

To think of pleasure as the greatest good is an error; pleasure is the telos and is not to be confused with the greatest good: DeWitt

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of February 13, 2022 at 3:45 AM

Quote

As a criterion the Feelings may take precedence over reason. Plato, for example, argued endlessly about the meaning of "good." Epicurus scorned this dialectic and arrived at a simple solution. His line of attack is as follows: the greatest good must be associated with the greatest pleasure. This greatest pleasure is easily identified: "What causes the unsurpassable joy is the bare escape from some terrible calamity."⁷⁷ This joy arises from the saving of life, the escape from shipwreck, for instance. Therefore life itself is the greatest good. To think of pleasure as the greatest good is an error; pleasure is the telos and is not to be confused with the greatest good. The testimony of the Feeling functioning as a criterion is decisive

That's the last paragraph in the eight chapter (p. 154)... and, to be honest, it left me confused. When life is the highest good- why does Epicurus then allow suicide? Why isn't the goal of Epicureanism then to prolong life to the maximum? Why do we then even pursue pleasure, when the highest good is to simply stay alive?

Probably that's some combination of a bad formulation from DeWitt and a misunderstanding of me- but I nevertheless am confused about this. What do you think on that?

Post by “Cassius” of February 13, 2022 at 4:14 AM

I think this is not one of DeWitt's best explained positions, and I would agree with it only after caveats that "good" like a lot of other words has multiple meanings.

In this sense, I think his best line is to the effect that pleasure and pain have meaning only to the living, and that therefore being alive is a prerequisite to experiencing pleasure. That's in his explanation somewhere in a place you did not quote.

As he states in the part that you did quote, pleasure is the telos and DeWitt is distinguishing between that and "greatest good.". It seems to me he is stressing the proper differences between the words goal and guide as well.

Ultimately you should also read DeWitt's article he entitled the summum bonum fallacy. He is to some extent calling into question, as does Epicurus in his criticism that DeWitt quotes about unsurpassable joy, of the issue of thinking that you are doing something worthwhile by focusing conceptually on defining "the greatest good.". Nature gives pleasure and pain as the feeling / basis for deciding what to choose and what to avoid. Nature does not implant in us a detailed reasoned definition of a "greatest good" nor do we create anything real - anything outside our own minds - by developing elaborate definitions of it.

Post by "smoothiekiwi" of February 13, 2022 at 6:19 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Ok, that makes sense- probably I've simply read over it. Even so, I think that I'm not the only one left wondering about what DeWitt really meant, so in case anyone from the future reads this- you're not alone 😊

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Ultimately you should also read DeWitt's article he entitled the summum bonum fallacy

I'll do it! Thanks for your time and your reply.

Post by "Eikadistes" of February 13, 2022 at 9:54 AM

[Quote from smoothiekiwi](#)

Quote

When life is the highest good- why does Epicurus then allow suicide? Why isn't the goal of Epicureanism then to prolong life to the maximum? Why do we then even pursue pleasure, when the highest good is to simply stay alive?

Epicurus resolutely rejects suicide under any circumstances:

"Even if the wise man should lose his eyesight, he will not end his whole life" (Wise Man Saying 17)

"He is a little man in all respects who has many good reasons for quitting life." (Vatican Saying 38)

Philodemus **does** argue that the length of the wise person's life should be maximized:

"And therefore the greatest good has been grasped by the person who has become wise and lived through a certain amount of time. Once his journey has achieved balance and consistency, it would be fitting to prolong it for an unlimited time, if such were possible; but should his life be limited, this will not be the deprivation of what has already been, but [sc. merely] a prevention of its continued presence." (Philodemus, *On Death*).

While De Witt is one of our greatest resources in modern scholarship, he takes liberties where he sees fit. His suggestion that Life (not Pleasure) is the Greatest Good does not align with my reading of Epicurus' original texts. Nowhere that I have found does Epicurus suggest that *agathon* ("the good") is *biou* or *bion* ("life", "living"). A life devoid of pleasure is not Good. I would argue to De Witt that a thing is only Good when Pleasure is present.

This is one of few places (to me) that De Witt's scholarship seems tinged by his own reading.

Post by "Cassius" of February 13, 2022 at 11:18 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

"And therefore the greatest good has been grasped by the person who has become wise and lived through a certain amount of time. Once his journey has achieved balance and consistency, it would be fitting to prolong it for an unlimited time, if such were possible; but should his life be limited, this will not be the deprivation of what has already been, but [sc. merely] a prevention of its continued presence." (Philodemus, *On Death*).

Wow this is a great applicable quote and one that I was not on top of -- but we need to cite it every time we talk about this subject. Thank you Nate!

[Quote from Nate](#)

A life devoid of pleasure is not Good. I would argue to De Witt that a thing is only Good when Pleasure is present.

We dealt with this again a little in today's Lucretius Podcast (109). I agree with your point in this quote. I think the best way to try to look at DeWitt's comment sympathetically is to consider whether the word "good" has multiple meanings (in the same way that "true" in "[all sensations are true](#)" can be interpreted on different levels. DeWitt's formulation definitely is something to treat carefully and not take on face value as being correct, especially until reading the detail of his full argument in his book and his article "The Summum Bonum Fallacy."