

Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics - Article By David Sedley

Post by "Cassius" of January 22, 2026 at 2:28 PM

In researching [other issues](#) I came across this article by David Sedley: [Inferential Foundations of Epicurean Ethics](#)

While I have some issues with the first section, but that's only a brief summary of Epicurean ethics and not essential to the main point of the article. The main part thrust of the article is to examine how Epicurus constructed his argument that in ethics good and bad divides into pleasure and pain in much the same way that in physics everything in the universe divides into bodies and space.

Sedley agrees with DeWitt in pointing out that we need to be careful in interpreting Cicero as to "the highest good." Sedley writes: "*The phrase summum bonum occurs literally hundreds of times in Cicero's philosophical writings, yet it is by no means clear to me what Greek term it could represent.*"

Here's the full section:

Quote

Quote

Now as far as the actual expression *summum bonum* is concerned, there is nothing new or surprising about finding it here. Pleasure was introduced at the outset, back in the Cradle Argument, as the *summum bonum*, and pain as the *summum malum*. The phrase *summum bonum* occurs literally hundreds of times in Cicero's philosophical writings, yet it is by no means clear to me what Greek term it could represent. Expressions like 'the ultimate good' (to *eschaton tōn agathōn*) and 'the primary good' (to *prōton agathon*) are far too rare in Hellenistic philosophy to account for such frequent occurrence. My own guess is that *summum bonum* is in most cases simply Cicero's rendition of 'the good' (to *agathon*). When one looks through the contexts in which it occurs, the overwhelming majority are ones in which the mere word *bonum* would, in the absence of a Latin definite article, have been ambiguous between 'the good' and 'a good'. For instance in the Cradle Argument, where all animals rejoice in pleasure 'as in the highest good' (*ut summo bono*), a mere 'as in the good' (*ut bono*) would have been indistinguishable from 'as in a good'.²⁸ The addition of *summum* before *bonum* neatly removes the ambiguity.

Let us take it, then, that *summum bonum* in *Fin.* 1.40–1 just represents ‘the good’. For an Epicurean, to call pleasure ‘the good’ is to label it, if not strictly as the only good thing, at least as the only underderivatively good thing, that by courtesy of which other things are good—in other words, the ethical end (*telos*). But the present passage goes further than that. The thing labelled the *summum bonum* (and also, more elaborately, the highest (*summum*) or ultimate (*ultimum*) or extreme (*extremum*) of goods, which the Greeks call *telos*) is not pleasure *tout court*, but the pleasant life (*iucunde vivere*, or *cum voluptate vivere*), the very life amply filled out with a portrayal of the ideal Epicurean. To see what has happened, we need here a distinction between a primitive and a substantive account of the good or the *telos*. In Aristotle, for instance, the primitive account is simply *eudaimonia*, or perhaps ‘activity of the soul in accordance with virtue’, while the substantive account would be a detailed analysis of this as acted out in the civic life, the contemplative life, or both. What has happened in the course of Torquatus’ speech is not a shift in the meaning of *summum bonum*, but a shift from the primitive to the substantive specification of what it consists in. Is this legitimate? How can Torquatus assert that the Epicurean life is the best possible life, when he has not yet even dealt with the question whether virtue has a place in it; or with the relation of mental to bodily pleasure; or with the lessons of physics for dealing with fear of death and god; or with the function of friendship?

But regardless of that, the more pressing point is that we may well have been locked by the term "highest good" into thinking that Epicurus advocated for some *particular* pleasure as the goal and that there are a larger number of "inferior" pleasures that should be flatly avoided.

To me the more likely alternative is that Epicurus was, as Sedley states, looking first to establish what is good vs what is bad in blanket terms, in the same way he offset bodies vs space in blanket terms, and only thereafter is it significant to look at the implication of further details.

I unfortunately have to point out that Sedley disagrees with Gosling & Taylor's "Greeks on Pleasure" as to the *katastematic/kinetic* issue, and that means he would also disagree with Emily Austin's position in "Living for Pleasure" (Chapter 4 Note eight) where she wrote:

This is a non-specialist text, so I have chosen not to wade into the dispute about katastematic and kinetic pleasures in the body of the text. A specialist will recognize that I am adopting a view roughly in line with Gosling and Taylor (1982) and Arenson (2019). On my reading, katastematic pleasures are sensory pleasures that issue from confidence in one's ability to satisfy one's necessary desires and an awareness of one's healthy psychological functioning; choice-worthy kinetic pleasures are the various pleasures consistent with maintaining healthy functioning, and those pleasures vary, but do not increase healthy psychological functioning. (emphasis added)

In fact in this section Sedley says flatly that "Katastematic pleasure is the absence of pain." I very much disagree with that and think it is far too overbroad, because it explicitly states that they are the same thing. Following the argument in the rest of Sedley's article, I would argue that Epicurus' analysis follows the pattern of contrasting bodies against space, and that he then sets off *pleasure* against pain. I would say that if Sedley wanted to discuss kinetic and katastematic pleasure within this article at all, he should have said:

"Pleasure is the absence of pain. Of the pleasures, Epicurus mentions two categories, kinetic and katestematic, the first of which requires stimulation, the other of which does not require stimulation..... He could then have proceeded to further discussion from there. That would have preserved the main point of the article, which is that just as in physics Epicurus establishes first and foremost that everything divides into bodies and space, in ethics Epicurus establishes first and foremost that everything divides into pleasure and pain.