life themselves" which is the form of the Good. This form is the basis for understanding all other forms, it is what allows us to understand everything else. Through the conversation between Socrates and Glaucon (508 a-c), Plato analogizes the form of the Good with the sun as it is what allows us to see things. Here, Plato describes how the sun allows for sight. But he makes a very important distinction, "sun is not sight" but it is "the cause of sight itself." As the sun is in the visible realm, the form of Good is in the [intelligible](#) realm. It is "what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower". It is not only the "cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge". Plato identifies how the form of the Good allows for the cognizance to understand such difficult concepts as [justice](#). He identifies [knowledge](#) and [truth](#) as important, but through Socrates (508d-e) says, "good is yet more prized". He then proceeds to explain "although the good is not being" it is "superior to it in rank and power", it is what "provides for knowledge and truth" (508e)

The discussion surrounding this article implies that this "form of the good" is maybe the single central concept of Platonism. Amusing fact: "There is an ancient anecdotal tradition that Plato gave a public lecture entitled "On the Good" which so confused the audience that most walked out. At the end of the lecture Plato said to those hearers who remained: 'The Good is the One.'"

The article also points out Aristotle's criticism: " [Aristotle](#) discusses the Forms of Good in critical terms several times in both of his major surviving ethical works, the [Eudemian](#) and [Nicomachean Ethics](#). Aristotle argues that Plato's Form of the Good does not apply to the physical world, for Plato does not assign "goodness" to anything in the existing world. Because Plato's Form of the Good does not explain events in the physical world, humans have no reason to believe that the Form of the Good exists and the Form of the Good is thereby irrelevant to human ethics"

2. [The Summum Bonum](#) We have discussed this recently in our review of Torquatus. This article lays the phrase at the foot of Cicero: "**Summum bonum** is a Latin expression meaning the highest or ultimate good, which was introduced by the [Roman philosopher Cicero\[1\]\[2\]](#) to denote the fundamental principle on which some system of ethics is based — that is, the aim of actions, which, if consistently pursued, will lead to the best possible life. Since Cicero, the

expression has acquired a secondary meaning as the essence or ultimate metaphysical principle of Goodness itself, or what Plato called the [Form of the Good](#). These two meanings do not necessarily coincide. For example, [Epicurean](#) and [Cyrenaic](#) philosophers claimed that the 'good life' consistently aimed for pleasure, without suggesting that pleasure constituted the meaning or essence of Goodness outside the ethical sphere. In [De finibus](#), Cicero explains and compares the ethical systems of several schools of Greek philosophy, including [Stoicism](#), [Epicureanism](#), [Aristotelianism](#) and [Platonism](#), based on how each defines the ethical *summum bonum* differently."